



# Boredom, Creativity, Crises, Normalcy...

written by Allegra  
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By [MHT](#) & [JB](#)

"I am to write about boredom - but I've got nothing. I have no inspiration in me, no fancy words or cutting edge hypothesis. I feel tired, worn down. I just want to turn the tv on and watch an American sit-com - preferably one that offers no surprises. Am I bored, am I trying to become bored? I feel like I am held hostage by my computer and this paper. I have mulled over this theme for a good 6 months now, knowing that the deadline would come. I love the theme - it is one that I have co-created, after all. What's the struggle?

Is this boredom? It is restlessness, for sure. I switch off the tv after 10 minutes of the show. I know perfectly well how it will end. I walk into the kitchen. Take a sip of water. Have I received any new emails? No new Facebook interactions? What was this paper about again?



I google one thing, a few more. Anything there? Inspiration, where are you? Insight, brilliance - I know I have met you on a few occasions. Boredom is the required road to Creativity! It sounds cheesy, I don't like this blog very much. Psychologists are all over the union of boredom and creativity. Are they onto something? It all sounds very privileged - like very First World approaches to human existence.



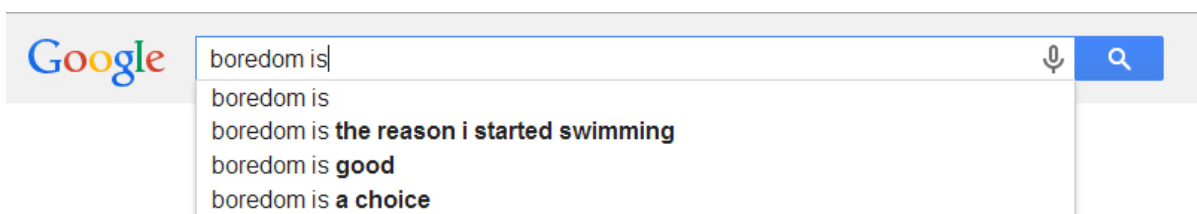
*Yes, boredom may be a path necessary to take - but only when you have the freedom to engage in it; only when the reward is a process of personal fulfillment, of satisfaction.*

'7 tips toward Creativity via boredom - succumb only to the RIGHT kind of boredom'. Damn you, individual, if you are subjected to the 'wrong' kind, be it as an asylum seeker, a menial worker...No, wait, they claim that doing menial repetitive work can also feed creative spirits. I wonder if it is fair to compare an author living in an isolated part of a country to someone stuck working in a factory production line for decades... Again, boredom as a state of the privileged, of those who have the freedom to assume agency - to have a choice, to have the choice to depart as a real option.



Is there something there? Am I bored – or merely restless? Is this the same sensation that has become my persistent, irritating accompaniment at all those fieldwork contexts at the UN, at all those seminars and academic events? Not really. For my horizons at present are unknown. I am free – at least to a degree – in the direction where my path would lead me.

*Bored. What does it really mean. Do I ever get bored? Under normal circumstances? Not really, I suppose. For me, I suppose I suffer chronically from the opposite – suffer, enjoy; apples and pears. I usually have too much going on in my mind. Difficulty to concentrate? Perhaps more so.*

