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**JEAN-BAPTISTE DU BOS:
REFLECTIONS ON GENIUS AND ART**

In 1719, Jean-Baptiste Du Bos (1670–1742) publishes his three-volume treatise *Réflexions Critiques sur la Poésie et sur la Peinture* (*Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*). A widely read and influential work in its time, it is resigned to obscurity amidst subsequent developments in aesthetics, and is forgotten about in the 20th century.¹ Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement/Kritik der Urteilkraft*, published in 1790, proves fatal to both Du Bos's works as well as many other treatises on aesthetics in the 18th century, leaving them on the background, and in the evolution of modern European writings on philosophical aesthetics, Du Bos only gets a minor role to play.² Nevertheless, it seems that the 21st century marks the renaissance, or rediscovery of Du Bos's opinions. Dan Edelstein considers Du Bos's work the most influential treatment of aesthetics in the 18th century, citing Voltaire who has called it 'the most useful book that has ever been written

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1 Later, 17 (!) French editions are published of the book (5 of them edited by the author). The English translation from 1748 is often used in citations (incl. in this article here): *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting. Written in French. By M. l'Abbé Du Bos, Member and perpetual Secretary of French Academy*, Vol. I–III, translated into English by Thomas Nugent (London: Printed for John Nourse, at the Lamb, opposite Katherine-Street in the Strand, 1748). It is translated into German in 1760–1761.

2 Benjamin Evans, 'From bullfights to Bollywood: the contemporary relevance of Jean-Baptiste du Bos's approach to the arts', *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics*, 55 (2) (September 2018), 180–181.

on the subject by any European nation'.³ Paul Guyer in his history of aesthetics treats Du Bos as an important game-changer in the early 18th century art theory, in the context of experiencing art based on 'aesthetic emotions', whose ideas influence Henry Home, Lord Kames, Moses Mendelssohn, Gottfried Lessing, Johann Herder as well as Joachim Winckelmann and Immanuel Kant.⁴ His ideas have been considered so relevant to the evaluations of today's new artistic media that Paisley Livingstone 'revives' him and introduces his concept of aesthetic emotions in the field of cinema, using the form of an interview.⁵ Next to many innovative ideas presented by Du Bos that are highlighted by researchers today, one of the principal thematic axes of his *Reflections* – the treatment of the artistic genius, in the first and second part of his tome, has been left on the background. In my article, I will concentrate on the interpretation of the artistic genius given in Du Bos's work, and on the aesthetic view of art directly connected to it, which is exceptional in its time and in many aspects showing the way forward for the future notions of genius in the 18th and 19th centuries. Through Du Bos's concept of genius, I will also look at his assertions on the relationship between the artist as the maker of an artwork and the public as its experiencer, and their relevance in the context of our contemporary artistic environment.

OF GENIUS IN GENERAL

'Now a person must be born with a genius, to know how to invent [...]', says Du Bos.⁶ With this statement, he is representing the 18th-century notion (akin to e.g. Charles Perrault, Roger de Piles, etc.) that humans possess a genius but are not geniuses, in accordance with the definition of 'genius' in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* of 1694.⁷ It is

3 Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 24.

4 Paul Guyer, *A History of Modern Aesthetics*, Vol 1. The Eighteenth Century (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 87.

5 Paisley Livingstone, 'Cinema and the Artificial Passions: a Conversation with the Abbé Du Bos', *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia*, 69 (3-4) (2013), 419–429.

6 Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting. Written in French. By M. l'Abbé Du Bos, Member and perpetual Secretary of French Academy*, Vol. II, translated into English by Thomas Nugent (London: Printed for John Nourse, at the Lamb, opposite Katherine-Street in the Strand, 1748), 4.

7 Kineret S. Jaffe, 'The Concept of Genius: Its Changing Role in Eighteenth-Century French Aesthetics', *Journal of History of Ideas*, 41 (4) (Oct.–Dec. 1980), 581.

