

REALLY BORING ART

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Abstract

There is little question as to whether there is good boring art, though its existence raises a number of questions for both the philosophy of art and the philosophy of emotions. How can boredom ever be a desideratum of art? How can our standing commitments concerning the nature of aesthetic experience and artistic value accommodate the existence of boring art? How can *being bored* constitute an appropriate mode of engagement with a work of art *as a work of art*? More broadly, how can there be works of art whose very success requires the experience of boredom? Our goal in this paper is threefold. After offering a brief survey of kinds of boring art, we: i) derive a set of questions that we argue constitutes the philosophical problem of boring art; ii) elaborate an empirically informed theory of boredom that furnishes the philosophical problem with a deeper sense of the affect at the heart of the phenomenon; and iii) conclude by offering and defending a solution to the problem that explains why and how artworks might wish to make the experience of boredom key to their aesthetic and artistic success.

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HAMM: We're not beginning to...to...mean something?

CLOV: Mean something! You and I mean something! [*Brief laugh.*] Ah that's a good one!

—Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

I

On July 25, 1964, Andy Warhol entered the TimeLife Building at the corner of 50th Street and the Avenue of the Americas in New York City. He was accompanied by poet and photographer Gerard Malanga, filmmakers Jonas Mekas and John Palmer, and Marie Desert, a member of the camera crew. Together they ascended to the 41st floor, the headquarters of the Rockefeller Foundation. There they met Henry Romney, the vice president of the Foundation, who escorted them into an office. While the sun was still visible, Mekas set the camera on a tripod and framed a shot. Warhol looked through the camera, said “Yes”, and turned it on. The camera was pointing at the Empire State Building and was left running for six and a half hours.

This is how Andy Warhol's *Empire* was shot. A silent black and white film with just one protagonist: the immovable Empire State Building. The movie was shot at twenty-four frames per second but was projected at sixteen. As a result, it runs for a total of eight hours and five minutes. “Nothing was to happen in the film,” Arthur Danto notes, “other than what happened to it” (Danto 2009: 79). Once, a viewer asked when the film was going to start, even though, unbeknownst to him, the film had started several minutes earlier (reported in Danto 2009: 78). On a different occasion, viewers found *Empire* so offensively empty of point and purpose that they threatened to destroy the theater (Mekas 1969: 12). Early critical discussions of *Empire* focused on its apparent concern with demonstrating that one can fill over eight hours of cinematic time with, if not quite nothing, then just one thing that does nothing at all. The film is about “a big nothing,” art critic Gregory Battcock wrote (Battcock 1966: 39).

Is *Empire* boring? “If I were the camera, I would faint with boredom staring that long at one

thing,” wrote John Bernard Myers (Myers 1967:138).¹ But if *Empire* is boring, and if Warhol created a work of art when making it, a number of questions arise. The art-historical question of whether there can be boring art—more precisely, the question of whether there are objects that have been enfranchised in the artworld which are intentionally boring—has already been answered in the affirmative by the many critics who have studied the phenomenon. In short, there certainly is boring art, and its history is a widely acknowledged chapter in the story of artistic modernism. Yet crucial philosophical questions remain even after the art-historical one has been settled. How can boredom ever be a desideratum of art? How can our standing commitments concerning the nature of aesthetic experience and artistic value accommodate this phenomenon, since, as we will see, the boring work of art appears to run dramatically afoul of many of these commitments? How can *being bored* ever constitute an appropriate mode of engagement with a work of art *as a work of art*? How can there be works of art whose very success requires the experience of boredom? And finally, how can we render intelligible that improbable conjunction of claims “this is really boring” and “I really liked it,” uttered sincerely and in respect to the very same object of aesthetic experience?

The lack of philosophical writings on boredom in art is surprising,² given the rich history of this topic in art criticism and the great interest in aesthetics on various puzzles of negative emotions in art. But even when boredom is not ignored, either in philosophy or in art theory and criticism, discussions of the nature of boredom tend to be uninformed by important recent theories of emotion and cutting-edge work in the relevant empirical sciences. Such neglect is unfortunate. Without a proper understanding of the character of the experience of boredom (i.e., its affective, cognitive, and volitional components; its antecedents, effects, and concomitants), we run the risk of misunderstanding it and of drawing the wrong conclusions regarding what its presence may signify. Indeed, in light of a wave of recent empirical studies on the character and function of boredom, we are now in a position to appreciate not just the dynamic and complex nature of boredom but also its place and role in aesthetic experience.

What we are undertaking in this essay is not an investigation into the very possibility of boring

¹ More recently, Warwick (2011) notes that the “simple reality” of films like *Empire* is that they are “boring.” And in his study of static cinema, Remes writes that “Warhol’s static films are interesting precisely because they are boring” (2015: 52).

² For example, there are no articles on the topic of boredom in art in any of the major generalist philosophy journals (*The Journal of Philosophy*, *Mind*, *Philosophical Review*, *Noûs*, *Philosophical Quarterly*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*), and of the two journals specializing in philosophy of art and aesthetics (*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* and *The British Journal of Aesthetics*), only in the former has the issue of boredom received any attention. Boredom is discussed in the following articles: Colpitt (1985), Lind (1986), Matravers (1995), and Moller (2014). We acknowledge our debt to these exploratory works.

art—it is no mystery that bad or failed art can be boring. Our concern is with the existence of *good* boring art, and especially with a subset of these works that appear to be successful as art precisely because of the manner in which they bore. Our goal in this paper is threefold. After offering a brief survey of kinds of boring art, we: i) derive a set of questions that we argue constitutes the philosophical problem of boring art; ii) elaborate an empirically informed theory of boredom that furnishes the philosophical problem with a deeper sense of the affect at the heart of the phenomenon; and iii) conclude by offering and defending a solution to the problem that explains why and how artworks might wish to make the experience of boredom key to their aesthetic and artistic success.

