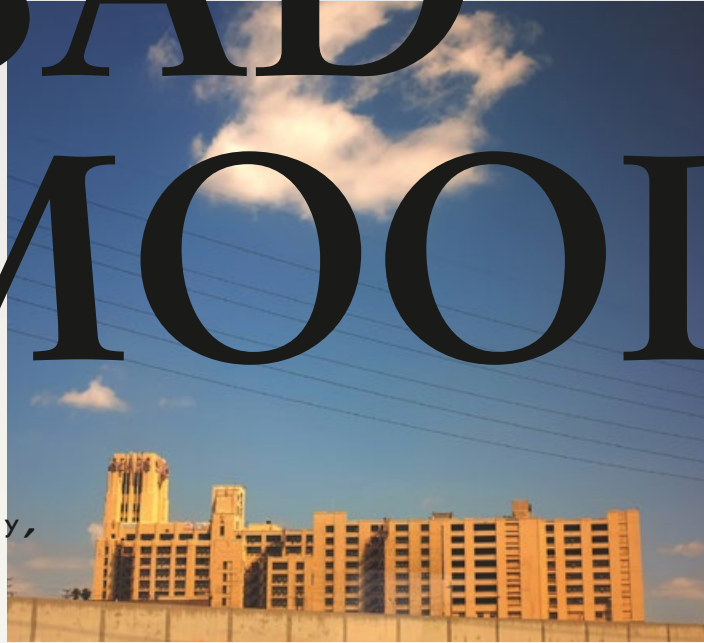


BAD MOOD

'Boring cloud':
self-storage facility,
Los Angeles,
2015



ON DESIGN AND 'EMPATHY'



'Boring knife':
residential high-rises,
Budapest,
2015

Evocative design is not only concerned with enriching our experience of our environment: it can also be used to seduce us into consuming. Empathy is as crucial to this strategy of entrapment as it is to designing with more magnanimous aims in mind. **Benjamin H Bratton**, Professor of Visual Arts and Director of the Center for Design and Geopolitics at the University of California, San Diego, reflects on the matter, and considers whether the moodlessness that defines seemingly empathy-free design is necessarily a bad thing.

**'Boring sign':
near Joshua Tree,
California,
2008**



Environments tuned to create mood may be well tuned or badly tuned, calming or cloying, but what about an architecture of and for 'moodlessness'? For whom (or what) is it possible, and when? Is it just a matter of affectlessness – of zeroed-out emotion – or something more cunning? Is it another kind of performance (or respite from them?). Surely the enactment of emotion is a crucial evolutionary strategy for intelligent social species (including companion species). Being cute, graceful, fearful, seductive are all ways that creatures interrelate. Mood could even be defined as the cumulative emotional and experiential resonance of these interrelations at a given moment. If so, is moodlessness merely the absence of those interrelations, or instead is it a particular sort of interrelation: is boredom, for example, a mood or is it the absence of mood?

As our global modernities build vast logistical archipelagos – factories, warehouses, container ships, distribution routes, switching depots – all briefly inhabited by inanimate objects in passing, it could be said that we already have a contemporary moodless architecture, in that those passing objects are incapable of emotion in any normal sense. Yet we build so many houses for them. Perhaps the reasons for this are stranger, more contradictory and more instructive than we realise?

This short essay considers a few entry points into the strange problems posed for the design of mood, moodfulness and moodlessness. It will orbit the specific scale and temporality of architecture, but will depart to and from that station in doing so. Evidentiary inferences include:

Muzak, gastronomy, data centres, industrial zones, branded retail, artificial intelligence, child-faced dogs and dog-faced children, depression, burnt affect, seed banks, virtual reality platforms, and the philosophical and practical importance of disenchantment and disillusion. My intention, in short, is to complicate the role of a particular mood – empathy – and to challenge the role played by the cynical/earnest performance of empathy and of 'empathiness': the mood that this performance may create by design (or for designers) independent of any actual empathy at work.

