Amsterdam University Press

Chapter Title: Boredom and Creativity in the Era of Accelerated Living
Chapter Author(s): Christoph Lindner

Book Title: Boredom, Shanzhai, and Digitisation in the Time of Creative China
Book Editor(s): Jeroen de Kloet, Chow Yiu Fai, Lena Scheen
Published by: Amsterdam University Press. (2019)
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvqr1bnw.9

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/.

Amsterdam University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Boredom, Shanzhai, and Digitisation in the Time of Creative China*

This content downloaded from 80.1.255.77 on Sun, 13 Oct 2019 19:45:59 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

1.4 Boredom and Creativity in the Era of Accelerated Living

Christoph Lindner

Abstract

Rethinking the historical relation between boredom and creativity in the era of accelerated living, this chapters examines the impact of neoliberal globalisation's culture of speed and connectivity on creative practice. It argues that boredom today has generally shifted from being an affected aesthetic pose involving stillness and retreat to become more of an involuntary response to the exhausting hyperactivity and excessive production characterising contemporary life.

Keywords: globalisation, contemporary art, creativity, cities, China

I took the photo below at the Kowloon campus of Hong Kong Baptist University. I was pleasantly surprised to find this small effort at urban wall gardening clinging to the side of a high-rise building. Part guerrilla garden and part art installation, the urban wall garden struck me as a creative intervention in the space and fabric of the built environment. It repurposes plastic waste by using empty bottles as plant pots. It brings a splash of life and colour to a dull, monochromatic space. It communicates care and attention for an overlooked non-place. It uses the aesthetics and materiality of green insurgency to gently push back – at an intimate scale – against the rampant denaturalisation of the city. And unlike some forms of urban art/intervention that rely on tactics of speed, mobility, and transience (such as flash mobs or parkour) the urban wall garden involves emplacement, stillness, duration. But vertical gardening, as it is more widely called, is not a practice unique to Hong Kong. Rather, it is one that circulates transnationally, materialising on urban walls throughout the world, largely thanks to the global ubiquity of plastic bottling (which is a different discussion about

Kloet, Jeroen de, Chow Yiu Fai, and Lena Scheen (eds), *Boredom,* Shanzhai*, and Digitisation in the Time of Creative China*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press 2019
DOI: 10.5117/9789462984745_CH1.4

This content downloaded from 80.1.255.77 on Sun, 13 Oct 2019 19:45:59 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

1.4.1 An urban wall garden on the side of a high-rise building at Hong Kong Baptist University

waste and petroculture), as well as to the highly developed networks of communication and knowledge sharing that characterise contemporary activism, street art, and urban farming movements.

The image itself was casually snapped with my smart phone in a moment of distraction and automatically uploaded to social media, where it was picked up and globally dispersed through the techno-informational 'space of flows', to borrow Manuel Castells' phrase.[1] I reproduce the image here not because of any potential aesthetic merit, but because both the object itself (the hypermediated digital image) and the slow creative practice it depicts (vertical gardening) bring together my main concerns in this essay. In what follows, I draw on the Romantic view of creativity as epiphany to question the impact of neoliberal globalisation's culture of speed and connectivity on creative practice.

Tranquillity

Western culture has a long tradition of associating creativity with spontaneity, as mythologised in the ancient Greek tale of Archimedes' mathematical bathtub epiphany. It was not until the rise of Romanticism in the late eighteenth century, however, that the insight and innovation associated with the 'Eureka effect' in

1 Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 409.

This content downloaded from 80.1.255.77 on Sun, 13 Oct 2019 19:45:59 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

science[2] also became tied to artistic production and, more broadly, the field of aesthetics.[3] Central to this development were writers such as the British poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, who carefully crafted a public image of themselves as solitary poet-geniuses prone to sudden and profound creative revelations when confronted by truth or beauty – usually in the form of a natural landscape, a rustic human figure, or an architectural ruin.

In the 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, the joint collection of poems first published with Coleridge in 1798, Wordsworth famously articulates his theory of creativity. 'Poetry', he writes, 'is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' and 'takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity'.[4] This statement is significant because it understands artistic creation as involving both impulse and planning, both stimulation and boredom (if we think of boredom as the endured passage of time). Central to Wordsworth's theory is that, while art derives from intense emotional experience, the act of aesthetic creation itself necessitates undisturbed time (tranquillity) during which the memory of strong emotions can be carefully conjured up and imaginatively intensified, before being filtered through the artist's aesthetic sensibility and redirected into the material form of the work of art – in this case, poetry.