II

If one is skeptical of the existence of the phenomenon we are exploring here, there are clear examples of celebrated artworks that are, on the face of it, boring and widely recognized as such. There is L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, which often intentionally and enthusiastically banishes meaning from verse. There is John Ashbery’s acclaimed *Flow Chart* whose 4,794 lines are, from the standpoint of syntax and semantics, frequently unintelligible and which routinely refuse to culminate in a discernable point. There are novels, that modern invention so fantastically apt for chronicling the minutia of experience and the rhythms and ticks of the everyday, that bore and often intentionally so. Think of the cetology sections of *Moby Dick*, Samuel Beckett’s trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*), or David Foster Wallace’s *The Pale King*, a novel that informs the reader that, “if you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish,” and that tests the hypothesis with extensive discussions of IRS tax law (Wallace 2012: §44). Even James Joyce’s *Ulysses* was found to be boring.³ There are also boring plays. The first *New York Times*’s review of Samuel Beckett’s masterpiece, *Endgame*, described it as “a portrait of desolation, lovelessness, boredom, ruthlessness, sorrow, nothingness” (cited in Ventzislavov 2018: 202). There are the theatrical creations of Robert Wilson in which single actions may last for hours and whose plays can take days to complete. There are the renowned works of slow cinema⁴ (e.g., Béla Taar’s

³ In his erudite defense of the novel against charges of obscenity, Judge John M. Woolsey found the book to be “brilliant” but also “dull, unintelligible and obscure” (United States v. One Book Called “Ulysses”, 5 F. Supp. 182, S.D.N.Y. 1933).

⁴ Not to mention those of static or avant-garde cinema. Works such as Larry Gottheim’s *Fog Line*, Michael Snow’s *Wavelength*, Ernie Gehr’s *Serene Velocity*, James Coleman’s *La tache aveugle* (*The Blind Spot*), and Chieko Shiomi’s *Disappearing Music for Face* challenge viewers’ expectations partly because they often invite the experience of boredom.

Sátántangó or Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels*) which are characterized by the employment of long shots, an emphasis on the everyday and mundane, and understated, sometimes almost absent, storytelling. There is minimalist or conceptual music—creations that consist either of silence or of simple, monotonous sequences of sounds.⁵ And there are repetitive, long, seemingly unending, musical compositions. Satie's *Vexations*, if played in its entirety, that is, 840 times, is boring. Wagner's *Ring Cycle* is very frequently boring, and so are many second movements of symphonies.⁶ Contemporary dance has blurred the distinction between dance and ordinary action (sometimes, even inaction) and in doing so often solicits, perhaps as a test or provocation, boredom. Steven Paxton's *Satisfying Lover* and Yvonne Rainer's *We Shall Run* are just two examples. Even within traditional visual arts, e.g., painting or sculpture, there is plenty of boredom. Minimalist works are often taken to be the paradigms of boring visual art: inexpressive and lacking in interesting content, they have, according to some, “raised boredom to an aesthetic principle” (Mellow 1968: 21; quoted in Colpitt 1985).⁷ Think of the monochrome paintings of Ad Reinhardt, Ralph Humphrey, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Kazimir Malevich, Robert Rauschenberg, Yves Klein, Robert Ryman, and Brice Marden. The list goes on.

The above examples suffice to demonstrate that boredom figures prominently in a variety of works of art. There is always the possibility of critical disagreement, and one may take issue with one or another of the works we put on this list. And some of the examples perhaps merely show that works of art at times have boring elements. We do need to understand why an artist would be inclined to enlist boredom to any degree in their aesthetic and artistic pursuits, and we will have much to say about this. But a proper puzzle arises when we note that a number of these examples give us reason to think there is a special class of boring works, namely, works of art that are not only intentionally boring, but thoroughly and essentially so. They are works that present themselves as, if you will, not good-though-boring but good-because-boring. It is *by virtue* of being boring that they stake part of their claim to artistic and aesthetic success.⁸

⁵ For instance, the score of La Monte Young's Compositions 1960 #7 involves only a sustained open fifth (a B3 and F#4) whereas that of Composition 1960 #9 consists simply of a horizontal line.

⁶ Elpidorou (2020a); Moller (2014).

⁷ Others criticized minimalist art for a kind of superficiality, not unconnected to the lack of content and novelty. See, e.g., Greenberg (1967), reprinted in Battcock (1995).

⁸ The claim that these artworks are good because they are boring does not mean that they are good *only* because they are boring. As we will argue in the fifth section, an artistically successful use of boredom creates a distinctive affective mode of engagement between artwork and observer such that the experience of boredom *elevates* the various properties of an artwork to the status of proper *aesthetic* properties. In this way, even though boredom does not confer *on its own* aesthetic status on an object, it is both essential in rendering it a successful work of art and an ineliminable feature of our aesthetic appreciation of it.

