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Edited by Dan-Eugen Ratiu and Connell Vaughan

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***Beginning with Boredom:  
Jean-Baptiste Du Bos's Approach to the Arts***

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ABSTRACT. This paper revisits the approach to the arts of Jean-Baptist Du Bos. It begins by noting that boredom (and its avoidance) lies at the heart of Du Bos's theory, and then draws out the two most central points that follow from this feature. Firstly, Du Bos argues that our fundamental desire to engage with the arts is grounded in a desire to be stimulated, activated and enlivened. Secondly, since avoiding boredom can only take place through experiences that elicit our interest, these interests cannot be excluded from our reflections on the arts. These two points are developed in turn and favorably contrasted with the tradition of 'philosophical aesthetics' that arose in the following century. Finally, the paper proposes three reasons why Du Bos's line of thought is valuable and relevant for contemporary issues. Firstly, it questions the plausibility of prioritizing the judgements of 'experts' over broader publics, and raises the question of just who 'the public' are. Secondly, Du Bos's conception of 'artificial emotion' can help us in approaching the distinction between genuine and artificial experience that is today rendered increasingly complex through the development of new media technologies. Finally, by emphasizing the arousal of the passions, Du Bos reminds us of the real and practical powers of artifice to influence our lives.

The issue of boredom and the role it plays in our lives rarely comes up in discussions of aesthetics. Given that 'aesthetics' as it is used in philosophical contexts primarily indicates inquiries into beauty and the fine arts, this might not be particularly surprising. Yet boredom is at the core of the theory of art developed by one of the earliest thinkers of the nascent discipline of 'modern philosophical aesthetics,' Jean-Baptiste Du Bos. Though tremendously influential in his day, his work has fallen into

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considerable neglect compared with others from the period<sup>2</sup>. In what follows, I hope to show that such neglect is not warranted, and that by beginning with boredom, Du Bos provides some useful insights which can contribute to contemporary debate.

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<sup>3</sup>. This prioritization of the avoidance of boredom leads directly to two related ideas which contrast markedly from the tradition of aesthetics that came to develop later on. Firstly, emphasizing boredom means that our fundamental desire to engage with the arts is grounded in a desire to be stimulated, activated and enlivened. Secondly, since avoiding boredom can only take place through experiences that elicit our interest, these interests cannot be excluded from our reflections on the arts. I will take each of these points in turn.

Opening a work of criticism with a discussion of boredom was just as unorthodox in his time as it is for us today, and in order to understand his motivations 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 17<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the presence of both increasingly pedantic critics and shrill moralists, who together policed the realm of culture and served to stultify innovation (Saisselin 1965, 9). Moliere's *L'école de femmes*, for 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.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Guyer's recent sweeping history of aesthetics may begin to correct this, as he counts Du Bos (along with Addison and Shaftesbury) as one of the three central early figures in the tradition.

<sup>3</sup> Du Bos 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' (Du Bos 1, §1. 5/29). References to Du Bos are all from his *Reflexions critiques sur la poesie et sur la peinture*. I provide volume and chapter numbers, followed by the page numbers from the English translation, then the French.

Saisselin describes the process whereby Moliere succeeded in wresting critical authority from these sources and establishing the legitimacy of a new audience of 'gentleman amateurs' for whom 'it was no longer permissible to be boring' (Saisselin 1965, 11) as the critics and moralists would have had it.

It is in this context that we must consider Du Bos' comments on boredom. Du Bos was a robust empiricist in the Lockean tradition, and instead of starting his enquiry with a-priori principles about the nature of the beautiful, he began by considering the practices of actual people. He observed that throughout the world, and throughout history, people were attracted to spectacles of an often dangerous, sometimes brutal variety, including such things as death-defying circus acts, bullfights, gladiatorial combat, and even executions. Rather than starting his project with the difficult question of our experience of beauty, he began with the even more difficult question of our experience of the horrible, the hair-raising, and the spectacular, a question that seems to fall under what we today call the 'paradox of negative affect'<sup>4</sup>. While such things might seem rather far removed from the theatre of Moliere, Du Bos saw both as stemming from the same ultimate motivation – the avoidance of boredom. Du Bos recognized that people didn't go to the theatre primarily to receive moral education, nor to find the truth presented in sensual form, nor to experience a rarified form of beauty. People went to the theatre to be activated and enlivened, to be rescued from the deadening quality of boredom. As Du Bos succinctly puts it: 'Poems are not read for instruction, but amusement; and when they have no charms capable of engaging us, they are generally laid aside' (Du Bos 1, §12, 63/62).

