

# FROM BULLFIGHTS TO BOLLYWOOD: THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF JEAN-BAPTISTE DU BOS'S APPROACH TO THE ARTS

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This paper takes up the somewhat neglected work of one of the earliest pioneers of modern European aesthetic theory, Jean-Baptiste Du Bos. It aims to correct views in which Du Bos is pigeon-holed as a 'sentimentalist', dismissed as a radical subjectivist, or, at best, acknowledged as an influence on the more important work of David Hume. Instead, it presents Du Bos as an original thinker whose highly intuitive approach to the arts is still relevant to contemporary concerns, and can be favourably contrasted with the tradition of disinterested, universalist aesthetics that rose to such strong prominence in the century following his work. It highlights several of his ideas that have not received sufficient attention, including his emphasis on boredom as a motivation for turning to artifice, his notion of the 'artificial emotions' that can result from such encounters, his community-based conception of taste, his faith in the general public as legitimate judges of artwork, and the importance he places on different forms of interest when thinking about art. In the course of this discussion, Du Bos's work is presented as presciently questioning clear cut distinctions between 'high' and 'low' cultural spheres, as well as exploring contemporary questions about the constitution of 'the public' and the legitimacy of its judgement. It also argues that the vocabulary of 'artificial emotion' can be as helpfully applied to the increasingly sophisticated world of mass entertainment as it can be to the world of contemporary art.

I

Jean-Baptiste Du Bos (1670–1742) was a well-known figure in his day, a respected historian, diplomat, and, eventually, secretary of the Académie française. His contribution to the development of European aesthetic theory, however, has not always been sufficiently well recognized. When he is mentioned in a philosophical context, it is usually in one of two contexts. First, he comes up in the literature surrounding Hume's work on aesthetics, which was influenced considerably by his reading of Du Bos.<sup>1</sup> Second, he is sometimes briefly considered in historical

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The author thanks Jason Gaiger, Paul Guyer, and editors of *Estetika* for their helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper, which led to some substantial revisions. He also thanks the participants in the 2017 conference of the European Society for Aesthetics who helpfully responded to a much shorter early draft, particularly Dan-Eugen Ratiu.

<sup>1</sup> Hume only directly refers to Du Bos at the opening of 'Of Tragedy' (1777), in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Black and Tait, 1826), 246. A very helpful discussion of Du Bos's influence on Hume is in Peter Jones, 'Hume on Art, Criticism and Language: Debts and Premises', *Philosophical Studies* 33 (1978): 109–34; *Hume's Sentiments: Their Ciceronian and French Contexts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982), 93–106; and Henning Jensen, 'Comments on Peter Jones' "Hume on Art, Criticism and Language: Debts and Premises"', *Philosophical Studies* 33 (1978): 135–40. For more recent work involving the two, see Debnay Townsend, *Hume's*

accounts of the origin of modern European philosophical aesthetics. In this context, he has been presented as a minor figure in the evolution of Kant's groundbreaking work, a key spokesman for a problematic 'sentimentalist' approach, as contrasted with an equally flawed 'rationalist' or 'classicist' view.<sup>2</sup> While the 'sentimentalist' label is quite understandable, the rush to establish Kant as the inevitable solution to this perceived impasse too easily dismisses much that is of interest in Du Bos. An important exception in this regard is Paul Guyer's sweeping *History of Modern Aesthetics*, which helps to correct this neglect by placing Du Bos (along with Addison and Shaftesbury) as one of the central early figures of the aesthetic tradition.<sup>3</sup> Guyer provides an excellent overview of Du Bos's principal ideas, situating him in contrast with the 'aesthetics of truth' found in Shaftesbury and Wolff, and as helping to initiate an alternative 'aesthetics of play' which continually resurfaces throughout the history of aesthetic theory. My goal in what follows is not to duplicate these efforts by summarizing the many ideas that Du Bos presents or to debate his role in the history of aesthetics, but rather to develop a reading of Du Bos that highlights certain key approaches to art which, while setting him distinctly apart from the Kantian tradition that was to follow, nevertheless make him a useful contributor to contemporary debates.

The central premise that opens and then underlies Du Bos's epic *Réflexions Critiques sur la Poésie et sur la Peinture* is that the human mind has an intense loathing of boredom and will go to great lengths to avoid it. Du Bos was a robust

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*Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge, 2001), 76–85; Timothy Costello, 'Hume's Aesthetics: The Literature and Directions for Research', *Hume Studies* 30 (2004): 87–126; Jason Gaiger, 'The True Judge of Beauty and the Paradox of Taste', *European Journal of Philosophy* 8 (2000): 1–19; and Paisley Livingston, 'Du Bos' Paradox', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53 (2013): 404–6. Most recently, Young and Cameron argue that Du Bos's influence was even greater than has previously been recognized, extending beyond his aesthetic theory. See James O. Young and Margaret Cameron, 'Jean-Baptiste Du Bos' *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting and Hume's Treatise*', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 58 (2018): 119–30.

