

Beyond Boredom:
The Importance of the Dull in Information Overload

Jacinthe Paré

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ABSTRACT

Beyond Boredom:

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Jacinthe Paré

New media technologies were supposed to make life richer and give swifter access to the useful information that residents of the Information Society desire and need for work, school and daily life. Instead, it seems these people are increasingly bombarded with useless data, including spam that clog their email and 150 TV channels that offer little worth watching. Even a Google search for "information overload" reveals an unmanageable 300,000 results. There is no denying that Information overload is a fact of daily life.

Through my extensive research of various sociological and cultural texts spanning 25 years, I found that the dull and the repetitive are believed to be increasingly present and that people must somehow find a way to get rid of this informational clutter to focus on the 'good' information that tells something new, useful, intelligent. However, if trivia and the fluff of pop culture are now an unavoidable part of Information Societies, it should be recognized as such before being automatically thrown out as useless. The case of the Japanese Otaku, as explored in my online research and through personal contacts, will reveal a more productive reaction to the supposed alienating and context-less data deluge of the Information Society. By appropriating the fluff of pop culture in their excessively dull collections, Otaku have turned the threat of information overload into the very source of their identity.

I would like to thank Arthur Kroker
for introducing me to the wonderfully strange Otaku.

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Beyond Boredom:

The Importance of the Dull in Information Overload

"Let me tell you something: if we can't survive all the information that we're going to develop, then we're in real trouble."

- *Brian Lamb, Founder and Chairman of C-SPAN* (qtd. in Shenk 22)

Overload!

No one can deny that we live in an information-rich society. Not only is there the good ol' morning paper to present the news and events of the day, but the noontime, 6 o'clock and late-night televised news broadcasts, as well as the 24hr news-only channels also cater to our need to be informed. In case these are not enough, one can now check with the live and continuously updated news websites that update the televised updates. How lucky we are to have information so readily available to us, and in so many formats! How incredible it is to live in such a historical moment, a time where information is so abundant, where all should and can be informed! This sort of rhetoric abounds in information-rich, technologically advanced societies. Just read up on the promises of digital television, with hundreds of specialty channels to choose from. Watch Gore and other academics paint up utopic 'Information Highway' sceneries, where all information is but a click away. Look at the efforts various levels of government spend on hooking up classrooms to the Internet so that no child is left wanting or falling behind.

Some think that if something is good, more must be better – but there does come a point where more is not better. Like the vain frog of the fable that took in too much air and burst, the increasing availability and speed of information in highly industrialized societies might lead media users into consuming as much data as possible, leaving them nauseated and bloated instead of with that pleasant feeling of content satisfaction as can occur after a good meal.

“Adapt or you’re toast” (Kroker 6)

Surely, it is clear that information overload is no longer a threat for ultra-mediated cultures such as Canada, the U.S. or Japan: it has already happened, and is especially evident in large urban centers. People are already living it; I am living it. People wade in information everyday in their over-connected homes and offices. They are told by the voices-that-be that there is so much more yet they ‘need’ to be informed about. Communication technologies are quickly multiplying their ways to serve up this information, faster and in larger quantity. As well, no one can deny the redundancy of much of what is being presented in so many different ways. Worse, to my own weary senses, the information strewn about the tangled web of the Internet, on the many specialty TV channels and elsewhere in my everyday media environment often all seems like only much more of the same. Amongst this data-jammed clutter, I even wonder if all of this purported information actually informs anyone of anything anymore. Haven’t I seen this before? And, more worryingly, do I really care?

Overload & Boredom: An Investigation

As one is now seemingly always at risk of being inundated with the data springing out of a seemingly endless parade of old, new and combined media formats (digital phones, cable Internet, television watches, and the oh-so-promising Web-connected refrigerator¹), the overload that can result undoubtedly brings along stress and anxiety. Sociologists and cultural theorists have worried and feared the consequences of information overload since at least the 1950's (Alvin Toffler, Orrin Klapp, Sean Desmond Healy, and Neil Postman, amongst many others). Some, as does Roger Abbott in his book The World As Information (1999), claim that because the whole world itself has come to be defined as information to be had & synthesized, people must come up with new strategies to deal with it or risk becoming absolutely overwhelmed. Others declare that the overload of information has made it all downright boring, causing

¹ LG Electronics introduced the world's first cutting-edge digital refrigerator (the 'Internet Digital DIOS Refrigerator' (R-S73CT) in early 2002. The refrigerator sports a monitor on its front door that allows for Internet surfing and even for making videophone calls. The refrigerator, transformed "from a mere electronic appliance used in storing food to a tool for family entertainment and communications [...] suitable for the Digital Age" (Chaudry), allows for such things as surfing the net for the latest grocery prices, recipes and nutritional information. It also can be used to send email, watch TV and DVD movies, play MP3 files, and, best of all, to take digital photographs. More information on LG Electronics website: <<http://us.lge.com/>>.

lethargy & indifference amongst the population, as does Jean Baudrillard in The Ecstasy of Communication (1988). The first part of this investigation will thus explore the problematic occurrence of information overload in post-industrialized societies, as well as delve into the idea of 'boredom' as it is often associated with it.

As will be presented, many of those who have written on the topic do agree that an abundance of information has brought about a general dissatisfaction regarding the quality of the offerings of the media in high-tech Western cultures. Orrin Klapp, Sean Desmond Healy and David Shenk, amongst others, argue that having to deal with too much data has led some media consumers to skip over what they perceive as useless and redundant -- by choosing to look at this extra information as being boring -- in favour of being quick and efficient at consuming as much of the 'better' information as possible. Boredom thus acts as a reflexive blocking out of the unwanted or 'junk' information in hope of finding a better balance between the information available and the information one truly seeks or needs. This gut reaction indicates that the once avid media consumer has had enough, and has chosen to dismiss some of what is presented to him by the media spectrum as being boring and of little value, limiting exposure to maintain sanity. However, these information critics wish to underline that such efficiency at processing and/or consuming information can lead to other problems when taken too far. Unquestionably, the value of information, its relevance and meaning lose out when the need for speed and for

'more' takes over (as illustrated in James Gleick's Faster (1999)). As well, the overabundance of resources overwhelming the average (post)modern subject could trigger a want to disengage from it more often than not². This active search for the state of inactivity, uninterest and apathy as a chronic reaction to the situation of information overload is what is most feared by the critics that will be reviewed here³. Despite having access to more information, people end up even more easily bored than ever before. How ironic⁴.

² Many terms commonly encountered in relation to the media and their usage suggest a certain sense of pointlessness, of vacuity. For example, distraction comes from the Latin *dis-trahere*, which means 'to draw away'; diversion comes from *dis-vertere*, or 'to turn aside'; amusement, from the word *ad-musare*, 'to idle' (Healy 47).

³ One important distinction to be stressed is the difference between everyday boredom and the more serious kind of boredom that we will investigate here. In its common form, being bored is an unavoidable phenomenon, disagreeable but harmless, and present in daily circumstances, such as when one doesn't know what to do, or when a task at hand is truly yawn-inspiring. The chronic boredom feared by the information overload critics stems from this constant accumulation of trivial boredom and presents itself into something much more corrosive and dangerous: that of the loss of personal and social meaning.

⁴ Even I, as I tackle this subject, find myself submerged by information. There must be twenty books piled high on floor by my desk, at least a hundred printed articles stuffed in (now dusty) folders. They all looked so appealing at the time of their encounter! They all promised the answers I was seeking! Will I ever find time to read them all? Probably

That individuals grow disinterested and bored despite (and because of) the gushing of the media is often understood as the result of a dysfunctional society that favours swift progress and instant consumption over traditional values and long-term satisfaction. But does this mean that the 'Information Society' and its values for speed, dispersion and knowledge are doomed to failure? To mute the television set, or to ignore the omnipotence of the Internet

not. All I can do is skim through them, looking for those "meaningful" words, for the points I need to make my argument. The leftover information will be discarded, and the books will serve to decorate my workspace, I suppose, as proof of my deep involvement and interest into my topic.

This overload of data sure impresses my friends, but to focus on the analysis of their contents becomes an impossible task. Interest does fade quickly as newer, fresher data find their way to my limited attention span (a symptom cousin to boredom when faced with information overload?). My mind can only take in so much at a time. I must stop looking and start thinking before I overload and crash. But there is so much to see, I no longer know where to start, I forget what I wanted to say in the first place. I wish technology would read my mind and form the words, the arguments for me, instead of offering me more and more bits and bytes, so I could recline to the much more simpler task of ingesting information, instead of having to process it and spit out yet another document to add to the glut.

The overload has brought me to a complete stop. I cannot bring myself to write. I wish to be bored – it is easier that way.

are obviously not valid options to avoid the supposed multiplication of increasingly dull information. At the basis of this investigation then, is the fundamental question: why indeed do people seek information? To further their education. To learn about the news of the world. To get the knowledge they need to lead better lives. To succeed in their business. To become experts in a certain field. To know in what others know and share common grounds and social meaningfulness with those they meet. But sometimes, no great knowledge or even information per se is demanded from the data one encounters. People may seek information (such as gossip about their favourite stars) merely to be entertained and diverted; some may collect data on a certain topic as a hobby⁵. They may also read and surf and watch television merely to pass the time. That much of the “information” we encounter daily appears useless, irrelevant or downright boring needs not be the downfall of the Information Society. From time to time, all of us engage in pointless media uses.

And some, as we will see, engage with pointless information.

Strategic Dullness

“The path to subversion is not to resist and revolt,
but to accede and accelerate.”

- John Parker (Parker)

⁵ Interesting audience studies include: David Morley's Family Television (1986); Joke Hermes “Media, Meaning & Everyday Life” (1991); and the many works of Stuart Hall, Henry Jenkins. John Fiske and Neil Abercrombie.

When the world of information passes by at high speed, boredom is a valid (and essential!) way out of the insanity. But how can one get back unto a better, more productive state of mind? We cannot, as a society, remain bored forever. In effect, to go on with life amidst the excess of the information world, one must move beyond boredom. In the second and main part of my investigation, I want to argue that the perceived overload of dull information can be used as part of a productive cultural intervention, rather than assume it only leads to the passive and dissatisfied state of being bored. The boring can indeed be reframed in a more fruitful way.

One such option involves electing to care too much about what most people can no longer care about. By reinjecting importance to what's come to be perceived as the boring, the useless and the overabundant, the exorcism is performed and meaning can be reinstated amongst the glut. Such a counter-attack, I will argue, forces the system to re-examine its own values, and allows society to go on, to evolve, and not remain stagnant nor collapse upon itself under the weight of information overload and boredom, as the more pessimistic critics would like to believe. The case of the Japanese Otaku will be shown to be such a cultural tonic, offering a functional response to the seemingly dysfunctional cultural situation that is overload and boredom, and will debunk the theories promoted by the authors explored in the first chapter. The Otaku's obsession with what the more expedient (dare I say 'normal'?) media consumer would dismiss as insignificant details will be shown to be an effective intervention

that changes the predicament of information overload into a site that provides its own rewards through a symbolic restructuring of what is considered to be the informative and the interesting. The key lies in finding value in the unavoidable multiplication of the dull and the useless, due to an excess of information.

The Boring, the Useless and the Overabundant

As Baudrillard suggests in The Ecstasy of Communication (1988), if the world has become so indifferent and resistant to meaning, we must be more indifferent than it, and rejoice in the details of the insignificant in a sort of exorcism. Various examples support my hypothesis. Many groups are popping up here and there, collectivities of people that have chosen to turn to the uninteresting and the useless as an act of (sometimes cynical) protest against the surges of information claiming to be most interesting and useful. For example, the Dull Men's Club website⁶ offers a look into the (non)activities and philosophies of its members, real men who have chosen to remain/return to the uninteresting as they do not care to take part in the world's desire for excessive excitement and hype. Another is Dutch media theorist Geert Lovink's concept of the "Data Dandy", describing those who shamelessly likes to promote their unproductive and overspecialized collections of trivia not to transmit information but rather just to show off⁷. Other instances include the (un)purposefulness

⁶ <<http://www.dullmen.com>>.

⁷ For more details on the Data Dandy, consult ADILKNO's Media Archive (1998), also available on the Web: <<http://thing.desk.nl/bilwet/adilkno/TheMediaArchive/index.html>>.

behind Kenji Kawakami's International Chindogu Society⁸ where members collect and invent a weird assortment of 'unuseless' inventions that could make life easier but don't (and can't), as well as the more serious academic stance of the Journal of Mundane Behavior⁹, which publishes sociological papers on the topic of very mundane events as opposed to the usual focus on the spectacular and the deviant. Most importantly, and to limit the scope of this investigation, I will argue the case of the Japanese teenage *Otaku*, who, alike the virtual Data Dandy, thrives amongst the perceived uselessness of the excessive amount of information he gathers about his favourite stars or topics.

Like the consumer who 'needs' an always excessive amount of things (the latest fashion, household gadget, technology, etc.), the *Otaku* 'needs' to be excessively informed. That is how he has chosen to deal with information overload: by jumping heads first into all of it. As if inspired by Baudrillard's argument that pleasure in a meaningless world takes the form of utter fascination and cool giddiness ("Ecstasy" 25), the *Otaku* ("obsessed fan") submits to the great presence of information in ecstasy, not looking for richness and meaning, but instead for the euphoria of its superficiality, the artifice of its infinite details. Not interested in categorizing its content value as 'good' or 'bad', 'worthy' or 'not worthy' of interest, the *Otaku* accumulates and values information only for its possession. They have not panicked in front of the informational onslaught: they

⁸ <<http://www.chindogu.com>>.

⁹ <<http://www.jmb.org>>.

instead thrive on it. They have successfully reinjected meaning and interest into the meaningless by caring too much about what most people can't care about.

The Otaku is not opposed to the system - he may go against the grain in terms of his use of information and in what he turns his attention to, but he is the embodied dream of capitalism and consumerism as promoted by the Information Society. The Otaku over-consumes and is over-involved with information, over fulfilling the wishes of the media industry. Caricaturing the stereotype of the good Japanese, the Otaku's behaviour becomes a critique of the unbearable social demand imposed on Japanese youngsters for learning mounds of rational facts and information by using the same efficiency to accumulate the useless instead. In this lies the appeal of the Otaku in relation to information overload and boredom: while he has a desire to accumulate as much information as possible, his strategic focus on the irrelevant and the dull for his data collection (while it can incite boredom and incomprehension in the eye of others) succeeds in reappropriating it as his own, making the dull meaningful to him in a new way. Purposefully, through his own personal over-interest, the Otaku reinjects intrigue and excitement into the dull to serve his own purposes: to obtain the facts that others don't know of yet, to regain some sort of control over information through an absolute collection, and to acquire an identity through the dull data itself. The information-fetishism performed by the Otaku confirms my contention that beyond boredom, one (and society) is able to fully adapt and thrive on the onslaught of information overload.

Chapter One: Overload and Boredom

This chapter will examine how the concept of information overload and boredom has been framed in the late 20th century. The obscene quantities of (non)information passing by so quickly that one has little time to absorb or understand any of it, the (contagious) throw-away/instant-gratification philosophy of the American consumer society, the flood of data provided by the various ultra-efficient communication networks, and the apparent general withdrawal of meaning and deep significance are all believed to be guilty of devaluing the quality of (post)modern man's life and of the information he encounters. Information overload will be explored briefly from three perspectives: how people desire to acquire always more information, yet worry about not being able to effectively deal with its sheer amount; how people wish to be knowledgeable, yet may be confused over what actually amounts to the informative amongst the data they encounter; and finally how, despite being put on such a high pedestal in highly developed societies, much of the information available has come to be devalued and rendered meaningless and useless precisely because of its excessive presence, resulting in boredom.

Boredom will be investigated as an important sign that too much information can amount to nothing when one can't find ways to deal with it, that significance may go unnoticed amongst the redundancy and noise as a sort of revenge effect. The multiplication of media outlets, and now the Internet, have

many worried about the future well being of society if all this information cannot be brought back down to a manageable size and made meaningful again.

The (not-so-great) Quality of Life in the Information Society

Information, under the guise of news, adverts, images, insights, facts and data in general, is easily transmitted by today's various media and growing in quantity and availability (or more precisely, becoming omnipresent) in Western societies and in other highly industrialized cultures such as Japan. In their everyday lives, the people of these cultures encounter and have the possibility to access more information than ever before about any and all topics, thanks to the multiplication of sophisticated information-delivery tools such as fax machines, the Internet, Web-enabled cell phones, personalized news services, email, chat groups, and specialty TV channels, amongst many others. Such technological advancements have allowed for improvements in sharing and distributing valuable information and knowledge quickly and relatively cheaply amongst whole collectivities, even the whole world, for the potential benefit of all. Most people can now be 'connected', and can hope to better communicate & understand each other as the golden Global Village and its networks promise to provide all with all there is to know. In its omnipresence, information may as well be the most important (if overused) word of the past 20 years: after all, is this not the 'Age of Information'? The Internet has been declared the 'Information Highway'; "You Are What You Know", claims CNN's slogan, not so secretly

promising that the more one knows, the more likely one is to lead a successful life. Residents of these 'Information Societies'¹ are said to love information; they desperately crave it (Waddington; Abbott, 21). They want and they can be informed about any and all topics of their choosing. The possession of (the 'right') information has always been a great source of individual and social power, and now that it is available in such abundance, this is even more so.

Such is the way proponents of the new information technologies frame their arguments for the need to be informed, governments, high-tech companies and non-profit organizations alike. Hence, there seems to be an increasing, even 'urgent' need to distribute all and any information to as many people as possible, and to archive and 'preserve' all of these bits of imminent knowledge for the good of generations to follow. Ads from Internet service providers push the need for all to be connected at an always higher-speed, as if faster download time equaled access to better or more rewarding information. Speed certainly promises the 'latest' information. People brag about their hip technological gadgets; some have even mastered the art of driving and carrying simultaneous conversations in both their cellular and car phones (it is quite chic to be over-connected). Efforts are being made to "bridge the gap" between the info haves and have-nots by, for

¹ Throughout this text, the term "Information Societies" will be used to designate North-America, most of Europe and other post-industrial countries such as Japan and Taiwan who make wide use of information technologies and the media in their everyday affairs, business, education and entertainment.

example, providing computers with Internet access to the less affluent². While access to electronic information does not come cheap and is therefore not (yet) accessible to each and all, there is nonetheless an abundance of information circulating outside those networks, be it by the newspapers, television or radio. It would be difficult to argue that members of affluent nations are 'deprived' of information in any way. I would even venture to say that the denizens of Information Societies are, quite simply, information gluttons³.