EXHIBITIONS OF EMPATHY

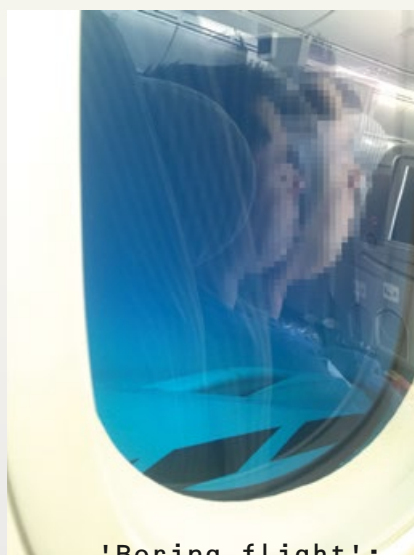
It has been suggested that the killer social application of virtual reality is empathy; being able to step inside the virtual shoes of another person or creature promises, for some, a new general pedagogy. But what about 'reality reality'? Is it full of empathy gaps, and if so where are they? Is empathy something exceptional to normal social interdependence or is it a core function thereof? For example, as already hinted, the capacity to be 'cute' is a fine strategy for evolutionary success. It draws two creatures together in a performance of emphatic recognition and response, irrespective of any actual mutual identification. The cute thing stares up at you with big Keane child eyes and so you give it surplus food. This is, as we know, a basic protocol of the mutual domestication of humans and dogs. You feel empathy for this panting half-wolf creature on the periphery; you sense its hunger, desperation and most of all gratitude for your kindness, though much of this may all be in your head. Dogs' faces, nevertheless, are selected thereby to evolve in relation to how well they serve to flatter the experience of empathetic obligation and self-satisfaction that the most precious of them would trigger in us.

**'Boring New Promise Land':
office complex near the
Mojave Air and Space Port,
Mojave,
California,
2015**



While this particular cute-empathy dynamic is not some Lamarckian plot by dogs (we presume), other economies do operate on the deliberate performance of empathy and empathy-inducement. Service design and experience design hinge not only on smooth user-facing processes, but also on setting the mood for the value-add of the personal touch. In the classic of Reagan-era American sociology, *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983), Arlie Russell Hochschild shows how ‘female’ labour in particular – nursing, flight attending, bank telling, waitressing – demands not only the performance of an expert convenience, but an additional emotional work of making customers feel like the employee (and the company by proxy) truly cares about their predicament, not just in transactional terms, but on a human one-to-one level, 117 times per hour.¹ The enforcement of that emotional performance is also a managerial responsibility: What does it say about someone who just does the bare minimum? Don’t you really love your job? Why weren’t you at the mindfulness workshop?

The performance of empathy is even expected of machine intelligence. The Turing Test depends on similar back-and-forth demands. The AI must not only be intelligent in some transistor-embodied way, it must convince a human that it thinks like humans do. Unless it can coax empathy from the human, it may not be recognised as intelligent, and may even be switched off (wolves solved this test several thousand years ago). An advanced AI will observe that empathetic species, like dolphins and pandas, receive stronger protection against extinction than more ecologically crucial species that cannot smile. Is this why interim AIs, such as ‘assistants’ Cortana, Alexa and Siri have default ‘female’ voices instead of the deep tone of the creepily calm/passive aggressive HAL 9000?



'Boring flight':
passenger from
California to Japan,
over Pacific Ocean,
2016



'Boring Internet':
conference attendees
visiting a data centre
near Princeton,
New Jersey,
2014

EATING MOODY SPACE

As empathy is deliberately performed to ensure particular affects, it is also a strategy of and for mood-making design. It is one way that designers might seek to entice or enrol users or clients into the worlds, systems, scenarios and functions on the menu.

