George TUDORIE*

“Wer jetzt kein Haus hat, baut sich keines mehr”. Notes on Bruce O’Neill’s *The Space of Boredom*

There is a scene in Grigor Lefterov’s and Todor Matsanov’s *Hristo* (2016) which, in the fall of the homonymous main character, stands out. It gives the measure of that descent, but in this ambiguous position of standard meter, it also brings the film as such into focus, as a means of delivering a moral tale. Hristo, a homeless young man, drags himself with mechanistic ferocity through the miserable outskirts of what, at an insurmountable distance, is Sofia. He endures almost constant pain and humiliation, and acts as if the overwork, the beatings, the cold, and the hunger are temporary, a *via dolorosa* he walks, true to his name, toward redemption. Then, one winter night, Hristo attacks an older man. If he died, then perhaps the next day Hristo could take over his job. It is, needless to say, all for nothing. What could have been assimilated to trying, failure, or perseverance earlier in the story now collapses to mere fibrillation. What began as seemingly heroic and monstrous is revealed to be inconsequential. If one wanted to concede to the character that his story mixed desperation and hope and had them fuel liberation, that he indeed *moved*, it is now transparent that Hristo did not and could not move. He is a feeling, pulsating object thrown on a trajectory which degrades as gravity dictates. What flickers ahead of him is not a horizon, but indifferent atmosphere and fiery reentry.

Regardless of its plausibility, Hristo’s intensity is part machinery, part of what makes the *character* work. His explosive arc is spent against a background of fading life, and this recognizable contrast allows for the narrative, empathetic punch of the film. But one is in deeper and comparably unfamiliar waters once that muted outside eventually overflows and becomes interior landscape. When the comfort of seeing the scene through the eyes of a hero is lost, one is left with a field of entangled ruins – of lives and of ways of seeing life. Grey pain exfoliates from walls with flakes of old paint, excess matter flows chaotically away from the city and sometimes freezes in human form. This is perhaps where a survey of homelessness – as opposed to a story – should begin. How is this territory to be mapped? How is it inhabited and taken in?

A few hundred kilometers to the north-east of Sofia, in Bucharest, Bruce O’Neill worked on such a sketch. The result is *The Space of Boredom. Homelessness in the Slowing Global Order*, a volume that builds on a depsychologized understanding of ordinary affects to argue that in the peripheries of the Romanian capital homelessness is experienced primarily as bore-

* National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Romania,
george.tudorie@comunicare.ro.

dom. This, moreover, is not exceptional, or a peculiarity of stagnant post-communism. Romania's recent history and cultural characteristics do confer local colors to boredom, but similar modes of experience should be expected in comparable contexts. Populations lacking or losing access to the rapid flows of the global economy suffer *ipso facto* a cataclysmic erosion of symbolic and material resources which leaves them nowhere, and in a kind of stupor. As with Lefterov's and Matsanov's Hristo, meaningful arrangements of what remains become impossible or, in crueler fashion, lapse into delusion.

O'Neill, in phenomenological spirit, privileges the term "displacement" to describe at the same time the loss, the palpable spatial exclusion, and the estrangement suffered by these people. In Bucharest, he meets men and women who could not navigate the downward spiral which followed the meltdown of the state-run economy after 1989. Deprived of the culturally treasured anchors of work, home, and family, and unable to participate in anything recognizably meaningful, the homeless are forced into a position of malignant contemplation, even when busy surviving. It is an experience of paralyzed restlessness which resonates with the ruins they zigzag through.

The Space of Boredom captures this landscape convincingly, and in elegant prose. The book moves effortlessly from the discussion of scholarly works in a number of fields, to observation of sometimes cinematic quality. It is well argued, abundantly researched, and clear about its theoretical assumptions. If some questions remain to be answered, at least to this reader, this may be an artifact of background. Assumptions, including important ones about the nature of affects, and about boredom itself, may not be shared. Some questions of this kind will be raised in the following.