As such, many people would like to know 'everything', and so the various information sources gush with always more data⁴. A weekday edition of The

² For example, The Benton Foundation (an American public interest organization), has set up the "Digital Divide Network" that seeks to connect all American schools to the Internet. Their slogan reads: "Knowledge to help everyone succeed in the digital age" <<http://www.benton.org>>. Electronic networks are often considered the source of the best and most up-to-date information for such groups. To hear the way politicians speak of the urgent need for Internet access in schools, you would think those not yet connected will never be quite up to par with the children who are, as if books have virtually lost all of their educational capacity. Also see Pamela Wendels, "Librarian, Long an Internet Booster, Sees Clouds on Web Horizon" The New York Times, 19 April 2000: B10.

³ For more on "informational obesity", see Orrin Klapp ("Overload" 9); also David Shenk (29).

⁴ Western man's appetite for information seems infinite. Said Aldous Huxley: "[s]cience is not enough, religion is not enough, art is not enough, politics are not enough, nor is

New York Times is said to contain more information than a person living in 17th century England would have encountered during their lifetime (Abbott 1). The U.S. government's National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) holds billions of pieces of paper, kilometers of shelved books as archivists heroically strive to gather of all the official records of a large, information-obsessed country⁵. NARA is probably still hard at work cataloguing the 40 million email messages sent within the White House during the Clinton/Gore administration (Craine)⁶. The contents of the Internet, practically non-existent just 10 years ago, are said to increase at the rate of 7.3 million pages per day (Lyman and Varian "2000"). Reuters produced 27,000 pages of information per second in 1997 (Waddington)⁷; this number can only be higher today. A study by the School of

love, nor is duty, nor is action however disinterested, nor, however sublime, is contemplation. Nothing short of everything will really do" (qtd. in Abbott 93).

⁵ For a great article on the impossible task facing librarians in archiving information, see "The Too-Much-Information Age: Today's Data Glut Jams Libraries and Lives" by Joel Achenbach, published in The Washington Post, 12 March 1999: A01.

⁶ NARA is responsible for storing and preserving this unfathomable mountain of data essentially forever, whether the contents of these messages be "How about lunch?", a speech draft, or more official resolutions.

⁷ "Statistics from Reuters (1997) show that every day 20 million words of technical information are recorded. In human terms this means (assuming a reading of 1,000 words per minute) it would take 6 weeks of 8-hour days to read. Upon completion, any

Information Management and Systems at the University of California at Berkeley estimates that stored information in print, film, magnetic and optical media has grown in size by 30% per year between 1999 and 2002 – not including TV, radio and Internet contents (Lyman and Varian “2003”). More and more individuals have the ability and freedom to create and publish their own texts thanks to the new technologies, their output only adding to the mass of messages already issued by magazines, newspapers, specialty channels and commercial websites.

As the populace seeks to become ultra-efficient in producing, learning, sorting and saving as much information as possible, it is soon obvious that there is more data out there than people know what to do with, more details than any one person ever needs to know. This apparent oversupply of information is highly problematic at best, and has been blamed by sociologists and cultural critics alike for “causing” much damage to society in general. Social problems said to result from the general unruliness of available data and the overflow of details spewing into people’s daily lives include stress and info-fatigue, mass confusion, loss of social and shared meanings, even violence, but most worryingly, as will be discussed later, a growing sense of apathy and indifference amongst the population. Some consider information overload as the negative but inevitable outcome of the ideals of progress and modernity, which call for the

sense of accomplishment would be quickly dulled with the realization that they have fallen - five and a half years behind!” (Waddington).

always newer and the better to replace the old and outdated⁸. Critics have long blamed the conspicuous consumption habits of affluent nations for the increasing spread of meaningless data that contributes to the situation⁹. Just as the consumption-obsessed, media-fed¹⁰ subjects of (post)modern societies are

⁸ "How do we define progress? Americans have always been enthralled by technology and often identify novelty in invention as synonymous with progress. The rapid growth of the Internet has served as the capstone of invention in communications, ushering in a faster, more efficient world, filled with convenience and ease. [...] However, when technology outpaces our ability to use it to advance social and political goals, then society suffers." The Digital Beat, 30 March 2000. <<http://www.benton.org>>.

⁹ For example, sociologist Orrin Klapp understands the increase in social noise (the term he uses to describe useless information) as being the result of Western societies being much too open to a philosophy of indiscriminate modernism (anything "new" being seen as better than the "old"), contagious commercialism and consumerism, on top of the proliferation of media outlets ("Opening" 169).

¹⁰ Returning to the idea of gluttony, "the emotional malnourishment mass communication provides may be likened to those refined white breads, cereals, and other foods which have had some of their food value removed. People eat, not knowing what they are missing." (Klapp "Collective Search" 130). Many accounts talk of information overload as if Western societies were in need of a good diet. Post-modern man is informationally obese, and his thirst for "knowledge" can never be satiated, hence the increase in entertaining ("refined") but often meaningless ("no nutritional value") information, fast food for wearied brains. Very interestingly, in the book Boredom, Self and Culture (1984), Sean Desmond Healy discusses boredom as being the "equivalent

driven to fill their lives with (oftentimes) pointless activities and materials objects in order to keep up with the trends, they (as I) would argue that the same is being done of information. Now considered as a goods itself, information as a commodity is more than ever to be had for its promises of power and status. Like the sports cars of the yuppies, the latest information has become a hot commodity, even a powerful agent in fuelling economic growth. 'Xtra! Xtra! Be the first one to hear THIS!' When information is presented and sold as knowledge, it must be 'new' (or at least give a good time) to gain in currency (Rodriguez C3). As a commodity, information can also be easily replaced once it has served its purpose; an opinion shared today can easily be disregarded tomorrow in view of new facts, the channel can always be zapped, the link does not have to be visited¹¹.

Intellectuals and critics also point their finger at technology as the very cause of the flood of information. The "gathering cultural storm, [the] information hurricane" (Achenbach A01) generated by the new technologies of communications, combined with our thirst for being better informed seem to have

(to) antihunger, not nonhunger – a revulsion against, a psychic anorexia, steaming from the increasing presence of such unpalatable morsels of pseudo-knowledge" (60).

¹¹ Says Robert Abbott: "My problem is with the compulsion to try and read everything. It is essential to try, but the intention to read up all about a subject is rapidly displaced by a new book, which then is itself so absorbing that its subject in return must be pursued. In the end this is a recipe for Jack-of-all-trades-and-master-of-none mind." (21).

made of data a force out of human control. More distressing is that this hurricane also appears to be out of technology's control. Personalized electronic agents that seek and sort out data may not be effective because they do not necessarily restrict how much information one can receive -- they just make it easier to gather more data on particular topics. Electronic storage solutions ease the problem of preserving large quantities of data only for so long, as hardware and software become obsolete in a matter of years, and information needs to be labouriously transferred again to newer formats so it is not lost¹². Technical solutions to information overload often only exacerbate the very problem they try to solve¹³.

¹² Edward Tenner's book, Why Things Bite Back - Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences (1996), is a great read on the increasing fragility of information. Tenner fears that future historians will have more information on the Victorian era than on the late 20th century: paper decays over decades, but videotapes have a life of barely 20 years; worse, the Internet is instantly obsolescent as more and more URL links lead to "Error 401: this page cannot be found on our servers". Other articles on the difficulty of preserving the digital present: "Books To Bytes: The Electronic Archive" (Katie Hafner, The New York Times, 8 April 1999: G1); "Archives and Obsolescence: Paper Seems Eternal Compared with High-Tech Storage that might Leave Data 'Stranded in Past'" (Mark Johnson, The Montreal Gazette, 6 May 2000).

¹³ Part of the problem is caused by the fact that technological advances have made the retrieval, production and distribution of information so much easier than in earlier periods. This has reduced the natural selection processes (personal circumstances,

Added to this technological apprehension and inadequacy, the absolute velocity of data is only intensifying the difficulty in dealing with an overload of mediated (and increasingly electronic) information. French technology critic Paul Virilio warns that with each new medium comes a dramatic acceleration of the pace and state of affairs of human life, as the increasing amount, detail and concentration of information “forces” people to assimilate more, and more immediately, says Virilio (“Open Sky” 95)¹⁴. Others, including Marshall McLuhan (“Understanding Media”) and Walter Benjamin (“Work of Art”) likewise maintained that with each new technology come more demands on our senses and sensibilities, on our consciousness, this affecting our being in the world¹⁵. As

geographic location, general availability of materials, production and distribution costs, education, or language, etc.) that would otherwise have kept all but the most important information from being published. The result is an explosion in often irrelevant, unclear and inaccurate data fragments, making it ever more difficult to see the forest through the trees. “These restrictions are being removed, for good or ill, and before long almost all significant information will be equally available throughout the industrialized world.” (Abbott 137). And so will the insignificant.

¹⁴ Who can deny the impact of the Internet in this acceleration in the amount and availability of information? It is shocking to recall it has been part of the mainstream for little more than 5 years!

¹⁵ McLuhan explained that technology’s effects do not occur in our reaction to it, but rather by altering our patterns of perception without (conscious) resistance from our part (18). Human experience is said to thin as a result of this ever-increasing speed of

time and space are being dramatically reduced by technology (Baudrillard; Kroker; McLuhan; Toffler; Virilio), it appears that the information provided by the messages, images and facts encountered daily are going by so fast and in such a disorderly fashion that one no longer have the appropriate time to understand their associations and assign meanings (Benjamin 238)¹⁶. Degraded by the speed of mediation, meaning, if it occurs at all, will probably arrive too late. One will have already surfed away from the page, has already moved on to something else, has always already changed the channel. Many are sounding the alarm –

interaction between ourselves, our bodies and with the environment; as we extend our senses more and more personally with the demands of cool multimedia, absorbed by the technology, comes a loss of anima and a certain numbness (42). Benjamin maintained that when watching a film, for example, “[t]he spectator’s process of association is [...] interrupted by their constant, sudden change” (238). This “shock effect” leads to a different state of attention: distraction in lieu of concentration. Before mechanized reproductions, “[t]he public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one”, explained Benjamin (241).

¹⁶ The instantaneous perception afforded by electronic media, he argued, mingles all levels of culture and literacy by presenting information all at once instead of in a linear fashion, and this may affect people’s perception and understanding (Benjamin 238). The Librarian of the US Congress, James Billington, for example blames the Internet for shortening our attention spans, destroying the English language “with its diction-mangling chat rooms”, and is “inherently destructive of memory” (Achenbach A01).

this new type of (dis)information is said to be “a new and major risk for humanity stemming from multimedia and computers”; it has to do with “a certain [poisonlike?¹⁷] choking of the senses, a loss of control over reason of sorts” (Virilio “Speed”) because, simply put, there is too much. “Maybe when the slope ahead gets impossibly steep, acceleration gives way to paralysis” posits James Gleick in Faster (276).

Sociologist Orrin E. Klapp has written extensively on the topic of information overload, and his argument generally cements that of many others who have dealt with the subject of information overload over the past 25 years. In his book Information Overload and Boredom (1986), he maintains that, due to its sheer quantity, information is losing its value, its meaning and its importance, and is becoming nothing but noise (also Healy 68):

Suspicion of communication and [...] the need to discount it are expressed in words like babble, ballyhoo, blab, bull, b.s., chatter, chit-chat, idle talk, gossip, verbiage, rhetoric, puffery, hype, glitz flimflam - a vocabulary of disenchantment. (Klapp “Inflation” 18)

¹⁷ If we follow Orrin Klapp’s “Value of Information” scale (“Opening” 47), it seems we have in fact long passed the levels of abundance (state of luxury, of the privileged) and overload (akin to a feeling of indigestion), and have reached that of pollution. Information, as noise, has turned bad and can become a social poison, he warns.

Klapp describes how an overload of information causes data to become a burden to those who seek it as, ironically, the more of it there is, the less useful it becomes. Signs and symbols proliferate at a rate where it becomes impossible to give them any adequate attention or meaning. The noisy, info-full environment has made of the receptive mind "a poorly organized photo montage" ("Opening" 9), where "[p]erfectly good information becomes a glut, in amount and rate of production beyond any person's time and ability to digest", deplores Klapp ("Inflation" 170). His dystopian outlook on the Information Society describes a world where people have to continuously fight to find meaning amongst an ever-growing tide of useless information, at the risk of remaining passive and apathetic, and of leading meaningless lives. (Post)modern society "is a world where chaotic events continually defy orderly interpretation", he laments ("Overload" 127)¹⁸.

¹⁸ Klapp's first writings, dating from the late 60s, explored the seeming 'weakening of meaning' and the confusion over one's sense of identity. Starting in the mid-20th century, an increasing search for meaning has taken place in modern society, he argued. In countless novel ways outside the conventional avenues of politics, economics, welfare & education, individuals have looked for something better, or more meaningful, behind the likes of fashion trends, religious and secular cults, and alternative lifestyles. Rituals and traditions were being left behind in favour of the new. Behind this chaotic search for meaning and identity, Klapp noted a malady, a poverty of symbols ("Collective Search" 129). As cause, he blamed: a dehumanization of work as machines replaced man; a thickening of bureaucracy; the extreme impersonality of social

Such dramatizations of the possible pitfalls of Information Societies may be excessive, but the sense of being unable to cope with an always increasing amount of data has been well documented¹⁹. While people crave and demand to be always more informed, they also worry that there is simply too much available and that they will not be able to make the “right” choices and gather the “right” information, the information needed to lead productive work, family and play lives (Abbott 129). Evidently, it has become impossible to keep the quickly increasing

interactions in larger cities; the loss of “roots” due to an increasing social mobility (as people move from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, from city to city more often); a pile-up of objective (or meaningless) information from an increasing amount of sources; and an explosion of expectations from the increasing presence of mass media. (“Collective Search” 328). Later in his writings, Klapp attributed this growing sense of meaninglessness more precisely to these last two items, together forming a problematic “high noise condition” (“Overload” 115). Information, he described, is a signal, a communication sent and received by various parties, but too much of it can blur feedback, confuse meaning and interfere with other social communication channels (such as the workplace, schools and church).

¹⁹ A simple Internet search with the keywords “information overload” uncovers thousands of documents. My favourite published books on the topic include Robert Abbott’s The World as Information (1999); James Gleick’s Faster (1999); Orrin E. Klapp’s Overload and Boredom (1986); David Shenk’s Data Smog (1997); and Richard Saul Wurman’s Information Anxiety (1989).

amounts of data communicated by the various media under any sort of real control, be it personal, social, cultural or technological²⁰.

Concerns about having to deal with an excess of data are very real, and they underline the stress, anxiety and apprehension that surround the notion that the denizens of over-connected, post-modern Information Societies are suffering from information overload²¹. But this is hardly a new concern. Says Barnaby Rich:

²⁰ The exponential growth of information output as affecting modern culture has been recognized in sociological research since at least the beginning of the 20th century (Klapp "Opening" 41). At the time (a mere one hundred years ago!), few had experienced the conveniences of the telegraph and the telephone; a few knew of movies and radio, and no one had ever heard of televisions, VCRs, CDs, or MP3s. Certainly, no one would have imagined satellites beaming images across continents, computers spluttering out infinite calculations, or receiving emails from a robot. However, within a few decades, the amount of mediated communications, as well as people's appetite for it, had grown tenfold, as (post)modern society developed into one where consumer goods and information were (quite suddenly, it seems) in abundance. This abrupt increase lead scientists, sociologists and literary types, as well as others, to warn of the dangers of possible oversaturation and overload by information, and this as early as the 1950's. Sociologist Georg Simmel was one of the first to notice the jaded attitude of the city dweller who could no longer "react to new situations with the appropriate energy" (qtd. in Klapp "Overload" 173).

²¹ Even the reputed Reuters information service has published several treaties on the topic, including 1997's foreboding "Dying for Information? A Report on the Effects of

One of the diseases of this age is the multiplicity of books, they doth so overcharge the world that it is not able to digest the abundance of idle matter that is everyday hatched and brought forth into the world. (qtd. in Abbott 14)

These words of caution date from 1613! And while, centuries later, the world is not in a state of crisis nor visibly suffering because of an over-availability of information, there undeniably is a spreading disenchantment, a feeling that the promise that we would all be better informed has been broken due to the presence of such an “abundance of idle matter” (ibid). It would seem that life in the Information Society might not be as expedient or as fruitful as it has been made to be by the promoters of the new media.

The Devaluation of Information by Its Excess

“I’ve seen everything but I’ve heard nothing. You know what I mean?”

- *Anonymous* (Morley 56)

As data (re)circulates through the various media, residents of Information Societies are likely to be bombarded with more unwanted facts and advice coming from all sides of the culturally-mediated spectrum than to receive or find the piece of information they truly need or want. For example, websites, sprouting like weeds, provide a never-before variety of topics and opinions,

Information Overload in the UK and Worldwide” <<http://www.cni.org/regconfs/1997/ukoln-content/repor~13.html>>. Oddly, they list “fewer secretaries employed to protect people from information due to downsizing” as one of the “causes” of information overload.

personal and professional, but whose authenticity and accuracy are sometimes difficult to trace or to trust. Pseudo-news, pseudo-facts about pseudo-personalities and pseudo issues abound (plus, who has the time to double-check a source these days?). Information, when seen as a commodity, may even come to be seen as just more of the same, “of equal value and emotional weight – infotainment/edutainment/advertorials – just another interchangeable species of ambient noise” (Abbott 130) that are more easily and more instantly perceived and superficially understood by the overloaded media user because of its familiarity, but also fails to command affection or lasting interest. Irrked by the overabundant and the repetitive information cluttering he/r precious, limited time, one can chose to ignore what they perceive as useless in favour of other options. Just as consumers become bored by the durable goods they so actively seek by losing interest in them soon after they are purchased and possessed (Klapp “Overload” 45), the efficient media-user’s once-preferred information and facts will quickly be relegated to the junk heap as soon as even better, more interesting choices present themselves.