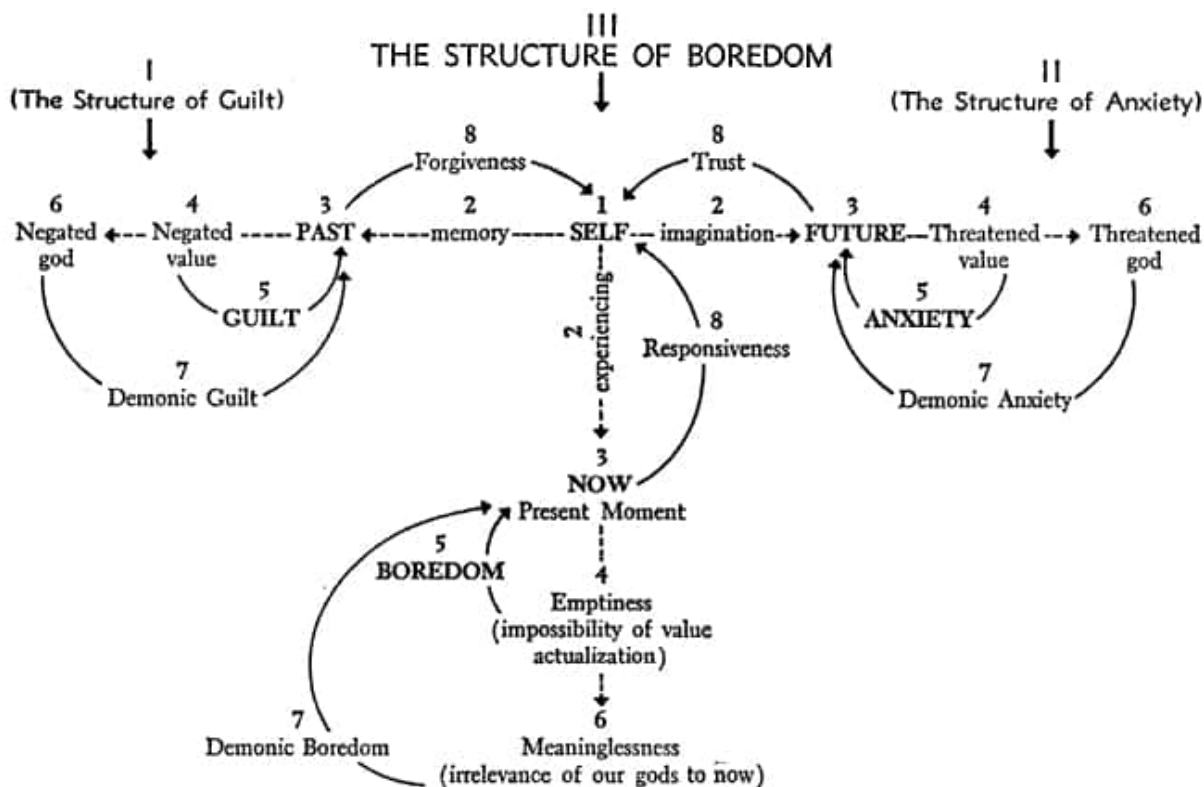


When am I bored? At a meeting that goes on for hours. That will continue in the



exact identical format tomorrow, the day after that, and after that. When I have no say on what goes on. At the UN, it was in those moments of feeling insignificant, irrelevant, removed where boredom was most intense. Boredom as a feeling of not belonging to a community, of being present and feeling that no one cares. Of not having any position of relevance for what unfolds around one. Neither the format nor the outcome. When was I not bored? When I had a feeling of personal involvement - lobbying for an NGO, seeing how my background material was woven into the UN Committee proceedings. Then I had a feeling of relevance, engagement, of being someone who mattered.

*Boredom as irrelevance, as lack of agency - of uselessness. Fundamentally the purpose in life for people is provided by a sense of being needed. Even for children. Can one universalize this much? All the same, there is something here.*







And if so, is boredom ultimately then a negative thing? Does it become part of a positive equation ONLY when a person does have the kind of agency to gain relevance – to snap oneself ‘out’ of what she is currently exposed to? Boredom as the ultimate definer of privilege – or lack thereof? Is boredom something that genuinely only those who have no choice to alter their position feel? Is boredom at the end the opposite of creativity, of being alive? Is it synonymous or symptomatic of ‘existential stuckness’? But what about cruel optimism then? Or is it part and parcel of the same thing...”



Allegra’s moderators will be running a panel at the #EASA2014 titled Boredom, Intimacy and Governance in ‘Normalized’ Times of Crisis in Tallinn – join us, either in person or virtually! The [theme](#) of [Boredom](#) has [preoccupied](#) us [several times](#) during this year, and we look forward to this opportunity for collective explorations into its diverse shapes! (And of course, remember the rest of our [#EASA2014](#) coverage too!)

**Panel Title: Boredom, Intimacy and Governance in ‘Normalized’ Times of Crisis**

**Organizers: Miia Halme-Tuomisaari & Julie Billaud**

**Discussant: Ghassan Hage**

Location: S-422



**Date and Start Time** 02 August, 2014 at 09:00

**Panel Abstract:**

What is boredom and how does it relate to intimacy and governance? This panel explores these questions by conceptualizing boredom as an alarmingly prevalent feature of modernity, produced by professional endeavours, routinized private lives and even popular entertainment. We depart from Ghassan Hage's notion of 'stuckedness' as something effectively negating what Tim Ingold describes as 'being alive', namely 'staying in motion'.



