

## A Delicate Monster. Three passages on the terrifying beauty of boredom

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### ABSTRACT

Yet, paradoxically it is boredom one of the distinctive traits of the post-Fordist economy: that condition of unresolved longing, when the soul is suspended within an uncertain presentness and life is experienced “as such”, open to unforeseen possibilities. If in the past labor activities were functionally limited within spatial rigid enclosures, on the contrary contemporary modes of production tend to flaunt the intrinsic indeterminacy and genericness of the human potential providing empty stages for life to be simply performed.

In this sense, boredom could be considered the index of human indeterminacy, the place where life is contemplated in its pure freedom: that formless state of hesitation necessary for either realizing or not its embedded potential. When any distinction between labor and life dissolved into action, form can no longer be considered as a steady object, but rather as a process of differentiation through which life becomes itself, stemming out of a context as the conscious expression of an inner drive, a “form-of-life”.

“Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form.”  
(Bataille, 1985)

In architecture there is no escape from form. Either in construction, to fulfill its fundamental sheltering task, or in abstract blueprints, by means of drawings and layouts, any architectural project always demands the intelligibility of a form to be communicated and understood in its purposes.

When the modes of production were still prevalently related to material and physical processes requiring specific spaces and fixed capital, any investigation of “form” in architecture was crucial to make visible the relations of power at stake within its boundaries. Nevertheless, with the shift of production towards higher immaterial processes and expanding mechanisms of finance and debt, it would be perhaps more fruitful to read architecture looking at the “forms-of-life” inhabiting and producing its spaces. In the following paragraphs the notion of form will be thus considered as the way through which life simply stares at itself, lacking of any specific purpose besides the action of living, as life as such in the perseverance of being itself.

Giorgio Agamben defined the “form-of-life” as a life for which what is important in its way of living is the living itself: a

life that could never be separated from the possibility to evolve or, in other words, from its potential form. A life detached from its possibilities is “naked”, constrained and objectified within the laws of a sovereign, which uses such a life without quality as crucial foundation for a system of power or management. In this sense, the form-of-life is an exodus from the ban of any sovereignty: a life solely directed towards the freedom to either realize or not its embedded potential (Agamben, 2000).

Form is thus a result not a presupposition: a relation between forces and possibilities rather than a simple object or a fixed outline. Within an imaginary evolution of the notion of form, we could quickly mark few passages through which its progressive understanding moved from an absolute principle imposed upon malleable matter towards an unstable living composition constantly modulating its inner structure against a field.

The first one assumed that sensible reality had to be shaped upon a-priori ideas or pure forms. For Plato, “form” was defined as an archetype or, in its etymological sense, as the original (arché) mould (typos), superior and indifferent to the phenomenal reality. The universe of ideas was a collection of incorruptible forms, constructed through invariant geometrical determinations: the world was condemned to be a mere reproduction

of these primordial ideas, subjected to degradation and imperfection.

The second passage occurred with Aristotle, who claimed that form did not precede reality but it was embedded within an individual entity intimately connected with matter. Hence forms were not part of an eternal domain but subjected to growth and decay, to ceaseless negotiations with life and energy. Each hylomorphic relation of form-matter was able to develop and become itself according to its own tendency, its own *télos* or direction: as a seed contained in itself the form of a tree, so a child the one of an adult being.

A third shift occurred with the introduction of the concept of field in parallel with the magnetic and electrical scientific investigations flourishing during the XIX century. In a field, whatever entity achieves a certain form because influenced by forces and levels of intensity. At the same time, each entity can reciprocally react or exert an active pressure upon the field, locally modifying the lines of forces and the gradient of potential, actively contributing to the configuration of the context itself. The field thus reversed the notion of form inside-out: the autonomy of a form would have been possible only because of its field of subsistence, in a culminating opposition within and against a background (for an unusual genealogy of the notion of form, please see Simondon, 2006).

It is precisely at this moment that form began to be considered as the expression of a living force, the manifestation of a drive: a will stemming from

a context and implying not only the conscious delimitation of an action but also an obstinate reaction against a preexisting field. Form turned into a political action, an act of differentiation, an alteration of potential able to include and exclude various gradients of development: the limits of form never rest in a perfect equilibrium but constantly negotiate and exchange information to preserve a difference of energy, or even a status of antagonism.

In this sense, the modern conception of form was intended as a dynamic relation standing between subjects, objects and fields rather than as immutable or a predetermined model to be copied: a relation that could affect the very construction of life on Earth. Within this perspective, the history of architectural forms appears as a sequence of strategies to organize life on Earth, enhancing or opposing different modes of production, systems of power and knowledge, rituals and ways of dwelling: all actions essentially aiming at framing the endless extension of the world and reducing the formless into intelligible definitions.