The perceived lack of emphasis on the quality of content in favour of speed and widespread access are what Klapp and others really fear and deplore. The presence of growing amounts of “information” and the widespread use of new technologies have not ensured that the content of the communicated messages have become any richer or more meaningful than before. Nor can it be implied that more outlets for information distribution entail more or better

knowledge, or that its widespread access implies a more intelligent population. It can only mean that more data is being made available. And so the information revolution has brought, along with the promise of higher knowledge, loads of details recounting the lives of wannabe stars, the numerous web diaries ('blogs') chronicling the very mundane lives of very ordinary people (and their pets), and the loathsome but necessary reruns needed to fill the dead air of 500+ channels.

At the center of this thesis is the information overload critics' belief that such an explosion of dubious data in this 'Too-much-information-age' has left many confused over the true value and nature of what actually is the informative, having difficulty in differentiating relevant information from extraneous data. As the most central and vital substance of the Information Society, many readily assume the available data to be suffused with the capacity to inform, educate, offer wisdom and promote knowledge. Problematically, the word "information" itself has been so overused that it has become difficult to pin down its precise meaning. Originally used to describe the "action of informing" and the "communication of instructive knowledge", the term has since WWII come to be used to refer to "something told or communicated" to basically "anything [...] sent over an electric or mechanical channel" (Wurman 38). The term now stretches to encompass news and facts, and is said to be provided by the printed word, TV programming, electronic data, the Internet and email, technological, scientific & professional writings, bureaucratic paperwork, and the list goes on. The noises of the city, its signs and billboards are also seen as information asking to be seen

and heard, whether it be a speed limit sign or an advertisement promoting the merits of the latest improvements in diaper absorbency. Others, such as British scholar Robert Abbott, suggest that part of the problem is that “the whole world itself is information” (2, 13)²². The word “information”, when used so liberally, becomes applied to things which do not necessarily inform anyone of anything, and there lies the problem for Klapp and his cohorts: useless data has been allowed to ‘pose’ as information. “Much of what we assume to be information is actually just data, or worse”, points out Richard Saul Wurman, author of Information Anxiety (38). Raw data can be, but is not necessarily, information, and unless it can be made to inform and be relevant from one’s perspective, he concludes, it has no inherent value (Wurman 38)²³.

²² In order to understand and know the world, we need explanations and representations of it through the aid of maps, scientific measures, and words that describe it. All this, suggests Abbott, can be said to be information about the world, and ultimately, “makes up” the world itself (13).

²³ James Billington, Head Librarian of the US Congress suggests this formula as to how data can become of importance: “pieces of raw data, when mildly processed, can turn into information, which then, through much added effort and value, can rise to the level of knowledge – which is finally the foundation for wisdom”. But with all the chat rooms, Web surfing and general data overload, he suggests we rarely go above the level of information, wondering if “our society is basically motion without memory - which of course, is the clinical definition of insanity.” (qt. in Armitage).

This critical standpoint sees all such 'valueless' data as cluttering the various informational spaces of society, and, as Klapp explained, contributes to informational overload by becoming noisy interference to efficient knowledge gathering and effective communication. As such, critics claim it has become increasingly difficult for individuals to extract the useful from the useless, the meaningful from the meaningless, to distinguish between knowledge and knowing, because of this overload. They also assume that an overload of information necessarily corrupts all available information by hiding or hindering access to "good" or "more useful" information. Critics worry that people will find it increasingly difficult to piece scattered data together into coherent, informative messages, and ultimately, valuable knowledge as individuals living in the fast-paced Information Societies are said to have little time to pause and interpret and/or understand all of the information and the many details they encounter daily (Armitage). They tend to believe that people need to consistently "fight" to uncover what is truth and what is fact from what is mere babble, and worry that too many details have affected the emotional well-being of persons in Information Societies, as they are left breathless by the impossibility of keeping up with all the data from any field. They above all deplore the fact that things and information have become equally replaceable, that they are scattered, no longer precious or related to social persons in important ways, that the everyday has been stripped of its domestic, personal qualities in the rush to acquire more (Healy 68; Adilkno "Fatal Attraction"). They worry that the superficial values

promoted by Information Societies, (compounded by the sheer volume of data) have promoted a certain sense of meaninglessness in the images and information secreted by the media. The unimportant, the useless and the boring abound.

The Boring Banality of Postmodern Reality

“Man is bored not only when there is nothing to do,
but also when there is too much, or when everything
waiting to be done has lost its luster”
- *Geoffrey Clive* (qtd. in Healy 42)

I would now like to explore in more details this idea that manifestations of the “boring” and the “meaningless” are on the rise in Information Societies. As was alluded to earlier, boredom and the multiplication of the dull are believed to be unfortunate social manifestations that result from information overload²⁴. I

²⁴ In traditional studies on the topic of boredom throughout the ages, as in Kuhn’s The Demon of Noontide (1976) or Patricia Meyer Spacks’s Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind (1995), boredom is usually believed to be the resulting state of not having enough choices as to what to do with oneself. Victorian housewives may have been bored because of the stagnant monotony of their home lives and of the various social restraints imposed on them (Meyer Spacks 64). Teenagers may declare themselves bored in an act of rebellion against the tastes of their parents. Other studies such as David Morley’s Family Television, Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure (1986) or Joke Hermes’s “Media, Meaning and Everyday Life” (1991) portray modern

agree with Kuhn, Klapp and Sean Desmond Healy that boredom derives from underlying cultural conditions (Healy 21). It is a socially constructed phenomenon: "once named, boredom is not just a state of mind, a state of feeling, but a *concept*, a *role*, a socially constructed reality" (Klapp "Overload" 33).

In her book Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind, Patricia Meyer Spacks reminds us that the concept of boredom is a social construction of a rather recent vintage. While literature studies trace the notion all the way back to antiquity, and the higher notion of "ennui" emerged in the French language in the 13th century, the verb "to bore" only appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary "after 1750" and the noun "boredom" only in 1864 (12,14)²⁵. That the idea of boredom emerged, like the novel, in the wake of early modernity's development of the concept of leisure is an interesting phenomena. Earlier on, ennui was thought to be mainly of theological concern, an unusual malady outside of priesthood and of intellectual circles. Free from the necessity to labor to survive,

housewives as bored by their being stuck in the suburbs and reading magazines to pass the time; etc. But this is not the same type of boredom that we are exploring here. The boredom that concerns us is one that is clearly brought about by the dilemma of having too many choices. Orrin Klapp even argues that boredom is now more likely to be caused by overload than by underload ("Overload" 3).

²⁵ The word "interesting" appeared within 2 years of the word "bore". Both belong to that "curious class of verbs and adjectives which describe not so much the objective qualities and activities of things as the effects they produce on us" (Healy 18),

but limited in the accepted roles and activities they could engage in, members of modern higher society found themselves confronted with a new situation: that of being bored. The rich classes of the Victorian era might have acted bored to show off the overabundance of their leisure time, just as today's teenagers and Gen X's slackers act bored and appear lethargic to show off the overabundance of options for entertainment or life options available to them. As Klapp underlines, boredom as a social role "might carry the obligation that one *ought* to be bored in certain company or circumstance" ("Overload" 33). Most interesting of all, there also have been efforts made to connect origins of the verb "to bore" to the French word "*bourre*", which means "padding" or "stuffing" (Meyer Spacks 13). All the more reasons to link the idea of boredom to the notion of information overload.

In his superb anthology of Western literature The Demon of Noontide (1976), Reinhard Kuhn skillfully explores the disenchanting state of "being bored" in personal, cultural and social situations over the ages, classifying its various forms under such categories as "acedia" (lack of interest), "tristitia" (dejection, despair), "melancholy" (feeling blue), "spleen" (physical evidence of boredom) and "chronic ennui", as if these various forms of boredom were true beasts that, throughout history, have threatened to eat away at the souls of humans. Boredom, as Kuhn explains, is an apathetic state where "the world is emptied of its significance. Everything is seen as if filtered through a screen. What is filtered out and lost is precisely the element that gives meaning to existence" (12). A book becomes a string of words; music deteriorates into a series of notes; a

painting remains an assortment of colours. Most commonly, boredom is a momentary circumstance that will eventually drive one to create or take action in order to fill the emptiness of one's life, but in more serious form, boredom might debilitate and render one's spirits sterile (375). Either way, for Kuhn, boredom is an ever-present aspect of people's lives as they struggle their whole lives to find balance between "frenetic action and deadly ennui" (377).

Towards the end of his treatise, Kuhn mentions that the apathy that often accompanies boredom is much more present in modern days, and seems to be more problematic than before²⁶. More than casual moments of disinterest and inactivity, boredom has become a social manifestation that the Renaissance as well as Modern eras have tried to overcome through "passion, adventure, artistic endeavors, political activity, religious striving, and scientific experimentation" (377). However, faced by the failure of history to come up with a lasting solution to boredom, a 'cure' for this apparently increasing apathy, Kuhn resolves that the postmodern subjects of today are left with little motivation and not much but ennui itself, despite having access to more options for education, entertainment and information sources than ever before. "We are on the verge of boredom because so much info is irrelevant, trivial, meaningless – or urgent but we can do nothing about it", concurs Klapp ("Overload" 9).

²⁶ While it is impossible for anyone to demonstrate with certitude that there is more boredom now than ever, or that there is more or less boredom in less or more developed societies, it certainly does not show signs of wearing off in affluent societies.

Such seems to be the troublesome ennui of the Information Society, a society in which subjects, battling against an ever growing tide of data, seem prone to give up and become passive and apathetic instead of fighting the noise and trivial detail impeding on their potentially more effective use and enjoyment of the various media. Kuhn and Klapp, not unlike postmodern theory, seem to imply that the Information Society has become boring in spite of itself, in spite of its claims to the most exciting data, the latest facts and the better technologies²⁷. They contend that constant inundation with information is bound to supply more banality than knowledge, and has led to nothing less than the attrition of meaning and loss of deeper social significance in people's everyday lives. They understand the phenomenon of boredom as a result of the degradation of

²⁷ Klapp believes modernism and its emphasis on the notion of progress and consumerism have lead to unhealthy and never before attained levels of boredom in society because its ideology holds the uncritical assumption that everything new must be "good" and better than what was, than what has now become boring ("Opening" 74). This has lead to an uncontrollable multiplication of news, events, fashions, trends, and technologies, all presented and urged upon the masses as being "information for their own good", hence the confused and unsatisfied state of a modern man always wanting "more". This has come at the cost of sacrificing "value". The all-too-easily bored urban Westerner's search for high sensations only seems to lead him to ever deeper levels of boredom, thrill-seeking a variety of stimuli to escape from the grips of an ennui that threatens as soon as he sits down to relax, reproves Klapp ("Overload" 42-44).

information; they deplore the increasing entropy of social life in spite – and more importantly on account – of its large information load²⁸.

When Information Societies develop such noisy and meaning hindering characteristics, its communications become boring in spite of a high level of variety and entertainment, the fundamental reason being that it is hard to extract meaning. “The price of eternal vigilance is indifference”, pointed out McLuhan (30). In a strange paradox, where it seems impossible for one to be bored by so many goodies being made available to the masses, it does appear that the bigger the media output, the more chance there is for the population to suffer of a syndrome resembling museum fatigue. Eyes tend to gloss over with boredom despite being presented the most fascinating objects, the most exciting tales, for the simple reason that there is too much to be seen all at once. A defeatist point of view also understands boredom as coming from recognizing a small chance of hearing anything really interesting. The vast, tangled web of information available today in a strange way becomes a measure of society's meaninglessness for our critics, who can no longer see the forest for the trees.

²⁸ “To cope with such overload – trying to turn the noise back into information, information into decisions, and facts into meanings – becomes the unending task of citizens as the flood of news, entertainment, education, claims, and “pitches” pours upon them. The price includes stress, delays in taking decision, frustration, a growing sense of absurdity, living in the front end of one’s mind while getting out of touch with oneself, and growing boredom with the mounting heap of information which, however accurate, does not add up to meaning.” (Klapp “Opening” 174).

Their arguments also entertain the idea that people have been deprived of some psychological or emotional payoff, and seem to be left groping in an endless search for something more meaningful in “a wasteland of uninteresting and unwelcomed stimuli” (Klapp “Collective Search” 103). Boredom as a social symptom is said to affect a large number of people, some transitorily, some more deeply; and is as well accused of bringing about social concerns ranging from the emergence of a generation of apathetic slackers to an increase in criminal activity²⁹.

²⁹ In fact, language referring to overload and boredom in sociological and literary texts often describe them in terms of illness: for example, “overload” is linked to indigestion and overdose; “boredom” to depression, spleen and lethargy. Such terms seem to imply that the sensory apparatus of the receiver is diseased, such as when Klapp describes other states akin to boredom, including *satiation* (as in reaching a limit of intake), *habituation*, (a loss of responsiveness to novelty due to repetition) and *desensitization* (becoming jaded; losing sensitivity to increasing stimuli) (“Overload” 38). Other pathologies said to be “caused” by too much information include anxiety, poor decision-making, difficulties in memorizing and remembering, and reduced attention span (Reuters; Shenk 36). Others directly link boredom to more serious social outcomes. Boredom’s ‘victims’ are said to suffer from health problems and eating disorders; are seemingly more prone to promiscuous sex, to loss of productivity at work, depression, suicide attempts, drug abuse and various addictions. These victims are also prey to acts of vandalism, crime and dropping out of school, etc. The list is long. For a look at this ‘crisis’, see <<http://www.boringinstitute.com>>.

More than a negative symptom of information overload, boredom can also be considered as a tactic used to deal with it. From this more proactive stance, the decision (conscious or not) to perceive things as boring is said to serve as a way to control information overload by limiting one's intake of data. In this sense, boredom takes on the role of shield, as barrier against the noise. Such a defensive strategy momentarily helps immunize one from information pollution, noisy communications and other such "bad" media effects (Klapp "Overload" 70)³⁰ by refusing to pay attention to them. In this sense, boredom is evidence of not an apathetic body, but rather of one that is actively eliminating the superfluous, and wanting to concentrate on fewer details, hoping to find more relevance and interest there (Klapp "Overload" 36). However, this perspective does not eliminate the troublesome supposition that much of the information made available to the citizens of Information Societies is not worthy of people's time and interest, and should be simply dismissed as boring.

Wanting to reinvest value and meaningfulness to the loads of information made available and distributed by the media industry, the critics of information overload call for a slow down of the informational and technological rush. Some

³⁰ Again, medical terminology is oft used. Boredom as a form of insulation against information overload, is said to be a kind of "psychic callous": post-modern man is sometimes said not that have the choice but to build up a certain immunity to infotoxicity in order to keep sane from the relentless noise of the media (Klapp "Opening" 54; O'Tate).

insist that individuals take the time to be reacquainted with their neighbours, and put the burden on social institutions such as churches and schools to re-emphasize the importance of ceremony and symbolic gestures over the mass consumption of information and media. They urge that things and messages be scrutinized for qualities other than their being newer, bigger, faster, cheaper, easier to access or more powerful³¹. Proposed solutions to information overload (other than avoidance through boredom) run the gamut from the silly to the ridiculous. David Shenk's otherwise excellent Data Smog (1997) disappointingly ends with such foolish recommendations as "turning off your TV" (185) and "avoiding the use of cell-phones" (187). Canadian psychologist Lawrence LaFave argued that people would be better off taking insensitivity classes as a protective buffer for the noise, movement and crowding of big cities. Being too sensitive to information overload was said to "cause ulcers, high blood pressure, allergies, asthma and failure of work" (qtd. in Klapp "Opening" 166). Orrin Klapp even absurdly suggests the creation of fenced areas (a "mosaic of lifestyles") shared exclusively by people of similar interests and beliefs in order for them to

³¹ Such characteristics are often attributed to the information made available by high-tech communication technologies and the Internet, and are presented to the masses as such – bigger, louder, better, more. Melanie Swalwell, of the University of Sydney, Australia, discussed the way progress is sometimes represented as an augmentation of the senses ("Hyperaesthesia: Sensory Concurrence and New Technology". Uncommon Senses Conference, Concordia University (Montreal) 27 April 2000.)

avoid exposure to extraneous, uninteresting and potentially harmful information (“Opening” 178). These suggestions may be well-intended, but such a nostalgic return to older values, to the comfort of the traditional family home and values, to the sanctity of rural life, of neighbourly closeness, is not possible nor desirable in today’s hyper-paced world.³² Avoidance and running away from information are truly not valid answers to counter the feeling of overload, and bring no satisfying solutions to our predicament of having to deal with too much information and the likelihood of boredom amidst such riches.

The apparent increase in what one might consider useless information and the shifting attitudes and positions in post-industrialized societies surely indicate that a turning point is near. At least, a revised critical perspective on the growing availability of data has become necessary, a more constructive position is needed. Faced with large amounts of information, it may be true that some occasionally give up and prefer the comforts of being bored over having to make yet another choice as to whether to like, dislike, believe or distrust yet another supposedly important message. But others have taken a stance. After all, all this information did not come about by itself – it had to be willed into being, the mess was created by the very desire of people for getting access to more information about any and all topics.

³² “Evoking “the old ways” becomes the ace up the sleeve of our latter-day moralists.

Nostalgia seems to be the only rhetorical solution some critics find permissible when faced with the crisis of meaning that is at the heart of lifestyle culture.” (Niedzviecki 36)

This thesis wants to locate a new engagement with the overload of information outside of the overindulgent consumer/victimized audience arguments presented so far, beyond the 'inescapable' postmodern boredom that is said to be on the horizon. If an overload of data can induce boredom, I want to argue that it is also the case that an overload of the boring can be cause for a renewed and reinvested interest. While all the information pouring out of too many media outlets may indeed be perceived as dull or meaningless by some, this abundance of questionable information and clutter could also be very well reclaimed as the new interesting by others. Such acts of subversion have already been witnessed in various sub-cultural groups: the Dadaists, Surrealists and Absurdist have all successfully exploited ennui in their art (Kuhn 377); more recently, rave culture indulges in the frenetic pace of techno music and its excessive, repetitive beats; Kenji Kawakami's weird assortment of *chindogu* - useless inventions that could make life easier but don't (and can't), but that are fascinating in and by themselves³³. As well, members of the Dull Men's Club³⁴ are not ashamed to admit their (un)attraction to very, very boring things such as

³³ Consult Kenji Kawakami's wonderful book, 101 Unuseless Japanese Inventions: The Art of Chindogu (1995).