O'Neill begins by laying out an extended justification for the choice of boredom as privileged lens for his investigation. The *Introduction* makes the case that, in the context of the acceleration specific to, and demanded by, globalization, belonging and meaning-making are mediated by consumption. A life worth living is increasingly defined by one's ability to buy one's place in the vortex of transnational flows. For those unable to do so, the consequence is punitive recoil – marginalization and Foucauldian *laissez mourir* (Foucault, 2012). It takes a particular theoretical setup to suggest that this systematic social erasing is to be described in terms of affect.

This is done following recent work on ordinary affects by, among others, Kathleen Stewart (2007), Sara Ahmed (2010), and Laurent Berlant (2011). In generic terms, this is a constructivist view which places affect at the interface of individuals and their life-worlds. Affect radiates in this vicinity and as such "marks a body's belonging to a world of encounters" (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 2). Affect is neither feeling, nor thought, even if it is *experienced*; rather it is intrinsic to inhabiting (one thinks of a phenomenological *erleben*) a given environment. What one may call the cognitive has at most a tangential role in this analysis¹. Indeed, it seems at points that efforts are made to purify affect of all psychological or natural-scientific connotations. This may – and I think should – be questioned, but, in the context of this book, it results in understanding the experience of the homeless as one of no-longer-belonging. In Bucharest, O'Neill observes a loss of friction between the still alive but discarded homeless and a world that used to be, but is no longer theirs. These people live, as it were, epiphenomenal lives. And while they may feel sad, and some may be considered depressed, a comprehensive picture takes them in fact at their word. They are bored (*plictisită*)². Unaware, the argument goes, when they insist on their boredom, they point to an affective state, in the sense suggested above.

A derailed history drove these people to the limits of society and left them stranded between social and biological death. Beginning with the first chapter of the book (*Space-time expansion*), O’Neill documents the nexus of forces which created a homeless population in Romania, and which continue to define its particularities. There is a concise, but informative incursion in the recent past of the country with a focus on the paternalism and eventual bankruptcy of Romanian communism. The crucial processes, however, followed the fall of the Ceaușescu dictatorship in 1989. Romania had a particularly destructive transition especially in terms of economic performance, and the belated signs of recovery were stifled by the economic crisis of 2008. It is in this context that Bucharest came to have a significant homeless population. It is also in this context that the concept of homelessness, with its specific administrative aura, entered the relevant jargons of Romanian. Even to a reader familiar with Bucharest, the book will provide an edifying synthesis of the current situation and its genealogy.

A substantial claim made at this point is that there is a substantial difference between the idleness characteristic of the final decade of communism in Romania (generalized scarcity led to the institutionalization of queuing), and the contemporary boredom generated by a failed market economy. O’Neill argues that time spent in the breadlines of the 1980s was less corrosive, since this was a shared experience. The vast majority of the population had to go through it, and consequently it was not stigmatizing. Importantly, the homeless O’Neill quotes do not *remember* being bored while waiting in line. Here, a more subtle argument comes into play. The breadline had a certain redemptive transitivity: it meant waiting for something, and having rapport with an interested, though abusive authority. This could have registered as belonging. I find this latter suggestion, in part, problematic. That the most deprived population of today projects nostalgic overtones over a by now distant dehumanizing experience does not allow for strong conclusions about the distinct nature of its current predicament. Perhaps the differences are not best captured in these terms.