<sup>2</sup> This is the general approach taken by both Ferry and Cassirer, though Cassirer does recognize that Du Bos can be described as a 'sentimentalist' only with certain reservations. See Luc Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus: The Invention of Taste in the Democratic Age*, trans. Robert de Loaiza (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 42–48, and Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (New York: Beacon Press, 1951), 303–4. Croce gives Du Bos even shorter shrift, a mere two paragraphs in his extensive work. See Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic: As Science of Expression and General Linguistic*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (New York: Noonday Press, 1968), 196–97. A more balanced discussion can be found in D. G. Charlton, 'Jean-Baptiste Du Bos and Eighteenth-Century Sensibility', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, no. 266 (1989): 151–62.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *The Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 78–94.

empiricist in the Lockean tradition,<sup>4</sup> and instead of starting his enquiry with a priori principles concerning the nature of the beautiful, he begins by considering the practices of actual people. He opens his lengthy work with the observation that throughout the world, and throughout history, people have been attracted to spectacles of an often dangerous, sometimes brutal variety, like death-defying circus acts, bullfights, gladiatorial combat, and even executions. Such behaviour, Du Bos believes, demands an explanation. Why should anyone want to see other people slaughtering one another at the Coliseum, or other such grim events? Du Bos's work thus has a starting point quite unlike those in the tradition either before or after him: rather than starting his project with the difficult question of our experience of beauty, he begins with the even more difficult question of our experience of the horrible, the hair-raising, and the terrifying, a question that has today been called the 'paradox of negative affect'.<sup>5</sup> Du Bos's initial response to the 'paradox' is simply to argue that such things, while gruesome, nevertheless quicken the blood and activate all sorts of intense emotions, and this activity (even if potentially harmful) is much more desirable than the inactivity of boredom. In one of his most quoted passages he writes, 'The heaviness which quickly attends the inactivity of the mind is a situation so very disagreeable to man, that he frequently chooses to expose himself to the most painful exercises rather than be troubled with it' (*CR*, 1, 1, p. 5).<sup>6</sup>

Opening a work about poetry and painting with a discussion of boredom was just as unorthodox in his time as it would be for us today, and in order to understand his position we have to bear in mind the cultural and critical context in which he was writing. His treatise on the arts was first published in 1719, almost fifty years after Nicholas Boileau's famous codification of classicism in *L'Art poétique*. As R. G. Saisselin has described, the French literary scene in the middle of the seventeenth century was marked by the ever-stronger presence of both pedantic critics and shrill moralists, who together policed the realm of culture and thereby served to stultify innovation.<sup>7</sup> Molière's *L'École de femmes* (1662), for

<sup>4</sup> Du Bos in fact had a correspondence with Locke. See Gabriel Bonno, 'Une amitié franco-anglaise du XVIIe siècle: John Locke et l'Abbé Du Bos; avec 16 lettres inédites de Du Bos à Locke', *Revue de littérature comparée* 24 (1950): 481–520.

<sup>5</sup> Livingston ('Du Bos' Paradox') identifies Du Bos as the first to present this problem as a 'paradox', and discusses his response to it.

<sup>6</sup> My references to Du Bos are all from his *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, 4th ed., 3 vols. (Paris: Mariette, 1740); Eng. trans. *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, trans. Thomas Nugent, 3 vols. (London: Nourse, 1748). Hereafter: *CR*. I provide volume and chapter numbers, followed by the page numbers from the English translation.

<sup>7</sup> R. G. Saisselin, *Taste in Eighteenth Century France: Critical Reflections on the Origins of Aesthetics* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1965), 9.

example, was attacked by both groups in spite of its popularity with the public: critics claimed it violated the rules of the classical stage, and moralists that it promoted general indecency. Saisselin describes the process whereby Molière succeeded in wresting critical authority from these sources and establishing the legitimacy of a new audience of ‘gentlemen amateurs’ for whom ‘it was no longer permissible to be boring’ as the critics and moralists would have had it.<sup>8</sup> It is in this context that we must consider Du Bos’s emphasis on boredom, for the *Réflexions* played an important role in the rise to prominence of the *amateur* throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

Bullfights and gladiators might seem rather far removed from the theatre of Molière, but one of the more interesting results of this approach is the idea that both stem from the same ultimate motivation to avoid boredom. While Du Bos does not stress this point, he nonetheless establishes a continuum between the animating power of a bullfight and that of a poem or dramatic performance. While we might tend to uncritically place such things in quite different categories (as falling into, say, ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural spheres), here they have been set into the same arena of debate by arguing that they have origins in similar impulses. In contrast to the professional critics or moralists, Du Bos recognized that people did not go to the theatre primarily to receive moral education, or to find the truth presented in sensual form, or to experience a rarefied form of beauty. Instead, as he succinctly observes, ‘Poems are not read for instruction, but amusement; and when they have no charms capable of engaging us, they are generally laid aside’ (*CR*, 1, 12, p. 63).