³⁴ A visit to the Dull Men's website < <http://www.dullmen.com>> reveals how fascinating the dull can be. This site provides non-exciting trivia such as the history of mayonnaise, states the fact that crocodiles can't stick out their tongues and that an average box of 100 paper clips in fact only contains 98. Naturally, and as stated in The Dull Men's mission, the site is also guaranteed to be "free of exclamation marks".

watching paint dry or making a detailed list of the direction of luggage carousels in various airports (clockwise or counter-clockwise?). All of these are examples that resistance to the construct that is information overload can take the form of caring *too much* about what most people can no longer care about.

The next chapter will explore such a curious form of rejoicing in the excessively boring by investigating the case of the Japanese *Otaku*³⁵. The Otaku revels in the uselessness of the excessive amount of information he gathers about his or her favourite topics, challenging the Information critics' argument that too much (boring) information necessarily prevents media consumers from leading productive and fulfilling lives in these post-modern, over-mediated times.

³⁵ "*Otaku*" is a Japanese word and as such is spelled the same way to designate the singular or the plural.

Chapter Two: Seeking a Way Out Through Information Overload

Reinhard Kuhn hinted that boredom can be an important building block of society (289), the push that leads to the creative act. Similarly, sociologists agree with Kuhn that there is a strong possibility that it is not man's social or natural needs that lie at the root of human and social advance, but rather "man's capacity to be bored" (Healy 43). A bored person will eventually be driven to do, to find something to alleviate the situation, the resulting creation (be it tool, book, game, art or innovation), pushing culture and society along the path of progress (ibid). Confusion and boredom can be a site of potential richness, a position from which the creative has the potential to emerge (Watzlawick; Kuhn; Healy). This has been proven by the incredible feats of scientists (Einstein), authors (Hemingway, Baudelaire), artists (such as Warhol), and others who were labeled as clinically depressed yet produced fascinating works. Most interestingly, much of their works were based on the mundane itself: ordinary life, ennui and soup cans.

I thus want to explore the opportunity to intervene, uncover and challenge Information Societies' craving for information gone out-of-whack precisely through what the critics rejected as redundant, useless, dull or meaningless. Wanting to find a functional response to such apparent dysfunctional cultural situations, cultural historian Virgil Nemoianu suggests that one gives into the "reactionary urge to oppose the march of progress and to linger with the abundance of the abandoned, with the discarded and useless world of the

irrelevant and the insignificant” (xii). Nemoianu strongly advises for an investigation of this world, or the “secondary”, in order to encourage a better understanding of society as a whole and to promote fuller lives¹. In the context of this thesis, the secondary includes those messages that are considered as dull, meaningless and useless in the eyes of information overload critics and the everyday media user. Inspired by such a perspective, the arguments surrounding information overload and boredom now allow for an opening up to the pleasurable, creative and regenerative possibilities that the supposedly boring, the useless and the uninteresting have to offer.

That some actively chose to linger amongst the dull will reveal not an apathetic audience but instead uncover a new site worthy of interest. Such a position also reasserts the media consumer’s power and agency over the possible uses of the information he faces in everyday life, as I will demonstrate through the case of the Japanese Otaku. While Orin Klapp agreed that boredom is often a motive for change (“Opening” 169), he probably never phantomed that such change could ever arise from the dull itself...

¹ Defining the primary as the “center” of society, that which generally defines its overall values, shapes its structure and influences its characteristics, Nemoianu defines the secondary as everything else: the quirks and spurts of the everyday that do not necessarily agree with the overarching values of society but are nonetheless an integral and important part of it. For further details, consult Nemoianu’s A Theory of the Secondary: Literature, Progress and Reaction (1989).

Otak...who?

Somewhere in a Japanese bedroom, a young man is playing video games when he is suddenly interrupted by the beep of an incoming email message:

“[From Batman:] Did you know that Thunder Dragon and Metal Black video games employ the same game-matrix but have different graphics and scoring systems? Check it out.”

The hyperlink takes him to 17 pages worth of notes to support this hypothesis. The young man is not impressed. He has known this ever since Metal Black hit the shelves way back last Tuesday. He sends out a message to other Thunder Dragon fans, warning them to be on the lookout for a certain Batman who is pushing stale information. Oh, and by the way, would anyone be interested in a chart of The Bay City Rollers' mid-70s tour of Japan that includes all concert dates, attendance and play lists?

Close by, another 'boy' of 30 is busy scouring the celebrity magazines and the Net to find out all he can about his favorite pop star (or "*idol*"). He already knows her astrological sign, her blood type, and that she suffered from chicken pox as a child. He is on the lookout for more, hoping to find the code to break in her record company's database, where he imagines he will find choice tidbits such as the schedule of her upcoming store appearances and the menu for what she'd prefer to eat backstage. He salivates at the thought of being the first one to divulge all this information to her other fans. These young people are showing

signs of what is considered to be an otaku disposition². One might suspect them of being just a couple of geeks getting a little bit too involved in their pastimes. A closer look, however, reveals a whole lot more...

To be "Otaku" refers to being the most obsessed fan of all. Ted Ekering, a self-ascribed Otaku, defines the term as follows:

"Otaku: (Jap. slang for obsessive anti-social fanatic) n. a devoted fan of Japanese animation and manga³, usually having acquired a disturbing

² These examples were taken from Karl Taro Greenfeld's 1993 article, "The Incredibly Strange Mutant Creatures Who Rule the Universe of Alienated Japanese Zombie Computer Nerds (Otaku to You)", which contains interviews with some Otaku in the early 90s.

³ *Manga*: Japanese-style comic books. These distinctively-drawn magazines, usually published weekly or monthly and containing multiple serialized and continuing stories among their 300+ pages, are widely popular in Japan not only with children but also with businessmen, housewives, and teenagers. The styles, contents and storylines are many, varying wildly from space adventures to gay romances, from business news reports to stories about clumsy overweight cats (*Doreamon*) and pocket monsters (*Pokemon*), even to the opinions of Japan's Prime Minister. "Japan is awash with manga" remarks Frederik Schodt in *Dreamland Japan: Writing on Modern Manga* (19). "[There were] 1.9 billion manga books and magazines sold in Japan in 1995, or over 15 for every man, woman, and child in Japan". (Schodt's books are a must for anyone interested in knowing more about manga's origins, influence and creators. Another

amount of inconsequential or excessively trivial information; in other words, an obsessive anti-social fanatic." (Ekering)

A useful approach to better understand the term involves looking at its roots. "*O-taku*" means "you" or "your house", and is traditionally a very formal word used by the Japanese to approach or refer to a person they do not know well (Schodt 43). The more contemporary use of the term first appeared in 1983 in a column in Burrigo magazine by social critic Akio Wakamori as a reference to both someone who prefers to spend most of their time on their own at home to pursue their past time (Barral 29; Grassmuck "Otaku Answer" 201; Schodt 44-6), as well as to someone who is not accustomed to close friendships and therefore tries to communicate with his peers while remaining detached and somewhat distant (Kinsella "Adult Manga" 10; Grassmuck "Otaku" 201; Ho 1). This new use spread amongst TV and computer circles, as a tongue-in-cheek term to refer to each other. With time, it has come to encompass all avid collectors of Japanese pop culture and trivia at home and abroad. Accurately describing the lifestyle of these obsessive fans, the name "Otaku" represents an overall difficulty to communicate with other humans; however, as I will discuss later, with machines and inanimate things they are most at ease. While they have few real-life acquaintances, they have found a haven and many a kindred soul amongst the comforts of the computer networks.

comprehensive look at the Japanese manga industry is Sharon Kinsella's Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japanese Society (2000).

Typology of the Otaku

Similar to our own trekkies, geeks and nerds⁴, Otaku are generally considered to be boring, studious and not very well groomed. Otaku are perceived as being social recluses, too absorbed with their favorite pursuits to socialize outside their circle of interest. Mostly male and varying in age from late-teens to early thirties, Otaku are characterized as either skinny and pale, or fat from the (too) many hours spent watching *anime* (Japanese animated cartoons) and sitting at their computers, eating chips with chopsticks not to get their keyboards greasy. They don't care much about what they wear or eat. They are not very sociable and aren't able to carry a conversation for very long, having a tendency to look down at their feet when spoken to (Grassmuck "Otaku" 201; Barral 47). They are generally seen as outcasts, out-of-this-world youngsters who seem to only talk or care about some exclusive and maniacal area of interest⁵. Although many consider the term insulting and degrading, those who consider themselves Otaku wear it as a badge of honor.⁶

⁴ "Otaku mythology roughly corresponds to America's antisocial computer hacker, but the passion for obscure trivia (often traded as databases over computer networks) is attached to a wide variety of pop enthusiasms from video games, Ultraman, and manga to teen-idol singers, American hip-hop, and Hong Kong action movies." (<<http://www.altculture.com>>).

⁵ A rather frustrated girl shares with us a little "Otaku 101" from her website: "an Otaku is male; he cares little about what he wears and has matted hair; many are noted to wear thick glasses. He is usually very thin or very fat, either way from malnutrition. He doesn't talk much (unless to other Otaku in the same field) and doesn't care much if

others listen when he does talk. His room is filled with his hobby, and little else; he has little interest in people in general. He spends all his money on his hobby. He doesn't care for plot or storyline, only the characters. He buys anime magazines for the most trivial info on series that no one else might know, and not for the latest news. Sometimes talks like anime characters in actual conversation; he knows statistics of a particular character (height, bust size, shoe size, favorite brand of potato chips, etc.) better than their own, etc. (Ishikawa).

⁶ The word Otaku held grisly undertones for quite some time in Japan, and it is only since the mid-to-late 90s that it has shed most of its negative connotations. Outside of the fan and computer underground, the term was little known until it gained a much wider (and very unfortunate) exposure in the summer of 1989 when it was associated to the case of a serial killer. Violent crime is a rare phenomenon in Japan (in comparison to America) (Schodt 50), and so the news of 27 year-old Tsutomu Miyazaki's arrest for abducting, raping and killing four young girls was especially shocking news. When the police visited the accused's dingy apartment, they discovered a mammoth collection of pornographic and anime video. His small room was overflowing with them. He was, it was declared by the authorities, an anime Otaku so used to viewing the smooth bodies of anime female characters that he must have become obsessed with little girls. The ensuing murder trial was widely mediatized and led to the erroneous but widespread assumption that all Otaku were loathsome characters (Steele). The media, looking for a reason to explain this appalling crime, was quick to point its accusing finger at Otaku types, to the point where Otaku came to mean Miyazaki himself (Kinsella "Amateur Manga" 10). One of the lawyers on the case blamed the "lack of sense of reality in the information society and the isolation of youth [...] as a sickness of modern society"

(Grassmuck "Otaku" 213) and as reason behind the crime. (This type of argument is reminiscent of the "moral panic" bemoaned by the authors discussed the previous chapter.) It is possible for Miyazaki to have turned to crime because of his lack of social life, his overinvolvement in video games and pornographic slasher (gay) cartoons, this resulting in him being no longer being able to make a difference between the real world versus the fictive world of his obsession. Many believed (and still do) that Miyazaki's motivation was somehow connected to a disintegration in the social fabric, due in part to the increase in violence and nonsense on television and in computer games. However, to believe that all people who collect, for example, large amounts of anime featuring planturous young girls in school uniforms will turn around and commit such horrible crimes is nonsensical. Miyazaki's antisocial personality traits (very shy, could not approach women, enjoyed collecting sci-fi videos and *manga*, even drew comics himself) were easy to connect to the Otaku stereotype, but this is not reason enough for all Otaku to be declared dangerous nutcases. He was, and remains, "a strange exception that has tarnished an otherwise peaceful movement" (Grassmuck "Otaku" 213).

The Miyazaki case relegated Otaku to a fringe group of anti-social computer kooks for many years. However, with the rise of the computer industry and perhaps the newfound rebellious allure and hipness now associated with the term, it seems the term has finally turned upon itself (Kinsella "Adult Manga" 129). More and more people are referring to themselves as being Otaku (just as the 60s' 'freaks'), and the term is becoming to refer to anyone involved with an obsessive hobby and a love for collecting information (Grassmuck "Animism" 5; Schodt 46). To further shed the stigma of Miyazaki's case and lighten its connotations, new spellings such as "ottaki" and "otucky"

In truth, they are little concerned about what lies outside their chosen topics, and live (if not still at home with their parents) with few material possessions. But what they do have is a lot of information about their favourite topic. They come to know everything & collect all and any facts about their beloved computer games, comics, pop music or TV stars. There are car Otaku, computer Otaku, *idol* Otaku, *cosplay* Otaku, military Otaku, etc.⁷. Preoccupied

have emerged, giving the word a more positive meaning by linking it to the less menacing term “teckie” (technology kids) (Barral 29; Grassmuck “Otaku” 217).

⁷ *“Idol”*: Generally refers to young girls with cute faces who are mass-produced into “talent-singers” (Grassmuck “Otaku” 211). Part of the dominant entertainment culture of Japan, these “singers” often only lip-synch to sugary pop tunes, and make frequent appearances in malls. Some idols don’t even actually exist: in high-tech Japan, virtual stars are now common. For example, Yui Haga (so sweet are her pop hits that her name literally translates to “Toothache”) is a computer-generated mix of different girls to which one lends her voice; during stage “appearances”, the performer is masked to represent the fictional singer (Grassmuck “Otaku” 212). Idol Otaku tend to gather at these staged events with cameras large zoom lenses; the most valuable photographs are usually those of the girl’s underwear. They do not care much for the music promoted by these girls, which tend to be syrupy candy-coated pop songs, concentrating instead on being the first to amass as many facts as possible about them (height, bra size, childhood diseases, etc.) before moving on to the next up-and-coming idol (Barral 108).

“Cosplay”: (“costume play”) Fans fabricate homemade costumes of their favorite anime or manga character and wear them to the *Komiket* (“Comic Market”: a fair where

about being the best and most knowledgeable in their field of interest (Ho 1), their greatest achievement comes when they are the first to uncover a previously unknown factoid and proudly divulge it to other Otaku sharing their interest. These fanatical enthusiasts are more concerned with the accuracy of the details of their most recent discovery than with their social importance. They appear to be permanently connected to their computer⁸, always on the lookout for the latest or freshest tidbit of information, no matter how trivial. They practically worship the subjects and objects of their fixation, publishing zines and forming

amateur and commercial comic books are traded and sold. The *Komiket* is held twice a year, and has become the largest public gathering in Japan – a quarter of a million amateur manga artists and fans attended in 1992 (Kinsella "Adult Manga" 110).

"*Military*" Otaku: replicate everything from fighter planes to weapons to WWI British infantry-issue beef rations in the finest of details in homemade plastic models (Greenfeld "Incredibly Strange" 5). They tend to hide in camouflage outfits around city parks on weekends.

These are not the only Otaku types in Japan. "There are Disneyland Otaku, UFO catcher Otaku [referring to those games where one has to grab stuffed animal with a metal catcher], ski Otaku, ski-gear Otaku who don't ski but who love to put the best ski equipment on their 4x4, and so on. I'm sure you get the idea," says Peter Payne, an American who has spent some time in Japan to observe the Otaku phenomenon (Payne).

⁸ Fax machines and CB radios were also popular devices for collecting and sharing data before computer bulletin boards and the Internet were widely accessible.

newsgroups to demonstrate their knowledge (Frauenfelder; Grassmuck "Otaku" 209); some even install museum-quality display cases in their homes to show off their accumulated models and trinkets. However, there is no doubt that the most valuable collection owned by Otaku is his information database. "The object themselves are meaningless to Otaku – you can't send Ultraman [a popular sci-fi anime character] or a German tank through a modem. But you can send every bit of information about them." (Greenfeld "Incredibly Strange" 3; "Speed Tribes" 276).

Otaku are as far above normal fans as the fans themselves are above the mundanes⁹. While their anthropological roots (if we can say so) are grounded in the stamp collector, the hobbyist, the music fan and the game player, Otaku have become monomaniacally attached to a very small section of the world. Instead

⁹ For a good (if tongue-in-cheek) portrayal of Otaku, Gainax Studios' Otaku No Video ("video for / about fans") is a very interesting introduction. This animated feature portrays Gainax's own (fictional) history as an anime production house, but is also about all Japanese animation fandom. The story is interwoven with a half-dozen "Otaku portraits", which are staged interviews that parody/exaggerate some aspect of being Otaku (i.e. being obsessed with female cartoon characters to the point of talking about them as if they were their real girlfriend, or comparing one who has finally left anime behind to get a real job to someone having been part of a street gang in a previous, shameful past, etc.) The video, produced a few years after the Miyazaki case, aims to laugh at those who think Otaku are disagreeable or dangerous social types, while at the same time poking fun at themselves.

of collecting objects, the Otaku collects mounds of obscure data and facts surrounding his beloved subject, which is usually situated in the realm of popular culture. What differentiates him from the typical collector (who is usually more interested in amassing the rare or the precious) is that the Otaku seeks to amass the very mundane as well as the commercial; in fact, nothing short of everything will really do. (Typical fans and collectors also do so as a hobby during leisure time; in reverse, Otaku spend countless hours at their hobby, working only enough hours to pay the rent and buy the latest magazines and videos related to their favourite topic.) Otaku are not very likely to collect information and data that might be socially relevant, of interest or informative to others, except to other Otaku involved in the same field. They are "into something useless", explains Volker Grassmuck, a Dutch sociologist and University of Tokyo fellow who has written extensively about the Otaku phenomenon ("Otaku" 203). For example, idol-Otaku do not care whether their favorite singer's latest single sounds exactly the same as all the other bubble-gum hits on the charts. They might not even bother to listen to her new album: they are too busy trying to find out who would have been hired as assistant sound engineer on track 5 had the current one not been available. Likewise, a tropical fish lover would be expected to be interested in reading books on the various species and care of fish, maybe even collect some photographs, but most likely would own an aquarium to enjoy his favorite species. Tropical fish Otaku, on the other hand, do not care for owning a pet fish, preferring instead to memorize the Latin name for 150 different fish species

and most likely would know that the life span of an angel fish in captivity is not the same in the northern and southern hemispheres (Greenfeld, "Incredibly Strange" 5). Otaku amasses such detailed lore with an aspiration for completeness, for the perfect collection (Barral 212). He knows his topic inside and out, ready to answer any and all question (it is irrelevant whether it will ever be asked of him).