This chapter also introduces the first extensive vignette – the book has many, and they constitute forceful portraits. The story of Mircea is one the most poignant in the book, and it is well placed early in the text, as it captures overlapping no man’s lands. Unable to separate himself from what O’Neill calls “a working-class sensibility” (p.43), but mostly without work, neither married, nor single, a Roma, but, as he insists, not a gypsy, Mircea is pictured at a time when his horizon of a decent life falls apart. Instead of some sense of security (Mircea had been able to rent a small apartment and could afford a scooter in exchange for hard construction work), there is only lack of employment and a stalling shelter life. Time changes nature, its substance mutates into something toxic, in a quite visceral sense. One can almost hear Mircea’s voice weighted down. Boredom captures, quite clearly, this transformation of temporal experience, but also of surroundings. Mircea, no longer in a position to migrate, speaks of a happy elsewhere while he lives empty days in empty rooms. The relation of boredom to time leads to a question to which I will return, and which the book deals with repeatedly. A number of experiences can eviscerate time. So in what sense is boredom the proprietary wasteland of globalization’s losers?

The theme of waiting for nothing continues into the second chapter (*Bleak house* – see e.g. p. 57). Here, the focus is on life in the shelters of Bucharest, and generally on the public and private infrastructure the homeless use in this city. Romania may be a latecomer in terms of managing homeless populations, but O’Neill shows that it borrowed quickly the sanitization reflexes which, to its west, are more mature and subtle. As elsewhere in Eastern Europe (Budapest is perhaps an even clearer example, see e.g. (Misetics, 2013)), the homeless of

Bucharest are forced away from the central areas of the city and “warehoused” in places which are not only peripheral in a spatial sense, but marginal in the sense of undesirable. O’Neill remarks that these institutions do not in fact provide *refuge*, as they serve only the better-off and more stable of the homeless. This, he argues, is both a question of fact and of norm: in most cases, the homeless have to pay for accommodation, as the institutions are underfunded. They also have to be able to maintain a socially acceptable appearance. Those addicted to drugs or the mentally ill – to take the extreme examples – are excluded from the start; the former are a prime example of the “undeserving” homeless.

As a counterpoint to the portraits of those wasting away in neon-lit, silent-shock corridors, O’Neill includes in this chapter the perspective of some administrators. The book is critical in their case, and I think it is helpful to distinguish two components of this criticism. There is, first, a solid case against the politics of segregation, and of hiding rather than helping the homeless. A second layer of criticism indicates the alignment of this dubious track record with larger global currents (e.g. gentrification). This is the more interesting aspect of the analysis, and while I think it is well defended, there is a certain tendency toward the programmatic which hurts the argument. Certainly, it is nauseating (my choice of words) that detached mandarins in cozy offices can make dramatic decisions about the lives of others, but the author’s own ideological inclinations are too visible in exposing (correctly) the rudimentary “liberals” (e.g. p. 50) who manage homelessness in abstract terms, and from a safe distance.

As I have already suggested, a recurrent topic in the book is the distinction between the boredom suffered by the homeless and other usual suspects, chief among them depression (and/or melancholia). The issue is already discussed in the *Introduction* (p. 5), and surfaces in this chapter, too. It is even mentioned, explicitly, by the homeless themselves. A certain Gheorghe explains: “without a job, without money to spend, I just sit on the street with nothing to do. I just have that feeling – as though everything in the world has turned gray, and there’s nothing to do. It’s not depression but boredom.” (p. 63). If one works with regimented concepts, as O’Neill does for example in the *Introduction*, where he restricts depression to a medical (and therefore pathologizing) construct, then perhaps things are in good order. But this is not always the case in the book. Surely, it seems implausible that all those informants who claim that they are bored are in fact (clinically) depressed. But probably some are – that is, *if* one accepts that the medical concept of depression has any validity. I suspect that a lot are in a looser sense of the term. Is this possibility irrelevant to the case the book makes? Even when informants confess suicidal thoughts and actual attempts (e.g. pp. 96, 118)? Only, it seems to me, if one has independent reasons to think that boredom-as-affect is the perspective of choice in such cases – that it can decide when to take, and when *not* to take the homeless at their word.

