

# “Let’s not deny that boredom is boring”: An Interview with Charlie Gere

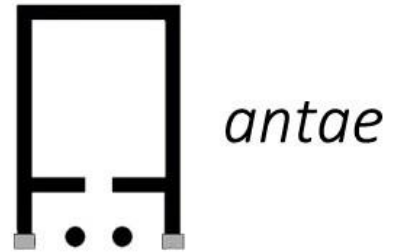
The *antae* Editorial Board

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## “Let’s not deny that boredom is boring”: An Interview with Charlie Gere

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**ANTAE:** First of all, thank you for your time, Professor Gere. During your keynote address at the ‘With Feeling...’ 2014 postgraduate symposium, you commented on a modern acceptance of time as a kind of Christian, linear, homogenic structure as opposed to the circular, Greek conception of time. Do you think we can break through this linear structure, in any way?

**CHARLIE GERE:** I think that’s what Agamben thinks we can do, and I think he looks to—as I said in the plenary, in an early paper Agamben wrote which deals with his first look at time, I think—and finds all these alternative models of time in various places quite early on.<sup>1</sup> And I think we can, and maybe we should, because for Agamben, as it is for me, time is the crucial issue. Once we abandon its naturalness, then it is something you can seize upon and use it productively in critical, radical ways to reconfigure our relationship to our existence. I’m much older than all of you, so time is a different kind of issue for me, and it is one that becomes more pressing as one becomes older, generally.

**A:** You made a comment after a particular paper about the value in staging something as already lost in order for one to repeatedly try to possess it, almost colonise it. Do you not think that this is a kind of fake staging, in the sense that you are putting something in flux which is not really there?

**CG:** Absolutely. Where I was taking this from, and I didn’t want to keep mentioning his name, but I’m going to again, is Agamben—more specifically, his first book, which is *Stanzas*, in which he really investigates the emergence of the melancholic disposition as a kind of trope of modernity.<sup>2</sup> One particular presenter here commented on nostalgia, which is a seventeenth century word, which is very much around the time where a melancholic disposition towards culture emerges, according to Agamben, one that interiorises the image of what is desired as a kind of lost object, in order to preserve it; so it’s not a good thing, I’m not saying it’s a positive thing. And I suppose it made me think, listening to the papers presented here that dealt with ethics and photojournalism, that there is something at play in the images we receive, a kind of melancholy that makes ethical action sort of impossible—always staging the image of what we see as something that’s kind of lost and mourned, and yet maintained, which is why those pictures of starving children or dead women are sort of impossible for us, because they’re images.

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<sup>1</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, ‘Time and History: Critique of the Instant and the Continuum’, in *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. by Liz Heron (London, New York, NY: Verso, 2007), 97-116.

<sup>2</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. by Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).



Figure 1<sup>3</sup>

**A: Would you think that mourning would then help that maintenance?**

**CG:** The mourning helps both maintain but also prevent action. It produces in us, I think, a kind of melancholic disposition; a figure that Benjamin and Agamben both discuss, albeit in different years, is that of Dürer's *Melancholia*, the famous woodcut; it's a sort of angel figure sitting among a bunch of stuff that he cannot engage with because he's at a sort of distance from the world, because he's interiorised the world as something within him.<sup>4</sup> Again, there's a wonderful description in both Benjamin and Agamben on the meaning of this figure, so it's a melancholic disposition, a different kind of affect, one that denies us action—rather than there being no affect at all.<sup>5</sup>

**A: Is there value in displaying something that is distant? Does it have to be affectual?**

**CG:** It would be more practical, in terms of the kind of emotive affect of images, and I think is quite a problem, in a sense, that they do tend to operate at a very immediate affectiveness. It may be actually the kind of antithesis of what is actually called action, in some strange way. I don't know if you've heard, but Bob Geldof's daughter just died, so I was thinking a lot about 'Live Aid', and the use of those images beckoning our natures to emote and invoke to create a certain kind of action, which turned out in the end to be quite counterproductive,

<sup>3</sup> Kevin Carter, 'The vulture and the little girl', 1993. See <<http://rarehistoricalphotos.com/vulture-little-girl/>> [accessed on 5 September, 2015].

<sup>4</sup> Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia I*, (43.106.1), in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000—).

<sup>5</sup> See Agamben, *Stanzas*, and Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London, Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2009).

according to many people, and became part of the contra-spectacle, which became the problem that they are trying to solve. So, yes—and I’m sorry I’ve rambled quite far from your question here—I think that’s a really interesting question about our relationship to the image, all images, which kind of fundamentally—I’d like to say pornographically, in a way—invoke a kind of immediacy, and that distance is something that is quite interesting as a way to think about it. One of the things that I was going to write coming here was a plea for what I call general anaesthetics, a refusal of the ascesis of the image, its punctum.

**A: It is funny that you would place it in relation to anaesthesia, because you would not want that lack of feeling either. This idea of distance and anaesthesia ties in with your ideas on boredom, as a way to...**

**CG:** A way to open you out to—I suppose one thing about the image is that it does make you think and moves you to an action, to some kind of response. I’m not sure I can quite bring these two things together, but one can say that the immediate response might not be the most responsible way of responding to something, because it might operate under a level of affect, in some way, in which it would be counterproductive to look over the distancing we need to engage with what these things mean, these impossible situations to deal with. Of course, we are surrounded with this ubiquitous, spectacular culture that mediates our every relationship to the theme, increasingly, even in my lifetime it’s got much worse.