While the Otaku will avidly buy any and all merchandise related to his interests¹⁰, Otaku wouldn't be Otaku if they were satisfied with the commercial fanfare of products attached to the promotion of their favorite idol or anime character.

[Otaku] idol worships involve collecting artifacts and information not on one, but on ten or a hundred idols. Mostly, [...] they pick the b-grade type, or "minor" idols-singers. Of course, they have to keep track of their schedules and have to have all the records, postcards, t-shirts and other paraphernalia. But they wouldn't be Otaku if they were satisfied with the ready-made products. Video-Otaku record all TV [appearances] and then edit the tapes. Camera-Otaku sneak in [promotional concerts] with bits of cameras that they reassemble once inside. [When they leave] they take

¹⁰ While Otaku remains a mostly subcultural phenomenon, the popular culture industry does cater to them due to their large number and rabid consumer habits. There are, for example, magazines published that specialize only on idols' appearances on TV commercials! (Barral 97).

only the film, which is worth enough to buy new cameras. Of highest value are shots in which the wind blows up the girls' skirts to reveal their underwear. (Grassmuck "Otaku" 211)

They will not only buy the dolls, but also create their own out of plaster, adjusting bust sizes as they see fit. The zines they create often imitate and copy characters straight out of popular manga series, Otaku only bothering to change the storylines¹¹. They mutate existing commercial art in joyful plagiarism; rarely will they create something truly new. It is as if they multiply the possibilities of any one subject in a yearning to be completely surrounded by it. The Otaku are clearly oblivious to any sentiment of information overload: in all appearances, these Japanese youngsters have fully adapted and are indeed thriving amongst the overwhelming presence of (trivial) information in their lives. The subjects in which Otaku are over-involved in can scarcely be considered purposeful, enlightening or remotely exciting to the onlooker. Their collection of trivia serves little purpose indeed outside of their own circles, and is largely perceived as being a pure waste of time. Why, then, this fascination in collecting, organizing and saving such irrelevant details and common knowledge, in creating such extensive collections that really only amount to too much of nothing much? How has this strange obsession with the (seemingly) pointless come about?

¹¹ This type of amateur manga parody is often called "yaoi", an acronym that means "no build-up, no foreclosure, and no meaning", describing the quasi-absence of narrative in these works (Kinsella "Adult Manga" 113).

Rise of the Otaku

The phenomenon of Otaku obviously did not happen overnight. Back in the late 70s, Keigo Okonogi, a professor of neuropsychiatry at a Japanese university, coined the term *moratorium ningen* (moratorium people), in reference to that “period of training or study in which young people are suspended from fulfilling their obligations to society” from which young people appeared increasingly reluctant to leave behind (Grassmuck, “Otaku” 199; Barral 36-7). In Japan, receiving a good education has always been the most important duty of young people, so they may become productive and successful members of society. Children are urged to study hard from a very young age to get the highest grades in order to be able to attend to best colleges, to become shoe-ins for the best jobs. The “moratorium” refers to those few years in college where they can finally pause for breath, pursue one’s interests and hobbies, even travel before embarking on a career. However, the purpose of the moratorium became less clear-cut by the late 70s as youth (and youth culture) began to assert themselves more assertively. Okonogi perceived an increasing unwillingness in youths to enter active adult life and take on mature responsibilities by delaying taking step towards a potential career. Instead of being a short and enjoyable period in one’s life in preparation for the ‘real world’, the moratorium, it seemed, was becoming an end in itself (Barral 42-3; Grassmuck “Otaku” 200; “Man” 4). Using the moratorium as a means for self-expression, it became a differentiating marker between youth (who enjoyed trying out the new and the trendy) from

adult reality (made up of the old, the controlled and the traditional). By declaring themselves as outsiders, they dissociated themselves from the likes of political organizations and organized workforce, and remained uncommitted commentators and critics of established society. Also, shielded by a lengthier moratorium period (traditionally ending at 22, but now allowed until 30 years of age) and benefiting from parents of increasing affluence, they could now afford to be college students for a little while longer, and delay making binding choices as to their future. Youth took on an increasingly larger role as consumer of goods and services (as the moratorium allowed for spending without (or very little) labour), to the point where youth culture itself became inextricably intertwined with commercial culture, argued Okonogi (Okonogi).

Naturally following the “moratorium people” came the *shinjinrui-zoku* (“the need breed”) (Kinsella “Amateur Manga” 2), who took this budding attitude and combined it with a joyful consumerism during the economic boom of Japan of the 80s. Passionate “consumers of leisure and cultural goods”, this “need breed” spent a lot of money on their appearance and fast cars, much like the Western yuppies of the times (Grassmuck “Otaku”; Kinsella “Amateur Manga”). Also called the “crystal people”, these hyper-trendy 20-somethings’ main source of pleasure came from showing off their luxury goods in a variety of details. For example, Somehow Crystal (*the* how-to guidebook for mid-80s Japanese hipsters written by columnist Yasuo Tanaka) enumerates sordid minutiae such as the very desirable left-arm suntan, as it implied one owned and drove a left-wheel

imported car (qtd. in Grassmuck "Otaku" 201). The term 'crystal' itself implies a certain vacuousness in lifestyle; these well-informed snobs, in the eye of the rest of the population, were understood to be "passionless cultural connoisseurs (leading) the sophisticated but empty and neurotic lives of fashionable students" (Kinsella "Amateur Manga" 2). Nakano Osamu, an expert on youth who upholds similar values to the critics surveyed earlier, deplored the *shinjinrui*'s preoccupation with pleasure and comfort, having chosen "pleasure over pain, recreation over work, consumption over production, appreciation over creation" (qtd. in Kinsella "Amateur Manga" 2). Seen as passive but heavy consumers of media and popular culture, the *shinjinrui* generation was, of course, the darling of the culture industry. Families may have worried that their children were spending so much time and money in hedonistic and self-centered practices, but were relieved to know that their children were nonetheless a good fit for the day's fast-paced society, and would eventually find high-profile jobs in advertising, TV and software companies (Grassmuck "Man" 4, "Otaku" 219; Kinsella "Amateur Manga" 2).

Information being *the* commodity of the late 80s through the 90s, it would seem unavoidable for the *Otaku-zoku* (Otaku generation) to come and replace the *shinjinrui*. Sharing the previous generation's passion for details, the Otaku has simply replaced the possession and boasting of valuable goods by the boasting of the possession of valuable information that others in his group do not yet possess. He shows it off by asking: "Do you know this? Oh you don't!". Of

course, for these non-professional, non-lifestyle kids of the late-80s, youthful rebellion logically takes place in collecting and displaying information that had no redeeming cultural value (Grassmuck "Otaku" 201), just as the *shinjinrui* had proudly exhibited his one-arm tan. The Mac replaced the fancy car, the buzz of popular chat rooms substituted for the need to appear at trendy clubs, and the need for fancy clothes was neatly replaced by a desire to virtually dress in information.

Made in Japan

Such a description of a new, 'otaku', predisposition resulting from a new found abundance of wealth, of personal freedom, of popular culture goods and of technologies that easily provide access to and sharing of information is somewhat reminiscent of circumstances here in North America. To collect trivial facts and figures is not a phenomenon restricted to Japan. The sensibilities of *shinjinrui* and Otaku are suspiciously similar to those of Generation X (or Y or Z): a slacker outlook towards work, an inclination for easy consumption of consumer goods and gadgets, generous helpings of television and pop culture, a general disinterest for history, politics or traditions, a passion for computer surfing and video games, and an inclination to publish blogs, fan zines and websites about obscure topics. People attracted to Japanese pop fare such as anime and manga in North America and in Europe do proudly identify themselves as being

Otaku¹². One can also witness similar excessive, “otaku-like” fan activity in Star Trek buffs who learn to speak ‘Klingon’, dress as their favorite characters at sci-fi conventions or can recall obscure details from any episode of the original series, for example. Such intense fanaticism towards popular culture texts seems to be on the rise worldwide, and is certainly worth further study¹³. Still, to have an interest in collecting trivial or odd matters is not substance enough to ‘make’ one a true Otaku. As of yet, the breath and intensity of Otaku fanaticism has no true equivalent elsewhere in the world. Digging deeper into the peculiarities of Japan, we will find a more satisfying understanding of the ‘original’ Japanese Otaku, and how they relate to information overload and boredom.

Here too, cultural critics and social scientists worry that such high dosages of mass communications and media is causing a certain “social fragmentation” and the general decay of higher, traditional values (Kinsella “Amateur Manga” 11). They deplore such investments in vacuous entertainment, repeating warnings that these pastimes are “if not dangerous, at least worthless”, and that

¹² To be Otaku outside Japan is more often understood as being a ‘japanophile’, a collector of pop-culture items from Japan, especially *anime* videos (Japanese-style cartoon programs), as a hobby. A good beginner’s guide is Antonia Levi’s Samurai From Outer Space: Understanding Japanese Animation (1997).

¹³ A good start is Tulloch and Jenkins’s study of Dr. Who and Star Trek fans in Science Fiction Audiences (1995). Sharon Kinsella also explores the similarities between Japan’s *Yaoi manga* clubs (which regularly features gay love stories) and US/U.K. “Slash” (Kirk/Spock) animation clubs in Adult Manga (2000).

video games and *manga* are keeping “young people from the more valuable cultural technique of reading books” (Grassmuck “Man” 7). Some are downright concerned that the playing of too many video games and viewing of violent anime will lead Otaku youth to mistake fiction for reality, blurring what is right and wrong, just as was the case for the disillusioned Miyazaki. Either way, Otaku and their inward obsessions are often pointed to as being victims of the corrupting influences of *manga*, television and the mass media in general, and are deplored as the result of a cultural deficiency in contemporary Japanese society. Frederick Schodt upholds, however, that “Otaku [...] are surely more the offspring of their social environment than the product of reading too many manga” (48). As we will argue later, Otaku are far from being victims of their society’s mediated excesses, having instead adapted quite well to its peculiarities and characteristics.

Some, like Schodt and Volker Grassmuck, see obvious links between the Otaku phenomenon and the particularities of the Japanese school system. Tests and entrance exams to various levels of schooling largely consist of multiple-choice questions, thus making Japanese students experts at memorizing and recalling reams of contextless information. As suspects journalist Karl Taro Greenfeld, it seems most young people in Japan are either cramming for exams or are stuck in cramming mode (“Incredibly Strange” 1). It is no surprise then that, come the moratorium period, some would find pleasure in hobbies that consist of gathering and remembering more information, since that is what they

know to do best. This could explain why Otaku are perfectly at ease with amassing copious amounts of trivia and fruitless facts without the need to validate their behaviour – after all, the memorizing of a wide array of facts is sanctioned by their society and the school system. It is also no surprise that these youths would rather go off hiding under piles of toys, comics and play machines in their spare time than finding more educational or purposeful hobbies, since they study so much for school. “Superficially they are good and well-behaved students, study hard, and get good grades, but underneath the surface they are runaways. Otaku is a shelter for them.” (Grassmuck “Otaku” 203). Such escapism may also explain why, come college years and finally having some time for themselves, young people desire to go back to their passions, TV shows and computer games “from before” (Barral 43) much to the dismay of their parents¹⁴.

¹⁴ This return to childish games and interests, ventures French journalist Etienne Barral, could be the result of Japanese youth not having enough time for play and hobbies when they were younger. Barral goes as far to say that “otakism” can be linked to childhood trauma (“Otaku” 48). For example, Mother might have thrown out your collection of action figures so you would spend more time studying, but now as a young man you rebelliously choose to collect garage-kits (home-made plaster or vinyl dolls of various anime characters). I do not agree with this “trauma” argument as a “cause” for becoming Otaku. Certainly, much more is at play, including environmental and social factors. Additionally, his use of the name “otakism” is too close for comfort to the medical

Schodt understands this escapism more as the result of a school system maladjusted to the new character of society than as a deficiency in character:

Beginning in the 1980s, children were growing up with unprecedented affluence and freedom of choice in a media-glutted society. Yet they were also being put through a factory style educational system designed to churn out docile citizens and obedient company employees for a mass-production, heavy industry oriented society that had ceased to exist. (48).

Faced with such contradictions, who could blame youth for turning to the only thing it knew how to do best: collecting and remembering mounds of data?

It is furthermore quite interesting to note that, for the Japanese, not to know is generally shameful and a professional error. The Japanese mass communication industry (or *Masukomi*) has huge proportions and influence, and the population makes extensive use of it in a constant effort to remain "in the loop" to avoid social embarrassment and to measure up to others, reports Barral ("Otaku" 231, 236; also Itoh 124). Being informed is not necessarily a way to communicate in Japan; it is more of a way to link up with a group of equals without having to speak. Information becomes a goal in itself, valorizing those possess it and stigmatizing those who don't know at that moment, just as failing an important school entrance exam was humiliating as a child. Yet to brag about being an expert on a certain topic is not well seen, unlike in the Western world

term "autism", unfairly labeling the Otaku disposition as socially ill and in need of treatment (169).

where self-proclaimed experts abound. The Otaku's actions stem from this basic attitude towards the acquisition of knowledge, but are rebellious in the sense that the information he seeks is the one which no one cares about in order to claim it as his. In a mocking opposition to his society, Otaku become experts in knowing everything about nothing¹⁵. They avoid the 'normals' to link up with a few other similar Otaku to share their uninformative lore, looking for a place to shine as the expert amongst them, and perhaps more importantly, as a unique individual amongst what he perceives to be the faceless crowd of Japan. Otaku are perceived as extreme individuals in a society where individualism is traditionally not well seen, hence the label as being persons 'out of this world'¹⁶.

¹⁵ Ironically, as rebellious or underground as the Otaku may appear, he is but the normal continuation of his society's ways. Says Volker Grassmuck: "[w]hen you have a society where the best test-takers go to the top, and the tests are all fill-in-the-blanks sort of things, then you end up with a society more comfortable with data than analysis. That's an Otaku society" (qtd. in Greenfeld "Speed Tribes" 280). As well, the Japanese have never been ashamed to become overinvolved in things and in trends. Fashion and cultural trends (*Booms*) are numerous (if fleeting) and affect youth and adults alike; the *manga* industry is huge, with 1.9 billion copies sold in 1995 – equaling 15 comic books per every person in Japan (Schodt 19-20).

¹⁶ On the other hand, the topics of their affection are so ordinary, fished out of the common lore and the popular culture of the everyday, that he is not much different from Mr. Everyman, except maybe in terms of what he feels is worthy of acquiring as knowledge, and what isn't. What one considers 'good' information is another man's

Another factor for the coming of the Otaku could be that Japan is a most media-saturated society. If postmodernism exist at all, it must be “here, in Tokyo”, claim the editors of Japan Edge: An insider's Guide to Pop Subculture in Japan (1999):

Crowded, noisy for sure. Lights, language, pictures everywhere. Faces. Advertisements. Foreigners. Buildings and shops crammed together with little regard for architectural harmony. Glass and plastic. A place where the boundaries between high culture, pop culture and subculture no longer matter or exist. (Macias, qtd. in Roman 11)

The Japanese, always having been so far apart from the rest of the industrialized world, has come to develop a very prosperous, creative and above all distinct cultural universe. Its entertainment industry, sometimes referred to as “*J-Pop*” (for Japanese popular culture) is large and varied. The idol-singer industry is huge, promoting numerous (if often short-lived) sugar coated pop acts; variety shows abound on television; even serious business men indulge in reading pointless manga on their long subway ride home. “Booms”, or fads, supplant each other at a furious rate: first it was children trading Pokemon cards in schoolyards, now it's grown men seeking to collect all 131 figurines found in chocolate egg candy (Naito). Electronic gadgets are as eagerly acquired as ever: strange items such as electronic pet fish that swim in water tanks are

rubbish, and vice versa. No one can truly declare what is the interesting, or what isn't. The Otaku's choices are as valid as anyone's.

readily sold to overworked professionals as a stress reliever, and computerized blue plastic dogs are all the rage, as they can learn fancy new tricks faster than good ol' real-life Fido.

Computerization certainly is a factor intricate to the coming of Otaku. Neither holding a sinister view of technology, nor one where it is deified, Japanese usually perceive technology as a friend and teacher, as their livelihood, even as "adorable" (Greenfeld "Speed Tribes" 274). Kids are taught from a young age not to fear machines (Barral 59); it could even be argued that, with fathers so often away from home on business, computers have become the surrogate fathers of the Otaku generation (Macias, qtd. in Roman 7). Either way, Japan is very comfortable with its technology, and Otaku have so much adapted and conformed to it that they are almost 'as one'¹⁷ with their computers, making them perfect workers for the information age. Coming of age with Pacman, Otaku-zoku has however also discovered that "by interacting with computers instead of people, they could avoid Japanese society's dauntingly complex

¹⁷ Karl Taro Greenfeld, musing on the future of the information age, wonders "...if there is one". Otaku-zoku, more at ease with their machines than with flesh and blood girls, may never gather up the courage to go out and meet them, let alone form lasting relationships with them. Many are still virgins as they reach their 30s, as their relationship with their machines, objects and virtual communities are much better than any flesh-and-blood encounters. Why become distressed over all the troubles associated with having sex with a real girl? "Masturbation", admits one Otaku, "is much more... efficient." ("Speed Tribes" 281).

Confucian web of social obligations and loyalties. The result: a generation of youth too uptight to talk to a telephone operator but who can go hell-for-leather on the deck of a personal computer or workstation" (Greenfeld "Speed Tribes" 274-5). The very word 'Otaku', it should be recalled, implies a certain distancing. What better shield than the computer screen, then, to allow for endless browsing and gathering of information and data, of interacting and communicating with others, while remaining invisible and anonymous in the comforts of one's own home? It should be no surprise that Otaku would be reticent to relinquish such ideal circumstances in order to join the ranks of the 'normal' working society¹⁸, or to bother making real life acquaintances when they are so much more at ease communicating through modems and fax machines. The Otaku generation has found a safe refuge in the web of technology, one that brilliantly supplies to all of

¹⁸ Of course, Otaku have to work if they are to afford buying the games, magazines, trinkets, collectibles and information they need to carry out their obsession. Computer-Otaku, close cousins of the hackers, are for example sought and hired by large companies for their self-taught expertise in thinking up better networks and devising uncrackable safety codes. "Leading high tech companies are actively recruiting Otaku-types because they are at the vanguard of computing & software design", confirms Karl Taro Greenfeld ("Speed Tribes" 280). Their passion for technology and their practically inexistent social lives make them the perfect and most devoted workers for the Information Society. Either way, for computer-Otaku, the only difference between work and play is "a matter of software" continues Greenfeld (281).

their needs. What better tools for information gathering could the Otaku ask for than the home computer, chat rooms and bulleting boards and the Internet?