Call the artworks that populate this class *resolutely boring*, and think of them as works in which boredom, on the face of it, plays a general organizational role: it describes how the elements of a work are arranged, presented, and are expected to be experienced, even “appreciated,” assuming sense can be made of that term in this context. It is instructive to compare resolutely boring artworks to resolutely boring *experiences*. In the case of the latter, there may be features of our environment that themselves are not inherently boring; but in these everyday cases our environment, regardless of its composition and promise for use and engagement, is experienced, if you will, *boringly*. The idea we are after in respect to resolutely boring art is similar. The adverbial qualification is key. A resolutely boring work of art, as we are thinking of it, is one that, *whatever its properties and point*, opts to present them boringly, such that the informed critic will be justified in calling it a boring *work*. Surely in many cases this will come in degrees and the relationship between the aesthetic and artistic features of a work and their boring manner of presentation will be nuanced and complex, though *Empire* furnishes an example of a resolutely boring artwork that approximates the ideal of this class of works. It is the possibility of apparently resolutely boring works of art that will be our primary focus. These are not abortive or halfhearted attempts at art. The list of resolutely boring works includes some of the most celebrated artworks of recent history. In short, what our paper undertakes is a study not of forms of failure but of a deeply puzzling form of success.

The existence of this class of resolutely boring works of art presents an obvious philosophical problem. On the one hand, many of our traditional theories of art and the aesthetic⁹ give us powerful reasons for thinking that it is true, perhaps even trivially so, that works of art, insofar as they are works of art, are stimulating, arresting, interesting, immersive, or engaging. Derek Matravers puts the point concisely when he says that the very idea of boring art appears to “violate the deeply-held intuition that there is a connection between experiencing a work of art and appreciating it” (Matravers 1995: 426). Stronger still, boredom is often associated with a form of *frustration*, as Susan Sontag has argued (Sontag 2001: 303); and to find a work boring would appear to place it in the extended family of things that are *exasperating*, *annoying*, *irritating*, *vexing*, and *disappointing*. It is hard to think of a family less hospitable to our understanding of art, except, perhaps, the family of things that are junk, clutter, and waste (though they too have a history). We tend to think that good art can be many things—terrifying, melancholic, sobering, surprising, offensive, even disgusting—but it just cannot be boring. This is what Donald Judd had in mind when, in defense of the new art of

⁹ For discussion, see Lopes (2018), Bonzan (2009), Feagin (1996), Hanson (2018), McGonigal (2018), Moran (2012), Riggle (2016), and Schellekens (2007; 2009).

the 1960s, he claimed, “I can’t see how any good work can be boring or monotonous in the usual sense of those words. And no one has developed an unusual sense of them” (Judd 1975 [1966]: 190). Art critic Lucy R. Lippard repeats this sentiment in a well-known 1966 review of structuralist/minimalist sculptures. “As far as I am concerned,” she writes, “good art is never boring no matter how spare it is” (Lippard 1966: 50).

It is important to note that the problem resolutely boring art raises goes beyond the standard “paradoxes” of negative emotions that contemporary philosophers of art have so thoroughly documented, though if our argument is sound, boring art constitutes a new and peculiar addition to the literature on this topic.¹⁰ For instance, the so-called paradoxes of tragedy and horror, which have received the lion’s share of attention, are animated by the attempt to understand how we can *enjoy* affective responses to art that are inherently unpleasant. How can we take pleasure in the experience of pity, fear, terror, disgust, and despair, given that the phenomenological profiles of these emotions are characterized by the presence of pain and absence of pleasure? We can add boredom to the list, but it is important to see a disanalogy. For one, given certain assumptions about human nature, there is nothing counterintuitive in the idea that we can find images of suffering, catastrophe, and the horrid immersive, engrossing, and stimulating. As Aristotle (1995: 1448b3-4) reminded us at outset of philosophical work on these issues, “we take delight in seeing [...] a pile of corpses” (translation ours). Thus Berys Gaut (1993) argues, in respect to the enjoyment of horror, that in a certain atypical class of humans, fear can produce pleasure, even as it evaluates its object negatively.

Or think of the many solutions to the puzzles of negative emotion in art that are variations on the following theme: while the negative emotions are inherently unpleasant, a successful work devises a manner of presenting the horrid, disgusting, tragic, or ugly, in a word, *interestingly*, not unlike the strategy we employ when we compensate for an undesirable gift by delivering it in an attractive box. That is, the artwork furnishes second-order rewards to intrinsically painful first-order experiences: the unpleasant elements are *made* interesting, say by being presented as objects of curiosity, appealing to prurient and taboo desires, and the like. But boring art presents the precise problem that it does because we seem to have no recourse to the idea of *interest* at all. With boredom we lose access to the varieties of cognitive and affective concern that the standard puzzles of negative emotions in art can invoke. As one imagines is the case with the viewers of Aristotle’s pile of corpses, these negative emotions admit of the kind of immersion in evidence when we yell

¹⁰ See Smuts (2007; 2009) and Strohl (2018) for surveys of these paradoxes.

“Ew!” but somehow cannot divert our attention from the horror before us. Reflections of this sort show how much more vexing the notion of boring art is than that, say, of ugly or horrific art, since we evidently cannot lodge the intuitive claim that, despite our theories, we are such as to be tantalized by the boring. It is gospel in work on art and negative emotions that a solution demands *some access* to positive forms of aesthetic immersion in an artwork, even if the form it takes is salacious, voyeuristic, or *schadenfröhlich*. The moves typified by Gaut and those who invoke notions of second-order pleasure are thus not available in the case of resolutely boring art, since boredom characterizes its object as unable to repay not this or that kind of interest (aesthetic, moral, etc.) but interest itself. It is for this reason that many scholars in the debate contrast the experience of negative emotions in art *with boredom*, since it is the ability to elicit some kind of affect (even a painful one) without compromising interest and immersion that typically provide the terms of artistic success in these debates.