This panel invites ethnographic considerations to investigate how boredom elevates self-control into a type of 'spiritual nobility'. Through Lauren Berlant's notion of 'cruel optimism' we trace the polarities of boredom: discontentment, rebellion and resignation, versus compliance, docility and security. How does boredom contribute to a sense of alienation, a lost intimacy to oneself? What happens when optimism-sustaining versions of intimacy meet normative practices, fantasies and ideologies organising everyday worlds? How does boredom encourage social cohesion among those sharing the wait - real or imagined. What kind of collective identities are generated as corollary?

Finally, we ask: why - when the choice to depart exists - do people rather choose boredom than abandon institutions on which they have lost confidence, located as well within the global financial sector, international (aid) organizations or the academia? How does our collective 'cruel optimism' shape our shared subjectivities, transforming us into more docile 'subjects'? What kind of political,



ideological and economic ends are served, and who benefits from the tacit acceptance of boredom?

## **1. Julie Billaud & Miia Halme-Tuomisaari: Introducing Boredom as the Inverted Field**



Boredom is not a concept that we started out with – it chose us. It became an intense sensation greeting us at both foreseen and unforeseen contexts – the UN, the law firm, the activist campaign. There it loomed, enwrapped in excessively tight formal agendas, standardized presentational formats, pre-choreographed interaction, excessive jargon. Amazingly, it captured us also in the academia, embodying the lack of objective ‘otherness’ between ourselves and our informants – only, it was not ‘out there in the field’ where we found unexpected sameness, but ‘within’ the domain we used to call our professional home.

What is the significance of boredom? Does it alienate, suffocate, destroy? Is it a necessary evil of global collaboration that is only possible through the lowest common denominator – a shared space of forms at the expense of diversified



content? Is boredom a prerequisite of self-sacrifice in the road toward a greater good, improving the world perhaps? Is it comforting, predictable, a source of continuity? What of boredom & the anthropologist – is it a break-through step toward empathic understanding of informants, or the ultimate test setting the anthropologist apart from ‘the native’?

This introduction provides an overview of the literature on boredom and explores the added value and potentialities of an anthropology of boredom. The topic of boredom has attracted the attention of philosophers, from Pascal, to Heidegger, Kierkegaard and more recently Lars Svendsen. Philosophers seem to agree with the idea that boredom constitutes a central feature of modernity, marked by the decline of spirituality, the triumph of cold rationalism and more generally, loss of meaning in a metaphysical sense. In contrast with these writings, historian Peter Toohey argues for the benefits of boredom and explores how over the centuries it has proven to be a stimulus for art and literature. These opposite conceptions of this universal phenomenon force us to think of boredom in terms of its polarities: Is the feeling of boredom the reflection of a loss intimacy to oneself, fed by a fantasy of the ‘good life’ that is disconnected from the actual experience of life in crisis, as historian of emotions Lauren Berlant argues? Is boredom the effect of a new type of governmentality through which restraint, self-control, self-government are celebrated, as Ghassan Hage suggests? Or is there something more positive to read in this widely shared sentiment: a sense of ‘being together’ that creates consensus and provides the conditions for unthreatening encounters?

## **2. Sylvain Piron: Occupying one’s time: on the medieval counterparts of boredom**





It is always a good test to check whether contemporary categories have any echo in the distant past of Western culture. Although boredom is very much a modern notion, it immediately evokes a major notion of christian monasticism, the sin of “acedia”. This complex term can be described as a lack enthusiasm for the performance of religious duties. While it is often translated into psychological terms as depression or melancholy, this behaviour does not necessarily require such a pathological qualification. It would be more neutral to conceive it as a failure to engage actively into performances required by an institution, which could be the very definition of boredom. This requirement was to fully occupy one’s time in the praise of the Lord, night and day. During the central Middle Ages (XIIth-XIIIth Cent.), monastic values were transfered in the secular realm. It is well known that sloth then became a major social sin.



According to the definition of the three orders of society, some groups were required to work, pray or fight (or hunt or practice instead). Yet some were left out of this scheme. Aristocratic women also had to find a means to occupy their time. In so doing, they practically invented the notion of entertainment (through performances and novels), in order to escape boredom. The necessity of maintaining a fully occupied time thus appears as an overarching medieval christian value that has enduring consequences in the modern age.

### **3. Antonio De Lauri : Office, Field, and Guest House. Notes on Romanticism, Boredom, and Habits in the Humanitarian Realm**



This paper critically focuses on “the office”, “the field” and “the guest house” as key locations/dimensions of humanitarian work. Starting from the experience of an aid worker in Kabul, the paper addresses some relevant concerns of humanitarianism in practice and reflects on certain unexplored implications of delivering aid. The question of boredom is analysed in relation to the tendency or romanticizing humanitarian work as well as to specific daily habits characterizing “the life of the expat”. In this context, the very concept of crisis emerges as a constitutive element of humanitarian’s perception of self.