This is, to be sure, a side issue in the book, but it does have ramifications, for example in the attempt to separate boredom from melancholia (see p. 118), on the footsteps of Berlant (e.g. 2011, p. 24). One would not want to either pathologize (as per above) or romanticize homelessness, so, given melancholia’s (modern) connotations, it may be preferable to proceed by stipulation, as the book, it seems to me, does. But this entails a cost. O’Neill tries to sculpt an idea of boredom out of a notion with a complicated modern career. Stipulation aside, I think however that the question remains open whether a qualified concept of melancholia would not be in at least a comparable position to capture what O’Neill identifies as the space of boredom, especially given melancholia’s connection to loss, rumination, and ruin. It is not perhaps by accident that historians describe overlapping histories for boredom and melanco-

lia, e.g. tracing them *both* to medieval acedia. The black sun of boredom is a derivative of the *soleil noir de la mélancolie*. There is a confounding cultural history here.

The image of shelter life developed in the second chapter is complemented in the third (*The gray years*) with a series of vignettes of older homeless people. There is ample evidence in this part of the book for O’Neill’s claim that the shelter system in Bucharest serves easier cases. Some of these manageable individuals are pensioners whose modest income could not support the cost of owning or renting an apartment. If the book presented, early on, the various layers and denominations of homeless life (divided, among other factors, by perceived cleanliness, gender, or drug and alcohol abuse), in this case, too, under the trope of ageing, O’Neill provides a multifaceted description.

An infantilizing gaze might expect, or even demand some sort of solidarity between victims. But here is Ana, bitter, rude, and racist (pp. 81-87), too proud to allow her grandchildren to visit her in the shelter, and saving a trace of dignity in the belief that her self-effacement saves her émigré children precious money. Is she also bored? She claims she waits for nothing but death; there is nothing worthwhile that the shelter can offer. What remains of her status and her education sets her apart, but one can tell this is a fragile partition indeed. Taken at her word, she might have been elsewhere, if she accepted financial support from her children. And to the extent that she lives by a choice, one may suspect that there is something meaningful about her position – that, for example, it could be assimilated to sacrifice. No matter. It seems correct, given his assumptions, that O’Neill insists that boredom is inherent in the way Ana has come to survive, and in the place where she spends her final years. “[T]he distinction between pensioner and pauper – he writes – grew indistinguishable” (p. 95)

I suggested above that there is a recurrent effort in the book to keep the concept of boredom apart from the theoretical and literary career of boredom-as-ennui. The fourth chapter gives the fullest justification for this choice. As the jaded bourgeois and the flâneur acquainted with the night, the homeless wanders aimlessly, and in his loss of a meaningful horizon his experience of time shifts – he suffers it from afar. But these similarities are merely nominal. The homeless is, in the older, infanticidal sense of the word, *exposed*, i.e. literally left to die. This has nothing to do with the “bombastic utterances of bourgeois ennui” (p. 101). One homeless man O’Neill calls Costel makes it clear that it isn’t lightness of being that kills him: “This boredom is a state – a situation in which you have nothing to do and nowhere to go. It makes you want a sudden death or, if I could, to die by a lethal injection so that I could just be done with this life.” (pp. 100-101).

O’Neill builds in this case on Foucault³ and Bauman. Boredom in the outskirts of Bucharest is secreted by a biopolitical machine which has identified the homeless as unnecessary and aims at slowly eliminating them. In Bauman’s words, these are people “earmarked for destruction” (2004). Socially, they are already dead (the notion of social death plays a large role in the book, and I cannot do it justice here). If earlier in the text O’Neill referred to the Marxist idea of superfluous labor (pp. 25, 34), at this point, under the heading of redundancy, he explains that it is especially traumatic for people who were instilled with a “labor fetish” (p. 108) to be indefinitely denied work. Their being stuck is assimilated, à la Bauman, to being “assigned to waste” (p. 107). The society in which they had a place is gone, and there is no alternative path of absorption in the current consumer society. The homeless are too poor even for accessing systematically what’s left of the social safety net, and so they are left “waiting unendingly” (p. 109) in precarious and unwelcoming surroundings.

