

regimes decide artistic, market, or other kinds of ‘values’ in an art world? Who influences institutions responsible for canonizing and influencing artistic practices? What practices of exclusion are implicit in often seemingly participatory and emancipatory art histories?

Such questions and others were raised with regard to Brazilian museum rejuvenation schemes, German Nazi art dealings, and independent performing arts and filmmakers in Hungary and Chile in the panel I convened with Alex Flynn on ‘Relational patrons’.

### Common conceptual paradigms

Two sessions differed notably from the others insofar as they tried to synthesize anthropological approaches to art theoretically. Thomas Fillitz and Ursula Helg, who convened the

panel ‘Anthropology of art’, suggested that even the most common concepts anthropologists use to describe artistic practice – ‘the art world’, ‘global art’, ‘curators’, ‘mediators’, ‘galleries’, ‘creativity’, ‘patronage’ – remain problematically context-*unspecific*. While also many non-European *artists* utilize such concepts, they often do so to evoke vastly different meanings. Thus, Thomas Fillitz rightly pointed out in his paper ‘Engaging with global art discourses’, we need to ‘reconfigure our concepts about art through local, process-based ethnographic understandings’. This would not only yield a thicker description of specific arts practices, but also enable unique anthropological contributions to discourses in neighbouring disciplines, such as art history, architecture, or design.

In the interest of uniting these efforts under the aegis of one interest group within the Visual Anthropology section of EASA (VANEASA), the ‘Anthropologies of art’ laboratory convened by Roger Sansi drafted plans for a follow-up workshop in Barcelona in May 2015. A new international research-based network entitled Anthropologies of Art (A/A), which I co-convene with Alex Flynn, complements this envisaged consolidation of a coherent set of anthropological approaches to (contemporary) art. ●

Jonas Tinius

University of Cambridge  
jlt46@cam.ac.uk

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# narrative

## BOREDOM AND CRISIS IN THE HUMANITARIAN REALM

Boredom is a polysemic category, defined – for instance – as a human phenomenon that can generate a range of effects at both the individual and social levels. Boredom is reflected in Charles Baudelaire’s *taedium vitae* or in the ordinariness of certain characters depicted by Melville and Dostoyevsky. What may be viewed as ‘modern boredom’ (Goodstein 2005; Jervis et al. 2003; Musharbash 2007) has been the object of analysis and philosophical reflection.

In an existentialist vein, Patricia Peterle (2013) has maintained that boredom is likely to be the point of contact between humans and animals. In line with Lars Svendsen’s idea that in ‘the in-humanity of boredom we gain a perspective on our own humanity’ (2008: 41), Peterle argues that the boredom caused by acting automatically, mechanically and unmindfully gives us access to a ‘chink’ through which to observe the world.

‘Humanitarian boredom’ produces its own perspective on the world, providing a ‘point of entry’ to the observation of humanitarianism in practice. In the current paper, while problematizing both a general understanding of boredom and a romantic idea of humanitarianism, I focus on boredom as experienced by humanitarian workers. More specifically, I explore the mutual relationship between boredom and crisis in the humanitarian realm.

### White City

When on a cold day in Kabul during the autumn of 2006 I heard a young man working for a French NGO (non-governmental organization) shout ‘Oh no, White City again!’, I initially thought that the dusty streets of the Afghan capital had finally been coated in snow. However, it was not snow that was at issue. In military jargon, White City is a security status used by UN (United Nations) personnel but also adopted by a number of NGOs to restrict staff mobility for security reasons.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 1. *l'Ennui*. Gaston de La Touche, 1893.

The young man who was complaining about the imposition of White City status had just obtained a master’s degree from the London School of Economics and Political Science and only the day before had received confirmation of a big project he was due to run in the role of programme manager: a \$12 million shelter programme in the province of Ghazni, in the central-eastern area of the country.

For the remainder of that day – or until the situation changed (though no one knew exactly what the security risk was) – it would not be possible to go into the office, eat out at a restaurant, meet friends at other guesthouses, attend parties, etc. ‘I don’t like working at

the guesthouse’ the young humanitarian worker said, ‘I like the office – and they cook much better there too’, he added with a smile stamped across his face. Everybody at the guesthouse settled in for another boring day: ‘Here we go again’ said Lidia, a logistics manager working for the same NGO, ‘I’m not sure that it’s really dangerous to leave the guesthouse. Anyway, what does it matter, we can’t go outside. In the end, expats are always a potential target. Luckily my mother sent me a food hamper last week. We can all tuck into it today’.