Initially this grounding of the arts on the avoidance of boredom might suggest that art has been accorded a rather lowly status, that it is somehow merely better than nothing. In this vein, Du Bos was criticized by Hume and others for developing a criterion of artistic merit based on

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<sup>4</sup> Paisley Livingston identifies Du Bos as the first to present this issue as a 'paradox'. See Livingston, 2013. I say "seems to fall" because it is not clear that there is a common 'negative affect' in all such cases.

popularity alone<sup>5</sup>. However, he in fact provides us with a richer theory than his critics have generally given him credit for. On Du Bos' account, the enlivenment the subject experiences through encounters with artifice occurs through the creation of what he calls *des passions artificielles*, a concept that adds considerable complexity and richness to his work. While there are obviously other potential distractions from boredom (Du Bos cites both manual labor and inner reflection (Du Bos 1, §1, 5-6/30)), those based on sensibility are demonstrably the most common, and of those a great many involve encounters with artifice (poetry, theatre, painting and the like). Furthermore, because they are based on artifice, the 'artificial emotions' they produce are unique. The purpose of engaging with artifice is thus not simply to alleviate boredom, but to do so through the creation of a unique form of emotional stimulation.

However, this idea needs to be handled with some care, for Du Bos does not mean that such passions are merely a form of make-believe, as Kendall Walton has more recently suggested<sup>6</sup>. On Du Bos' account, artificial passions are just as 'real' as those generated by non-artificial sources, but are distinct from them because the passions they generate are different in nature. When we (merely) view or read about a scene that would, if literally 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.

Du Bos gives the striking example of the story of the 'massacre of the innocents' depicted by Charles LeBrun around 1660 (Du Bos 1, §3, 24/40). If one were literally 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 compared with standing before LeBrun's painting. The painting doesn't 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

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<sup>5</sup> See Hume's *Of Tragedy*.

<sup>6</sup> See Walton 1978 and 1990.

on the different emotional states expressed by the figures and on our own reactions as well. The painting, as he puts it, 'touches only the surface of our hearts' (Du Bos 1, §3, 25/40-41), though the 'only' here is clearly not meant as a deficiency. Artifice is not merely a second-rate, watered-down version of reality, but a zone in which very real emotions and ideas are able to be more concretely explored because they are experienced in exceptional, concentrated circumstances. Rather than being overwhelmed, we are provided a place in which we can more deeply (and more safely) explore our passionate selves. Artifice thereby provides the opportunity to experience real emotions often unavailable in everyday life.

Because of his emphasis on the direct impact of the sensual and the stimulation of the passions, Du Bos is often described as a sentimentalist, and the label is certainly understandable. Yet it is important to note that cognition also plays a role in his theory, and it is misleading to present him as exclusively occupying one side of a 'debate' with 'rationalists' or 'cognitivists', in order to establish Kant's work as the inevitable solution<sup>7</sup>. While Du Bos thoroughly rejected the idea that we make judgements about art through reference to rules, and that education is a principal function of art, he also recognized that being enlivened by artifice often involved a form of intellectual stimulation as well. As he rightly observes, '...pleasures wherein the mind has no share are of very short duration' (Du Bos 1, §13, 74/68), suggesting that without giving us something to think about, or something to take an interest in, it is very likely that the work would simply bore us.

This brings us to the second central consequence of beginning with boredom: The importance of interests. While in England Shaftesbury had already been developing theories of beauty modeled on the form of disinterested judgement required for moral theorizing, Du Bos turns this idea upside down by pointing out that the enlivenment we derive from artifice is in direct proportion to the interest we take in it. While it could conceivably make sense to consider *beauty* as disconnected from our moral or practical interests, Du Bos saw that works of *art* could not be effectively

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<sup>7</sup> This approach can be found in both Cassirer's *Philosophy of the Enlightenment* and in Luc Ferry's *Homo Aestheticus. The Invention of Taste in the Democratic Age*.

understood in this way. 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 experience in the first place.