Japanese cultural economy has long been associated with technology, and quite often with a technology of leisure: comic books, hi-fi systems, disc/walkman, video cameras, Nintendos, and karaoke, to name a few (Psomiadis). Otaku have eagerly adopted these as the basis of their identity, subversively perhaps but still very Japanese at heart. There is also a certain techno-mythology, a worldwide belief that Japan (always at the leading edge with its infinite variety of futuristic techno gadgetry) might lead the way towards a "postmodern mutation of human experience" (Grassmuck "Man" 6). The multiplying technological formats are providing for wholly different electronic signs, images & sounds, requiring new ways for decoding, understanding and dealing with the information they provide. Otaku, having successfully adapted and become perfectly at ease with them and their multiplicity, may be such a mutation. Electronic games and the *famicon* (home computer) have been blamed for "transformogrifying people (especially children) by swallowing up their time, money & attention" (Itoh 123), and Japanese cultural critics have wondered whether new technologies, the media and computer games are swallowing the younger generations whole (ibid).

Whether the media, the culture industry, the educational system, or the computer is to 'blame' for the rise of Otaku, one thing is for sure: Otaku are here to stay. According to Karl Taro Greenfeld, there were an estimated 350,000

hard-core Otaku in Japan in 1994, this figure not including those who were just beginning to show Otaku-like enthusiasm in their collecting and guilt-free enjoyment of pop culture artifacts. This number is still growing. Is this spreading phenomenon something for Japan, or the world, to be concerned about? Criminal activity, such as Miyazaki's infamous rape and murder of small girls or the 1995 Tokyo subway nerve gas attack attributed to the Aum group (a secluded religious sect which shared eerily similar features to that of the popular anime series Evangelion) have been linked to Otaku circles (Grassmuck "Man" 7). Are the trivial obsessions of these young people leading them towards unhealthy lifestyles and crime? Toshio Okada, the self-proclaimed Ota-King (founder of the famed Gainax Anime Studio; also taught a course on "otakuology" at Tokyo University in the mid 90s), says the Otaku are not to be feared. They may seem strange, but in truth they are regular people who happen to be overly interested in silly things like animation instead of on a career or on more scholarly themes. "It is a kind of love, or religion", he claims. "A person who studies something or collects something has a kind of mania for that thing", he admits, "[but] Otaku are not crazy or maniacs" (Okada). Volker Grassmuck supports Okada's opinion. "It's a silly way of spending time, from a normal business point-of-view. They play games [and (collect) silly things] with the same seriousness others use for business" ("Otaku" 203). "Otaku people have their own sense of values, and history. They order objects with that feeling", he says (qtd. in Ota).

Do You Otaku? For a Refreshed Perspective

Behind the 'symptoms' and the stigma attached to the Otaku's maniacal passions, besides being ostracized as "sad souls unable to deal with reality [who] spend their days engrossed in child-like fantasies or big explosions" (Dinsmore), and beyond being fanatical collectors of trivia, Otaku attitudes merit closer attention. It would be easy to simply dismiss the Otaku as being a freak or a weirdo on the fringe of society, but something of great interest lurks behind their rabid gathering of useless data about cartoon characters and bubblegum pop singers. To investigate the phenomenon of Otaku, I believe, constitutes a fresh approach in addressing the concerns expressed earlier as to the state of the so-called Information Society. Their strange obsession with dull data will be shown to be an interesting rebuttal to the perceived negative aspects of information overload in society, and provide clues as to how one can deal with it without falling in the gooey traps of its associated boredom.

Otaku show that it is possible to get along with the excessive supply of data of the Information Society¹⁹. However engulfed by the media's outpourings,

¹⁹ Indeed, despite the very origin of their nickname, social seclusion is not the most significant characteristic of the Otaku. More important is Otaku's peculiar attitude towards information (Grassmuck "Man" 2; also "Alone" 1). Otaku have clearly come to terms with the overload of media and information in their lives. The anxiety of being exposed to "too much" probably never occurred to them, having recognized and

Otaku have managed to find power in their mastery. They may indeed be a “new breed”, a “different kind of human”, best adapted to the wide offerings and fast pace of the Information Society. Koichi Yamazaki, a historian of everyday life, pop critic and an authority on Otaku in Japan, explains (not unlike Schodt) that Otaku are the “product of a hyper-capitalism and hyper-consumption society” (qtd. in Grassmuck “Otaku” 203). They positively demonstrate that people still have the upper hand over information and the media technology that provides it. They underscore that individuals are not victims ‘confronted’ with an overactive media output with which they must ‘deal’, but rather that they are agents who can still make personally meaningful choices amongst the glut, and that they can go on as a society despite and amidst an abundance of information and trivia. The Otaku, despite his compulsive and seemingly anti-social behaviour, nonetheless offer a refreshing perspective and can counter the type of dismissive accounts of mass culture examined earlier.

accepted the boisterous presence of uninteresting or dubious data in their world as a simple fact of life.

Chapter Three: Useful Uselessness

“In the endless wasteland I run alone for all I am worth,
embracing the hope of an unseen world faraway”
- *From the opening theme of “Otaku No Video”* (Steele).

Choosing to delve into the boring and the useless as do the Otaku is an act that purposefully responds to the perceived overload of information in post-industrial societies. Oblivious to the supposedly ‘negative’, ‘unproductive’ or ‘unavoidable’ situation deplored by the critics of Information Societies, Otaku have managed to keep their heads above the flood of information in their own, productive way. Their use of data is an active, even positive, reaction to the overwhelming presence of information in their lives, and to choose the dull as the subject of their fascination is in fact a clever choice. Unknowingly following cultural historian Virgil Nemoianu’s advice to “linger ... [in the] useless world of the irrelevant and the insignificant” (xii), the Otaku’s seemingly purposeless interlude amongst the trivial is in fact a productive critique of the state of post-industrial Japan, and by extension, of all Information Societies dealing with an abundance of media and information. Best of all, it demonstrates that a renewed agency is possible despite an overwhelming presence of trivia in one’s daily media diet, proving the information critics wrong in their assumptions that audiences necessarily are at risk to become frustrated, bored and apathetic due to an overload of information. The dull will be shown to be just as valid and productive a part of the informational landscape, instead of being dismissed as

the negative, unproductive refuse of a society bent on producing always more and more data.

“To Get Along”: A Penchant for the Unremarkable

“Ordinary life is so dull I get out of it as much as possible”

- *Steve Jones of the Sex Pistols* (qtd. in Niedzviecki 185)

The Otaku subculture demonstrates a valid alternative to deal with, or more accurately to “be” with an overload of what many consider to be irrelevant information cluttering an overactive media system. Supposing, as the information overload critics suggested, that with ease and affluence come boredom and apathy, the Otaku’s answer logically calls for the need to create some trouble in order to recreate excitement and interest once again. By standing at the side of society and shaking up the usual perceptions on the use and consumption of information, the Otaku example refreshes the perspective on the situation that is information overload. To challenge the integrity of society’s primary (to use Nemoianu’s terminology) by accumulating and consuming the ‘trivial’ instead of the ‘relevant’ and the ‘useful’ is indeed an effective eye opener as to the state of Information Societies. Orrin Klapp agreed that non-conformity (such as the Otaku’s peculiar acts) is an important way in which society can “recharge [its] battery” (“Collective Search” 320), but much of his argument seems overly concerned with the negative undertones of such acts of ‘deviance’. Mostly, he worried that overarching social values and ‘true’ meanings would be

lost in such unorthodox quests for new ones, and that short-lived fads (such as fashion, music styles or lifestyle trends) were dangerously becoming the religion of a misguided youth. However, Virgil Nemoianu's Theory of the Secondary reminds us that that it is in these very acts of dissent and difference that society avoids stagnation, and therefore should not be cause for alarm. While such "secondary" scenes always react and conflict with the primary, they also can help to refresh and preserve it (135). The Otaku lifestyle may be an underground phenomenon, but is not opposed to 'the system' per se. They simply use the situation to their advantage. They have, as Nemoianu suggests, cast their glances "sideways" instead of forward or backward, in the process exposing a new perspective from which one can observe the construct of overload and boredom.¹

¹ Klapp correctly observed that alongside slogans of "access to info" and "the right to communicate", there was a new emphasis on the right not to communicate and not to be communicated to, a spreading desire for people to "switch off" and disengage from the increasing "noise" level and intrusiveness of information in [their] everyday lives ("Overload" 86-87). Instead of fully cutting themselves off of their surroundings, Otaku have taken this idea one step aside by cleverly choosing to communicate to excess that which has little or no interest value to others, and to overly engage with information that does not communicate much. Klapp's argument, under Nemoianu's scrutiny, is clearly aimed backwards, refusing to see usefulness or long-lasting value in the popular culture and media that are the very markers of Information Societies.

Instead of becoming increasingly frustrated by or running away from an overabundance of facts and figures, the Otaku has gleefully jumped heads first into it all, finding some sustenance and a renewed potential amongst the mess. In fact, Otaku have adapted so well to the Information Society that overload has become precisely what they thrive on:

Information is the fuel that feeds the Otaku's worship dissemination systems – computer bulletin boards, modems, faxes. The only thing that matters is the accuracy of the answer, not its relevance. No piece of info is too trivial for consideration. [...] Anything qualifies as long as it was not previously known. (Greenfeld "Speed Tribes" 276).

Otaku are very aware that their peculiar interest in, say, listing the childhood diseases of a minor pop star will not appeal to anyone but themselves and a few other idol Otaku. Their concern is only to find and collect any and all information related to their own field of interest². They take pleasure in information's

² As was discussed earlier, actual subject matters are largely irrelevant to Otaku; information is gathered for its sheer possession, and to show it off (Grassmuck "Otaku" 199; "Man" 2). All the usual perspectives (such as whether something is good or bad, smart or stupid, etc.) are irrelevant to Otaku because "all those things are judgments based on social relations. If you don't socialize, you don't have much sense of morality", explains Abiko Seigo, editor of Lap Top magazine. "The only thing that matters to them is data. How much you have and how much can you memorize" (qtd. in Greenfeld "Speed Tribes" 275). Knowing the 'right' or 'socially important' information to connect

appearance on the page and its presence in their databases. It appears that Otaku intuitively and correctly recognize that having the data does not equal wisdom, that possessing the information does not imply intelligence (Shenk 67), a fact that some may have forgotten in their quest to always be 'better informed' through constant perusal of as much information as possible. It can only mean that you have it, a fact that Otaku is content with. They can be satisfied with the mere possession of information, because they do not ask of it to entertain them or enlighten them or guarantee them a respectable place within society; their only

with other members of society becomes a moot point, as Otaku only socialize with other similar Otaku to show off their latest find, and this more often than not through their modems. Even in cyberspace, making friends or sharing information with fellow Otaku is not as significant as the thrill of finding and displaying a previously unknown fact or of perfecting the ultimate and absolute collection.

This lack of concern for social relevance may stem in part from the Japanese school system, which does little to teach youth (and by association the Otaku) to discern between ideologies or to judge or critique the substance of any given subject, focusing instead on rote memory. As discussed previously, it teaches them to take the world as data and information in a fragmentary manner, as it is designed for efficient cramming of dates, names, and facts and tests their retention of them through multiple-choice answer. These scraps of information are rarely, if ever, combined into a total view of the world. Without any context, this "knowledge" remains just that, a collection of info-chips. It is as if information no longer "ha[d] a knowledge value, but the character of a fetish", says historian Koichi Yamazaki (qtd. in Grassmuck "Otaku" 203).

expectation aims at finding the data to complete their collection. From this 'sideways' perspective on what Information Societies have to offer, what now counts is the passing of messages, the delivery and accumulation of data *over and above* the perceived importance of the information gathered.³

As the 'need' for lasting, deeper meanings and for upkeeping so-called normal social relations outside of the communication networks are no longer demanded out of information and facts, these become free to flow in and out of the Otaku world. The Otaku's response to information glut indeed goes against our information critics' recommendations: throwing away the 'protective buffer' of boredom, the Otaku has immersed himself in the data flow and let it all happen, for better or for worse. Having clearly accepted that in a world where information is so abundant, where there are no possibilities of limiting the flow and reflows within the various media, they decided to joyfully join in. The useless and the dull as appropriated by the indiscriminating eye of Otaku permit them infinite outlets for carrying on their true passion, in these areas largely ignored by others who tend to prefer focusing on subjects that are generally considered to be more 'important'. By not imposing such limiting qualifiers on information, all data remains valid and potentially interesting. The stress of judging the pertinence of

³ "The Otaku continue the same pattern of information acquisition and reproduction they have learned at school. Only the subject matter has changed: idols, cameras or rock and roll. But the content has become negligible anyways. It (information-fetishism) is a mode of being" (Grassmuck "Otaku" 207).

a given bit of information, the expectations of being entertained or educated by it, or of needing to find the 'right' data in order to 'fit in' society having been done away with, the overload of the boring and the meaningless becomes a vast territory that is to Otaku a minefield of tidbits patiently waiting to be uncovered⁴. The Otaku's more playful attitude towards the abundance of information in their everyday world allow them to see the information world around them as one to be discovered and unearthed, and not one imposing on them in any way. It reveals that switching the focus from needing to find meanings or relevance or wisdom in each bit of information encountered to one that simply wants to experience it may help deal with the potential weight of information overload and sidesteps the prospect of chronic boredom. When one recognizes that the communications they encounter daily do not have to impact them, nor have to be deciphered in full as facts wanting to necessarily inform and educate, the avalanche of information can be more easily encountered, without feeling guilty of not understanding it fully, of not being productive with/about it, and of not paying attention to all or any of it. This alternative, in my opinion, seems to be more realistic than the avoidance of certain types of information that Orrin Klapp

⁴ I used the expression 'waiting patiently', as I believe that the part of the appeal of the dull, for the Otaku and others as well, may be in that it simply does not scream for his attention. Dull data lies dormant, never claiming to be of any interest; in this unaggressiveness lies much of its value, its appeal. Best of all, dull data and trivia are of a certain timeless quality, allowing one to discover and enjoy them at their own leisure.

and others too often recommend as a 'solution' to information overload. The construct of information overload is effectively returned to being a fact of life, and no longer a threat.

Making the Age Their Own: Reclaiming A Personal Significance

The sudden breathing space created when one stops resisting the tide of information, and simply asks "why not more?" may indeed be the first step needed to allow interest and meaningfulness to resurface amongst the mess. Such a simple switch in perspective also returns choice and agency into the hands of the receivers and users of information, a point that is vital yet forgotten by Klapp and many other Information Society critics. The Otaku's (over)interest in dull information reminds us that personal meaningfulness is ultimately more important than skimming the surface of vast trenches of data in an impossible attempt to know everything or to keep up with the Joneses. No matter how odd or useless their collections of trivia may seem, by fashioning their own informational spaces outside the usual requirements (such as quality, usefulness or meaningfulness of content), Otaku remind us that it is not information and data that impose meaning upon its users and culture, but that their true significance ultimately lies in people's actual perception and use of it.⁵

⁵ Of course, culture always plays a large role in determining meanings, unifying and guiding society towards what should be considered relevant or important or interesting to know. However, whether a fact is considered noise or information depends not on the

Information as a commodity becomes ever more the same sort of thing, of equal value and emotional weight, as transient news or fodder for entertainment [...] just another interchangeable species of ambient noise.

It fails to satisfy or to command affection (Abbott 130).

In his book The World as Information, Robert Abbott accurately noticed that one of the main problems when the world and the media are described as providers of information to be had, processed and possessed is that the personal significance of this data and the desire of persons to acquire all of this potential knowledge are seldom addressed. With much emphasis given on producing, distributing and consuming information, and in the heated discussions over what kinds of information should be more valued than others, there has been a general lack of discussion about *how* all this information is actually being used by people. On either side of the dialogue for or against more information, "little is said about real human needs or hunger for understanding and meaning, or for the desire to acquire knowledge" (Abbott 1). The technological enthusiasm of those who promote the increased use of new media (such as the Internet) typically show little interest in the personal significance of the information offered through their use; the arguments for the Information Society tend to favour speed

sender's intentions or on socially preferred readings of a text, but always in the receiver's needs and/or interest level at the moment it is encountered (Hermes 503).

over content, image above meaning, instant reaction above careful deliberation⁶. Meanwhile, the arguments of many critics, sociologists, psychologists and scholars such as Orrin Klapp, Alvin Toffler (Future Shock 1973) or more recently David Shenk (Data Smog 1997) have focused on the negative social and psychological effects of information overload on culture at large. Too often, they assume that “audiences necessarily try but fail to identify with the whole pre-structured abundance of artificial and arbitrary images pouring out of the media” (Pierre-Henry Jeudy qtd. in Van Weelden 127).⁷ Either way, it seems that media consumers are too often portrayed as ‘information processing beings’ in their use of the media and in their attempts to deal with the abundance of available data (Abbott 134).

I prefer to think there is a trace of humanness left in the users of the information and of the media that assigns significance to the surges of facts that surround them, and that they have not come to merely ‘process’ it. The very word ‘processing’ seems too clinical a term - it trivializes the actions and decisions people make towards the information encountered daily, concurs Abbott (131). Certainly much of the data one comes upon on a daily basis

⁶ For an interesting essay on the need to rethink the use of technology and what is happening to culture, read “Resisting the Neoliberal Discourse of Technology”, an article by John Armitage in CTheory. 1 Feb. 1999.

seems useless to one's individual purposes, but always there remains the hope that within the trash and the drivel of the media there will be morsels that will appeal to each media consumer, to ME. After all, aren't meaning and significance ultimately formed in the mind of the receiver? I agree with Stewart Hall when he says that texts are not the source of meaning, but rather a site where articulations of meaning can take place (qtd. in Dyson 7). Data, on its own and floating in the vastness of the media or lost in the far reaches of the Internet, certainly can't mean much to anyone. Only once encountered, chosen and retrieved, or once the text is seen, read and used can meanings and personal relevance be produced.