In effect, Wordsworth formulates a cliché that has dominated popular perceptions of artistic production for many centuries: namely, the image of the artist as a tortured soul toiling in solitude under extreme mental pressure and subject to sudden eruptions of creativity. Whether accurate or not, it is an image that has accompanied the mythos surrounding many iconic writers, visual artists, designers, architects, musicians, and more. One of the problems is that, in order to locate creativity in the singular mind of the artist, the Romantic self-image of creativity constructed by writers like Wordsworth, and amplified by contemporaries such as Blake, Byron, and De Quincey, underplays collaboration, influence, and worldly engagement. In this version, creativity occurs under highly privileged and protected conditions of seclusion – at a remove from society, interaction, exchange. And yet, as Wordsworth's own co-publishing with Coleridge demonstrates, creative work is frequently – even necessarily – collaborative in nature, in the sense that, like language itself, ideas do not materialise out of nowhere but are formed by interaction with and influence from other ideas and, by extension, other people.

2 David N. Perkins, *The Eureka Effect: The Art and Logic of Breakthrough Thinking* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

3 See also Wilf in this volume.

4 William Wordsworth, 'The Preface to Lyrical Ballads'. In *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2003), 21.

This content downloaded from 80.1.255.77 on Sun, 13 Oct 2019 19:45:59 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

I am reminded here of Roland Barthes' wonderfully provocative claim in his 1967 essay, 'The Death of the Author', that 'the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture [...] the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original'.[5] The idea that creative expression is always already unoriginal to some degree – that its meaning resides in its relation to the meaning of other texts and is, in this sense, derivative or gestural – can be widely applied beyond literature to other art forms. More to the point, Barthes' theory, partly articulated in the title of his essay, rejects the cult of authorship promoted by writers like Wordsworth in favour of an understanding of creative production as a networked, relational activity.

Clearly, I find Barthes' poststructuralist spin on creative production more convincing than Wordsworth's Romantic meditation on spontaneous overflows. My interest, however, is not in arguing the merits of these positions, nor even in developing some working definition of creativity. Rather, I want to question the widespread popular view – still dominant today – that creativity is constituted by sudden flashes of imaginative insight. Such an understanding of creativity does more than obscure its interactive and collaborative dimensions. It renders the labour of creative work invisible. It privileges the artist as a singularity. It fetishises originality. And it neglects the socio-economic realities, as well as the cultural politics and technological-material conditions, that shape (and are shaped by) creative practice.

Precarity

Fast forward to the 21st century and to the present era of globalisation, accelerated urbanism, transnational mobility, and digital nativism. Yes, the Romantic cliché of the lone creative genius endures. In the Chinese context, for example, it can be seen in the international superstardom of the artist Ai Weiwei. But if we look beyond the elite exceptions of today's global art world, the broader picture that emerges is very different. For one thing, creativity has long ceased to belong to the domain of aesthetics. Following the industrial turn and the rise of modern capitalism, the professionalisation of the artist in the nineteenth century (including the commodification of art itself) paved the way for what the scholar-consultant Richard Florida

5 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author'. In *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146.

This content downloaded from 80.1.255.77 on Sun, 13 Oct 2019 19:45:59 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

has described as the 'rise of the creative class'[6] in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries.

Although heavily critiqued for oversimplifying the complexities of urban living and for over-privileging economic development as a marker of cultural vibrancy, Florida's theory that we are living in the 'creative age' has gained considerable traction in urban and cultural policy worldwide and has been actively mobilised by countless municipalities seeking post-industrial revitalisation. Such efforts to reinvent declining cities as creative cities frequently fail or end up exacerbating gentrification, inequality, and segregation, as Florida himself has been forced to concede in later work.[7] Partly tapping into the zeitgeist of hipsters, laptops, and cafés, and partly contributing to that zeitgeist by promoting professionalised forms of creativity as instruments of urban prosperity, Florida's vision of urban renewal promotes an understanding of creativity as a quotidian, workplace activity taking place in the wider context of a global market economy and within the loose clustering of output-oriented, hype-driven, tech-centred professional fields we call the 'global creative industries'.[8]

One of the dark sides of the creative turn in urban policy is the mobilisation of the artist as a gentrifier. This typically involves attracting creative professionals to 'ailing' areas of a city so that their presence and activity can create a positive cultural-economic vibe that attracts rapid development. In this scenario, artists are lured by the affordability of space only to become displaced, along with other low-income residents, once the neighbourhood 'renews' and property prices increase.[9] Key to this phenomenon is the widespread precarity of creative work, which not only makes artists and other creative professionals susceptible to policy-led neoliberal renewal in the first place, but also ensures that the cycle continues.