At that time there was one North American and seven European expats staying at the

guesthouse, plus the NGO's regional director who was frequently back and forth between Afghanistan and India. In addition, I myself lodged there for a couple of months and a journalist with *Le Monde* (if I rightly recall) stayed for a few days. I do remember that the accommodation was expensive in relation to my limited PhD grant.<sup>2</sup>

The life of this group of humanitarian workers was characterized by rigid spatial and temporal organization. The eight expats used to get up at about 8.00am (or 11.00am on non-working days), and gather in a large living room where Afghan staff had already prepared breakfast. At around 9.15am, two drivers usually took them to the office, located 10 minutes from the guesthouse. The director had different habits – she generally preferred to eat alone – and had her own driver. The expats had no involvement in the running of the guesthouse: everything from cleaning to cooking, from making beds to washing clothes, was looked after by the Afghan staff. Naturally, while at the office, expats were obliged to maintain a certain code of conduct, including mode of dress; at the guesthouse they felt freer to do (almost) whatever they wanted.

This humdrum life model, divided between the guesthouse and the office, was also marked by a bureaucratized form of humanitarianism that mostly consisted of producing documents and attending meetings. Working directly 'in the field' represented a marginal part of these NGO employees' work. Attending parties or getting drunk in expat-only pubs had the effect of heightening their habitual sense of estrangement, making it even more difficult for them to fully experience the social and cultural context they were immersed in. Thus, contrary to what many are likely to believe, a certain amount of frustration and boredom was a constant for these humanitarian workers. Now, what exactly does boredom imply in this scenario?

### **Boredom and the collective self**

According to Toohey (2011: 4):

Despite its ubiquitous usage there seem to be two main instances that the word [boredom] describes. The *first* form of boredom is the result of predictable circumstances that are very hard to escape. Long speeches or long church services or long Christmas dinners are typical examples. This sort of boredom is characterized by lengthy duration, by its predictability, by its inescapability – by its confinement. And, when you feel like this, time seems to slow, to the point that you feel as though you stand outside of these experiences.

The second form of boredom is usually associated with 'complexity' and existential dilemmas.

This form of boredom is said to be able to infect a person's very existence and it may even be thought of as a philosophical sickness. It is no easy thing to characterize. Its complexity can take in many well-known conditions. These often go under such evocative names as melancholia, depression, ennui, *mal de vivre*, world-weariness, tristesse, *taedium vitae*, the Christian 'demon of noontide' or spiritual despair (named *acedia* or

*accidie*), the French 'existentialist' nausea and despair, and many other comparable terms and conditions. It is the subject of most of the books written on boredom (ibid: 5-6).

I tend to agree with Peter Toohey that this second form of boredom is more intellectual than experiential; that is to say, it is a condition that seems 'to be more read about and discussed than actually experienced' (ibid: 6). Yet, I also believe that boredom plays an important role in the process of constructing the self, at least under certain circumstances.

While the humanitarian workers I encountered, daily experienced boredom due to the highly repetitive nature of their activities and commitments and their limited interest in expanding their knowledge of Afghanistan, White City made this boredom take on a completely different aspect. If you are bored by your daily work, you tend to have an indistinct perception of boredom, but if you get bored because of White City, your presence in Afghanistan suddenly makes sense – everything is going as you had expected before going there. In short, an immediate connection is made between the mass mediated humanitarian imaginary and personal experience.

For the humanitarian workers, White City represented the expected breakdown in security conditions, thus the period of collective boredom was directly caused by the crisis they were there to ameliorate, thereby justifying their 'being there'. Boredom seen from this perspective functions as a memo, or reminder. It includes a set of standardized actions that make the existence of the humanitarian crisis tangible. The identity of humanitarian workers is therefore caught up in a dual dynamic of boredom and crisis.

It is worth distinguishing here between minor crises affecting everyday/practical work, and the broader humanitarian crisis that plays a fundamental role in shaping humanitarian workers' perceptions of self. For example, being a humanitarian worker means first and foremost working in conditions of crisis. Boredom is therefore something that must be gone through; it is the very moment in which humanitarian workers share among themselves their common belonging to a crisis situation, although the opportunity to elaborate such a collective self is provided by their isolation from the crisis they are meant to be working on.

During the days declared to be of White City status, the expats spent much of their time discussing White City, the many things they could not do because of it, their 'life in Afghanistan', their need of a holiday, and so on. The time spent waiting<sup>3</sup> at the guesthouse was transformed into a time of searching for a collective identity. Waiting for the White City status to be revoked was a social experience that enabled the expats to situate themselves within the humanitarian carnival (Billaud & De Lauri forthcoming).