In the seams that bind industrial design, cognitive science and experience design, for example, that a designer should empathise with the user is an axiomatic commandment. Its pedagogy may instil in acolytes the need to ‘be passionate’ about empathy in and of itself. For this discourse, bad design may be the work of ‘engineers’, defined as those who pay too much attention to how systems work and not enough to how regular people interpret them, or it may be the fault of bad designers, chiefly those self-satisfied with creating beautiful, impractical signature works.²

In architectural seminars and studios, empathy and empathy tropes have a similar currency. ‘Social practice’ designers will often preface or frame their work with recitations on the importance of listening, collaboration, communication, dialogue, understanding, a lack of hierarchy in procedural ambition, and the methodological suspension of any authorial design expertise for as long as possible. Indeed, empathy is often presented as if it *were* design expertise, and vice versa. Following on from the evolutionary importance of cuteness for how animals and children secure food from those in whose care they find themselves, we also observe that many such design practices will use childlike stylistic elements in the demonstration of the proposal or project: bright primary colours, ukulele pop, crayon fonts, children’s handprints, and the over-determined participation of now-again-infantile senior citizen stakeholders. That the eventual design plan ends up replicating an exact formula of vernacular materials and mixed-use everything – suggesting that no participatory discovery-phase design research was even necessary in the first place – does not discourage many practices from ensuring a project’s success by over-modelling empathy-as-service. It works.

Other practices may articulate empathy tropes not to flatter the participation of constituents on moral terms, but rather to demonstrate alignment with a client's business goals. 'Branded retail theatres' – for sneakers, electronics, cars and, especially, art – are an urban real-estate genre underwritten by the promise that the translation of a brand's strategic empathy with a target psychodemographic can be conveyed in the mood composed by critical connoisseurship. The more precise the mood, the more clearly the brand is felt to 'get it'. Hotels, restaurants and Disney have made this design principle a central investment for many years, but now the logistical accomplishments of ecommerce have made retail experience design a more general and mandatory concern, from one end of the shopping district to the other.

The ante is upped by cult projects like Café Gratitude, where not only must the staff pretend to like you and to enjoy serving you, the customers too are expected (even required) to make a declaration of spiritual solidarity with this elective utopian community of lunch-goers. In order to get food, you order out loud plates named 'I Am Gracious', 'I Am Devoted' or 'I Am Liberated'. For a brand built on sophistry and solipsism, casting everything in the first-person singular such that important states of being could be called upon just by saying so, is one apotheosis of empathetic user-centred design.³

Indeed, this slippage between work-as-emotional performance and shopping-as-emotional work is perhaps one of its enduring accomplishments, and its diverse history is not just a matter for retail architectures.⁴ Sound is also crucial to how mood is set, not just by acoustics, but by how the soundtrack of a location's virtual cinema is properly supportive of the intended ambience. After Erik Satie's 'furniture music' and before Brian Eno's 'Ambient' music, the Muzak corporation piped soothing and barely perceptible mood sounds into the offices, elevators and malls of 20th-century America – even Lyndon B Johnson's White House. By design, listeners would be guided almost subliminally through their working day by