There is a further problem. Experiences of pity, fear, horror, and sadness are standardly highly episodic and element-specific emotional responses to artworks. We pity Desdemona *as* Othello smothers her; we are terrified *that* Medea will murder her children to spite Jason; we are horrified *by* the image of the maniac in a hockey mask disemboweling the teenage camper. In all these cases, there is the rest of the work that is there to offer compensatory pleasures. As such, it is always possible to claim, with Noël Carroll, that these negative emotions are simply “the price we pay” for the other gratifications the work affords (Carroll 1990: 186). To call a work tragic or terrifying merely indicates a prominent and intended affective response to *this or that* feature of its content. But as many of the above examples make clear, boredom is often a much more comprehensive affective response. In resolutely boring artworks, boredom is a response *to the work taken whole*, and Carroll-type arguments evidently cannot help us dissolve the mystery.

Lastly, in many of the standard paradoxes it matters greatly that our emotions are directed toward representations, typically fictional, which itself creates a number of puzzles. In these cases, it is always an option to make two moves, neither of which is available in the case of resolutely boring art. One can argue that since the intentional object of my emotion concerns an acknowledged fictional truth (Othello is smothering Desdemona), then it is arguably the case that it is merely *fictionally true* that I fear her imminent demise. This isn’t to say that the emotions the fictions prompt are “unreal,” but it is to claim, with Kendal Walton, that they are the kinds of emotion we have when assuming the role of a participant immersed in a game of make-believe.¹¹ Add to this

¹¹ See Kendal Walton (1978) for the locus classicus of this argument. His position has been elaborated and refined in many publications since then. See especially Walton (1990) and the essays collected in Walton (2015).

that the acknowledgment of the fictionality of my emotion’s intentional object introduces a *distancing effect* such that I am aware that my object, precisely because fictional, implies nothing about the wellbeing of any real person. Here’s the rub. As Matthew Strohl notes in respect to another under-researched affect in this context, agitation, “it doesn’t matter whether this nuisance is a fictional representation” (Strohl 2018: 2). It is likewise with boredom. In respect to the cases we have explored, we cannot say that the puzzle is merely apparent because we are in fact only *fictionally* bored by a work. Boredom takes as its object the perceived significance and meaning of the experience that an artwork affords and not the fictional truths that compose its content, though those too can be boring. In this sense, resolutely boring artworks are fiction-indifferent and the boredom they inspire appears to be straightforwardly continuous with the experience of boredom in everyday contexts. Since this is so, the phenomenon of resolutely art does not grant us access to the notion of distancing effects and the excuses they can provide when we try to make sense of how we can enjoy tragic, distressing, and immoral fictional content.

If we put all of these worries together, the basic problem is this. A work that presents its content boringly in the resolute sense would seem bound to be experienced *as having no aesthetic properties*. Boredom doesn’t merely block us from experiencing a work’s potential aesthetic value; its presence implies that there is none to be experienced. The above arguments trouble not just the familiar matter of whether we can take aesthetic satisfaction in a painful or otherwise “negative” experience; they cast suspicion on the very idea that we can describe an experience as aesthetic when its object fails to elicit the basic forms of interest, appreciation, care, concern, curiosity, immersion, investment—take your pick—that are the hallmark of aesthetic experience. Boredom characterizes its object as *insignificant and meaningless*, and, whatever one’s theory of the aesthetic, surely it commits one to thinking that it is the role of aesthetic properties¹² to endow their bearer with some form of significance and meaning. Given this, resolutely boring art would appear destined to suffer from a chronic failure of aesthetic enrichment.

So far we have made use of an intuitive and untheorized notion of boredom. What we explore next is what happens to the puzzle once a measure of sophistication is introduced. In the next section we offer a theory of boredom, and after that we shall return to the issue with a more nuanced account of the problems it raises for art and the nature of aesthetic experience. We will see that we can be literalists about the phenomenon: there are resolutely boring artworks that are

¹² Thus, this argument goes through regardless of whether we are speaking of “positive” or “negative” aesthetic properties. We do not have the space to introduce the notion of negative aesthetic properties here (though it is implicit in the above discussion), but the line of argument here would appear to apply just as readily to them as it does to positive aesthetic properties, for the reasons offered above.

good as art because of the manner in which they bore, and this is compatible with the claim that we enjoy them, indeed that they bring within our appreciative purview recognizable varieties of aesthetic value. Needless to say, earning the right to make these claims will require revising some of the assumptions that make the resolutely boring work of art appear an impossibility.

IV

In this section, we focus on empirical research on boredom and elaborate the character of *state boredom*. As a first approximation, state boredom is an aversive experience that signifies a failure to engage with one’s environment in a desired manner *despite one’s wish to do so*. State boredom is “simple” or “ordinary” boredom. It is the boredom that most of us feel—that which we experience, for instance, when we wait for a delayed bus, scroll down our social media feed in order to kill time, pretend to enjoy the company of those who we find tiresome, or engage in monotonous or repetitive tasks.

An empirical investigation of state boredom is appropriate in the present context. Boredom in the face of an artwork is different from many of the things that have been called “boredom,” e.g., existential dread, depression, ongoing melancholy, or metaphysical despair. It is instead *state boredom*: an experience that is elicited by our encounter with the work of art; that depends upon and is specific to a particular situation; and that lasts, typically, as long as we engage with the artwork in question.¹³ Investigations of other aesthetically relevant affective phenomena (e.g., disgust, horror, fear, sadness) focus on the corresponding state of the phenomenon under question, and so shall we.

