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On the Photos of *The Space of Boredom* – and What Might Be Missing from the Picture

Photography has been, from its early stages, a powerful tool for the anthropologist, both as a mechanical technique to record data and as a heuristic tool used to reflect on the anthropologist's approach as such. At the same time, its iconicity and indexicality have allowed for a different epistemic regime, an allegedly privileged connection to "the facts" or "the truth", in opposition to the written notes of the anthropologist, vulnerable to subjectivity, bias or error. A substantial direction in visual culture studies questions the articulation of image and text, and acknowledges a power relation between the two, as if despite its iconicity and indexicality, photography needs taming by the text that clarifies its meaning and incorporates it in bigger narratives. It is in this context that W. J. T. Mitchell echoes the famous question "Can the subaltern speak?" in relation to photography, asking "What do pictures want?" (Mitchell, 2005, pp. 28-30). It is within this vision of photography as a potential site of resistance to the narrative in which they are embedded that I will try to raise some critical points about Bruce O'Neill's book, *The Space of Boredom*, by focusing on the photos included in this book.

In the subchapter *Shelters and the Infrastructure of Boredom*, the reader encounters two photos. What we see is the Backwoods shelter, and the two photos reveal the same "infrastructure": corridors with walls covered in (what seems to look like) wood panels, the ubiquitous uPVC doors and windows (*termopane*) of post-communist Romania and the mosaic tiles reminding of the communist period rather than of its aftermath. There are, however, substantial differences between the two images. While in the first one, the outside world is completely missing, and the light is provided by neon tubes, in the second, the scene is lit from the outside by natural light, creating a *contre-jour* effect, kept under control to allow us both to distinguish the details of the inside world and to make a sense of the outside world as well. More importantly, the first photo depicts just a long empty hallway, some buckets and cleaning tools breaking the rhythm of the doors, without animating the image, whereas the second picture contains activity: at least four persons of various ages take part in a game of tossing coins. It is the caption that clarifies what the activity is about, and for Romanians of a certain age it will bring to mind a game played in childhood, during breaks at school – *Liniuța*. The first photo is typical for a range of images illustrating total institutions, and it reminds of standard approaches to the topic, from Goffman (2009) to Foucault (2012a, 2012b); the

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second one depicts agents, interaction, and a sense of activity apparently at odds both with boredom and with the excerpts from individual interviews with the residents of the shelter, which give substance to this subchapter.

There is something puzzling about the two images: first, in the economy of the book the images are not that frequent, and conjecturing that the first one is just an illustration of a certain atmosphere that could also be reconstructed from the text of the book, the reader could be left thinking whether a more relevant photo could have been selected. Second, photos depicting interaction between the homeless are rare in this volume, on a par with the (textual) accounts of the interaction between the homeless persons (excerpts from one-to-one interviews dominate O'Neill's approach). Overall, in the book, a reflexive discourse about how images are employed is lacking¹, despite the careful presence of the author throughout the text, sometimes even at the margins of implausibility (for instance, O'Neill writes, as if watching himself in a mirror, when describing a failure to reply to one of his interlocutors' lamentation: "My own brows arched and my face drooped as I drew a breath to speak but found myself without suggestion" (p. 21).) In counterpart, a photographic metaphor is structuring O'Neill's understanding of his presence in the field, a metaphor that is announced in the preface ("I came to view the moments of diversion as a kind of photographic negative, capturing through their inverse the boring times and places that my informants spent so much time and effort trying to escape" – p. xiv) and is developed into a potentially fully-fledged methodological discussion in the fourth chapter.