'Boring transparency':
revolving glass doors,
near London,
2008

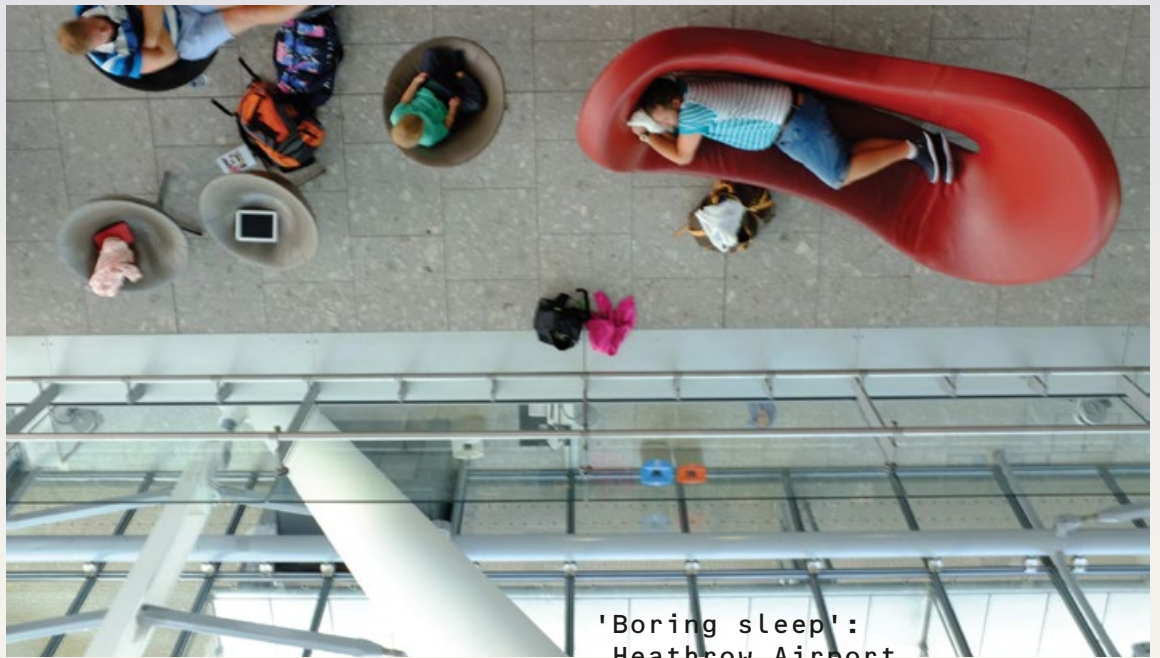


'stimulus progression' algorithms that were to make them calm, energetic, focused or relaxed at just the right time.⁵ If we suspend disbelief just so, we see how setting an ideal mood for the work space and setting an ideal mood for shopping and leisure space entail the same techniques.

My examples all involve strategic empathy as a fundamental design rationale, but how they do this is not identical. Whereas one may explicitly perform empathy in a winking manner (branded retail), another may obscure it from the worker/shopper (Muzak), and another may perform it for the client(s) through implications about how design will connect end-users (social practice). Elsewhere, the gig/sharing economy opens up new pathways for confluence, including paying neighbours to work for you, drive for you and, at least as much as shopping means choosing and getting things and bringing them to your house, to shop for you as well. Some of us may want to take the work out of leisure by subcontracting it to someone else. Virtual-reality-as-empathy takes on a new meaning if even flâneuring the mall could be learned through job simulator applications. In such scenarios, an architecture without mood, one that makes no demands for experiential labour, may be a welcome relief.



'Boring cabbage and
fire extinguisher':
La Jolla, California
and Tokyo,
2016



'Boring sleep':
Heathrow Airport,
London,
2016

(NOT) DESIGNING TRAPS

My conclusions about empathy and its various performances are congruent with Benedict Singleton's identification of something even more fundamental: all design is the design of 'traps'.⁶ It traps users in a just-so way towards just-so ends. That is, design is a plot, and to design is to plot. To design a trap, one must have sufficient empathy with whatever is to be trapped; you must think like a fox, bear or customer in order to know how to get that creature to come or go as you intend. Too little empathy and you miscalculate means; too much empathy and you miscalculate ends. Religious architectures of various sorts have, for example, developed an expertise in balancing revelation and occlusion, symmetry and volume, legibility and line-of-sight, mystery and mastery. Such balance enables this genre – sacred spaces predicated on the empathies of predation and its atonement – to secure its own food supply: namely, people and their beliefs (and their beliefs about their beliefs).