Basing the arts on the avoidance of boredom might initially suggest they have been accorded a rather lowly status, that they are somehow merely better than nothing. But Du Bos’s account of just how the arts are able to succeed in animating us turns out to be richer than this. While there are obviously other potential distractions from boredom (Du Bos cites both manual labour and inner reflection), those based on sensibility are demonstrably the most popular (*CR*, 1, 1, pp. 5–6). Sensory stimulation can itself take many forms (intimate encounters, a good meal, a bullfight), but often enough we seek those of an ‘artificial’ nature, meaning simply those generated by artifice of some kind, including theatre and painting. Artistic productions such as these are capable of stimulating a form of emotional response akin to those found in the more gruesome diversions, and, to their credit, a broader range of emotions as well. In Du Bos’s account,

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to Saisselin, Guichard provides a thorough discussion of this history and Du Bos’s role in it. See Charlotte Guichard, ‘Taste Communities: The Rise of the *Amateur* in Eighteenth-Century Paris’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45 (2012): 523–25.

the mental stimulation the subject can experience through such encounters with artifice occurs through the eruption of what he calls 'des passions artificielles' (CR, 1, 3, p. 21).

Du Bos illustrates the unique qualities these 'artificial emotions' possess with the striking example of the *Massacre of the Innocents* (c.1660) by Charles Le Brun (CR, 1, 3, p. 24). If one were present at such a scene (in which knives protrude from infant bellies while dogs lap up the blood), one would obviously have a much more intense, and likely traumatizing, experience than when standing before Le Brun's painting. The painting obviously does not cause us to experience the trauma of fearing for our lives, but instead can lead us to experience from a safe distance a range of cognitive and emotional responses, including horror, disgust, empathy, outrage, curiosity, and so on. In looking at the painting we can linger on the scene, reflecting on the different emotional states expressed by the figures and on our own reactions as well. When we merely view or read about a scene that would, if actually experienced, provoke a certain set of emotional responses, through artifice we experience a related but not identical set of responses which are typically less intense, and often shorter lived. The painting, as he elegantly puts it, 'touches only the surface of our hearts' (CR, 1, 3, p. 25).

It is crucial to note, however, that the 'only' in that phrase does not necessarily imply a deficiency, and the word 'artificial' needs to be handled with some care. Du Bos does not mean that such passions are phony, 'quasi-emotions', or merely make-believe. While there is a clear affinity between Du Bos's 'artificial emotions' and the 'fictional feelings' discussed by Kendall Walton,<sup>10</sup> the two are working towards quite different objectives. Walton is, at least, keen to explain how we are to understand sentences of the form 'X fears the Green Blob in the film', arguing that the 'fear' X apparently feels logically cannot be identical with the fear she or he would feel if encountering an actual Green Blob in the street, because the beliefs underlying these emotions are very different. Regarding the film, X does not actually believe the Blob can harm him or her, but only 'makes believe' that it can. The 'fear' is itself therefore a form of make-believe, no matter how much X's heart is pounding. Du Bos also remarks on the different epistemic situations involved, noting that theatrical presentations do not sufficiently 'attack our reason' (CR, 1, 3, p. 23) to cause us to mistake the representation for reality, but he does not have the same cognitivist understanding of emotion as Walton. For Du Bos the 'mere' image or pretended sound of a person in anguish, for example, acts directly on our God-given sentimental faculties and causes an immediate

<sup>10</sup> Kendall L. Walton, 'Fearing Fictions', *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978): 5–27; *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

response that is the same as when observing an actual person in anguish. This initial response might well be tempered through rational reflection, the cognitive realization that 'it is only a play', but for Du Bos our physiological make-up itself allows us to be immediately moved by costumed actors, even though we never for a moment believe that their ordeals are anything but representations.

This issue has surprisingly serious ramifications in the field of ethics as well, for Du Bos views this natural sensibility as the very foundation of society. He writes:

When we give ourselves time to reflect on the natural sensibility of the heart of man, on his proclivity to be moved by several objects, which poets and painters make the subjects of their imitations, we find it very far from being surprising that even verses and pictures have the power of moving him. Nature has thought proper to implant this quick and easy sensibility in man as the very basis of society. Self-love generally degenerates into an immoderate fondness of one's own person, and in proportion, as men advance in years, renders them too much attached to their present and future interests and too inflexible towards one another when they enter deliberately upon any resolution. It was therefore necessary that man should be easily drawn out of this situation. Nature, for this reason, has thought proper to form us in such a manner, as the agitation of whatever approaches us should have the power of impelling us, to the end, that those who have need of our indulgence or succour may with greater facility persuade us. (*CR*, 1, 4, p. 32)

Du Bos here suggests that our native capacity to respond to images, rather than only to arguments, is the fundamental condition of civilized society. If we did not immediately respond to the sensible presentations of one another, to our smiles of happiness or grimaces of sorrow,<sup>11</sup> if we relied exclusively on rational argumentation, we would have an almost impossible time acting on anything other than rational self-interest. For Du Bos, we are immediately moved by the sight of our aggrieved fellows, and 'fly to [their] assistance' not because of rational calculations that compel us to do so but rather 'previous to all deliberation', simply because we have been naturally set up to be impressionable in this way (*CR*, 1, 4, p. 32). And since artifice, at its best, aspires to reproduce those situations that move us, they are capable of accessing our most fundamental ethical drives.