Borrowing from W. Benjamin, O'Neill conceives the ethnographic record as a negative: "This means interpreting boredom narratives as the taking of a snapshot, one that records an inverted social world, whereby the present actors and activities serve as a dark background against which the displacements and disconnections that make up the homeless state of being bored with life are brought to light" (p. 110). More specifically, the metaphor suggests that the ethnographic record of the homeless embedded in a variety of activities, interactions, and relationships (obtained mostly through participant observation) could be developed either in a "decidedly etic perspective" of "productive agency (...) of the homeless's endurance, creativity or empowerment" (p. 116), or used as a mere backdrop needed to emphasize "the homeless's emic sense of a troubling absence of activity" (reaching us mostly through excerpts of interviews). The metaphor is ambiguous, though, condensing a spatial representation (background - foreground) and a chemical transformation (the relation between the negative and the positive), and overlapping it with the emic-etic distinction. Are we supposed to understand the relationship between etic and emic as the relationship between negative and positive, or as a relationship between background and foreground? Or is it that both etic and emic perspectives are developed from the same negative – the ethnographic record? But then, the interviews are ethnographic records as well, in need of their own processing. Not to mention that the same holds for the photos in the book, peculiar ethnographic records which were taken at a time when digital photography was quickly replacing film photography, rendering obsolete the chemical processing from film to negative and back to positive.

Consider, in this context, that there is at least a suggestion to understand the photo of tossing coins as mere background: "these new attachments to people, places and activities were, from the homeless's perspective, not worth acknowledging" (p. 117). Nonetheless, the relationship between foreground and background seems to be a back-and-forth movement without a definite number of steps or a clear ending procedure.

The most frequent photos in the book are those of people waiting. Framed frontally or from behind, depicting people standing or sitting, groups or individuals, these photos are probably meant to give a visual account of boredom. But a single and discrete affect is not so easy to pinpoint in these photos. The people photographed might be simply tired, idle, worry, worn by apathy or even depression. Careful, considerate argument is provided in the text to separate depression from boredom and to make a point about a depsychologized understanding of ordinary affects. In another review included in this issue, George Tudorie gave an in-depth treatment of this topic, so here I would only add the need to either rule out alternative affects, or (more probably) clarify the continuous affective disposition that makes it difficult to separate between boredom, apathy, melancholy, angst, and any other candidates.

Sometimes, the camera records more than might be intended, and through accumulation of details might point to elements that are missing from the text. A priest, his eyes to the mobile phone, attracts the reader's gaze, despite being at the very edge of a photo otherwise documenting the renovation of Bucharest's old town. Several pages before, a middle-aged man, wearing a cross (?) necklace, is sitting on a cheap sofa, drinking Nescafé (so says the caption). Behind him one can see a fragment of a religious tapestry. Religious life, which is very present in real Bucharest, is quite present in the photos as well, yet is almost absent from the text of the book – and this is a relevant absence. Several times monasteries are indicated in the book as places where homeless people could get a meal or sleep at night. A Pentecostal church in Florida is mentioned as a source of donated clothes. And a trip to Cernica, a monastery just outside Bucharest, is mentioned to narrate an episode of verbal abuse and prejudice against the homeless. But the religious views of the homeless are never discussed. We don't find out whether they are religious people, nor whether various religious organizations try to tackle not only the problem of food and shelter, but also the problem of boredom, apathy and lack of meaning. Faith might provide an alternative to consumerism as a way out of boredom. In the context in which the Romanian Orthodox Church, the dominant religious organization in Bucharest and throughout Romania, has explicitly declared its social mission a priority, the puzzle of how come this subject is not present at all in the book persists.

Bruce O'Neill makes it clear from the very beginning that his "ethnographic study was based on the classic anthropological methods of participant observation, recorded interviews, and documentary photography detailing the daily lives of homeless men and women in Bucharest" (p. xii). However, his practice of building a case out of his data is not so classic, allowing his images to work as a counterpoint to the text, and not as mere illustrations – since his photos are rather independent, not strongly anchored through text (captions), or in the text where they appear. As negatives inserted in the textual positive, they invite further processing from the reader, producing a back-and-forth movement between image and text (seeing the photo containing a religious tapestry made me look again, in the book, at every mention of religion in the book). Indeed, in this sense, Bruce O'Neill's images are allowed to speak for themselves, even to the point of jeopardizing the argument of the author. Coming back to Mitchell's question, "What do pictures want?", if his answer is correct, if images want "to change places with the beholder" (Mitchell, 2005, p. 36), then most of the photos in *Boredom* invite such a swap, but not with the aim "to transfix or paralyze the beholder" (ibid.), but to better trigger imaginative identification and reflexive empathy with the homeless.

Note

¹ A similar point about the use of images in the book is made by Peter Soles Muirhead in his review of the book.

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