Rather than rejecting them as irrelevant to the experience of art, in §12 of the first volume, Du Bos sketches a nascent theory of interests by describing how they 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 forms of interest will naturally inform differing responses to the painting (Du Bos 1, §12, 62/62). 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 even universal form of judgement. What mattered for him were the unique and complex reactions of individuals in specific contexts. Furthermore, Du Bos argued that a balance of general and specific interests is required for a successful artwork: If too specific (say, a poem or painting narrowly detailing some personal issue), it might fail to move anyone not deeply acquainted with the topic, but if too general, it might simply fail to be of interest to anyone – it might, in other words, be boring. He then went on to extend this approach of contextual interests to much larger communities, including even entire nations. Ancient Romans clearly responded quite differently to Virgil than did his French peers because they obviously had a different set of broader cultural interests in approaching the work.

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. Several chapters of volume two are devoted to accounting for how and why such differences come about, and his answers include, but also go deeper than, the climatological explanations popular at the time<sup>8</sup>. In particular, he emphasized the political context, religious beliefs and relative wealth of particular societies, and in so doing initiated what would today be called

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<sup>8</sup> Chapters 12-20 in volume two all involve working out the different effects of 'moral causes' compared with 'physical causes' for impacting the development of the arts.

anthropological or sociological approaches to art<sup>9</sup>. As a result, Du Bos presents a scale of interests ranging from the individual to the universal, with all kinds of overlapping constituencies of competing interests in between. Both the production and reception of art must always be understood as being created in a context with quite specific interests in mind.

These two core ideas (the importance of enlivenment and the need to recognize contexts of interests) are clearly anathema to the traditional approaches to aesthetics that evolved afterwards, particularly in the wake of Kant's third critique. Indeed, it might seem as though Du Bos is promoting precisely those things many contemporary professional aestheticians typically labour strenuously to avoid. For starters, he seems to deliberately ignore what eventually came to be known as the 'aesthetic dimension' of art. This is the criticism leveled at him by Cassirer, who charges Du Bos with endorsing the claim that 'If [a work of art] satisfies the desire to see something, if it arouses the inner concern of the auditor and constantly entertains and intensifies his emotion, then it makes no difference with what means this effect is achieved' (Cassirer 1951, 325). Du Bos is thus charged with failing to distinguish between true aesthetic pleasure and the merely subjectively agreeable. For Cassirer, Du Bos seriously errs by allowing sports, eating, and bullfighting to be allowed into the same conversation as genuinely aesthetic domains like painting, music or literature. Such critics might recognize that the agreeableness generated by such things might be fruitfully studied, this is a topic for psychology, sociology, history and anthropology, and has little to do with 'philosophical aesthetics'.

Yet even though Du Bos does not explicitly defend himself from this form of attack, since the very idea of 'the aesthetic' was still several decades away,<sup>10</sup> we can imagine Du Bos responding to such comments in much the same way as he responded to the rationalist critics of his own time. Without an account, he would reply, or even an acknowledgement of diverse human interests involved in art, devotees of disinterested aesthetics fail to provide a

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<sup>9</sup> In particular see volume two, §12.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Baumgarten was, after all, only four years old at when the *Reflections* were published.

very compelling account of the workings of artifice in actual societies. When turning to artifice, many (perhaps most) of us are not principally, nor even necessarily, seeking to have an experience of 'disinterested' beauty, but rather an experience of interesting enlivenment. There might so happen to be a form of disinterested (and thereby universal) aesthetic experience, but it begs the question to assume that this has been, is, or should be the primary concern of art. The experience of beauty can certainly provide us with a form of enlivenment, but so too do experiences of the ugly, the horrific, the mysterious, the death-defying, and so forth. Du Bos acknowledged that "aesthetic" qualities (like beautiful, cute, elegant, tacky, harmonious, cheesy, dainty or dumpy) inevitably influence the capacity of art to move and enliven us, but it is the movement and the enlivenment that is most interesting to him. Indeed, we must recognize that, just as in Moliere's day, many of the examples of artifice most celebrated from a purely and professionally 'aesthetic' perspective are often the very same that members of the general public find extraordinarily boring. Consider in this context John Baldessari's response to the work of his peers *I will not make any more boring art* all the way back in 1971.