In sum, then, in Du Bos's account artificial emotions are the result not of an intentional game of make-believe, but of our natural instincts, and are thereby just as 'real' as those generated by non-artificial sources. Yet, because we generally do not lose sight of the fact that what we are witnessing are indeed representations, these emotions are naturally less powerful and less long lasting. Artifice is thereby not merely a second-rate, watered-down version of reality, but

<sup>11</sup> Du Bos points out that the smiles of others are often contagious and we thus tend to smile more around smiling people (*CR*, 1, 4, pp. 32–33).

is instead a zone in which very real emotions and ideas are able to be more concretely explored because of the distance from reality which that zone provides. Because we experience works of artifice in exceptional, concentrated circumstances, we are provided a place in which we can more safely (and therefore more deeply) explore our passionate selves. It is largely for this reason that we turn to them in the first place, since for most of us everyday life does not offer anywhere near the same opportunity for emotional stimulation as that provided through artifice. Far from only providing merely weakened versions of emotions we can experience more powerfully elsewhere, artifice provides the opportunity of emotional experience generally unavailable in everyday life. The goal is therefore not simply to avoid boredom, but to create a unique space to engage in a form of emotional exploration or, as Guyer calls it, 'play'.<sup>12</sup>

This emphasis on the direct emotional impact on the spectator and our natural impressionability continues in Du Bos's remarks on taste. As touched on above, one task of the *Réflexions* was to critique the classicist idea that the merit of a work could be established by reference to rules. By arguing for the priority of immediate sensual response, Du Bos denies the possibility of a rule-based approach. To illustrate his point, Du Bos makes rather glib use of a gustatory metaphor. He suggests that in much the same way that we taste a stew and immediately know whether it is any good, so too do we immediately determine our response to a poem or painting (*CR*, 2, 22, pp. 238–40). It would never occur to us, while dining on stew, to consult any 'rules' about how it should taste, even if someone took the trouble to enumerate them, since, according to Du Bos, 'we have a sense given to us by nature to distinguish whether the cook acted according to the rules of his art' (*CR*, 2, 22, p. 238). On the contrary, we would use our own sensation to ascertain whether some enumeration of the rules was accurate, and should it be that our judgement was to contradict the rules, we should tend to say that there is something wrong with the rules rather than with our judgement. Even if we were to be shown how perfectly the stew conforms to a set of rules, this awareness would not fundamentally alter the pleasure we get from eating it. Regarding stew, there is no higher authority than our own tongues, and Du Bos argues that our responses to art are much the same. He writes, "'Tis that sixth sense we have within us, without feeling its organs. 'Tis a portion of ourselves, which judges from what it feels, and which, to express myself in Plato's words, determines, without consulting either rule or compass. [...] The heart itself is

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<sup>12</sup> Guyer, *History of Modern Aesthetics*, 78–81. Guyer uses 'play' in contrast to both 'work' and 'rest', which helps explain his meaning and alleviates to some degree the tension we might feel at describing people sobbing in a theatre as engaged in a form of 'play'.

agitated of itself, by a motion previous to all deliberation' (*CR*, 2, 22, p. 239). Here again reason is capable of operating only after a judgement has been made, to help articulate why a particular effect has been achieved, but not to determine whether it has been achieved.

This emphasis on individual feeling and an instinctive sixth sense may paint Du Bos as a radical subjectivist on the matter of taste. But there is another important side to his work. On the one hand he is eager to discredit any rule-based system and the authority of a professional class of critics through an appeal to native sentiment; on the other hand he does not want to accept the idea that one particular individual sentiment is as good as another. As a result, there is a considerable amount of fascinating equivocation here as Du Bos struggles to find a balance between accepting the validity of everybody's instinctive feeling and establishing the authority of the 'gentlemen amateurs'.

In support of the first of these dialectical poles, and in keeping with his conception of an incorrigible 'sixth sense', Du Bos argued that the general public are for the most part reliable judges of works of art (*CR*, 2, 22, pp. 237–39).<sup>13</sup> In fact, he went so far as to suggest that they often judge *better* than the professional critic, since the critic all too often has a vested interest in the success or failure of a given work. Critics, after all, have their own reputations, alliances, and established theoretical positions to worry about, and too often devise sophisticated but misplaced rationales to account for their views (*CR*, 2, 25, pp. 267–69). By contrast, the public relied directly on their own sentiments which were unsullied by professional preconceptions and thereby free of bias. He gives examples of Molière and Malherbe reading their work to the servant maids to see 'whether they would take', that is, whether the work was successful, for servant maids were considered to be as well equipped as anyone else for productively responding to such things (*CR*, 2, 22, p. 244). Rather than dismissing public opinion as duped by false consciousness, benighted by general philistinism, or otherwise unworthy of serious attention, Du Bos's work is refreshing in the way it endeavours to take public opinion seriously.