State boredom (hereinafter, “boredom”) is a short-lived emotional experience characterized by feelings of dissatisfaction, a perception of meaninglessness, non-optimal (either low or high) arousal, attentional difficulties, and a desire to change one’s activities. In the literature, one finds different theoretical articulations of this emotional state. Often, such accounts single out

¹³ The science of boredom distinguishes between state boredom and trait boredom. Trait boredom is conceptualized as the propensity to experience boredom often and in a wide range of situations and the most commonly used measure of it is the Boredom Proneness Scale (BPS) (Farmer and Sundberg 1986). We ignore trait boredom here. The theory of trait boredom is unclear and the validity of BPS is questionable (Elpidorou, 2020b; Gana et al., 2019; Struk et al., 2017). Most importantly, a focus on trait boredom, which is understood to be a lasting personality trait (akin to depression or extroversion), is inappropriate in the present context. That is because any investigation of trait boredom would reveal more about individual differences—i.e., how boredom prone individuals react to art compared to those who are not boredom prone—than the experience of boring art itself.

one particular aspect of the experience of state boredom and treat it as its essence. For instance, existential theories of boredom render one's perception of meaninglessness as the core of boredom (Barbalet 1999; Maddi 1970); arousal theories take boredom to be a state of non-optimal arousal (Berlyne 1960); and attentional theories understand boredom to be the result of certain attentional or cognitive difficulties (Eastwood et al. 2012). We will not follow theoretical attempts to locate the essence of boredom in one of its cognitive, volitional, physiological, or experiential aspects. Instead, we adopt a functional perspective on boredom according to which boredom is the affective state that it is because of *what it does*. Such an account of boredom has been developed in various ways. A recent, detailed, and theoretically motivated explication of the functional account treats boredom as a regulatory state that aims to promote the pursuit of meaningful, interesting, or engaging activities when our current activities cease to be so (Bench and Lench 2013; Danckert, Mugon, Struk, and Eastwood 2018; Elpidorou 2014, 2018a, 2018b). Boredom thus arises when we find ourselves in a state of dissatisfaction and acts as a "push" that can help us to move out of such a state and into one that is either in line with our interests and values or engaging. The functional account is well supported by extant empirical findings. Importantly, it also allows us to see how the various aspects of boredom come together in order to confer upon boredom its distinctive function. What is more, given its emphasis on what boredom *does*, the account is uniquely suited to articulate boredom's effects on those who experience this affective state during their engagement with art.

Why would one think that boredom is a functional state? The functional account of boredom is supported by what we know about boredom's character, effects, and antecedents. Boredom is a multidimensional construct: it is a complex psychological state composed of experiential, cognitive, volitional, expressive, and physiological components. A characterization of each of its components would reveal, respectively, the felt quality of boredom, its effects on various cognitive and perceptual processes, the actions and desires prompted by its presence, its associated bodily, facial, and vocal expressions, and, finally, its neurological and physiological correlates. We do not need to articulate in full detail each of boredom's components in order to make a case for its functional nature. Still, a brief discussion of (most of) its components would reveal enough about the nature of boredom and would allow us to discern both its functional nature and its importance in art.¹⁴

¹⁴ We will not be discussing the expressive component of boredom. Although important for understanding its various manifestations and for distinguishing it from other related states, boredom's bodily, facial, and vocal expressions have little bearing on boredom's place in and relationship to art. See Wallbott (1998) and Elpidorou (2018a) for a review of findings on the expressive and motor characteristics of boredom.

Boredom's most obvious characteristic is its felt quality. Phenomenologically speaking, boredom is a negative state characterized by a felt dissatisfaction with one's situation (Fahlman et al. 2013; Harris 2000; Mikulas and Vodanovich 1993; Pekrun et al. 2010; Todman 2003; Vogel-Walcutt et al. 2012). The subjective experience of boredom, however, is neither simple nor necessarily uniform. Qualitative data on the character of the experience of boredom (Goetz and Frenzel 2006; Harris 2000; Martin et al. 2006) reveal that even though individuals in a state of boredom often comment that they feel tired and lethargic, they also report feelings of restlessness, anxiety, irritability, and frustration (Harris 2000; Martin et al. 2006; Steinberger et al. 2016). Indeed, boredom can be experienced as a state of uniform subjective arousal (it is either apathetic or energizing); as a state of mixed subjective arousal (while bored one is both mentally fatigued *and* eager or anxious to do something else); or even as a temporally dynamic state that manifests itself as both apathetic (low arousal) and energizing (high arousal), depending on endogenous and exogenous factors (Elpidorou 2020b; Mills and Christoff 2018).

In terms of its cognitive nature, boredom is characterized, primarily, by attentional difficulties and the perception that one's situation is meaningless. Although both attentional difficulties and perceived meaningfulness can be, either individually or jointly, the antecedents of boredom (Westgate and Wilson 2018), they also constitute proper parts of the experience of boredom. Thus, while bored, one experiences difficulty sustaining one's attention (Eastwood et al. 2012) and one becomes aware of fact that one's situation is lacking in meaning (Van Tilburg and Igou 2012). In addition, the experience of boredom is often accompanied by mind-wandering (Harris 2000; Martin et al. 2006). Such a feature of boredom is important. Mind-wandering mentally decouples one from the boring situation and allows one to bring to mind alternative and more preferable situations. Finally, it has been noted that bored individuals experience a slower passage of time (Gabriel 1988; Hartocollis 1972; Martin et al. 2006; Tze et al. 2013; Wangh 1975; Watt 1991), something that could potentially contribute to the aversive character of the state of boredom.

Whereas the cognitive elements of boredom disengage one from their situation and make salient alternative and more attractive possibilities, the volitional component of boredom acts as a catalyst for action. Boredom is characterized by a strong desire to escape one's current (unsatisfactory) situation (Berlyne 1960; Fahlman et al. 2013; Fiske and Maddi 1961; Mikulas and Vodanovich 1993; Pekrun et al. 2010; Todman 2003; Van Tilburg and Igou 2012). During boredom, one wishes to be doing something other than what one is currently doing (Fahlman et al. 2013). As such, boredom is not simply an unpleasant experience but, crucially, one that contains a strong motivational component. Boredom is, in other words, a drive. It motivates us to act in various

ways, all of which share a common aim: to escape boredom's unpleasantness. Boredom can foster creativity (Mann and Cadman 2014). It can trigger prosocial behavior (Van Tilburg and Igou 2016) and lead to more extreme political orientations (Van Tilburg and Igou 2017). It can push us to shock ourselves when we are left alone with nothing to do (Nederkoorn et al. 2016; Wilson et al. 2014). It may force nurses to kill and arsonists to start fires (Elpidorou 2020a), individuals to eat more (Havermans et al. 2015), and participants in a psychology study to enter rabbit holes (van Aart et al. 2010). In a series of publications, psychologists Wijnand Van Tilburg and Eric Igou have argued that what underlies one's attempt to escape a boring situation is a desire to re-establish a sense of meaningfulness (Van Tilburg and Igou 2011, 2012, 2016, 2017; Van Tilburg et al. 2013). Boredom, according to their account, is both a crisis of meaning and an attempt to recover this lost meaning. What this body of work highlights is that boredom motivates one to find an activity that is more meaningful than the current one. Because meaning comes in various shapes and forms, our reactions to boredom are many and varied.

It is important to note that it is not always possible for us to alleviate the experience of boredom by escaping our situation. If behavioral escape is not possible and we lack a sufficient reason to engage with the boring situation, we may adopt a cognitive-avoidance strategy by engaging in mind-wandering (Fisher 1993; Harris 2000). However, if we are strongly motivated to engage with the boring situation, we may choose to alter the manner in which we engage with it. Often such a decision involves the cognitive *reappraisal* of the situation. For example, we could try to find meaning or value in a boring activity by seeing it under a new light (Nett et al. 2010; Tze et al. 2013). This will become crucial when we return to art.

Lastly, boredom is also characterized by its physiological and neurological correlates. For our purposes, it is not necessary to review these findings in any detail here. Suffice it to say that extant physiological studies of the experience of boredom do not agree as to whether boredom is, physiologically speaking, a state of low, high, or mixed arousal. Fortunately, we do not need to settle the character of boredom's physiological arousal (Elpidorou 2020b). All that it matters for our discussion is that the physiological concomitants of the experience of boredom contribute to the exercise of its function. They can facilitate the pursuit of alternative situations, either by deactivating us (low arousal) and thus disengaging us from our current situation or by activating us (high arousal) and thus preparing us for action and change.¹⁵

¹⁵ The neurological correlates of boredom are relatively unexplored and only in recent years have researchers begun to investigate them. For reviews, see Danckert, Mugon, Struk, and Eastwood (2018), Elpidorou (2018a), Mills and Christoff (2018), and Raffaelli, Mills, and Christoff (2018). Still, it is worth noting the following: alpha waves have been shown to be present during boredom (Oswald 1962); boredom was found to be correlated with lower beta activity in

In sum, boredom is an unpleasant state during which one experiences not only weariness and fatigue but also frustration and irritability. While bored, one is both disengaged from and dissatisfied with one's situation. The situation lacks in meaning; it neither captures one's attention nor interests one. At the same time, one is strongly motivated to pursue an alternative situation and will, in fact, go to great lengths to alleviate the experience of boredom. Our analysis of boredom strongly suggests that boredom is a functional state: boredom signals the need to change something about ourselves or our environment and it motivates us to do so. Boredom thus promotes the pursuit of alternative situations (physical or mental) when our current situation ceases to be interesting, engaging, or meaningful.

The adoption of a functional approach contributes to our understanding of boredom by underscoring its function in our mental and behavioral economy and by highlighting how the different components of boredom work together in order to promote the exercise of its regulatory function. In addition to being informative about the state of boredom, a functional model of boredom is theoretically advantageous in the following two ways. First, a functional perspective on boredom synthesizes what appears to be a diverse and unruly field of research (Elpidorou 2018a). It can explain why boredom arises in the first place; why boredom's presence is related to various meaning re-establishing strategies; and why boredom might lead to a variety of behaviors, some harmful and some beneficial to the agent. Second, a functional characterization of boredom illustrates how boredom is distinct from both apathy and frustration. Boredom is not apathy because it is not a state of resignation or motivational loss: when bored we have not given up; rather, we are strongly motivated to escape our situation (Goldberg et al. 2011; Nisbet 1982). And boredom is not frustration because the aims of the two states are markedly different: frustration is often a call to persist in what we are doing and to overcome obstacles blocking our goals (Amsel 1992; Elpidorou 2020a), whereas boredom is a call to switch our activity when our activity ceases to be engaging or in line with our interests and values.

The benefits of the functional view do not, however, end here. And the aim of the following two sections is to demonstrate how we can apply the functional view to art. We will argue that it is through a consideration of the functional nature of boredom that we can begin to understand the possibility of boring art. In other words, it is only when boredom is seen through a functional lens that boring art makes sense.

the left DLPFC; and parts of the default mode network are activated during boredom. These findings suggest, respectively, that boredom is related to mental fatigue, attention, and mind-wandering.