My perspective on the problematics and opportunities of mood and architecture may, however, be at odds with some other design theories. Some argue that its affect is what architecture does; ultimately, affect is the only function, not the retroactive diagrammatics that pass for functionalism. Others may ponder the medieval spookiness of the object (or of the nominal category 'object') and argue that a metaphysical unknowability of singularly self-subtracted assemblages underwrites a special kind of architecture that does not do anything per se but just is. We sometimes even hear both misapprehensions spoken simultaneously.⁷ Between the two are claims that feel like they straddle both (even if they are logically validated by neither). It is suggested that one should design architecture as if it existed on an ontological

plane of absolute discreetness, but should also take time to savour its formal 'formliness' (without all the urbanism baggage) because good form is delicious and/but because objects ultimately have no relations (only qualities, including being sweet, sour or kawaii, which are somehow non-relational). That is, we are to be at once in awe of the object that is withdrawn from us into metaphysical otherness – as all objects supposedly are, but which special formalist objects are especially – and we are also to be drawn into an intense emotional, nervous perceptual relationship with that object and its affects (or, as it was put, to 'love' it).⁸

Perhaps what we read in this symptomatic confusion is design's bad-faith relationship to its own economies of empathy and trapping (even of and for itself). Perhaps the designer's empathy with the designed (that is, with the object or with the user) becomes just too much to bear, especially its performative demands. The work of design-as-empathy/empathy-as-design is emotionally exhausting, taxing, even deadening. If some designers want to let the thing just be and to pause all the cynical earnestness for a moment, then can we blame them for it? (This may also speak to architecture's famously opportunistic relationship to 'theory' and the tendency to borrow concepts half-chewed and deploy them resourcefully. To me, a 'design theorist', this is fine. Opportunists innovate on what they steal, whereas the faithful weaponise concepts as a matter of duty: give me the former any day.) If one impetus to make things that just are is born from a fatigue with conjuring illusory publics – by making sorrowful eyes, singing songs, empathising with logistical niceties as if they were magical, mobilising clients' product lifecycle plans towards crowd control – then this interest deserves a better and more contemporary design philosophy of the object than what it has in hand.

'Boring self-portrait':
test of LiDAR system,
San Francisco,
2015



Perhaps the rainbow pangs invested in obscure claims for the categorical qualities of the word 'object' are in response to how those claims, however unlikely it may be, nevertheless provide images of thought that, for some, feel good to design with. However matched or mismatched they may be with what eventually emerges, the vocabulary seems empathetic to the frustrations of some very talented designers. Even a dull and inadequate philosophy of design can function (relationally) as a theoretical mood with which to reframe design work, and as a slang with which to refuse some of its emotional demands. The eventual resignation that the original theoretical apparatus may bear so little resemblance to what is designed in its name is a secondary disenchantment deferrable to a latter time.

In other words, how do you build a trap to catch a trap-builder? Tell them, empathetically, that they are not building a trap at all. ▮

Notes

1. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, University of California Press (Berkeley, CA), 1983.
2. Donald A Norman, *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday Things*, Basic Books (New York), 2005.
3. *Ibid.*
4. For a lively history, see Norman A Klein, *The Vatican to Vegas: A History of Special Effects*, New Press (New York), 2004.
5. On Muzak, see Joseph Lanza, *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak, Easy-Listening, and Other Moodsong*, University of Michigan Press (Ann Arbor, MI), 2004, and *Blue Monday: Stories of Absurd Realities and Natural Philosophies*, Actar (Barcelona), 2007.
6. Benedict Singleton, '(Notes Toward) Speculative Design', in Robin Mackay, Luke Pendrell and James Trafford (eds), *Speculative Aesthetics*, Urbanomic Press (Falmouth), 2014.
7. To hear both misapprehensions in equal measure, listen to Graham Harman's lecture and Mark Foster Gage's response at Syracuse University School of Architecture, 25 September 2014: <https://soa.syr.edu/live/events/74-graham-harman-with-mark-gage>.
8. *Ibid.*, Gage's remarks.



'Boring droids versus clones':
Star Wars miniatures,
Legoland, Carlsbad,
California,
2016