Wisely moving away from Baudrillard's strategy of indifference and from arguments that people are becoming "victim of a technological determinism" (Dyson 9), Otaku make the best of the situation, using the technologies and methods available to them to resist and reclaim the spectacle (Iida 426). Not dropping out of the task of dealing with large amounts of data, they instead have creatively chosen to build their own informational spaces, one that reflects their own lives, their own interests.⁸ "The subjective nature of mass culture can

⁷ Under such a perspective, one can see how the media landscape of Information societies can be described as stale and sterile: couch potatoes stare at the screen, personal creativity no longer seems to be involved; audiences need only watch.

⁸ When there is so much (too much) information available for perusal and consumption, "we must be able to select to fashion our OWN informational spaces", stresses Abbott

validate our lives if we recognize it as not just mindless fodder but as 'MINE'", proposes Canadian alternative culture guru Hal Niedzviecki (40). The gushing

(130). However, he also acknowledges that it is problematic to think that, in these postmodern times, there no longer are limits in the way information can be put together, used and interpreted. When "everyone's opinion is as good as anyone else's, [...] there is no definitive structure of information possible" (138), everything theoretically becomes free to mean anything. And "if everything can mean everything, then everything is equally pointless" chips in Jeudy (qtd. in van Heelden 127). Hence the basis of Orrin Klapp and other media critics' anxieties and dissatisfaction as to the state of Information societies, their crumbling overarching values and impending boredom. But when choice becomes impossibly wide, when making informed decisions becomes laborious because there are too many facts and variables to digest, and when access to information beyond one's capacity has come to be the norm, is there another choice but for media users to form their own associations?

Of course, to pull out such personal and pointed choices amongst the flow of data or to create anew our own personal identities as do the Otaku would require considerable and invested efforts – and many already do feel stressed and overloaded by the data in their lives. However, it is not realistic to expect some new "meaning" to emerge straight out of the media stream and magically enrich their lives. From where would such meaningfulness and relevance come, if not from individual efforts in seeking them? It remains that, despite the undeniable oddity of their behavior to the outside observer, Otaku "are seeking and creating options for their lives that are more complex than the conceptual divide between postmodern lightness and modernist adherence to content" that Klapp and co. would allow for (Iida 457).

mediasphere may have 'commodified' and devalued information in a general manner of speaking, but Otaku show some success in reclaiming part of the spectacle as relevant and meaningful to them. The relative proportions of a cartoon character were it human size may be a useless fact on its own, but in the eye of Otaku it is very important as it brings him one step closer to the ultimate collection, asserts his authority over his favourite topic and maintains his credibility as a true fan. While Klapp deplored the fact that "[t]he knowledge of today is too often information about, and not knowledge which identifies" ("Collective Search" 21), for Otaku, it is those very bits of data "about" something that, once collected, identify him as being a real Otaku. Amassing large amounts of inconsequential information becomes his identifying marker, and the goal of having every little fact about a certain topic offers him a sense of purpose, the hope and fulfillment of personal achievement. Acquiring the facts that others don't know yet is precisely what elevates Otaku to computer stud amongst other Otaku, and marks his own self-value (Greenfeld "Incredibly Strange" 3).⁹ "The more outlandish and difficult to procure an item, the greater the acknowledgement received from fellow Otaku," remarks Grassmuck ("Man" 5). Data is status, and the newer the better.

⁹ The point of the monster Otaku who finds out that the actor who played Godzilla in the sequel was 3 inches shorter than the one who starred in the original movie is not the relevance or the importance of this particular bit of information, but that HE had it and not the others.

Reveling In the Excess: For a Returned Agency

True enough, the scattered, unsociable or extreme 'Trivial Pursuit knowledge' of the Otaku is exactly what social critics such as Klapp feared would happen in the face of information overload. Deploring the apparent shallowness of communications of Information Societies, and blaming the repetitiveness and artificiality of much of the pop culture circulated by the media for creating an inevitable mass indifference and boredom in its denizens, they claimed this increasing 'noise' was standing in the way of efficient data gathering and of more 'useful' and 'productive' communications. Stereotypically, then, the Otaku (alike the Trekkie or other super-fans) emerge as the "grotesque embodiment of everything critics feared about mass culture – blind consumerism, obsessive commitment to the trivial, a loss of dignity and respect, a retreat from reality into the world of the 'boob tube'" (Tulloch and Jenkins 14). Yale sociology professor Sharon Kinsella, who has extensively studied manga (comic books) and youth culture in Japan, concurs that Otaku (especially when linked to the infamous Miyazaki case) has often been singled out as tangible proof of the dysfunction inherent to an information-heavy society:

The Otaku panic reflects the concerns of social scientists about contemporary Japanese society: social fragmentation due to mass media & communication infrastructure; decay of close-knit society due to the growth of individualism amongst the younger generation; failure or stubborn refusal of youth to adequately contribute to society, etc. The

growth of subcultures on the back of mass media was the focus of this sense of chaos and declining control over the organization & communication of the younger generation. (Kinsella "Adult Manga"137)

However, Hal Niedzviecki accurately points out that the problem with today's information culture is not necessarily

dumbed-down television or the proliferation of immoral pop culture, or even a house-of-mirrors assembly-line media. The problem resides in the inability of the majority of those who comment on the arts – journalists, academics, professional artists, producers, editors, information-age critics – to come to terms with new ways to live with and through mass-culture.

(Niedzviecki 20)

Critics and academia too often put down information and media contents that do not uphold what they perceive to be of a certain standard of importance or relevance, or what they consider to be 'normal' use of information. They often point to the consumers and to the fans of such fare as subliterate or irrational in their media consumption choices (Tulloch and Jenkins viii, 16). Such representations of infantilized or politically duped audiences allows writers and critics to speak of audiences and fans, but doesn't let them talk back, doing little to explore how audiences really perceive and use the media in their everyday lives.¹⁰ Indeed, what authority do these critics have to designate what is good or

¹⁰ Writes Henry Jenkins of his own experience as a fan of science fiction: "I was enormously frustrated with academic representations of media consumption, because

bad, worthy or not worthy, useful or useless, essential or superfluous information (Tulloch and Jenkins 11)? How can one declare fans such as the Otaku to have 'lost touch with reality' when the reality of an Information Society is that it precisely makes available that wide variety of topics and points of views that were previously harder to access or safely tucked away on the margins of society? When mainstream media itself promotes and encourages the unlimited consumption of pop culture? The high culture prejudice that lies at the bottom of Orrin Klapp and others' argument about information overload and its ensuing boredom can only be said to reflect their own values and judgments. Such criticism can hardly be imposed on others' perceptions or applied to all or any information that doesn't fill their criteria for 'usefulness', and is difficult to hold up when there is such a wide variety of 'realities' out there. Indeed, what is the 'normal'?¹¹ All information is potentially valid and interesting in its own right; it

their vision of isolated, passive, and ideologically vulnerable consumers were so at odds with my highly social, engaged, empowered, and creative experiences as a fan. I often joke that I got tired of being told to get a life and decided to write a book instead. Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture was that book -- an attempt to map fandom as an interpretive and creative community actively appropriating the content of television for its own pleasures." <<http://web.mit.edu/21fms/www/faculty/henry3/consume.html>>.

¹¹ There is often only a thin boundary between what is considered 'normal' or 'abnormal' ways of relating to mass culture. Bjo Trimble recounts this anecdote: "A journalist asked a Trekkie (Star Trek fan) "Don't you think it's *abnormal* for grown people to run around

only depends on how it is approached. What seems dull to one is gold to another. While closing oneself off to society at large to elaborate on the colour of Ultraman's spandex suits is not the satisfying answer most media users seek, a more relaxed perspective on their particular attitude towards information will recognize that "otakudom is very successful as a strategy for mastering the social & psychological uncertainties of our age" (Grassmuck "Man" 11). Best of all, it lets the Otaku talk back.

Otaku's love affair with information can indeed be said to speak of, to and from their cultural moment. That is to say, they are both willing consumers and active agents within the overload of information that surrounds them, and have actively chosen to be involved and interested in with what many would classify as boring and irrelevant. While largely a subcultural movement, Otaku partake fully in mainstream consumerism (Grassmuck "Otaku" 199). Whatever income they earn goes directly into buying the latest video releases, manga collections, and

in costumes and be able to quote every word Mr. Spock ever said?" The Trekkie countered this by asking his interviewer about his own detailed knowledge of baseball statistics. The journalist retreated by saying: "No, baseball is normal; this stuff isn't" (qtd. in Tulloch and Jenkins 13). This anecdote unveils the thinly drawn yet sharply policed boundary between normal and abnormal audience conduct, appropriate and inappropriate ways of relating to mass culture (both within fandom and in the culture at large). "The 'Trekkie' caricature, a distortion of actual fan behaviour and practices, marks that boundary, separating the cultural practices of the Other from the writer's own relationship with the media" concludes Jenkins (Tulloch and Jenkins 14).

three apiece of the newest dolls and toy models that suit their fancy.¹² They upgrade to the latest technological gadgetry in order to outdo each other and have the best, biggest zooms for their cameras to better capture their idol's underwear.

However, diverging from Klapp and the likes' worries that such maniacal consumption would enslave people to "external things", make them victims of an endless "self-indulgent greed", all the while depriving them of "deeper values" and "frittering away meaningful social ties" (Klapp "Opening" 169), Otaku prove otherwise. While they do consume and buy commercial objects and avidly follow the lives of their favourite pop stars in their most intimate details, they also seek to transcend, transform, and adapt the market system in order to fully appropriate it (Barral 60). In no way unsettled by the outpourings of pop culture from the media, they buy and consume, display and produce it to excess amongst themselves. Their acts declare that they will not be passive consumers even if they choose popular culture and trivia to express their individuality. No one with a passive consumer attitude would ever qualify as an Otaku (Grassmuck "Man" 3; Levi 3, 30), as the Otaku spirit calls not for consuming large amounts of random data, but for an intense and continuous effort in collecting all things related to his area of interest. "Fans and followers are not so much transfixed by images as engaged by them, both fascinated and frustrated by their potentials"

¹² Three is a necessity: one for safekeeping, one for trading, and one to assemble and put on display.

points out MIT professor Henry Jenkins (Tulloch and Jenkins vii).¹³ As “Ota-King” and Tokyo lecturer Toshio Okada puts it, Otaku are able to look at an object of desire from every angle possible:

Where Gutenberg-schooled readers will detect a story, the Otaku first of all refer to the syntactic levels. Their judgment is based on an extensive knowledge of the particular genre [of manga and anime] allowing them to decode quotations, grasp references, & appreciate nuances. (qtd. in Grassmuck “Man” 5)

Otaku are not only reader, but also author, producer, and critic. Only when they've had an in-depth look at all the details of a text or of a topic (probably going as far as to include the shoe size of a series' creator) can Otaku affirm their

¹³ Even if one did agree with Klapp that inattention or boredom has become an quasi-automatic response that strategically resist an increasing cultural load, this does not make of the masses a distracted bunch with no opinions or taste, or unable to hold deep-seated, meaningful values. I do not agree with Klapp that the citizens of Information societies (those poor “anguished subjects of modern societies who are no longer able to find any value in their lives”(Klapp “Opening” 47) have found refuge in a mentality of consumerism, or in boredom for that matter. They have, as fans demonstrate, found ways in getting along with the excess of information in their lives. The overload is an everyday fact: is it not, in a sense, the mundane reality of life in Information societies?

admiration and authority over it (Barral 1999, p.252)¹⁴. The Otaku's over-efficient gathering of data over-fulfills the media producers' wishes as they find new, subversive uses for these commercial series and products originally intended for a more passive consumption.

Evidently, the taking in of such irrelevant moments in pop culture and regurgitating them in their own websites and zines returns the privilege of speaking for and to them]selves, asserts Niedzviecki (120, 195, 326). The Otaku

¹⁴ The Otaku watch and read to find the tidbits they need to round out their collection and perfect their "knowledge", not to merely be amused or to pass the time. Not focusing on specific interpretations, trends or quality of the production, the Otaku can also more easily perceive the whole of a topic, grasping its texture while recognizing the small details that define each genre, each author, each character. An anime Otaku will not only know all about the animated series' episodes, but might also write his own plots in hand-drawn zines (which he might sell at the next *Komiket* (Comic Market) and reshape favourite female characters in plaster molds according to his own specifications. Phonebook Otaku will find new uses for the white pages, devouring it to create their own, extremely personal listings of historical figures' homonyms and their phone numbers. For the anime Otaku who has figured out that "Tuxedo Man" wore red socks in 46 Sailor Moon episodes, this fact may give him the feeling of a having a "hand's up" over the media producers (as they most probably never knew this themselves). The Otaku' all-encompassing and meticulous approach to gathering information overwhelmingly shows that fans of popular, commercial series do not mindlessly absorb all that is presented to them through the mass media.

strategy has everything to do with regaining control of information. While their appetite for information is humongous, they very well know that they can never know all things about everything. But they can know everything about a very small section of the world. In this way, they can claim a certain control of an informational world gone rampant. The stress and feeling of information overload in heavily mediatized societies oftentimes ascend from a "bad conscience about never having acquired enough information, never having communicated enough", hypothesizes Volker Grassmuck ("Man" 2). The Otaku refuses to submit to "the frenzied demon's dance" (Grassmuck "Alone" 2) required to deal with an always increasing informational pool, which demands of people to always strive to keep up with it. So, unlike Sherry Turkle's conviction that people in information Societies have to develop multiple personalities and multiple attention spans that can process information in parallel in order to keep up with and satisfy a want to know as much as possible about a lot of things (as she describes in her 1995 book Life on the Screen), the Otaku goes the opposite way. He concentrates fully and completely on one topic; he is a "monomaniacal personality" (Grassmuck "Man" 2). "This radical limitation enables them to form an identity and bundle together a life story as a narrative", rationalizes Grassmuck ("Man" 11). Through his strategy of pursuing information in one tiny area of the world, but one about which he can learn and know everything, the Otaku cleverly sidesteps the stress of facing the always new and can find comfort within the confines of his topic. In the vast amounts of available data, he targets small

areas (such as a favourite anime series or photos of athletes from the former German Democratic Republic) in which he can “feel secure and prepared to cope with all eventualities” (“Man” 11). This may come at the cost of closing himself off to other subjects and to society at large, but by his radical confinement the Otaku avoids the stress of a messy recollection of semi-digested facts and, in a way, regains a sense of control over the information he encounters, and of his own life. Instead of Turtle’s multiple attention spans armed for battle with cell-phones, portable computers and PDAs to take on the hectic pace of society, the Otaku seek to appropriate the world through the microcosmos of collecting and play.

By so appropriating the fluff of pop culture, Otaku “have turned the threat to their identity into the source of their identity and, by extension, have challenged the authority of existing hegemonic codes.” (Iida 426). Hence why the actual substance (or apparent lack thereof) of the data he collects can never cause boredom or dissatisfaction in the Otaku: the dull and the trivial, from the Otaku perspective, are not dull and trivial at all. “For fans, information about the programme, its characters, its production, etc. is information which fits a very precise context and is used to make sense of an even more complex narrative universe”, underscores Jenkins (Tulloch and Jenkins 17-8). The accumulation of trivia becomes a sort of “unauthorized knowledge”, an expertise on those details that certain authorities (such as the academia) had somehow decided should not count or should not matter (Tulloch and Jenkins 17). Fans such as the Otaku

show that they are neither powerless nor brainwashed by the endless stream of the media. Their collections of trivia are not a 'pseudo-expertise' at all, but a knowledge that precisely reflects those dominant qualities promoted within Information Societies and with which they have grown up: education, consumerism, information and technology. Theirs is a direct "expression of the culture of fractured knowledge and info-chips" that surrounds them, declares Grassmuck ("Otaku" 207).¹⁵ Otaku cleverly use the system that uses them by taking full advantage of the pop culture so vigorously thrown at them by an overactive entertainment industry. Reimagining it to serve their own purposes, they can stand defiant to their commerciality (Niedzviecki 14).¹⁶ More concretely,

¹⁵ Indeed, the Otaku's desire to accumulate always more information corresponds to their society's own love of technology, information and media; it is only the topics and the intensity of their affection that differ from the rest of the population's general interest in gathering information.

¹⁶ "Fans respond to this situation by preserving the traditional practices of a folk culture in responding to mass culture, treating film or television as if it offered them raw materials for telling their own stories and resources for forging their own communities. Just as the American folk songs of the nineteenth century were often related to issues of work, the American folk culture of the twentieth century speaks to issues of leisure and consumption. Fan culture, thus, represents a participatory culture through which fans explore and question the ideologies of mass culture, speaking from a position sometimes inside and sometimes outside the cultural logic of network television." (Jenkins "Poachers").

the Otaku's approach "[a]ttempts to reshape the cultural forces swirling about [them ...], a way to tell the story of life in the pop void without denying the importance of pop culture in [their] lives" (Niedzviecki 27).

The fact is that the dull does matter. The seemingly meaningless secretions of the media saturate the rhythm of everyday life are no less real, no less vital to those who engage with it than those other supposedly more important subjects of politics, business, progress, etc. (Tulloch and Jenkins.17). The mundane data that fill up and supposedly clog the communication channels may in fact reflect a truer perspective of what life is really like in the Information Societies. Ephemera, the bubbling over of pop culture, the ordinary and all that is seen to have become 'dull' due to their sheer quantity are in fact quite interesting when seen from such a perspective. They can provide for a social history not of political ideals, heroic acts and scientific feats, but of the everyday, of the lives of ordinary people and of individuals living on the margins of society (Achenbach A01; also Frisby 183).¹⁷ What is needed is to recognize more productive ways to read and understand information overload. The repetitive and the trivial are an intrinsic part of Information Societies, and should be recognized

¹⁷ "This subject of the mundane [...] keeps revealing new dimensions of the human subject as we study it. It leads toward contradictions, and in the process it brings us to a better understanding of ourselves." affirms Severyn T. Bruyn, an editor of the fascinating Journal of Mundane Behaviour. Visit the journal online at <www.mundanebehaviour.org> to explore and to recapture the extraordinary essence of everyday life.

as such before being thrown out as useless, boring or irrelevant. The case of the Japanese Otaku is an example as to how audiences actively find the resources and methods that help them deal with, understand, use and profit from information media on a daily basis. By choosing information overload as their very lifestyle, by openly incorporating the frivolous details of the pop culture that are so dear to them into their everyday lives, the Otaku succeed in reconciling the abundance, the superficiality and the faux-world of advertising, TV, games, music and the Web with their own mundane lives (Niedzviecki 109, 167). From their example, one can see how the construct of overload and boredom can and should be reframed from being a destructive and negative trend innate to Information Societies to one that is more productive, one that allows for people to go on amongst the heavy presence of information in their lives.