Yet, precisely when a form is considered as a process of becoming, it turns into a crucial instrument to reveal the power relations and the dynamics at play within a context, filtered through the psychological effects and the mental reactions of an experiencing subject.

In his doctoral dissertation titled "Abstraction and Empathy", Wilhelm Worringer considered form as the emotional and psychological outcome of the interactions between men and environment via their feelings of

pleasure or pain. The attempt was to demonstrate that empathy was not the sole presupposition of artistic creation, which in fact required a positive and almost pantheistic confidence to the external world. Through empathy, men perceive formal arrangements thanks to their inner biological organization, vicariously adopting the regularity, symmetry, proportion and harmony of their bodies to measure and compare what they experience: a good form was the one able to reflect the balance of human body, the projection of human pleasure upon reality into a sort of "objectified self-enjoyment".

On the opposite, the urge of abstraction resulted from "a greater inner unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world," as a way to tame the fortuitousness of the world into forms of regularity and psychological refuge (Worringer, 1997, p. 26). For Worringer abstraction developed in moments of crisis or danger, requiring a meticulous analysis and deeper meditation upon the possibilities for action: a reflection upon the self and the position in the world. In the construction and contemplation of abstract regularity, men released their fears and dispelled their anguish for the uncertain by means of simple forms, dissecting the arbitrary complexity of the world into discreet rules, repetitions and rhythms.

Worringer demonstrated that precisely within the formless indeterminacy of such a primitive condition men produced the highest expressions of abstraction and rigorous forms, from the seriality of ornamental motives, to the regularity of structural patterns, to the alternation

of flat surfaces in spite of volumetric articulations. When imagination confronted danger, but also when it tried to measure the overwhelming forces of nature – oceans, deserts, mountains – or to figure out the openness of their spatial extension, men were seized by a particular feeling between a consolidated knowledge and the unknown, tension and release, a fear for death and the possibility of salvation.

Despite he never explicitly adopted the concept of sublime (Das Erhabene), Worringer's reflections on abstraction inherited and completed the XVIII century aesthetic debate about the "terrifying beauty", which from Edmund Burke to Immanuel Kant conceptualized the idea of negativity within aesthetic judgement and artistic production. Terror, or that feeling of exposure towards what does not have a limit and cannot be seized, was regarded as inherent in any attempt of ordering the chaos through a frame for action: only by means of the apprehension, the acknowledgment and the progressive domestication of the formless, human action would have been able to produce its forms of living and strategies of refuge (for a complete understanding on the notion of sublime, please see Burke, 1958; Kant, 1961; Lyotard, 1994).

The sublime coincided with the collapse of representation, the inability of presenting and thus comprehending a totality: in a way, the same vertiginous unrest for tempests, oceans, deserts and mountains characterizes the limitless extension of contemporary market. Embedded in the crucial contradiction of capitalist production, the sublime

is the impossibility of measuring and exploiting human labor-power without restraining or compromising its potential. Paradoxically, in the present financial regime, where everything has supposedly become measurable and thus purchasable, it seems that the experience of sublime turned into an almost daily experience. Introjected within average modes of working and living habits, the sublime emerges every time we confront the immense availability of information, we attempt to map the extension of collective knowledge or estimate the value of affective labor, or even in banal states of the soul, when life appears to us just as undefined and boring as it is.

Boredom could be defined as the terrifying beauty of the XX century: the index of human indeterminacy, the place where life is contemplated in its form. That state of unresolved longing when the soul is mirrored upon itself, suspended within an uncertain presentness. Nothing is comparable to such a sense of emptiness able of inhibiting movements and thoughts while at the same time to reveal an infinite scenario of non-exhausted possibilities. When time and space appear in their intrinsic purposelessness, boredom insinuates the raw matter of living as a "delicate monster", to use a famous Baudelaire's allegory, swallowing the world in a yawn and make a shamble of the Earth.

Centuries of literature depicted boredom as the hidden malaise of modernity, as the plague of industrialization which separated man from his natural endowments weakening his capacity of self-reflection into indifference. The blasé idleness was the premise for

manipulating souls and distracting the masses while integrating them within the vicious circle of commodity consumption and instilling subtle coercive behaviors.

Almost as a sociological detective, at the beginning of XX century Siegfried Kracauer wandered among the salaried masses of workers trying to understand the character of the rising metropolis through the forms-of-life proliferating in its cafés, cinemas, passages and department stores, collecting traces and meticulously observing the activities taking place within its new architectures. The desires and behaviors, the emerging modes of production and professions, the daily rituals and the obsessions typical of that historical moment were actually described through the specific traits of a new spatial sensibility, which privileged laxity over organization, emptiness over program, repetitiveness over originality.