At the same time, while he does make these and other remarks in support of the general public's capacity to evaluate art, Du Bos is hesitant about this position, and moments after acknowledging the capacities of servant girls argues that by 'public' he does not mean the lowest, crassest members of society: 'The word "public" is applicable here to such persons only as have acquired some lights, either by reading or by being conversant with the world. These are the only persons who are capable of ascertaining the rank of poems and pictures'

<sup>13</sup> The discussion of different communities of judgement continues in subsequent chapters.

(CR, 2, 22, p. 244).<sup>14</sup> This is not because he viewed such people as simply biologically defective as a result of bad breeding, but because they tended to lack education and experience of such things. While the immediate response of our sensitive organs was important, Du Bos also saw that other factors were required to appreciate a given work. In his discussion of Poussin's *Les bergers d'Arcadie* (or *Et in Arcadia ego*), for example, he describes how the viewer must be able to use his or her imagination to 'hear' the speeches given by the youth, to read the Latin inscribed on the tomb, to reflect on the inevitability of death even in a utopia, and so forth (CR, 1, 6, pp. 45–46). This slower process of imagination and contemplation contributes enormously to the picture's capacity to move us, but is not part of our built-in sensibility. Instead, it is a result of the knowledge and effort we bring to it and for this reason, not everybody's abilities to respond are alike. In another example, Du Bos points out that an audience would naturally be baffled by, and thus unresponsive to, lines of Racine which made reference to Roman mythology of which they were ignorant (CR, 2, 22, p. 244). Remedying this situation therefore largely involved educating people, providing them the information required to be able to make sense of and thereby respond meaningfully to what they were seeing. As one straightforward example, Du Bos noted that 'since the establishment of operas, the number capable of giving their judgement on music, is considerably increased at Paris' (CR, 2, 22, p. 246).

Du Bos thereby conceives of the legitimate public as a middle position between the totally ignorant, whose lack of information and experience reduces the functionality of their 'sixth sense', and the experts, whose specialized interests and reasoning prevent them from paying sufficient attention to their built-in sensibility. The best judges are a group of cultivated amateurs with sufficient experience and knowledge to be able, for example, to compare works on a similar theme, but not so specialized that they allowed theoretical rules or preconceived critical arguments to take precedence over their spontaneous responses.

This conception of an ideal middle ground dovetails perfectly with another key point Du Bos makes concerning the importance of interests. While in England Shaftesbury had been developing theories of beauty modelled on the form of disinterested judgement required for moral theorizing,<sup>15</sup> Du Bos turned

<sup>14</sup> Saisselin discusses at some length Du Bos's thoughts here. See Saisselin, *Taste in Eighteenth Century France*, 70.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *The Moralists, a Philosophical Rhapsody* (1709), in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 231–338. See as well Guyer, *History of Modern Aesthetics*, 30–32, particularly 30n1.

this idea upside down by pointing out that the stimulation we derive from artifice is in direct proportion to the interest we take in it. Though it could conceivably make sense to consider the experience of *beauty* as disconnected from our moral or practical interests, Du Bos saw that it made no sense at all to approach works of *art* this way and he therefore made no attempt to do so. Artifice was demonstrably concerned with much more than an abstracted, disinterested beauty, and leaving aside our personal interests when encountering art meant leaving aside the very things that motivated our encounter in the first place.

This becomes clear in chapter 12 of the first volume, where, rather than rejecting interests as irrelevant to the experience of art, Du Bos begins to develop a theory of them. He suggests that interests, at the most basic level, can take both 'general' and 'individual' forms. Looking at a portrait, for example, might be of little 'general' interest to a wider public, but of considerable 'individual' interest to the loved ones of whoever is portrayed, and these differing kinds of interest will naturally lead to differing responses to the painting (*CR*, 1, 12, p. 62). For Du Bos it would serve little purpose to attempt to set these interests to one side in the name of obtaining a more objective or universal form of judgement about the painting's 'ultimate' value. Instead, he argued that a balance of general and specific interests is required for a successful artwork: if too specific (say, a poem or painting narrowly describing some personal matter), it might fail to move anyone not deeply acquainted with the topic. Likewise, if too general, it might simply fail to be of real interest to anyone, simply becoming banal, obvious, and boring (*CR*, 1, 12, p. 63). Du Bos recognized that interests were unavoidable in thinking about art, that individual reactions always took place in the context of their interests, and that even broader criteria for assessment are always determined relative to a set of interests.