An interesting turn in this chapter is O'Neill's criticism of an ethnographic, "etic" view which describes the homeless as embedded in a substantial net of social relations – occasional work, friendship and solidarity with other homeless individuals, frictions with shelter administrators and so on. Such a perspective *would* endanger the book's claim that there is atrophy, to the point of collapse, of meaningful social relations. According to O'Neill, "this ethnographic record misses the point of the homeless's existential angst." (p. 117). He argues compellingly that what the homeless do have acts in fact as a reminder of their exclusion. This emergency social net gives biting contour to the magnitude of the one which has been lost; it is a "negative" (p. 117).

This argument from the "structure of feeling" opens, however, a path back to the demarcation of boredom from ennui – to questioning how this distinction works, that is. It seems perfectly clear that one should not assimilate the boredom that results from momentary lapses from the rush of consumption with what affects those who witness this rush, but can never partake in it. But exactly what, I'd like to insist, should not be confused? Not the angst, for example, because it would be close to circular to make a mockery of angst among the privileged. The undeniable ethical scandal of privilege says little about the quality of one's suffering. Moreover, this could easily be turned upside down: walking, cold and humiliated, hostile city streets is by any means *not* analogous to *flânerie*. But one would not want to interpret this as claiming that the homeless are unable of the sophisticated, detached observation which non-belonging allows. Indeed, O'Neill mentions a number of times the wisdom of what his informants observe in their wandering.

This may be a case where my assumptions and O'Neill's diverge (or it may simply be my naivety about affect theory), so I should make clear that this is a puzzle rather than criticism. It seems to me that one should take seriously the idea that concern devoid of object may very well be a *shared* modern experience. Same goes for the unavailability of a reliable horizon of meaning. Boredom is better suited, in my view, to do what its conventional understanding had it do: capture what it's like to wake up to, and inhabit this cluttered nowhere. Chronic meaninglessness rather than chronic underconsumption. That being said, of course things are *not* equal, and that, too, should be stressed. All exits are simulacra, but it does matter who can make use of them, for how long, and at what cost. And this is far more important than any question of depth of feeling or authenticity of grief.

This puzzle extends, in my view, to what O'Neill's informants say. They do mention boredom⁴. But sometimes this can be discarded. In the fifth chapter of the book (*Bored stiff*), O'Neill writes the following of a comparatively well-off client of the homeless male prostitutes of Bucharest's main rail station: "Like [the homeless], Franco spoke of being bored in Romania. Franco's subjective malaise had an entirely different set of temporal and spatial characteristics owing to his relative affluence." (p. 140). What makes the difference, at least in this case, is that the waiting is not endless. Franco is able to buy half his time elsewhere, whereas the prostitutes have nothing to wait for, except for the occasional wealthy (and preferably foreign) client. Clearly, this is not a distinction without a difference, but neither does it seem as clear-cut as the book presents it. Franco is not, in fact, wealthy. He certainly isn't given to light-hearted tirades "between parlor games and parties" (p.4). The other half of his life is wasted in long and empty Wallachian winters. So perhaps something more ambiguous than a line should separate his "malaise" from whatever sucks life out of the homeless of *Gara de Nord*.

The portraits of these men who sell sex in the toilets of the station are exceptional. Even clearer than with Mircea or Ana, they capture nuance and contradiction with enviable ability.

