

by FRED INGLIS

The Secret World of Doing Nothing

by Billy Elin and Orvar Lögfren

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It has always been the great strength of Swedish social science to be unafraid of tackling the commonplace and the everyday, and to do so without any concession to those power-mad sociologists who refuse to tolerate any topic without capital letters in front of it. Professors Elin and Lögfren are no exception to their genial tradition, and with tactful friendliness bring on the time-honoured methods of social survey in order to discover what is the something which people are undoubtedly doing when doing nothing.

The trouble is that the techniques of ethnography will only yield new and surprising truths if the interpreters are equipped with intrepid powers of intellectual and emotional penetration, and are capable of setting out their speculations and conclusions in prose of a sufficiently poetic force and originality. Their minds and spirits must be, as Wordsworth unforgettably put it, "endued with a more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, having a greater knowledge of human nature and a more comprehensive soul than are common among mankind ..."

Our authors have great decency and kindness, but they confine their language to the terribly small change of the therapist, and their conceptual framework to the self-help book. This means that doing nothing as reported from interview and diary has only cliché-content, and the self-descriptions of their interlocutors turn the human subject into a frightful bore.

Thus, doing nothing is, for both social scientist and research subject, an aspect of 'time management', takes place in 'limbo' (which was, according to Dante, quite a lively spot), may be subject to 'power-games', is given vitality by 'multitasking' and, in the eventuality of 'burnout' when 'life gets out of synch' causes victims to lose their 'autopilot' and to sit staring at the wall.

The paucity and vacuousness of these concepts leaves these two obviously intelligent men with nothing to tell us. They seem to sense this, and struggle to enliven extremely dull and droning little extracts with something much more vigorous and illuminatingly introspective from assorted novels, including *Ulysses* of course but not, alas, Proust, as well as such pensive and gripping self-criticisms as the wonderful Jenny Diski's on the way to the Antarctic or John Steinbeck's travelling across the highways of the USA with Charley.

Some powerful feeling of social democratic obligations seems somehow to work to prevent Elin and Lögfren from using the high intelligence of the novelists to throw into relief the banality and unreflective blankness of so many of their individual cases. They turn the most trifling devices of the quotidian into a 'skill', and do so in so heavily plonking a manner that the reader has to do something to fill in the nothingness on the page ("This excerpt describes the social construct where composure communicates that the here and now is hopeless and boring". *Sic*. Aaaarrggh!)

The best part is the long third section on daydreaming, but even here they heed bores rather than Walter Mitty or the genius of quotidian vacancy, Michael Frayn. They are very well-read but can't tell us the difference between the good and the desolately awful.

Above all, their biggest subject – one with definite capital letters attached to it – eludes them, even in their nicely titled "backyards of modernity". The central predicament of modern urban life for millions is to discover meaningful action and what to feel about it. The most horrible daydreams of our time are filled for innumerable people by the revolting destructiveness of computer war-games and the attendant DVDs. A map of that mutilated and secret inner space would unlock a dark cellar in the many cultures of capitalism, and even suggest something about the imaginative body-building of terror.