#### **4. Heath Cabot: The Intimacies of Waiting: Boredom and Asylum Seeking in Greece**

Asylum seeking entails an often protracted period of legal limbo, of waiting (Kobelinsky 2010), in which the claimant is subject to temporal and spatial liminality in relation to the state where he or she seeks protection. This period of legal limbo is also accompanied by periods of bureaucratic liminality that are deeply material and sensorially rich: waiting rooms, waiting for papers that may or may never arrive, returning again and again to offices whose “true” function may remain obscured to claimants and legal advocates alike (Hoag 2014). In these spaces of waiting, boredom often becomes a defining affective mode, punctuated by, and sometimes saturated with, profound anxiety and even despair. Yet boredom can also create openings for fleeting socialities between claimants, bureaucrats, and advocates,





which are crucial to making lives livable and may even have transformative potential. Based on ten years of ethnographic research on asylum seeking in Greece, one of the Europe's most porous external borders now facing economic and political crisis, I explore the intersection between waiting, boredom, and sociality. I argue that despite the forms of subjectification and violence at its core, boredom is often at the heart of new forms of intimacy and even solidarity that arise through asylum seeking on Europe's thresholds.

## **5. Daniele Cantini: Stuck in a perennial crisis: youth, boredom and endurance in Amman**

This paper tests the notion of waitthood among Jordanian university graduates, putting it in dialogue with the one of stuckedness. Waitthood refers to the presumed common traits of Arab university graduates, unemployed, marginalised, and forced into years of wasted time before being able to obtain a job and marry, and Jordan is a particularly apt example both for the celebrated success of its educational system and for the relevance of its youth on the overall population. Stuckedness points out to the sense of not moving forward; the perceived crisis of education and the loss of perspectives, not just at the economic but more importantly at the citizenship level, make Jordanian students a good entry point to investigate the nexus between boredom, intimacy, and governance.



The paper examines how Jordanian students wait out their university years, trying to find their ways in a political context that is heavily shaped by a number of crisis



in almost all neighbouring countries, which have heavy consequences in Jordan. First aim of the paper is thus to present a discussion of the consequences of stuckness in the political realm.

Among students feelings of boredom, and fears of waitness, abound but within a notion of normalcy, of the endurance necessary to successfully wait out this liminal condition. This creates a sense of shared identity, at least for the years spent on campus, and second aim of the paper is to discuss ways in which students somehow create a community, with quite specific norms and values.

## **6. Bruce O'Neill: In search of release: boredom, precarity, and the sex trade**

In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, tens of thousands of Romanians found themselves out of work, broke, and struggling to make rent. Everyday pleasures and routines became unaffordable, and long held life narratives derailed. Unable to work and with little money to consume, empty hours dragged into endlessly dull days, and an unbearable boredom abounded. In search of release, those cast aside by an economy in crisis did not take to the streets to demand social protections. Instead they headed underground. Inside the public restrooms of a major Metro station proliferated an illicit market for cheap sex, rendering the trade in 'la petite mort' central to fending off a dull but deeply felt sense of 'la mort sociale.' Based upon extensive ethnographic research, this paper enters into the sexual lives of Bucharest's homeless men in order to reflect upon the politics of precarity amidst a neoliberal economy in crisis.





## **7. Amanullah Mojadidi : Idea Sun Bursting: Problem-Solving Boredom in Desensitized Times**

How is that in a world that - is simultaneously globalizing and fracturing, has more ongoing conflicts at the local, national, regional, and international level than any other time in recent history, makes information (if not knowledge) available with a clack clack clack of the fingertips, sees human migration currents that flow more swiftly than those of our deepest oceans, and presents existential crises of being and identity on a scale perhaps not known since the Neanderthals came face to face with anatomically modern humans - we could actually be bored? And what is boredom? Where does it come from? Where does it go? Who and/or What are to blame for it?



I will use mixed-media performance art as a tool through which to map Boredom and attempt to come to some sort of personal (and hopefully larger societal) conclusions about what 'contemporary boredom' is within times of not simply 'normalized,' but in fact 'desensitized' crises; and ultimately to solve the problem of Boredom.





[Enterprise Estonia](#) is Allegra's official sponsor for the event.