My presence as an outsider, and a guest who was immune to White City confinement, stimulated further discussion and distinctions. Contrary to Michael Taussig's (2004) experience among Afro-Colombian gold miners,

I was myself not so preoccupied with not projecting my boredom onto the people I was interacting with, as with not providing the expats with further justifications for their representation of the humanitarian crisis. As one of them asked me that day, in reaction to my criticism, 'C'mon, how can you not see that our work here is much needed?' While complaining about another boring day spent in the guesthouse, the expats were actually experiencing a ritual of affirmation and self-esteem: White City finally reminded them that there was a reason for being there.

### **Solidarity, boredom and crisis**

Rather than being in antithesis to one another, crisis and boredom in this context are closely linked and reciprocally constitutive. They are essential elements of a solidarity system based not on reciprocity but on professional aid delivering and a pinch of idolatry and heroism.

A recent survey conducted among humanitarian volunteers in Scandinavia (Bjernerud et al. 2006: 53) reported that 'The concept of heroism (i.e., making contributions that involve bravery or great endurance) also arose during the interviews. Some participants had been inspired, usually as children, by the doctor-heroes and nurse-heroes they had seen in television dramas or humanitarian documentaries'. From the second half of the twentieth century onwards, solidarity has been profoundly reshaped by humanitarian action. In the triptych of expat humanitarian experience – performed between the office, the guesthouse and the field – the ideal of solidarity has been bureaucratized and transformed into a *technique*. In *Bureaucratizing the Good Samaritan* Tony Waters observes that

The reason that succouring the needy and delivering credit is more efficient for both the victim and the donor, is that, as with other complex tasks, the task of providing relief has become bureaucratized. To do this, the 'mercy' function has been broken down into tasks done by specialists hired and trained to do each action efficiently and effectively (2001: 3).

Rightly, Lilie Chouliaraki also notes that 'changing performances of solidarity also reflect changing articulations of the market, politics and technology' (2013: 21). To this, we may add that while for benefactors from donor countries, proxy solidarity – such as sending two euro to save children – is characterized by a certain degree of unresponsiveness, for humanitarian workers solidarity is articulated on the axis of action (which, in a sense, may be translated into the anthropological mantra of 'being there'), boredom and crisis.

The relationship between boredom and proxy solidarity is historically grounded in eighteenth-century German society in which the

vocabulary of boredom and melancholy became linked to an ideal of interiority and self-cultivation ... The bourgeois discourse on subjective malaise valorized solitude in poetic longings for unity with nature, elaborating an ideal of spiritual superiority that was explicitly

un-worldly. If the French aristocracy's refined melancholy had expressed collective solidarity, the German bourgeoisie cultivated private emotions for the sake of individual distinction. Thus while the melancholy of the salons embodied a politics of resignation that openly expressed dissatisfaction with the world of the absolutist court, the melancholy of the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie invoked a rhetoric of interiority that disavowed the importance of worldly things together. (Goodstein 2005: 83)

Exploring how this process has gradually been reshaped in the terms of humanitarian solidarity is crucially relevant to understanding contemporary ideals of collective consciousness and global togetherness. And I believe that it can also help us to understand contemporary boredom.

We generally assume that the 'world becomes boring when everything is transparent. That is why some people hanker for what is dangerous and shocking'; they replace 'the non-transparent by the extreme' (Svendsen 2008: 38). Consistently with this, it is widely accepted that 'there is no more exciting escape from the boredom of repetition than the discovery, however inconvenient and disturbing, that the truth is quite other than it appears to be' (Sisk 1985: 25).

Yet, I believe that in many humanitarian contexts, crisis does not simply provide relief from boredom. Nor is boredom simply time spent in the absence of crisis.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, boredom and crisis – in their mutual presence – constitute *the ordinary* of humanitarian workers. I am not referring here to ordinary boredom such as that described in Heidegger's *Being and time* (2008), nor to the notion of 'genuine boredom' as more recently proposed by Biceaga (2006) in a further development of the work of Heidegger. By 'ordinary' I mean a process that provides the flow of social life

with meaning and a means of coping with the multiplicity of becoming (Billaud & De Lauri forthcoming).