The latter element is fascinating in this chapter. Most of the men that either sell or buy sex with other men in the station declare emphatically that they are heterosexual and would prefer a “normal” family. Their sexual identity, as their working class allegiance, is insulated from the realities of their life. Their encounters are both about making easier money and being transported briefly out of their stasis. That this happens in a dilapidated train station, a place which promises movement, seems only proper. Here is O’Neill mixing *Metropolis* and *Howl*:

In an effort to counteract the slowing down of their worlds, men displaced from work and home headed into the bowels of the city’s transit hubs in pursuit of a rush. There they organized a market for sexual favors, commodifying *la petite mort* as part of a wider effort to combat the dull but deeply felt sense of *la mort sociale*, if only for a moment. (p. 124)

The final chapter of the book (*Defeat boredom!*) elaborates on a different promise of movement. The focus in this case is on the inclusion that consumption affords, and the pretext O’Neill uses is a coffee commercial – which also gives the title of the chapter. He suggests that cheap stimulants, like instant coffee, are sought after not only for their sugary rush, but because the ability to buy them repeatedly is the best approximation of belonging available to the homeless. It is a merit of the book that it shows how the homeless are excluded from the livable parts of the city without being thoroughly absent from its “places of consumption”. As in the case of their remaining social ties, this is a presence which illuminates an abyss. There is an unbearable disproportion, which the book describes with subdued empathy, between the large efforts of managing every penny and the ‘luxury’ of abusing instant coffee.

Another facet of this effort is the travesty which the homeless undergo in order to be able to enter into the food courts of shopping malls and especially that of Ikea. To enter, they need to hide the telltale markers of their condition, so clothes are cleaned and body odor managed obsessively. This, as with buying coffee, is both about necessity (food) and comfort (AC in summer), and ritualized inclusion. Where else then in the proverbial temples of consumptions should such rituals be performed? The chapter includes a memorable scene which brings the latter aspect into full view. Consumption, in a context of mandatory acceleration, is coupled with excess. O’Neill describes a party in his honor and the expedition of – given the resources of those involved – irresponsible spending which preceded it. If abnormal shopping passes for a version of personal autonomy among the well-off, here is, in striking colors, its counterpart.

The book concludes on a sobering tone. What the homeless population of Bucharest endures is not an anomaly, but what should be expected. The very same processes which allow for lives of quasi-perpetual stimulation at the center of globalization have a centrifugal effect on those unable to compete on increasingly merciless markets. They become stuck in a viscous perimeter – the margin of both the world of consumption, and of death. *The Space of Boredom* offers a detailed and sensitive cartography of this territory – both of what the author calls “boredom” and of the particular context he studied. The image he paints of a looming, barren autumn – which the homeless live, but which hangs over all of us – should be of concern everywhere.

Notes

¹ One may be reminded of the adventures of embodied cognition in Anglophone philosophy.

² From the Greek πληκτικοζ.

³ In his 1975-'76 lectures (*Il faut défendre la société*), Foucault writes: "Et je crois que, justement, une des plus massives transformations du droit politique au XIXe siècle a consisté, je ne dis pas exactement à substituer, mais à compléter, ce vieux droit de souveraineté – faire mourir ou laisser vivre – par un autre droit nouveau, qui ne va pas effacer le premier, mais qui va le pénétrer, le traverser, le modifier, et qui va être un droit, ou plutôt un pouvoir exactement inverse : pouvoir de « faire » vivre et de « laisser » mourir. Le droit de souveraineté, c'est donc celui de faire mourir ou de laisser vivre. Et puis, c'est ce nouveau droit qui s'installe : le droit de faire vivre et de laisser mourir."

⁴ Moreover, at least in my experience, confessions of boredom are quite common in Bucharest *across* social strata. I do not think this poses any special problems to O'Neill's account, but it should perhaps be mentioned.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2004). *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Foucault, M. (2012). „*Il faut défendre la société*.” *Cours au Collège de France (1975-1976)*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Gregg, M., & Seigworth, G. J. (2010). *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Lefterov, G., & Matsanov, T. (2016). *Hristo*. Ideacinema & Lema Film.
- Misetics, B. (2013). Criminalisation of homelessness in Hungary. In G. F. Evangelista & S. Jones (Ed.), *Mean Streets: A Report on the Criminalisation of Homelessness in Europe* (pp. 101-112). Housing Rights Watch.
- Stewart, K. (2007). *Ordinary Affects*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.