**A: In relation to boredom as a sort of space, potential...**

**CG:** Yeah, or an experience that, in its very boredom-ness, opens out. Let’s not deny that boredom is boring, let’s not pretend it’s some transcendental experience or something—but something opens out, and that can be frightening, but it can also open you out to that which happens when you’re not distracted by all the things that make you feel operative. In its very negativity, and only its negativity, does it have this. David Foster Wallace, the novelist, who was in the middle of writing *The Pale King* when he killed himself, is a study of boredom set in the 1980s in Midwest America, which is why it’s all so genial, among other things.<sup>6</sup> He makes claims that boredom, being continual, is in a sense an opening to a transcendence, and I don’t think he got to remain in the grip of this thing that does not give you a way out.

**A: This consideration of boredom, as a potential space for an opening, reminded us of what Simon Critchley said about meaninglessness as an achievement, which to me sounds like an instance where, instead of accepting the logic of one’s own thoughts, accepting the conclusion of resigning ourselves to the fact that there is meaninglessness as an open space. I was wondering, is this not kind of the same thing?**

**CG:** Very similar. A kind of opening out to a refusal of operativity, the notion that we have purposefulness, that we have telos, which we innately grip on to, because otherwise we are in a state of total panic. And it is an achievement, to open yourself out to something, which someone might call ‘meaninglessness’, which I would characterise as being available in

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<sup>6</sup> David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2011).

boredom, that is, a sort of release—a word that Heidegger uses is *Gelassenheit*—a release from the grip from the fetish for meaning.

**A: But, then again, boredom could also be the very rare moment where you grasp the actual impossibility of action.**

**CG:** Yes, or even the sheer possibility of action—this is not the boredom of the repetitive task, it's not the banality—it is the boredom of having absolutely nothing. And that's not merely lack of something to do; it is, if you've experienced it, which I have many times, it is a really quite frightening feeling that your very self is kind of paralysed.

**A: And at the very same time, do you have all possible possibilities?**

**CG:** You don't, because somehow, if you did, you would do them, and you would then overcome or cover over or disavow the abyss that opens up in front of you, which is that you are fundamentally meaningless.

**A: So would you agree with the Derridean bracketing of the 'im-' of (im)possible boredom?**

**CG:** I would bracket the suffix off. Again, what Agamben does is to say that it is only by (im)potentiality, by the fact that we can not do things, which is what animals cannot do—they cannot not do.

**A: Can one be anxious when one's bored?**

**CG:** Well, there's the anxiety which is like an itch one has to scratch, and there's the anxiety of scratching even though you have no itch.

**A: I wonder whether you see a difference between boredom, which to us almost suggests a frustration with what is not there, and indifference, which to me suggests a different relation to the possibility of some action happening? Would you make a distinction?**

**CG:** Ah, indifference. I think indifference sounds more desirable as a sort of end point of what one might want. But, I don't know, that strikes me as being quietist and accepting, whereas the anxiety of boredom is in some ways more productive. To sink back into a kind of stoic, Buddhist acceptance...

**A: Is there something immediately wrong with quietism, since it is so often avoided in our field of academia?**

**CG:** Well, I'm naturally a quietist in some ways I think, which is why fight against it, because it is in some ways it leads one not to bother with injustice, or the things that we ought to in some ways be making an effort with, because one just sits there and accepts. That is where quietism is most critically problematic. How to find a way to be politically engaged without fetishising action, radical action as a kind of solution—which usually seems to necessitate violence and other forms of power? That, I think, is a problem Agamben has been



trying to deal with: is what it is you can do that jumps you out of either just cultivating your garden, or becoming a Messianic nihilistic revolutionary?

**A: So, is Agamben perhaps trying to find the ethical voyeur?**

**CG:** His great example of the coming community, the person who exemplifies what he thinks is great, are people like Bartleby, from the Scrivener story, and also the lone man standing in front of the tank in Tiananmen Square, who is a lone figure and does not represent an identity, but represents a refusal of the kinds of forces through which different kinds of identities oppose each other. So he is not a voyeur exactly, he’s had an interesting set of discussions with, for example, the people who Occupy Wall Street, who, controversially, didn’t have an agenda, or a manifesto, or set of demands. And again, the point is, this is not something to be satisfied by demands, it is simply a refusal of the kind of structures in power on either side that, in the end, just go on repeating the same thing.



Figure 2<sup>7</sup>

**A: This is very interesting, and very Blanchovian: the absolute refusal of the law, as an opening into an anarchic space of possibility, and dissidence through being apolitical in a sense.**

**CG:** Yes. The great figure for Agamben, interestingly, is St Paul—appropriate to Malta—as evidenced by his study of Pauline Christianity as a radical movement, what he calls a ‘revocation of every vocation’.<sup>8</sup> You don’t become something else; you simply refuse the

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Franklin, ‘Tank Man’, 1989. See <<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/photography-blog/2014/jun/03/stuart-franklin-tiananmen-square-tank-man>> [accessed 5 September, 2015].

<sup>8</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. by Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 23.

inhabitation of that as a meaningful thing. You go on being what you are, but you're also not—so you're in a different kind of space. I may not be articulating this very well; but this is a genuine attempt to think of what a new kind of community would be that would not be defined by identity, at least in the kinds of positive ways that we tend to do so now, and would jump us beyond all the operative theologies, as well as the kinds of ideological disavowals of them.

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