V

Our discussion has shown that boredom is, fundamentally and despite appearances, a value-seeking emotion. The crisis of meaning, interest, agency, and engagement at the heart of boredom activates a mode of reflection on, and confrontation with, its object, with either the goal of avoidance or the aim of affective and cognitive reorientation towards it. As we highlighted in the previous section, such a type of reaction is often triggered by the realization that our situation lacks meaning (Chan et al. 2018; Fahlman et al. 2009; Van Tilburg & Igou 2011, 2017). Perceived meaninglessness need not be, however, the only negative appraisal that prompts us to alleviate boredom and to undo its causes. In the literature, it has been suggested that boredom is also related to appraisals of one's situations as lacking in relevance (Fahlman et al. 2013), as being low in perceived autonomy (Caldwell et al. 1999; Martin et al. 2006; Steinberger et al. 2016; van Hooff & van Hooff 2018), and as offering non-optimal stimulation or challenge (Csikszentmihalyi 1975; Daschmann et al. 2011). Whatever the underlying trigger might be, boredom is an unstable emotion that seeks its own undoing, with the tension characteristic of it functioning as motivation to re-establish one's sense of connection to, broadly put, the meaningful and valuable. It is exactly this feature of boredom that we take to be essential to understanding its role in the experience and appreciation of resolutely boring art.

Boring art is risky—more so than ugly, disgusting, or offensive art. If we were to attempt to mitigate the experience of boredom by leaving behind the situation that gave rise to it, as we do in many everyday cases, we would be effectively ending our engagement with the artwork. Such a reaction would render the boring artwork not a site of aesthetic engagement but an object that would simply redirect our attention elsewhere. Boring artworks would thus be reduced to mere “traffic” signs: objects that are of no aesthetic value but useful, perhaps, in helping us to move from one location to another. And so the most obvious way to answer boredom's call for reestablishing meaning, interest, or engagement—viz. moving away from the situation or object that bores us—appears to be one that is anathema to aesthetic appreciation.

Fortunately, within the context of art appreciation, such an evasive response to boredom, although possible, is often not our first reaction. After all, we put ourselves in the presence of an object (or event) that ought to be, we think, if not exciting or beautiful, at least interesting or engaging. Because of that, we are motivated, certainly initially, to attempt to explore and make sense of the boring artwork. However, as the empirical literature on boredom reveals, the magnitude of our

motivation will influence our experience of the artwork. In other words, it makes a world of difference whether we are weakly or strongly motivated to engage with the boring artwork. It is only in the latter case that an honest attempt to engage with the artwork is to be expected (Fisher 1993; Harris 2000; Nett, Goetz, and Hall 2011; Tze et al. 2013). The lesson here is that for its boredom to be aesthetically productive, a work of art must somehow instill in the audience the contention that it is worth engaging with.

It also matters how boredom is experienced. In fact, if low arousal boredom leads the subject to turn her attention elsewhere, we have a quick example of the fate of the unsuccessful work of boring art. But boredom in its highly aroused state hints at more desirable artistic outcomes, especially if this is coupled with a motivation to understand and engage with the artwork. In these cases, the perceived meaningless or felt blahness of an experience can propel the bored subject to reappraise the object, look for occluded dimensions of significance, and, generally put, righten one's relationship to one's situation (Elpidorou 2017). It is *while bored* that we are so propelled, and this gives the air of plausibility to the claim that an artist might wish to prolong this experience and explore the predicament of sense and significance it gives rise to, illuminating both the crisis itself as well the search for resolution. On the face of it, this would seem to be a deeply creative manner of pursuing the forms of philosophical, psychological, and moral insight that we expect from serious art.

Our concern is primarily with the hard case of resolutely boring works. Before we turn to the hard case, however, it is worth noting how much clarity our discussion brings to the weaker but still perplexing class of episodically boring works, which is, admittedly, by much the larger of the two classes. In episodically boring art, the work itself yields a type of affective and cognitive resolution, typically by furnishing appreciation with a positive meaning or experience that it has intentionally withheld, presumably before the curtain falls. The general dynamic of tension and release is certainly common in art, from the anticipatory function of diminished and altered dominant chords that resolve to a happy major, to banal and desultory dialogue that culminates in an admission that changes the meaning of all past dramatic events. In this sense, the wandering mind characteristic of boredom is refocused, and the work of art repays our efforts by providing attention with an element of potential aesthetic immersion.

Our hypothesis is that there are two basic kinds of resolution boring artworks strive for, and the distinction will turn out to be key to our positive argument. Call one kind of resolution "enacted" and think of it as indicating the class of artworks that explicitly and intentionally relieve extended experiences of boredom, for instance by endowing manifest features of its form or content

with properties that are intended to prompt positive aesthetic and affective appraisal. The sudden bursts of poetic diction and narrative development after *Moby Dick's* cetology section provide an example of enacted resolution, as does the occasional appearance of a motif during the 40 minutes of free-form, atonal improvisation in John Coltrane's *Ascension*. Prolonged episodes of boredom help prepare us to receive, often with greater intensity and reward, the aesthetic and artistic goods that a work wishes to deliver. This can be a powerful way of bringing to a reader's, listener's, or viewer's reflective awareness features of the structure of aesthetic experience itself and the role it plays in the experience of art.