Du Bos goes on to extend his notion of general and specific interests from families and their portraits so that it applies to the interests of much larger communities, indeed to entire nations. Virgil's work, for example, affected the ancient Romans quite differently than it did Du Bos's French contemporaries because the two obviously had different sets of broad cultural interests; works about Joan of Arc, for instance, were clearly of more interest to the French than to the Italians (*CR*, 1, 12, p. 63). In fact, Du Bos went further than anybody else at the time in recognizing and taking seriously the diversity of artistic practices and evaluative criteria that have existed in different times and places. He describes at length the ways in which not only our responses are conditioned by our geographical, cultural, and family backgrounds, but so too are the artistic productions a given culture creates. Chapters 12 to 20 of volume two describe in

detail both the 'moral causes' and the 'physical causes' which influence how and why 'genius' arises in different societies in different periods. Of particular interest is his emphasis on the political context, religious beliefs, and relative wealth of particular societies, a discussion that effectively initiates anthropological or sociological approaches to art.

From the above discussion a picture of Du Bos's conception of a spectator begins to emerge. Owing to our built-in sensible apparatus, every subject is well equipped with a natural capacity for responding to art, though this capacity is shaped through experience, education, and cultural inculcation. Furthermore, both the production of art and its reception must always be contextualized within overlapping and competing communities of interest ranging from the narrowly specific to the broadly cultural. The central purpose of artifice is to allow us to engage this sensibility so as to have a comparatively safe space in which to 'play' with or otherwise explore the complexities of our emotional selves. This activity can be seen as both escapist fun (a flight from boredom), but also more seriously as a way of exercising our powers of empathy and thus the core muscles of our ethical selves.

One way of illustrating Du Bos's position is to consider our own common-sense concept of a 'sense of humour'. Generally speaking, humour is not something that can easily be understood in terms of rule-following: no matter how well a particular joke is explained, and no matter how well it seems to conform to general standards, nothing can make us laugh unless we actually find it funny. Our laughter often seems to be an immediate upwelling of emotion from within, far from the result of a cognitive judgement. At the same time, it clearly relies on cognition, imagination, and prior knowledge – unless you know who John Locke is and know North American informal English, witticisms about locked Johns are not likely to be terribly funny. Furthermore, this sense of humour is understood to be something quite personal and idiosyncratic, perhaps even a key attribute of one's personality, but at the same time it is quite common to generalize about humour along various cultural lines. 'British wit' might be described as very dry and deadpan, while Japanese humour delights in the absurd slapstick of game show contestants failing to complete ridiculous tasks. On a different scale, certain 'insider' jokes only work within a much narrower community of interests. One's sense of humour is therefore highly individual but influenced by various communities, both narrow and broad, and can often change throughout one's life as a result of changing experiences and interests. Humour, then, involves an upwelling of irrepressible, subjective feeling, but as with all things subjective, it must also be understood in terms of its intersubjective context.

## II

With this sketch on the table, I want to turn now to the question of how some of Du Bos's ideas might be applied to today. What might Du Bos think about our contemporary world of artifice?

To start with, Du Bos's insight about our intolerance of boredom, and the ways in which we seek stimulation through artificial emotion rings very true today. Though attending live theatrical performances is not generally part of ordinary life, their contemporary descendants in the form of televised dramatic presentations occupy the average American about five hours a day.<sup>16</sup> Add to this the time spent in front of cinema screens, video game consoles, mesmerizing smart phones, online videos, and so forth, and it is not hard to conclude that one of the primary activities of contemporary life is precisely the cultivation of 'artificial emotion'. The ubiquity of modern forms of entertainment and distraction strongly supports Du Bos's central premise concerning boredom, and his description of artificial stimulation is strikingly prescient.

From this perspective, arguably the most successful form of 'artifice' today is popular television and cinema, which, when successful, can bring viewers to the edges of their seats in suspense, leave them weeping at the failure of a romance, or exuberant over the triumph of their favourite hero. The adventures and ordeals of artificial people (be they fictional characters or the ambiguous figures of 'reality television') can generate an astonishing range of emotional reactions, even emotional attachments, which last much longer than the screening itself. By the same token, a large portion of our elite visual art is decidedly unsuccessful by this standard, failing to attract anything like the same number of viewers and failing to provide many of the people who do go to contemporary galleries with anything like the same kind of emotional enlivenment. This is quite understandable since most contemporary art does not take its purpose to be the animation of the viewer's sentimental core, but rather seeks to push conceptual boundaries surrounding 'art' itself or explore the formal properties of various materials, or, more recently, to 'develop strategies in the service of communicating social, political, and economic histories'.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> This figure was reported by John Koblin in the *New York Times* based on data collected by the Nielsen ratings company of the first quarter of 2016. See John Koblin, 'How Much Do We Love TV? Let Us Count the Ways', *New York Times*, 30 June 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/01/business/media/nielsen-survey-media-viewing.html>.