definitely more than a 'gift/talent' acquired and perfected by learning, because 'such disposition of mind [...] cannot be acquired by art; it can be possessed only by a person, who has brought it with him into the world'.⁸ We can certainly assert that Du Bos is familiar with the views of Joseph Addison, who publishes his essay 'On Great Natural Geniuses' in *The Spectator* in 1711.⁹ The idea of the 'great/natural' and 'small/formed' geniuses, which Addison raises in his piece, is repeatedly echoed in Du Bos's approach. There are studies that consider Du Bos the first one to draw a clear line between a genius and a talent.¹⁰ The congenital, nature-given quality of the artistic genius is much more likely to manifest itself than the geniuses of other professions, according to Du Bos.¹¹ Genius is an ability given by nature, which is not inheritable, which reveals itself by chance and depends on air quality and special climatic conditions, which will be discussed below. 'Emulation and study can never enable a genius to leap beyond the bounds which nature hath prescribed to his activity. Labour indeed may perfect him, but I question whether it can give him a greater extent than he has received from nature.'¹² The author in his *Reflections* metaphorically refers to genius as a plant, '[...] which shoots up, as it were, of itself; but the quality and quantity of its fruit depend in a great measure on the culture it receives.'¹³ In 1759, Edward Young in his concept of genius is basically repeating the same thought.¹⁴ Considering the time of Nugent's English translation, and its popularity, we can presume with great probability that Young has used ideas from Du Bos's book. As he develops the topic, Du Bos reaches an idea that is completely new, compared to earlier concepts of genius, endeavouring to explain it through the physiology of the human organism, 'The genius of these arts [painting and

8 Jean-Baptiste Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, Vol II, 6.

9 Joseph Addison, 'On Great Natural Geniuses', *The Works of Joseph Addison with notes by Richard Hurd*, Vol. II (*The Spectator* no. 160), ed. by Henry G. Bohn (London: George Bell and Sons, 1901), 504. My claim is based on a couple of citations from Addison by Du Bos in the first part of his *Reflections*.

10 Ann Jefferson, *Genius in France: An Idea and its Uses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 30.

11 Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, Vol. II, 27–28.

12 Ibid., 54.

13 Ibid., 32.

14 Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition* (London: A. Millar and R. and J. Dodsley, 1759), 12.

poetry] consists, as I apprehend, in a happy arrangement of the organs of the brain, in just conformation of each of these organs, as also in the quality of blood which disposes it to ferment during exercise, so as to furnish a plenty of spirits to the springs employed in the functions of imagination. [...] I have supposed here that the composer's blood is heated; for indeed painters and poets cannot invent in cool blood; nay 'tis evident they must be wrapt into a kind of enthusiasm when they produce their ideas.¹⁵ With regards to the blood circulation theory, Du Bos is alluding to the studies of William Harvey (work published in 1628).¹⁶ However, the author is subsequently forced to admit that although in his opinion the right quality of blood converges with the happy placement of the organs and this fortunate union creates either a pictorial or a poetic genius, he does not trust physical explanations, 'considering the imperfection of this science' within which 'we are continually obliged to have recourse to conjecture', insisting that 'the facts I have explained, are certain, and these facts, though not so easily accounted for, are sufficient to support my system.'¹⁷ Through doubts and hesitations, Du Bos associates the physiological explanation with the idea of 'divine madness', which has accompanied the image of the artistic genius since the antiquity. Despite respecting the opinions of ancient authors, he does not consider them completely satisfactory and that forces him to seek answers even from an imperfect branch of science (medicine).¹⁸ Searching for new approaches to the phenomenon of genius, he does not once in his physiological explanation point to the conventional understanding of the melancholy mindset of a genius, which is caused by the secretion of black bile (*melania chole* in Greek) in the organism – one of the more longstanding and used beliefs ever since the antiquity. This approach indicates the author's desire to find proof for his idea of a genius as a person, along with his wish to revise the existing views on genius and to give them a contemporary explanation. In Du Bos's descriptions of the recent developments in science (incl. regarding genius), there are no mentions of a divine

15 Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, Vol. II, 10–11.

16 Ibid., 343.

17 Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, Vol. II, 12–13.

18 Kineret S. Jaffe, 'The Concept of Genius: Its Changing Role in Eighteenth-Century French Aesthetics', *Journal of History of Ideas*, 41 (4) (Oct.–Dec. 1980), 584.



FIG. 1. JEAN-BAPTISTE DU BOS. ILLUSTRATION FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

will or intervention, which is not a sign of the author's opposition to, or lack of, religion, but rather of Du Bos's approach to human achievements in science in accordance with the ways of the age of Enlightenment – as an independent sphere functioning without a divine presence.¹⁹ The search for a physiological explanation for genius, initiated by Du Bos, may be regarded as a prophetic prologue to the subsequent 19th century (as well as the 20th), when an intensive search for the answer to the genius-question commences in various fields of science, such as psychology, eugenics and anthropology, examples of which may be the studies by Francis Galton, Cesare Lombroso.²⁰

19 Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 32.

20 Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1869); Cesare Lombroso, *The Man of Genius* (London: Walter Scott, Ltd., 1896).

GENIUS AND CLIMATE

Through the above-mentioned simile of genius as a plant, Du Bos incorporates the climatic aspect in his argument, endeavouring thus to explain the essence of the phenomenon. 'During the life of man [...] the character of our minds and inclinations depends very much on the quality of blood, which nourishes our organs [...] during infancy and youth. Now the quality of our blood depends vastly on the air we breathe [...] Hence it comes that people who dwell in different climates, differ so much in spirit and inclinations.'²¹ Du Bos is convinced that every nation's genius depends on the quality of the air they breathe and that the climate is 'responsible' for the lack of genius and intelligence within some nations.²² Among other things, Du Bos's *Reflections* contain a connection between the thriving ancient Greek culture and arts and a favourable climate,²³ an idea on which the eminently influential work by Winkelman, *The History of Art in Antiquity/Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764), is also based.

In his book, Du Bos views climate in two parallel meanings, in purely physical terms, and considering the historically developed cultural climate in one place or another. The ensemble of these two climates that to a large extent is conditioned on the quality of air, which can fluctuate from era to era, facilitates the emergence or else the lack of genius. Du Bos means to be as objective as possible, which is reflected in the abundance of his examples and wide geography, which basically incorporates the whole world. His interest in the religious, political and social wealth of different regions has been regarded as an attempt at approaching writings on art using sociological and anthropological methods.²⁴ During his analysis, the author occasionally offers opinions that seem curious. For example, when discussing the manifestation of the artistic genius in humans, he suggests '[...] that out of a hundred geniuses even one only should remain for ever buried, unless he happens by a very odd caprice of fortune to be born among the Kalmyk Tartars, or by some unfortunate accident to be transported in his infancy into Lapland.'²⁵ Similarly, the next statement sounds unfortunate, "Tis thus that wines

21 Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, Vol. II, 177.

22 Ibid., 213.

23 Ibid., 102.

24 Evans, 'From bullfights to Bollywood', 190.

25 Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, Vol. II, 32.

have a particular taste in each soil, which they always preserve though they are not always of equal goodness. Hence the Italians, for instance, will be evermore fitter for painting and poetry, than the inhabitants of the provinces bordering the Baltic.'²⁶ We must keep in mind that the author's aim, to be as variative as possible in presenting his examples, is carried by the beliefs, value judgements and moral norms of the era; however, this should not diminish the goal of the *Reflections* to explain the phenomenon of genius, as it offers a unique approach to the concept of genius, which will influence future treatments of the topic.

ART, GENIUS, AND THE PUBLIC

'Since the most pleasing sensations that our real passions can afford us, are balanced by so many hours that succeed our enjoyments, would it not be a noble attempt of art to endeavour to separate the dismal consequences of our passions from the bewitching pleasure we receive in indulging them? Is it not in the power of art to create, as it were, beings of a new nature? Might not art contrive to produce objects that would excite artificial passions, sufficient to occupy us while we are actually affected by them, and incapable of giving us afterwards any real pain or affliction?'²⁷

If in many other aspects Du Bos may be doubtful, then in the art's role and only aim as the creator of sensory emotions in humans the author is irrefutably certain, rehearsing it repeatedly in his book. Tatarkiewicz has rightly called it the first theory that explains the importance of the aesthetic experience.²⁸ Comparing painting and poetry, Du Bos gives preference to painting as a medium that influences the viewer through vision, deploying 'natural signs', as opposed to poetry which uses 'artificial signs'.²⁹ This acknowledgement, which is later used by Ephraim Lessing to contrast the two art forms, has been regarded as the first instance of an inclusion of a semiotic argument in the literature of aesthetics.³⁰

26 Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, Vol. II, 225.

27 Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, Vol. I, 21.

28 Władisław Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas: An Essay in Aesthetics* (Hague; Boston; London; PWN; Warszawa: M. Nijhoff, 1980), 318.

29 Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, Vol. I, 321.

30 Joris Corin Heyder, 'Seeing, Comparing, Narrating. Making of the Middle Ages in Early History of Art', *Narratives and Comparisons*, ed. by Martin Carrier, Rebecca Mertens, Carsten Reinhardt (Bielefeld: Bielefeld University Press, 2021), 149.