As these dynamics suggest, the Romantic ideal of aesthetic innovation, and in particular Wordsworth's call for tranquillity and retreat, is increasingly incompatible with the everyday realities shaping contemporary life. As Jonathan Crary argues, for example, late capitalism has given rise to an exhausting war on rest, in which the forms of disengagement needed

6 Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

7 Florida, *The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities Are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle Class – and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

8 Terry Flew, *Global Creative Industries* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

9 Loretta Lees, Hyun Bang Shin, and Ernesto Lopez-Morales, *Planetary Gentrification* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016); Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

This content downloaded from 80.1.255.77 on Sun, 13 Oct 2019 19:45:59 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

to experience tranquillity are under relentless attack.[10] 'The expanding, non-stop life-world of 21st-century capitalism', he observes, is marked by a constant struggle between 'shifting configurations of sleep and waking, illumination and darkness, justice and terror', in which human life is inscribed 'into duration without breaks, defined by a principle of continuous functioning'.[11]

Many mourn the loss of tranquillity brought about by neoliberal globalisation's 'culture of speed',[12] as well as the loss of the privileged social and material conditions that enable such states of repose. One reaction against accelerated living can be found in the slow living movements that have proliferated worldwide, beginning with Slow Food in Italy in the 1980s and now encompassing a broad spectrum of slow movements extending from art and design to science and finance.[13] What unites the global slow living trend is the view that slowness – as both an embodied practice and an affective condition – can be used as 'a strategy for confronting globalisation, neoliberal, and the associated accelerations of everyday life, transport, communication, and economic exchange'.[14] I do not wish to discount the real and potential benefits of slow movements to individuals or communities. Yet the critique can be made that slowness is frequently reactive and exclusive – too often an expensive lifestyle choice that temporarily mitigates the effects of accelerated living rather than delivering a genuine, long-term, systematic alternative.

This tension is perfectly captured in an advertising poster I once encountered inside a trendy organic 'farm-to-table' burger restaurant in Berkeley, California. Overlaying images of a chef cooking, the poster promotes the restaurant as '(slow) fast food', effectively acknowledging the vicarious form that the slowness of organic burgers assumes in this rapid-dining context. From the local sourcing of food to its preparation and presentation, the restaurant engages in slowness (or at least the performance of it) on behalf of rushing customers who do not have the time or desire to slow down themselves. In scenarios such as these, as I had to admit to myself while consuming my slow-fast meal, slowness is the lie we tell ourselves so that we can continue to indulge the neoliberal dream of accelerated

10 Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013). See also Peeren in this volume.

11 Crary, *24/7*, 8.

12 John Tomlinson, *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy* (London: Sage, 2007).

13 Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slow: Challenging the Cult of Speed* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).

14 Christoph Lindner and Miriam Meissner, 'Slow Art in the Creative City: Amsterdam, Street Photography, and Urban Renewal', *Space and Culture* 18.1 (2015): 4.

This content downloaded from 80.1.255.77 on Sun, 13 Oct 2019 19:45:59 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

1.4.2 A poster at an organic 'farm-to-table' burger restaurant in Berkeley, California

living, complete with all its inequalities, excesses, and contradictions. Another way of thinking about such contemporary contradictions is to say that slow is another dimension of fast – that slowness often depends on hidden forms of speed and ultimately helps us to endure the growing intensity of 24/7 living, making the very condition of acceleration all the more viable.

It is against this backdrop of neoliberal globalisation and accelerated living that I wish to return to the topic of boredom and creativity. The reason is that boredom today, especially in the context of creative practice, has generally shifted from being an affected aesthetic pose involving stillness and retreat to become more of an involuntary response to the exhausting hyperactivity and excessive production characterising contemporary life. Echoing Georg Simmel's early-twentieth-century theory of the blasé metropolitan attitude, in which individuals adopt a posture of indifference as a mechanism for coping with the psychological demands of modern city life, boredom in the age of speed derives from the pervasiveness and aggressiveness of creativity as an activity driving urban development and cultural-economic life in neoliberal (and neoliberalising) societies.[15] To put this another way, boredom is no longer a *precondition* for creativity, as per the Romantic conceit. Instead,

15 Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in *The Blackwell City Reader*, eds. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 11-19. Originally published in 1903.

This content downloaded from 80.1.255.77 on Sun, 13 Oct 2019 19:45:59 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

boredom has become an *outcome* of creativity, a result of overstimulation, overabundance, overexposure.