<sup>17</sup> This description comes from the introduction to the 2018 exhibition 'Stories from Almost Everyone' at the Hammer Museum of the University of California, Los Angeles. Of particular interest in this context is the fact that the museum invited two well-known Hollywood actors to be filmed visiting the show as part of its publicity campaign. The actors effectively express in a light-hearted way the bafflement of many members

While the merits of such goals can certainly be debated, there is no question about the relative popularity of cinemas, art galleries, and museums.

Hence one way of reading Du Bos in this regard is to see him as reminding artists about the goals of art, that works 'which have no charms capable of engaging us [...] are generally laid aside', as noted above. On this reading, we can see Du Bos offering, from the early eighteenth century, a critique of many strands of contemporary art. We can easily imagine him making similar criticisms to today's world as he made to his own: art should be less insular, less concerned with the narrow views of elite experts (in the form of high-profile gallerists, critics, curators, collectors and so on), and more concerned with animating a broader public through the direct stimulation of the kinds of 'artificial' emotions only art can provide. Recalling John Baldessari's ironic and self-incriminating work of 1971 that urged others to 'not make any more boring art',<sup>18</sup> we can read Du Bos as reminding us that the claim 'art should no longer be boring' is as relevant now as it was in Molière's day.

Yet Du Bos offers us more in this regard. While he emphasizes emotional stimulation, perhaps thereby suggesting that the most spectacular, adrenalin-inducing productions are to be preferred above all others, he also emphasizes the importance of empathetic engagement. His ideal, after all, was not the spectacle of the gladiatorial arena, but the more introspective exploration of our complex emotional lives provided by the best theatre and the most interesting paintings. While a super-hero blockbuster might provide immediate excitement, its emotional content is not, and is not intended to be, particularly complex, and does not require much exercising of our empathetic abilities. Films, or other works, that explore a deeper range of emotional complexity require more from the viewer and in return offer a richer emotional experience. Furthermore, while there is no denying that statistically cinemas are more popular than art galleries, for many, mass-market blockbusters are in fact often rather boring,

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of the general public about these kinds of practice. Further indicators of the goals of contemporary art appear in Alix Rule and David Levine, 'International Art English', *Triple Canopy*, no. 16, [https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international\\_art\\_english](https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international_art_english). According to the language of the thirteen years of gallery press releases Rule and Levine reviewed, contemporary art is much more concerned with 'deconstructing', 'questioning', 'subverting', or 'challenging' various aspects of contemporary life than it is with the emotional animation of the public.

<sup>18</sup> In 1971 Baldessari instructed students at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design to write the phrase 'I will not make any more boring art' on the walls of a gallery, like students being given a punishment. This came one year after Baldessari burned all his previous abstract (and boring) paintings and turned to more conceptual work. Of course, it may easily be debated whether this conceptual shift resulted in anything less boring. See 'John Baldessari, *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*, 1971', *MoMA*, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/59546>.

in spite of their high-quality special effects. They fail, in Du Bos's terms, because of their lack of 'specific' interests, because they are so generic they become as incapable of engaging us as the most esoteric work of elite fine art. Meanwhile, many works of 'fine' art do in fact remain quite profoundly and uniquely moving (and wildly popular), providing a complex kind of animation unavailable elsewhere. One obvious example in this regard is Marina Abramović's *The Artist Is Present* (2010), which not only attracted staggering numbers of people, but also provided many with particularly profound experiences.<sup>19</sup> Du Bos's work, therefore, argues not for the priority of lavish spectacle, but for that which leads to the most productive exploration of our inner lives and the exercise of our empathetic abilities.

Generalizing from these ideas, we can also read Du Bos as encouraging those of us who study the arts to re-evaluate our conceptions of 'high' and 'low' cultural spheres. We have seen how Du Bos's initial observation concerning our universal loathing of boredom led to his original claim that, at the most basic level, both low-brow bullfights and high-brow poetry stem from a similar origin. Recall too that Du Bos began his work not with the elite experience of Parisian opera, but with the common-place entertainments of people lower on the social ladder (gaming dens, circuses, and the like). Though clearly Du Bos's own interests were with loftier productions, his willingness to consider the 'bad' taste of less sophisticated people also suggests that a comprehensive approach to the arts requires engaging with a broad range of cultural practices and their related communities. Additionally, while Du Bos was directly concerned with the fine arts of painting and poetry, his use of the term 'artifice' is suggestive, indicating a much broader domain of exploration.

Traditionally, philosophical aesthetics has had little interest in stepping outside the bounds of more elite forms of cultural production, since they are often taken to be the site of our more interesting 'aesthetic' experiences.<sup>20</sup> But this is changing in the work of many contemporary writers. At least some of today's professional aestheticians increasingly pay attention to such things as sport, eating, and popular entertainments (along with the somewhat amorphous category of 'everyday life'), even as this strains the understanding of the terms 'aesthetics' and

<sup>19</sup> Many people cried during their visit with the artist, as documented in Marco Anelli's fascinating book *Portraits in the Presence of Marina Abramović* (Bologna: Damiani, 2010) and associated website *Marina Abramović Made Me Cry*, <http://marinaabramovicmademecry.tumblr.com/>.