Du Bos's art critical elements in the descriptions and evaluations of artworks have been justifiably considered the precursors of Denis Diderot's art criticism.³¹

Du Bos's innovative view of the art public is important, as it is no longer purely connoisseurs and specialists, but an audience as wide as possible, who previously had been excluded owing to their lack of topical knowledge and education. This lack of knowledge is positive in the context of the emotions-based art experience of Du Bos's, because it is sincere, innocent and not influenced by reason. Du Bos clearly contrasts himself with art connoisseurs, he is the 'spokesperson for the taste-oriented aristocracy'.³²

The audience's taste is based only on the senses, more precisely the 'sixth sense', which gives the experiencer the most authentic knowledge of the value of the artwork.³³ 'Tis that sixth sense we have within us, without seeing its organs. 'Tis a portion of ourselves, which judges from what it feels [...] determines, without consulting either rule or compass.'³⁴ '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', those that do not possess knowledge of a specific field, but possess the 'taste of comparison'.³⁵ Du Bos raises the importance of the amateur/dilettante to a significant position with regards to art evaluation.³⁶ This kind of audience or listenership is able to give the arts 'disinterested judgements' based on impressions made on the senses, which in the author's opinion is akin to judgements we make on food, where it is the senses that decide, not rules.³⁷ Du Bos wishes to educate this public, using a very wide-ranging set of examples from different scientific spheres to support his claims. We must also not forget that the author himself

31 Sylvain Menant, 'L'Abbé Du Bos, Critique Art', *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 111 (2) (Avril 2011), 266.

32 Rémy Gilbert Saisselin, *Taste in Eighteenth Century France: Critical Reflections on the Origins of Aesthetics or an Apology for Amateurs* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1965), 70.

33 Bianca Muresan, *L'émergence de l'idée moderne d'art dans les Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture (1719) de l'abbé Dubos (1670–1742)*. PhD thesis (Nice: Université de Nice-Sophia-Antipolis, 2014), 7.

34 Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, Vol. II, 239.

35 Ibid., 245.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., 237–238.

is an art-loving critic, not a professional painter or poet – he is an amateur.³⁸ As their 'plain fellow-citizen', Du Bos is 'rendering them [his readers] service' through his observations.³⁹ The desire to make art understandable to a large number of art lovers is reflected in Du Bos's proposal to artists to add a 'short inscription' to their artworks because 'the greatest part of the spectators, who are in other respects capable of doing justice to the work, are not learned enough to guess at the subject of the picture.'⁴⁰ Du Bos's idea of the wider engagement of the art public, and art appreciation, becomes especially relevant in the middle of the 18th century, with the advent of the height of the *Salon de Paris*.

Du Bos vividly defines the relationship between the artist as the maker of the artwork and the viewer as its experiencer. 'Painters and poets raise those artificial passions within us, by presenting us with the imitations of objects capable of exciting real passions [...] the impression of the imitation is not serious, inasmuch as it does not affect our reason [...] This superficial impression, made by imitation, is quickly therefore effaced, without leaving any permanent vestiges, such as would have been left by the impression of the object itself, which the painter or poet hath imitated.'⁴¹ Following this Platonism-driven thought, with which he reduces the degree of the impact of an artwork, Du Bos recognises that 'the painter and poet afflict us only inasmuch as we desire it ourselves; they make us fall in love with their heroes and heroines, only because it is thus agreeable to us; whereas we should be neither able to command the measure of our sentiments, nor regulate their vivacity nor duration [...]'.⁴² With this, he promotes the artistic emotions created by the artist to be influential due to the emotional uncontrollability of the viewer/experiencer. However, since artistic emotions are essentially short-lived, only touching the 'surface of our heart',⁴³ the aesthetic art experience has

38 Muresan, *L'émergence de l'idée moderne d'art dans les Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture (1719) de l'abbé Dubos (1670–1742)*, 6–7.

39 Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, Vol. I, 4.

40 Ibid., 74.

41 Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, Vol. I, 22–23.

42 Ibid., 25–26.

43 Ibid., 25.

an entertaining role to play, being a relief from everyday monotony.⁴⁴ In order to avoid tedium, people engage in different activities, some of them may even be complicated and dangerous, but it may also be achieved in a way that is not dangerous or detrimental, namely through art and aesthetic experiences.⁴⁵ The arts, including painting and theatre, are for warding off boredom, they have the ability to invigorate our senses through sensory stimulation without deeply traumatising our mind.⁴⁶ We should add here also the aspect of false sensations, which accompanies the aesthetic experience and has been referred to as the 'problem of Du Bos' – the ability of an artwork to evoke false emotions, which can even be unpleasant but not interfere with the pleasure driven from the artwork.⁴⁷