Victim No More: A Different Information Strategy

“It’s not the center of ideas that are interesting [...], it’s the living, seething mess out there, where actions have consequences, where the street finds its own uses for things. [...] It’s up to us, not just to imagine it, but to inhabit it. Not just to admire it and make gestures, but to judge it and take action.” (Sterling 37)

The overwhelming presence of information in highly industrialized cultures being inevitable, our critics’ (not so) helpful ‘tips’ on dealing with information overload by avoidance or by ignoring most of it (because of it being perceived as mostly

boring or useless) are not sensible. Encounters with information and how one deals with them will always remain a personal decision taken in relation to personal or professional interests, previous knowledge and experience; context will always remain more relevant than a particular amount. We must remember that the act of doing holds just as much significance, if not more, than the lasting work (Niedzviecki 129). What is certain is that the Otaku's approach to information creates a functional response to the seemingly dysfunctional cultural situation that is overload and boredom. They have successfully drawn elements from the endless media stream to construct imaginative worlds that suit them perfectly (Abercrombie and Longhurst 103).¹⁸

The case of the Otaku clearly demonstrates that it is possible to feel at home amongst the noisy communications of Information Societies. Having to deal with high loads of information can be returned to being a normal part of one's everyday life, instead of being cause for panic and stress. There is no reason to believe that the world (and its information) has been impoverished or hampered by the new forms of human interaction provided by the new media of

¹⁸ Within the intense mediascape that modern societies provide, there is much that is unregarded or discarded by audiences; every magazine article, piece of music and television program is not and need not be taken in as fuel for the imagination. Hermes makes such the same point in arguing that not all media products are *meaningful* to all audiences. What audiences are doing, therefore, is "drawing from the endless media stream that passes them by a set of diverse elements out of which they can construct imaginative worlds that suit them" (Abercrombie and Longhurst 107).

information distribution (McLuhan 1966). The overload of (dull) information cannot be blamed solely on the presence of too many channels, on a spewing Internet or on sloppy media contents production; it somehow was willed into existence, it was written and distributed by real human beings. While technology is obviously an extremely important and determining force in precipitating the situation of information overload, it is important to remember it is not the only agent of change; more importantly, the denizens of Information Societies are not victim to it. "Information and communications technologies [...] both contain and signify the cultural and political values of particular human societies" (Armitage). Accordingly, these technologies, their use and the information they provide are always expressions of socioeconomic, geographical, and political interests, partialities, alignments and commitments. This means that the dull is just as much a valid part of the information landscape than other, more 'respectable' forms of information. Critics cannot designate what is good or bad, worthy or unworthy information. Information simply is, and its true value can only reside in the eye of each person that encounters it, and how it is of use to them. The clichés and superficiality of pop culture, while meaningless in the eyes of some, hold rich treasures and give birth to the fond memories of others.¹⁹

¹⁹ See We Want Some Too: Underground Desire and the Reinvention of Mass Culture by Hal Niedzviecki (2000).

Less dramatically but most importantly, the relevance of the Otaku lies in the fact that their peculiar use of information invites reflection. Their odd, obsessive gathering of information can also be understood as a social critique of the so-called Information Society, and its want to be information-savvy, to be information-efficient. Why all this fear about information overload? Why be so bothered about the so-called proliferation of the dull and the meaningless throughout media outlets?²⁰ In their charming weirdness and exotic appeal,

²⁰ Why not think like the King of Hearts in Alice in Wonderland, who, after hearing the nonsensical presentation of the White Rabbit, simply shrugs off the overabundance of details with the remark: "If there is no meaning in it, that saves a world of trouble, you know, as we need not try to find any?" (Watzlawick 75). Whoever said that the artificial surface of the world, presented as it is through large vats of 'information' sources, needs to be filled by unending activity and purposeful meaning? Everything does not *have* to be interesting or be full of meaning and relevance. Why not find refuge and pleasure in what is assumed to be dull? I do believe that there is cause in bringing back some of what has come to be generally tossed aside as 'the boring' to the same level as the 'interesting' and the 'worthy of knowing', as it helps cast a new light on the apprehension and skepticism that seems to be engulfing the present situation of information overload. By reinvesting a connection with the mundane, with the boring and the irrelevant, Otaku demonstrate that there is value to be had in it, if not for the inherent quality of its content, then at least for some sort of personal connection with their own daily, personal surroundings.

Otaku everywhere open our eyes to things unseen, to the possible value of the dull inside one's life. By stepping aside from the madness, to "oppose the march of progress" and linger for a moment in the secondary and the useless can help "break the momentum that is making us torpid" (Monroe 75)²¹.

The Otaku's particular use of information in his life needs not be seen as a solution or as a more efficient way to deal with information overload and the resulting meaninglessness, but rather as a step aside, as "making waves" to refresh our perspective (Monroe 54). As urges Abbott:

the glut and information overload and burn out of meaning which derives from the devaluing relativism of post-modernism should reinforce the desirability of an individually though out answer to our fundamental question (139).

If it is true that an ever-increasing amount of information finds itself to be trivial and superficial media fodder, Nemoianu's advice can help people reap from these discarded items, recognizing that they also represent and contain who we really are as a society. To 'get along' in the Information Society, it is not enough

²¹ I particularly enjoy William Monroe's argument that the acts of subcultures, as that of the Otaku, are "dirt affirming" (54). By this, he means that through their making of "waves" by questioning the habits and beliefs of a society (in this case one that favours the gathering of useful data and the consumption of interesting data), through the dirt (any data that is not useful nor inherently interesting). The taking in of this "dirt" in culturally tonic acts "help restore resistance and immunity" (ibid).

to either frantically interact with the impossible amount of available information or to simply ignore it. I believe that audiences react to it, take it and make it their own, as do the Otaku. It is by disrupting the flow of information, by jumping right into it and creating waves, that one can regain meaning and value in the loads of data faced everyday. Otaku, never stagnant, has found a personal, renewed energy in the trivia itself.

As Brian Longhurst, Professor of Cultural Studies at Salford University, accurately points out: "it is not [...] that the media provide the resources of escape from the mundane world, but rather that they provide some of the materials for living within it" (Abercrombie and Longhurst 107). The tidbits about pop stars and video games are an integral part of everyday lived lives in Information Societies. Otaku wisely demonstrate that reality and meaningfulness can just as likely be found in the trivial outpour of the media, in "the insignificant and the refuse corners" of society than in the grand theories of sociologists and media pundits (Frisby 183; Abbott 130). Japanese manga artist and Otaku Yahagi Takako establishes this quite precisely when he asks: "I am not living in a fantasy world of my own, I am living in the real world. How about you?" (qtd. in Kinsella "Adult Manga"131).

Conclusion: Beyond Information Overload and Boredom

"It's all around us, and ...the only chance of renewal is to open our eyes and see the mess"

- *Samuel Beckett* (qtd. in William)

Undeniably, information media have had tremendous impact on people throughout the ages: art, typography, telegraph, film, television, and now informatic networks have all influenced human interrelations by promoting and spreading information and knowledge. As much as the denizens of Information societies value the collection and possession of the latest information and the seeking of in-depth knowledge, I will agree with the critics' argument that there now is so much 'information' available through the various media that people are sometimes at a lost to know what to do with it all. As one flips amongst the channels of their obese, digital cable-fed television and surfs the infinite space of the Internet, one soon realizes that a significant amount of the information provided is not all that useful. In the desire for knowledge and information, one discovers confusion, redundancy and uselessness; in the quest for more, eyes tend to gloss over as attention spans reach their limits. The sociologists, psychologists and cultural critics explored in the first chapter were unable to precisely define why 'the boring' was so contagiously spreading throughout the media outlets of Information societies, except in terms of it being a reaction and a result of over-consumption and over-stimulation. Disappointingly, they offered no real alternatives as to how the citizens of Information societies may ever escape from their perception of a bleak future where jaded couch-potatoes and mouse-

clickers forever roam the impossible depths of a data stream gone berserk. Only one thing remained certain for them: that boredom and the boring were to be an ever-present circumstance of societies that favour the unquestioning distribution and consumption of large amounts of information.

Brian Lamb, founder of the public-service C-SPAN channel, once asked:

“Which part of the library of the Internet do you want to shut down? Let me tell you something: if we can’t survive all the information that we’re going to develop, then we’re in real trouble. No one is going to stop writing books. No one is going to stop creating information.” (qtd. in Shenk 22).

Neither man’s mental limits at inputting and absorbing information, nor (post)modern Information societies’ communication output rate are likely to change much. The critics who fear information overload and the spreading of meaninglessness and boredom are justifiably concerned, but as changes in society are often misunderstood, it may just be that a different perspective is needed to deal with the circumstance that is information overload. As Tom Standage reminds us in The Telegraph: The Victorian Internet (1998), history repeats; we just tend to forget about it. The same vocabulary and hype now surrounding the Internet and the new technologies of information were utilized at the arrival of the telegraph more than a hundred years ago: a revolution of communication; concerns over having to deal with an overload of information; anxiety over the survival of the more serious information sources, such as

newspapers and books; the deploring of people's seeming preference for the newer and the faster over reasoning and tradition; the appearance of new jargon and worrisome subcultures, etc. Despite these apparent 'dangers', culture and society have not only emerged safe and sound from the emergence of the telegraph, but also enhanced by the experience that an increased availability of information brought about.

And so in today's Information societies, where information, facts and data appear to be in overabundance and 'out of control' once again, individuals need not avoid exposure to the media out of fear of overload, nor dwell on nostalgic memories of times past, when things supposedly meant so much more. There is no need to fear information overload, nor its Midas touch that is, in the eyes of information critics, transforming to dull all in its path. In fact, while so much of the Information society's media landscape is said to be 'infested' with meaningless data, a quick look around reveals that most people are in fact not reduced to apathy and boredom by the information provided by the popular media in general.

This thesis has exposed various reactions to information overload. There are those who strive to keep up with as much of it as possible: they wish to keep the sprawl of data under control in their archives, they want to keep up to date and be 'in the know' of the latest facts. However, as I have discussed, the accompanying stress and the impossibility of really knowing everything show the futility of such sweeping attempts. Then there are those who have chosen to

block much of the data overload out of their lives, either out of pure confusion or unwillingness to keep abreast of the informational tide. Yet this 'blocking out' risks causing a loss of social connection or meaning, apathy and chronic boredom, all of which can be of no good for the continuing of society. Otaku have chosen a third option in dealing with data overload in their lives, one that strangely but successfully combines both attitudes: they choose to have it all, but only of very specific topic. They beat the stress of facing 'too much' data by only focusing on a very small section of the world, but one through which he can be confident to hold under his absolute control. They neatly forgo boredom by choosing only those topics that are of interest to them personally, not ones dictated by others or by social pressures. Moreover, with many of their subjects already so dull, how can they fail but to be reinvested with potential, with interest and with a renewed purpose as they are included in the new order of Otaku's peculiar collections?

The seemingly useless boring does not have to lead to passivity, apathy and boredom, as was demonstrated with the case of the Japanese Otaku. Certainly, they are not victims of information overload, of the 'system' or of a meaningless postmodern society. They are not all runaways, or lonely, sad souls "unable to deal with reality, [...] spen[ding] their days engrossed in big-eyed childlike female fantasies or big explosions" (Dinsmore), an image that some like to perpetuate. Faced with the onslaught, Otaku have not "reclined" (Kroker 161) nor are they languidly absorbing all the "lifeless secretions" of the media

(Baudrillard "Cool Memories" 97). They instead have taken an active stance, one that does not reject involvement. The Otaku knows that the only way out of the mess is to go all the way through; holding nothing back, he has mutated his sensibilities into non-linear ones, which allows him to deal with a variety of tiny details, despite the apparent lack of coherence, order or social meaningfulness. The Otaku speak to and from their cultural moment, both willing consumers and active agents within the overload of information that surrounds them. They truly embody the possibility of positively living with media and without meaning in a postmodern society (Grassmuck "Otaku" 219).

That there no longer seems to be (that is, if there ever was) a consensus to point at what the values of a particular society are (Niedzviecki 70) or to "give reliable reference points by which people can locate themselves socially, realize themselves sentimentally and declare (to themselves and others) who they are" (Klapp "Collective Search" viii), doesn't mean that media users are a hopelessly lost bunch, confused by an onslaught of disjointed data. The case of the Otaku demonstrates that it is possible to reclaim the scattered, supposedly useless data and to go on amidst the overload by giving it new purpose. At worse, the Otaku's antisocial obsession with tiny details comforts him and provides him with solace whereas real relationships can't; at best, it helps him achieve a sense of control in a world full of chaos. Otaku create coherence in a small section of the world - coherence that is scarcely to be had elsewhere. They succeed in returning

pattern and order, significance and meaningfulness in the chaos of the informational world that surrounds them.

Some will argue that the extreme individualism and peculiar interests of subcultural groups such as Otaku can only cause more divergence in opinion and spread even more useless data in a world where there already is too much information, and that such attitudes cannot logically help regain control of the situation that is information overload. That may be the case. But what are the other solutions if we cannot even begin by choosing what interests us, truly and personally? If people don't care, they need not bother getting involved at all. If they do, why not become overly involved like the Otaku? It is but a first step which allows one to get into the mess of information media, and beat the torpidness it is engendering by creating one's own informational spaces, a space where one would hope to find meaning once again. If the critics whine that there is too much, that it all means little, the Otaku have shown that there is a way through and out of the mess. They have regained a sense of identity within the artificial abundance of mass culture; they have created meaningful informational spaces that suit them and their close-circled community and that provide them with a sense of accomplishment and pride, even if in a non-traditional way. Despite different motives and moral condemnation Otaku are subjected to, their

strategies represent relatively successful ways of coping with the challenges of the times¹.

Moreover, it is important to point out that the attitude towards what it means to be Otaku has considerably softened in recent years. The Japanese public has become more aware that otaku fanaticism does not necessarily imply antisocial and violent behavior à la Miyazaki, and that deeper social problems (economic uncertainty, the pressure to fit in, cutthroat academics, bullying, overly busy parents, etc.) are more likely to be the cause of such deranged behaviour (Eng "Current Status"). To be Otaku now speaks of one's belonging to a "high-information handling elite" very much adept at bridging the gap between information overload and everyday life (Kinsella "Adult Manga" 130). 'Otaku' is now commonly used to represent any deep passion about something, and it is

¹ I believe that through the Otaku's obsession with the useless is mirrored in Information societies' denizens' own collective love affair with information. Their odd collections invite one to reflect on their own relationship with information, exposing the inflated (and often fleeting) importance that media tends to impose on items such as news stories or fads to increase their mass appeal. The resulting piles of outmoded clothing, unlistened CDs, unvisited bookmarks and forgotten news clippings that crowd our living spaces are only witness to our own budding collection of the trivial, meaningless perhaps in the grand scheme of things, but meaningful in the sense that WE accumulated it. They represent a little of what it means to live life in an Information society.

even beginning to be used directly as a verb meaning “to obsess”². The term ‘otaku’ has also come to be widely used by fans outside of Japan, more generally describing an emerging outlook on how individuals use the drivel of pop culture and information to their own pleasurable ends (Eng “Politics of Otaku”). Similar approaches to media and the delight in accumulating excessive, trivial knowledge are common amongst not only manga and animation fans, but academic bookworms, film buffs, rock music fans, etc.

As Orrin Klapp himself underlined in one of his early writings: “[w]ho knows who will be the progenitors of a new way of life?” (“Collective Search” 255). It would be a mistake for the academic community to turn a blind eye to such luxuriant fan cultures as that of the Otaku if they propose to pursue relevant and accurate media studies, or to discuss audiences’ reaction to and use of the contents of the media. The attitude behind Otaku may hold the key to a better accommodation and understanding of information-bloated societies, and invites all to reflect on their own media consumption and on the choices they make in a society chock-full of information. This new instinct towards the retrieval and use of information expresses a new vitality and a faculty to adapt to a world in

² For example, a New York Times Magazine article on fashion published in February 2002 explains how the term otaku means “deep passion. About anything.” (Spindler 134). As well, in the vox pop column of the March 5, 2004 edition of Japan Today, one participant casually uses the term as a verb: “In Japan, many young men adopt a much more feminized style -- fussing over their clothes, otaku about lots of weird stuff.”

movement, showing clearly that people can and have learned to deal with the excess of the media in their lives, and in a sense, have successfully returned the situation of information overload to the mundane reality of daily life.

Epilogue: An Invitation for Reflection on the Pressures of the Information Society

“And presently, your soul gets frightfully sterile and dry because you are so quick and snappy and efficient about doing one thing after another that you have no time for your own ideas to come in and develop and gently shine”

- *Ueland* (qtd. in Richardson 527)

Working as a multimedia production manager and director, my job is indeed stressful, filled with an endless parade of details to attend to, deadlines inevitably due “the day before yesterday”, and a creeping urgency to try to keep up to forever mutating technologies. Indeed, the chaos and frenetic activity of my line of work had left me, I felt, dulled and dried, and indeed bored. I was busy, but not interested; I was moving, but not always consciously. I had no will to make constant (and tiresome) effort to dig through the heap of data trash to unearth the (possibly) meaningful. Has life in the early 21st century made robots out of people like me, efficiently contouring meanings and skipping over the useless and the redundant -- because we chose to look at this extra information as ‘boring’ -- all in favour of being quick and efficient?

If our lives are indeed being submerged by an overload of information, the most part considered useless, redundant or trivial, we owe it to ourselves to find redemptive, creative and productive outlets within this particular cultural situation, for our ideas to have a chance to come to the surface again and “gently shine”, for society to go on, for the future to take place. The meaninglessness, the boredom that seems to be spreading in my workplace, my generation, my

culture, spells not the end but the possibility of a new era, or at least, to go on.

The final outcome of the Information Society has yet to emerge.

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