For Kracauer a paradigmatic case was the hotel lobby, which accommodated:

"all who go there to meet no one (...) the setting for those who neither seek to find the one who is always sought, and who are therefore guests in space as such - a space that encompasses them and has no functions other than to encompass them." (Kracauer, 1995, p. 175-176)

The banality and extreme rigor of the lobby for Kracauer had an aura of sacrality but devoid of any religious attribute. Differently from a religious congregation, which fulfilled the relation with god through the edification of a collective ritual, the people dispersed in the lobby indifferently accepted the power of an unknown host, unaware

yet bound within the same emptiness and boredom which made vain their togetherness (Kracauer, 1995).

Not by chance, in the same years Mies van der Rohe and Ludwig Hilberseimer were developing several projects upon the constitutive emptiness and abstract speculative logic of the emerging tertiary city, whose architecture of office buildings, banks and departments stores tautologically coincided with its simple structure: columns and beams. By clearing the plan from any obstruction and ordering the working space just through concrete frames, Mies and Hilberseimer totally subverted the inward logic of the traditional office space, configuring the plan as a totally "enabling" surface, absolutely permeable and disposable for the activities of its inhabitants: the organization of layout no longer relied on partitions or rooms but instead on roles, duties and relations among subjects.

In this sense, the office itself was no longer conceived only as a space, but it also recovered its original function of "officium", of a service. The office, as cognitive labor in general, did not refer to specific end-products but rather to the action of a subject and the conditions in which it took place. Those absolute vacant spaces reduced the idea of the office to a duty, to a praxis more than a thing: an action which coincided with its own performance, which defined itself and its agents only when effectively executed. Precisely within these purposeless vacant spaces and in such a state of abandonment, human labor-power stemmed in its purest evidence, in a sort of total openness to the world and

to themselves: a primordial boredom.

The subtle point of separation between men and animals is boredom. While animals coincide with particular instincts and circumscribed ecosystems, men are indeterminate beings who do not have any specific milieu, confronting the world as a whole and constantly producing their own nature through the industriousness of labor. Instead of instincts man owns faculties, material and intellectual endowments that exist only as potentials, as a repertoire of possibilities which become tangible only when concretely actualized in time and space (Virno, 1994).

Animals cannot get bored being trapped within the sphere of their environments, the limits of their unconscious actions. What truly elevates men from the bare animal condition is the faculty of choosing and mentally planning their actions before actually doing something (Agamben, 2004). The common character of human species resides in such an innate ability to project, to externalize its inner potential and reduce the complexity of the world within the finite forms of spatial, temporal, cultural organizations: whereas animals are immediately ones with their lives, men make their life-activities the object of their will and of their consciousness.


In this sense, man is the only animal able to negotiate with the eternal traits of his species and the contingencies of his immediate life at the same moment. Human labor-power represents the constant development of such an innate biological indeterminacy, which allows men to become what they are and

everything they aspire to. Nevertheless, as potential, each human faculty is pure dynamis: it cannot have a singular form per se as far as being effectually performed. Practically, in itself a capacity does not exist. The potential is a void, an absence, a sort of infinite basin of non-present possibilities, juxtaposed to each singular action we perform at a precise time and in a specific place (Virno, 1994).

Boredom is the awareness of such unresolved potential, the moment in which everything might occur: yet, within boredom, the complete indeterminacy of being and its infinite possibilities become evident and thus exploitable. Rather than limiting the genericness of human activities within rigid enclosures or divisions as in the past, contemporary modes of production flaunt and emphasize the indeterminate human capacity to invent, vary and evolve ways of dwelling, providing them empty stages to just per-form themselves.

Neoliberal economy does not impose forms but creates formless conditions which could be freely articulated and developed into difference, as demonstrated by the recent simplification of architecture into simple and flexible mass-containers: universities, learning-centers, atria, covered squares, canopies, co-working, open spaces, all professed emptiness as new mantra and boredom as a domesticated sublime. When life is put at work in its entirety, boredom becomes the only moment of pure self-reflection, producing and isolating moments of authenticity.

In this sense, rather than indulging on imposed forms or schemes, it

would be perhaps more important to understand how a form develops and modulates its own becoming against a field. Reconsidering the formlessness of boredom as the generic condition of life as such, and especially the ways it has been integrated within the system of production as source of value, it would be possible to recover a deeper consciousness of the human labor-power, formulating new strategies for inhabiting the world and hopefully emancipating alternative forms-of-life. 

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