Building on this, I envision humanitarian boredom as the *conditio sine qua non* of intervention in crisis conditions, the hidden face – perhaps it would be more accurate to say one of the hidden faces – of humanitarian workers. I use the expression 'hidden face' because, after all, a doctor-hero is more attractive – for the purposes of fund-raising, just to cite one example – than a bored programme manager confined to his hotel-like guesthouse. ●

**Antonio De Lauri**

Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca  
antonio.delauri@gmail.com

*The author is Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Cultures and Societies of the Middle East at the University of Milano-Bicocca. His current research focuses on humanitarianism, forms of extreme dependence and emancipation in Afghanistan, and on long-term implications of war.*

1. On an interesting anecdotal note, White City is currently also the name of a progressive punk rock band based in Kabul; speaking of boredom, Wikipedia provides the following description of one of the members of the group: 'Ru: (vox, bass), of British origins, is a video journalist and film maker, she came to Afghanistan in 2009 due to extreme boredom with her hometown, London'.

2. I began doing research in Afghanistan in 2005, initially exploring the implications of the post-2001 legal reconstruction and carrying out ethnographic research in the Kabul courts. During my several periods of field research in the country over the past number of years, I have more than once had occasion to stay at guesthouses used by NGOs. Currently my research is funded by the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013), ERC Grant agreement n° 313737.

3. On waiting as a social and existential phenomenon see Hage (2009).

4. This is far from being limited to the humanitarian industry. There have long been descriptions of soldiering and war, for instance, which display significant parallels.

On boredom in military experience see for example Laugesen (2012). An increasing body of critical literature on academic work also addresses boredom as one of the key elements of the academic world. Although we may argue that boredom is intrinsic to academic jobs (see for example Baghdadchi 2005), what we are witnessing nowadays is a profound transformation of the academic system due to new ways of applying for and accessing funding, extreme bureaucratization, and the standardization of intellectual production. It would thus be interesting to analyze how boredom itself changes in this complicated conjuncture.

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## news

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### CHINA CONFUCIUS INSTITUTE

The **Confucius Institutes programme**, an ambitious soft-power effort by China to support education overseas (see AT 36(2)), has been dealt a setback by some of its most prestigious partners, including the University of Chicago and Pennsylvania State University. Also, in respect of its school programme, after parental criticism the Toronto District School Board voted to terminate its ties with the Confucius Institute. Meanwhile, however, universities internationally continue to inaugurate Confucius Institutes, such as at the University of Cyprus, which opened in September 2014. **Marshall Sahlins** has produced a Prickly Paradigm Press pamphlet on the subject entitled *Confucius institutes: Academic malware* (64 pp Paper \$12.95 ISBN: 9780984201082), excerpts of which he delivers in seven parts (three of which have so far been published) on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yViUXtw-NPE>. While critical of certain policies of the Chinese government, Sahlins is particularly careful to point out at the beginning of each part that this issue is purely one of academic

integrity and is not in any way motivated by a critique of the PRC or the Chinese people. The third part on self-censorship and the eight 'speak-nots' (the eighth being the speak-not about the seven speak-nots) is particularly revealing in respect of the effect these institutes are having on self-censorship in the universities hosting them: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-DMyEOBVUY>. GH

### SERENGETI SELL-OFF

Around 40,000 **Masai pastoralists** are being evicted from their ancestral homeland as official plans to turn lands bordering the **Serengeti** into a commercial hunting reserve go ahead. The government proposal to sell an area of 1,500 sq km to a **hunting and safari company** based in the **United Arab Emirates** has met with strong opposition. In an international campaign against the sale, over 1.7 million people have signed a petition calling on Tanzanian **President Jakaya Kiwete** to let the Masai remain on their lands. Last year the government appeared to step down from the deal, but have now backtracked

again and have told the Masai to leave their homes by the end of the year. The Masai have dismissed the government's offer of 1 billion shillings (£369,350) compensation which would not be paid to them directly but funnelled into socio-economic development projects. (Source: *The Guardian*, 16.11.2014) MI

### WILLIAM H. RIVERS

In a recent publication edited by Edvard Hviding and Cato Berg, titled *The ethnographic experiment* (Berghahn 2014), it is claimed that **William H. Rivers**, a doctor who treated soldiers for shell-shock in the First World War, should be considered one of the early forefathers of modern social anthropology in view of his 1908 research trip to the Solomon Islands with **E.M. Hocart** during which they lived among local people, immersing themselves in the culture in what is now termed **participant observation**. The book suggests that his contribution to anthropology has been written out of history by later academics. Source: Flood, A. Doctor who treated