Nevertheless, by emphasizing both subjective passions and constituencies of interest, Du Bos is clearly a relativist of some variety, and relativism is logically incompatible with a universalist approach to aesthetics. But here again the charge is somewhat misplaced, for Du Bos isn't trying to develop a universal theory of human responses to beauty, but an account of our necessarily context-dependent responses to artifice<sup>11</sup>. In addition, his relativism is productively complex, and had important limits. While he recognized that Roman and French people had different evaluations of Virgil, he also recognized that Virgil's work had been capable of enlivening people for centuries, suggesting that it had value that resonated beyond the specific interests of its local community. Hence one test of a work's ultimate value was not simply the popularity of a particular

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<sup>11</sup> Saisselin points out that 'Du Bos never bothered to define beauty and was not interested in constructing a doctrine of taste or of art, since the conclusion he had drawn from the recent history of the arts and the quarrels that accompanied them was that it was vain to do so.' (69)

performance, but the popularity it maintained throughout the course of history.

Furthermore, his relativism does not lead to the shoulder-shrugging, anything-goes subjectivism of *'des goûts et des couleurs, on ne discute pas.'* On the contrary, here the discussion of taste and style is at the heart of cultural life. Du Bos subscribes neither to the view that artistic judgement is merely a matter of personal subjective taste, nor the view that it involves making universalizable claims. For him the experience of art takes place neither at the level of the deracinated individual, alone and cut off from all cultural heritage and context, nor at the level of the universal law, as an abstract phenomenon of nature. It takes place within publics which breathe different kinds of air, speak different languages, share certain values, and innovate, change, and mutate intersubjectively. Du Bos was the first to really feel the weight of this issue and to attempt to face it head on. While Kant's critical philosophy would turn philosophical attention almost exclusively to questions about the experience of beauty divorced from social relations, Du Bos perceives the importance of artifice as a site in which those relations are prominently and importantly revealed. Such themes would later be developed by Kant's pupil and later rival J.G. Herder and eventually by Nietzsche, but they arrive on the scene in a very plausible format first and foremost in the work of Du Bos.

Still, it must be accepted that if 'aesthetics' is defined in some Kantian terms as the study of disinterested, universal and cognitive (if not 'determinate') judgements then Du Bos by definition seems to have little to offer. Yet one reason why Du Bos is valuable is because he reminds us that there is much more of interest in art than 'aesthetics' as so defined, and that even at the dawning of early modern exploration of these issues, alternative questions were being taken seriously. I want to conclude by suggesting a few reasons why Du Bos's perspective is still valuable to us today.

Firstly, by prioritizing interests and direct enlivenment, Du Bos reconfigures our understanding of expertise in the arts. As mentioned, he noticed the degree to which the professional critics of his day were largely out of step with the preferences of the general public. Yet instead of siding with elite professionals, he believed that the general public collectively were

for the most part reliable judges<sup>12</sup>. In fact, he went so far as to develop the more radical view that the amateur public could often judge *better* than the professional critic, since the critic all too often had a vested interest in the success or failure of a given work. By contrast, the public relied directly on their own sentiments, undiluted by professional preconceptions and thereby free of bias. Rather than the tradition of dismissing public opinion as duped by false consciousness on the one hand or benighted by general philistinism on the other, Du Bos's work takes public opinion seriously.