<sup>20</sup> Irvin has pointed out that 95 per cent of the articles in two leading journals of philosophical aesthetics from 2001 to 2006 were about fine art, with a further three per cent dealing with nature. See Sherri Irvin, 'The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008): 29n1.

'aesthetic experience'.<sup>21</sup> This gradual shift in the philosophical establishment reflects earlier developments within the humanities more generally, in which popular culture has long been taken as a serious avenue of academic critical investigation.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps most obviously, questioning high/low boundaries has taken place within the artworld itself, which has a long tradition of seeking to reinforce, tear down, or simply play with such distinctions. Du Bos's work may legitimately be seen as encouraging these forms of broader investigation, not by demanding that narrowly understood 'aesthetic' concerns be brought to bear in new domains, but by seeking a better understanding of the circumstances under which we can be moved, animated, and enlightened by our creations.

In a related vein, Du Bos's equivocations over who constitutes a legitimate public are also relevant to contemporary discourse. In today's multivalent artworld, the 'public' occupies a variety of positions: the elite commercial gallery world tends to treat any 'public' outside its community of specialist dealers, collectors, curators, and critics as almost entirely irrelevant; the non-profit sector often worries about the lack of cultural diversity among their visitors and develops programmes to remove barriers preventing 'public access to the arts'; and large museums seek public relevance by developing ever more spectacular 'blockbuster' shows designed to appeal to a wider audience. Of particular interest in this context is the contemporary development of artistic practices brought under the somewhat nebulous banners of 'social practice' and 'participatory art'. Such practices can be tricky to generalize about, but often involve projects that alleviate the alienation many people feel from the artworld by directly addressing and including the input of a particular public community. In place of being for a monolithic and generic public conceived of as a population of 'ordinary people', some of this work deliberately seeks to engage more specific local communities as active co-realizers of the artistic project (for example, those living

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<sup>21</sup> Scruton asked in 2007 whether we can still meaningfully speak of 'aesthetics' as a subject at all. Roger Scruton, 'In Search of the Aesthetic', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 47 (2007): 232–50. The debates in contemporary 'everyday aesthetics' surrounding the aesthetics of such things as coffee pots and itches have raised questions about just what might be allowed to count as an aesthetic experience. Examples of this debate are too numerous to list, but the following provide a good sense of its scope: Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Sherri Irvin, 'Scratching an Itch', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66 (2008): 25–35; Brian Soucek, 'Resisting the Itch to Redefine Aesthetics: A Response to Sherri Irvin', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009): 223–26; Chris Dowling, 'The Aesthetics of Daily Life', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (2010): 225–42; and Jane Forsey, 'The Promise, the Challenge, of Everyday Aesthetics', *Aisthesis: Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico* 7 (2014): 5–15.

<sup>22</sup> Multiple departments of 'cultural studies' were founded in the late 1960s, which helped pave the way for departments and journals devoted to visual culture, material culture, pop culture, and so on.

in an old age home, or the families of former miners).<sup>23</sup> These diverse forms of practice have an abundance of theoretical difficulties of their own, but collectively serve to illustrate the contemporary concern with questions about what we mean by 'the public' and who might be the appropriate 'audience' of art. Du Bos responded to such questions by positing the learned, experienced, but amateur gentleman as the ideal figure, and excluded *le bas peuple* (the common people) as insufficiently equipped to respond meaningfully to sophisticated theatre. Yet his work also suggests a more egalitarian and pluralist response to these questions: there is no single public, only differing, overlapping communities of interest with varying levels of experience in comparing relevant work. Du Bos, by refusing to engage in a context-independent approach to aesthetics and articulating instead a position in which the cultural heritage, interests, and knowledge of the spectator all are taken into account, helps us to pluralize our own conception of 'the public'.

In conclusion, by approaching the arts through the lens of boredom Du Bos develops a theory centred on emotional stimulation which acknowledges rather than ignores the role of individual and community interests, and that raises difficult questions of expertise and public judgement. This approach clearly stands in contrast to the less emotional, disinterested and universalist aesthetic theories that were later developed by Baumgarten and Kant and would remain dominant throughout much of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, through its emphasis on artificial stimulation, its equivocation concerning notions of the public, and its questioning of the boundaries between cultural spheres, Du Bos's is an approach that remains highly relevant to the cultural milieu of today.

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<sup>23</sup> *Tentantspin* (2009) by the Superflex collective created a TV station for the elderly on a housing estate in Liverpool; *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) by Jeremy Deller worked with villagers in Yorkshire to re-create a fight between striking miners and police.

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