Submission to the tastes and feelings of the public, not academic rules, sets new conditions which the artistic genius, wishing to be successful, must consider. These are conditions produced by an art-loving dilettante, which reflect Du Bos's innovative approach to art. The artistic genius is for Du Bos the main executor/implementer of his sensation-based view of aesthetics. Du Bos restricts the artist by the tastes and wishes of the public as an important art appraiser, tasking the artist to depict that which would ward off boredom and help to pass the time (Du Bos's motif),⁴⁸ resulting in the biggest acclaim when the arts 'are most successful in moving us to pity'.⁴⁹ Ernst Cassirer has reprimanded Du Bos for his concept's one-sidedness, pathos-centredness, where the aesthetic satisfaction only stems from the viewer's reaction to the experienced, and the quality and character of the artwork itself are of secondary importance. There is a danger of the artwork turning into a merely spectacular phenomenon, wherein the artistic genius's unique creation story has gone missing.⁵⁰ However, I would like to disagree with the

44 Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to Present History* (Tuscaloosa, ALA: University of Alabama Press, 1966), 201.

45 Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas: An Essay in Aesthetics*, 318.

46 Evans, 'From bullfights to Bollywood', 183–184.

47 Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas: An Essay in Aesthetics*, 327; Paisley Livingston, 'Du Bos' Paradox', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 53 (4) (2013), 393–406.

48 Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas: An Essay in Aesthetics*, 347.

49 Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, Vol. I, 1.

50 Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (New Jersey: Princetown University Press, 1951), 323–324.

mentioned by maintaining that the creation of a sensation-based artwork, which is no longer dependent on academic-classical rules, opens up a much larger creative freedom for the artistic genius, which is vividly expressed in the changes in the content and form of the visual arts of the subsequent eras.

CONCLUSION

Reflections as a whole may be considered as a critical analysis of painting and poetry, with the artistic genius, or more precisely an individual who possesses an artistic genius, as one of its protagonists, and the public who experiences those artworks as the other. The numerous examples offered by the author, many of which may seem off-topic at first glance, are meant to reveal on the one hand the essence of the artworks, their reception, and on the other hand the question of the phenomenon of genius, one of the main ideas of the analysis. At the same time, the goal of the *Reflections* is didactic. With the narrative he presents, Du Bos does not postulate definitive truths, which is common to many works by his contemporaries. To cite Du Bos, 'If at any time I happen to assume a legislative tone, the reader will please to execute it, as proceeding from inadvertency, rather than from any notion I entertain of my legislative authority.'⁵¹ As a thinker of the Enlightenment, aiming to reach conclusions, Du Bos uses wide-ranging empirical proof, remaining conjectural in many arguments. Du Bos's book must be regarded as more than a narrowly aesthetics-bound statement – containing achievements of many different branches of science, which the author has utilised to prove his claims, *Reflections* is a cumulative representation of the latest scientific developments of the early 18th century.⁵² With this epistemological book, Du Bos establishes the genius as a unique phenomenon, thus influencing to a great extent the subsequent genius-narrative in Western culture, and highlights many new aspects of art in his work (entertainment, sensory impact, etc.) that are relevant in today's art discourse.

51 Du Bos, *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, Vol. I, 4.

52 Pascal Duris, 'Les sciences dans la théorie esthétique sa l'Abbé Du Bos', *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 117 (4) (Octobre–Décembre 2017), 914.

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KEYWORDS: JEAN-BAPTISTE DU BOS; ARTISTIC GENIUS; 18TH CENTURY AESTHETICS; ENLIGHTENMENT; AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

SUMMARY

In 1719 Jean-Baptiste Du Bos publishes his treatise *Réflexions Critiques sur la Poésie et sur la Peinture*, which Voltaire has called 'the most useful book that has ever be written on the subject by any European nation'. In his book the author deals with the problem of artistic genius, a phenomenon that was in focus from late 17th century in many treatises on theory of art, especially in France and England. This article concentrates on the interpretation of this particular idea in the work of Du Bos, who tries to explain it through a wide range of empirical examples, using the latest achievements from different branches of science. His concept of 'physiological genius' and 'climatic genius' can be seen as unique. His reflections on sensation-based aesthetic experience and the new way of defining the relationship between the artist-genius and the dilettante art experiencer, influenced later 18th century authors who wrote about art theory and aesthetics (Lessing, Home, Herder, even Kant). Du Bos's idea of wider public engagement with art, and art appreciation, becomes relevant in the 18th and 19th centuries, so one can say that in many respects Du Bos's treatment is ahead of its time and that these ideas are also relevant in the contemporary context.

CV

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