There is, however, some disagreement about how Du Bos conceived of this public. Saisselin argues that Du Bos still viewed the legitimate public as an elite, aristocratic group who, while contemptuous of pedantic professional critics, were also contemptuous of those who were insufficiently cultivated to form correct judgements (Saisselin 1965, 70). This view, however, doesn't seem very faithful to the text itself. While Du Bos did explicitly exclude the crassest members of *les bas peuple*, he seems to intend this only as a matter of historical contingency. Du Bos saw no inevitable deficiency in the physiology or psychological construction of such folk, nor did he think that they simply but inexplicably lacked 'good taste'. What they lacked was only sufficient knowledge by which they could take a suitable interest in a particular work. An uneducated audience would naturally be baffled by, and thus unresponsive to, lines of Racine that made reference to Roman mythology of which they were ignorant. Yet even if some failed on these grounds to qualify as competent judges, Du Bos held that potentially anybody could quite easily achieve this status, and noted that the numbers of such judges in his time were constantly increasing owing to shifting social conditions. Du Bos thus calls on us, firstly, to take more seriously the views of various publics, and secondly, to consider the epistemic questions involved in public access to the arts. In fact, simply by raising the question of who counts as the 'general public', Du Bos presciently anticipates the sociological work of Pierre Bourdieu, and the

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<sup>12</sup> See volume 2, §22 in particular. The discussion of different communities of judgement continues in subsequent chapters.

radical contemporary work of Jacques Ranciere<sup>13</sup>.

Secondly, Du Bos's theorizing of artifice and artificial emotion provides a critical starting point for thinking through today's increasingly blurred distinctions between the artificial and the genuine. While a painting of a bullfight, a bullfight in an arena, and an encounter with an angry bull in the wild are all quite straightforwardly different experiences which elicit quite different responses, our contemporary giant-screened theatres, surround-sound speakers, ultra-hi-res cameras, VR helmets and so forth cause the artificial to be realized with ever-increasing precision. At the same time, we remain transfixed by narratives 'based on a true story' and have built an industry around the quasi-reality presented by 'reality television'. Today the news (the presentation of selected real events through artificial means) occupies the same artificial space as other forms of distraction, and as a result, like Lebrun's painting, it tends to scratch only the surface of our hearts. Meanwhile, our contemporary artists continue to explore the intersections between artifice and reality, as for example in the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija and many others working in 'social practice'. Furthermore, the ubiquity of video screens in public spaces and smart phones in private space document the centrality of boredom avoidance in our lives. Boredom, our continual efforts to avoid it, and the conditions under which our tolerance for it have decreased, are central issues of contemporary everyday life. By theorizing about artifice and the unique form of response it engenders, Du Bos expands our domain of inquiry and provides us a vocabulary for thinking through our simultaneous and paradoxical desires for artificial stimulation and authentic experience. This in turn offers a quite different, though potentially very profitable, way of approaching the issues presented in the emerging discourse of 'everyday aesthetics'.

Finally, because artifice for Du Bos operates directly and primarily on the passions, he noted that it can powerfully move us in a way reason cannot. In his work, the power of art lies not in the abstract mental processes

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<sup>13</sup> In particular Ranciere's radically egalitarian approach developed in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, but his general concerns with 'the distribution of the sensible', involving who can see or hear or speak links in with Du Bos.

it sets in motion (the famous 'free play of the imagination and understanding,' as Kant would later put it) but in its capacity to subvert rational processes and directly influence people's beliefs, values and desires. Paintings, he noted, may well be merely artificial imitations of reality, but have nevertheless lead to the conversion of kings, which in turn has shaped the course of nations (Du Bos 1 §4, 29/43)<sup>14</sup>. Artifice, *when it is interesting and enlivening*, can be a remarkably powerful rhetorical tool, as evidenced by the impact of contemporary advertising, news media, prime-time television and so on. The power of the stimulation of artificial emotion through engagement with artifice is of tremendous relevance in today's climate of 'fake news', social media echo chambers and political stagecraft, and, rather than struggling to defend the relevance of the arts, Du Bos's approach refreshingly reminds us of the very real, practical and even dangerous power of artifice to shape our lives.

In sum, by approaching the arts through the lens of boredom Du Bos invites a shift of perspective from the disinterested aesthetic reflection that would come to play so large a role in the history of aesthetic theory. Instead, we are directed to consider the passions and interests of publics inhabiting complex environments in which artifice plays a central role in both providing happiness and shaping belief. Even though this might necessitate an interdisciplinary approach drawing on disciplines outside of philosophy, the benefits for a comprehensive approach to the arts and the publics who engage with them are clear.

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<sup>14</sup> See also Thomas Kaiser 1989.

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