Fatigue

Thus, we can speak of the 'boredom of speed' – the cognitive, aesthetic fatigue that occurs in the face of rapid, constant newness. At one level, the rise of the global creative industries – including the transnational networks of communication and power in which they operate – have transformed the conditions under which creative practice occurs, eroding the autonomy of the artist, networking production, commodifying innovation, streamlining development, fast-tracking culture. Beijing's 798 Art Zone is a conspicuous example of this trend and one that, like many such initiatives worldwide, repurposes former factory buildings for use by artists and galleries. In this government-backed, policy-led, post-industrial creative complex, the presence of art serves to drive larger dynamics of gentrification and urban renewal, as well as to accelerate the commercial and aesthetic flows of the contemporary global art market.[16] The resulting slippage between creativity and profitability registers in a peculiar phenomenon that various commentators have observed: the proliferation of luxury sports cars, belonging to both artists and patrons, parked in the streets around 798. This conjunction of art and automotive bling speaks not only to the financialisation of creative practice, but also to the link between that practice and globalisation's culture of speed – quite literally embodied here by the excessively, impractically fast cars.

Yet, the 'boredom of speed' also manifests itself in other ways that are less complicit with the economic imperatives of neoliberal globalisation. Consider the example of vertical gardening with which I opened this essay. Like guerrilla gardening and urban farming more generally, vertical gardening is a community-oriented form of bio-urbanism that has emerged as a direct reaction against the speed of contemporary life and the flattening of creativity in urban environments. Vertical gardening's green insurgency does not emerge out of tranquillity. Rather, within a larger landscape of speed, vertical gardening seeks to generate conditions of tranquillity in which embodied, durational experiences such as boredom become newly possible through creative slow practice.

16 Jeroen de Kloet, 'Created in China and Pak Sheung Chuen's Tactics of the Mundane', *Social Semiotics* 20.4 (2010): 441-55.

This content downloaded from 80.1.255.77 on Sun, 13 Oct 2019 19:45:59 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

1.4.3 The proliferation of luxury sports cars, belonging to both artists and patrons, in the streets around 798

Here, boredom is much more than an aesthetic strategy. It becomes a form of critique, however ephemeral and oblique, against globalisation's architecture of velocity. Yet, like the Californian slow-fast burger, the vertical garden in Hong Kong nonetheless remains ambivalently, vicariously connected to accelerated living. It also remains similarly reactive and, potentially, exclusive (it hinges on participants having free time). What matters is that the wall garden invites an escape *into* boredom rather than an escape *from* boredom, and in this respect connects to an emerging trend in urban counterculture aimed at recalibrating the speed-space of the contemporary city in order to revalue the human experience of time.

Note

I would like to thank Joyce Cheng for sharing her work on Paris Dada and boredom, and for introducing me to the field of interdisciplinary scholarship known as 'boredom studies'.

This content downloaded from 80.1.255.77 on Sun, 13 Oct 2019 19:45:59 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Bibliography

Barthes, Roland. 'The Death of the Author'. In *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).
Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).
Crary, Jonathan. *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (New York: Verso, 2013).
de Kloet, Jeroen. 'Created in China and Pak Sheung Chuen's Tactics of the Mundane', *Social Semiotics* 20.4 (2010): 441-55.
Flew, Terry. *Global Creative Industries* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).
Florida, Richard. *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
—. *The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities Are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle Class – and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).
Honoré, Carl. *In Praise of Slow: Challenging the Cult of Speed* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004).
Lees, Loretta, Hyun Bang Shin, and Ernesto Lopez-Morales. *Planetary Gentrification* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016).
Lindner, Christoph and Miriam Meissner. 'Slow Art in the Creative City: Amsterdam, Street Photography, and Urban Renewal', *Space and Culture* 18.1 (2015): 4-24.
Perkins, David N. *The Eureka Effect: The Art and Logic of Breakthrough Thinking* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).
Simmel, Georg. 'The Metropolis and Mental Life'. In *The Blackwell City Reader*, eds. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 11-19.
Tomlinson, John. *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy* (London: Sage, 2007).
Wordsworth, William. 'The Preface to Lyrical Ballads'. In *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2003), 5-25.
Zukin, Sharon. *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

About the Author

Christoph Lindner is Professor of Urban Studies and Dean of the Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment at University College London. His recent books include *Imagining New York City* (Oxford University Press, 2015) as well as the edited volumes *Deconstructing the High Line* (Rutgers University Press, 2017), *Global Garbage* (Routledge, 2016), *Cities Interrupted* (Bloomsbury, 2016), and *Inert Cities* (I.B. Tauris, 2015).

This content downloaded from 80.1.255.77 on Sun, 13 Oct 2019 19:45:59 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

This content downloaded from 80.1.255.77 on Sun, 13 Oct 2019 19:45:59 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms