

**VIOLENT  
BOREDOM**

## VIOLENT BOREDOM

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\*SPOILER ALERT\*

The problem with changing psychoanalysts is that your case history will not already be digested by the next one. You will inevitably have to bring yourself to narrate your biography, contextualise your “anguish,” and make yourself known all over again. If I failed to connect with the Lacanian I started seeing earlier this year, it was only partly because I found irksome the occasional buzzing of his phone during the session. The rest was down to the utter fatigue I felt when he said, early on, “So, tell me your story.” Three months later, we hadn’t moved very far. I remained elusive; he failed to become the “subject supposed to know.” In our penultimate session I said I couldn’t do it, couldn’t talk again about the things that I had talked about *ad nauseum* with his predecessor. The repeated disclosure lacked the thrill of the first time. I told him that to reveal myself again was essentially boring.

“Boring,” he repeated. “That’s not the first time you’ve said this. Tell me, what is your experience of boredom?”

There are, of course, more deleterious states one could encounter, but I do believe that the experience of chronic boredom, especially at a young age, inflicts its own kind of trauma. The profound lack of stimulation I endured in my youth has ruined my focus, my ability to sit still; I am now constantly in search of new ways to “feel something.” I suppose I could’ve dug into this with the Lacanian, but I couldn’t face up to the dullness all over again.

To depict boredom in art presents a similar challenge, with the artist risking the replication of tedium in their audience. Though Kelly Reichardt’s later filmography transforms this peril into possibility, embracing a slower, more melancholic pace, her debut film *River of Grass* (1994) is a clipped, blackly comic chronicle of its anti-heroine Cozy’s monotonous existence.

Cozy’s narration of her own life story, delivered in a tinkly voiceover, never states her boredom explicitly. Its origins and later consequences can only be read between the lines of the dreamy, aphoristic observations she relays. Nor does the perennial ennui evident in her expression weigh the film down; Cozy, so bored of the Florida Everglades that Reichardt’s camera resists romanticising, so uninterested in her husband Bobby and her children, is girlishly charming as the victim of torpor. Though she’s hemmed in by domesticity, wiling away her time wishing a nice couple would come unburden her of her children, *River of Grass* shows that boredom, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Cozy may be dissatisfied with her life and surroundings, but her humdrum day-to-day is depicted as worthy of curiosity. I’m amused by the Coca Cola-filled bottle she gives her baby as she drags despondently from a cigarette; by her plain, legging figure cartwheeling around her room.

Meanwhile, the spectres of more sensational lives haunt the film. Named after the jazz drummer Cozy Cole, Cozy recounts how her father Jimmy was once a session musician, playing drums in after-hours clubs all around Miami; when her mother became pregnant, her father traded in the drumsticks for a steady job as a crime scene detective. Cozy’s mother, however, leaves them when she’s ten years old. Jimmy tells his daughter that she went to join the circus, a fanciful story

that she chooses to indulge, daydreaming about her mother in a “sequined cape flying through the air without a single net to catch her fall.” The house that she and Bobby live in has its own lurid history: it once belonged to a woman who “murdered her husband and buried him inside the shower wall.” Cozy ambiently wonders “what made her act so violently”; perhaps “it wasn’t one big thing but a lot of little things that just grew deeper and deeper under her skin.”

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There’s a joke early on in *River of Grass*, delivered by a barman to a glum Jimmy, who has misplaced his duty gun. It concerns a man and a woman who meet at a bar and decide to go back to the woman’s place after the woman expresses her interest in kink. Back at her apartment, she takes off all her clothes and gets under the covers, while he goes to the bathroom. He doesn’t join her in bed; instead, he comes back out of the bathroom straightening his tie. The woman asks where he’s going. “I’m through, I already shit in your purse,” he responds.

The joke foreshadows how libidinal energy is thwarted and misdirected throughout *River of Grass*, never finding release in sex itself. Cozy seems never to have had a meaningful or fulfilling sexual outlet; “though Bobby and I never touched, he wrote me poems all throughout high school,” she narrates in the film’s opening. “Later I accepted his proposal for marriage. I knew Bobby loved me and figured someday I’d probably grow to love him too.” In a brief scene back at the bar, a middle-aged woman with an indistinct European accent tries to flirt with Jimmy. He remains impervious to the woman’s advances, his listlessness emanating again from the fact of his missing gun.

Any feeling of excitement that arises in the film typically does so when a character comes into contact with this symbolic object. The loutish Lee shares Cozy’s experience of monotony, yet seems unmotivated to do anything meaningful about it, disregarding suggestions from his friend Doug to join the army. After Doug finds the gun lying outside, he is apprehensive about keeping the weapon, leaving it in Lee’s custody so he can sell it somewhere in Broward County. The next morning, Lee is invigorated, transformed, when he pulls it out on his poor grandmother as she comes into his room to wake him up.

Given that the pursuit of (satisfying) sex is as good a way as any to “feel something,” Cozy’s apparent disinterest in it is noteworthy. When she gets dressed up to go out, it feels familiar; the trope of a woman staving off boredom by looking for sexual attention. At the bar, she finds Lee, and they seem to hit it off. Together they break into a stranger’s backyard; Cozy jumps into a swimming pool and floats romantically in the water, but swims towards Lee when she spots him fondling the gun. She hoists herself out, dripping wet, and comes to sit between his legs. The camera caresses Cozy’s back then lands on the gun in Lee’s hand, which he then places in Cozy’s. In the film’s only sexually-charged moment, the so-called romantic interests fail to kiss; their bond is consummated not by sex but by holding the gun in union and shooting—just as a man walks out.

The bleak comedy of *River of Grass* is found in the over-eagerness with which Cozy and Lee go on the run. They haven’t killed anyone; they have completely missed their target. He survives the shot without the slightest injury, but

the would-be criminals don't even stop to check. Instead, Cozy nurses her new self-image: "I could feel the butterflies in my stomach as I tumbled deeper into a life of crime ... After all, murder was thicker than marriage, and Lee and I were now bound by the life we took."

However, like my attempt at making myself known to the Lacanian, Lee and Cozy don't get very far on their "crime spree"; they don't have the money to pay for motels, or gas; they don't even have a quarter to pay the toll fee when they decide to try and escape the suburbs. Ultimately, it's Lee's lack of gumption that keeps them rooted. Cozy is devastated when he admits to her they're not murderers after all. "If we weren't killers, we weren't anything," she laments in voiceover.

So is that why Cozy kills Lee at the end? It might be because she believes the only way to constitute her reality is by becoming someone—a murderer. It's a motivation I understand only in intellectual terms. But just before she points the gun at Lee's head, he suggests they move in together, that he could get a job, maybe two jobs, have some money coming in. Cozy's expression is despairing. Lee hasn't even finished saying what he's saying before she cocks the gun towards him. When she shuts her eyes, I question whether it's at the unbearable act she's about to commit or at the unbearable thought of returning to the doldrums of domesticity. Whichever it is, she pulls the trigger.