Matters become more philosophically and artistically interesting when we consider episodically boring works that do not enact this resolution, certainly not in the diachronic sense of providing positive and standard forms of aesthetic immersion after subjecting the audience to a stretch of intentionally tedious content. Call this second form of resolution "prompted" and think of it as requiring *the audience* to create the conditions of resolution. In an episodically boring work, we often seek to escape our weariness by finding a feature of the work in which attention can take immersive interest. In the case of enacted forms of resolution, this will usually be an event in the artwork, timed by the artist to arrive at just the right moment so that the audience's affective state is changed, hopefully for the better. In prompted forms of resolution, however, the positive features are there, and usually have been all along, though they may be intentionally occluded and at any rate are unacknowledged. The audience must therefore *expand* its attentional and interpretative horizons if it is to find these positive features. We are thus called on to become proper aesthetic agents, since it is through our efforts that positively valenced aesthetic properties emerge and are made available to appreciation. In this respect, the artist of boredom often harnesses the call to agency that we have already seen is distinctive to the affect itself, understood on the functional model elaborated above.

Slow cinema typically makes excellent use of prompted forms of resolution. The lack of any discernable plot or dramatic structure can motivate one to focus on aesthetic features of a film, for instance, photography, camerawork, sound, or staging. The work of art withholds meaning from the place where we usually and easily find it (the plot) only to rouse us to discover it personally and often effortfully elsewhere. As Karl Schoonover notes, "Art cinema exploits its spectator's boredom, becoming as much a cinema of expectancies as one of attractions. It turns boredom into a kind of special work, one in which empty onscreen time is repurposed, renovated, rehabilitated" (Schoonover 2012: 70-71). Consequently, works of this sort intentionally involve a violation of our expectation that an artwork must be arresting, engrossing, interesting. Of course, what such a work

of art offers is not a complete or absolute refusal of engagement. The refusal is both strategic and temporary: the boring features of the work of art are such that they invite the spectator to restore meaning and value. Precisely because of the search for meaning and value that it occasions, boredom can lead the spectator to engage in sophisticated forms of critical and interpretive scrutiny, exploring the formal, aesthetic, and expressive features of work for that thing of value. When that thing is found, we establish the conditions for aesthetic immersion, but the search itself is arguably of more value, if clearly not in respect to the hedonic value of the experience, then surely in the just as serious matter of teaching us how to explore artworks for value and refining our ability to stage and answer questions about their point and purpose.

VI

We now have two broadly “internal” senses in which episodically boring works can bear aesthetic fruit as well as a much richer sense of why boredom might be a desideratum of works with serious artistic goals. But the hard problem is the possibility of resolutely boring art, that is, art that is good *because* of the manner in which it bores, and how does any of this demystify its existence? Our claim is that resolutely boring art is of a piece with episodically boring art of the *prompted* sort, though with one crucial difference. As we will argue, in the case of resolutely boring art, the meanings and objects of value we seek are not internal to the work itself. In this way we can be literalists, up to a reasonable degree, about the phenomenon: there are works of art whose properties are exhaustively boring yet which still create conditions for positive varieties of experience and appraisal. If boredom is a kind of situational crisis that calls on us to find features of our environment that can relieve it (Van Tilburg and Igou 2011, 2012), the move we are suggesting is effectively that of broadening the notion of the aesthetically relevant situation. Thus when bored spectators are prompted to find meaning, they are granted access to an expanded field of attention and potential immersion, and in a manner that in no way entails that the boring work has become something else, something now “unboring.”

Much of what makes the idea of resolutely boring art appear odd is a natural but impoverished picture of the nature of art and the structure of our experience of it. Despite appearances, there is nothing inconsistent in saying that we find the object before us both thoroughly boring and art, even good art. That is, we can affirm that the semantic, sonic, or visual surface of certain novels, films, poems, musical performances, and paintings offer appreciation nothing but wholly

boring items, and intentionally so. All this commits us to is the claim that the material aspects of an artwork are boring; and while it is of course through their material features that artworks are made present to us, *they are in no way reducible to them*. There are many ways of developing this claim, but, for our purposes, we can put it in terms of the difference between two basic stances we can take toward a work of art when considering questions of its meaning and significance: an *object-stance* and an *event-stance*, with each designating a *perspective* we can take on a work and not at all competing accounts of the nature of art.

We use “object-stance” to betoken a narrowly perceptual mode of attending to an artwork that focuses attention solely on the displayed qualities of the thing before us. This is intuitive enough, and it is the notion of an event-stance that requires explanation. We intend “event” in an ordinary rather than metaphysical sense.¹⁶ There are two perfectly colloquial senses in which we speak of certain artworks as events. We can speak of an artwork as *representing* the discovery of perspective or the harmonic potential of tritone substitutions, where “represents” in this context has nothing to do with depiction and everything to do with signaling that the work constitutes a significant occurrence in the natural history of an art form. In another clearly related sense, we speak of a work as an event when we wish to draw attention to the particular coup it wishes to effect in the world around it. To think of an artwork as an event and not just as a kind of object is in part to try to understand it in light of what it was made *to do, bring about, accomplish, demonstrate, or make happen*: that film reveals the aesthetic limits of Italian neo-realism; this opera establishes the dramatic viability of lyrical sentimentalism; that play wants to start a revolution; this poem gets us to see race in a new light; and so on. Certain of these things that a work might try *to do or bring about* can be understood in straightforward intentionalist terms; others are statements of the art-historical significance of a work and likely require no reference to an author and her will. Regardless of what confers these broader forms of meaning and significance on these works—the answer will surely vary, depending on the case—the point that matters for our argument is that one stance is clearly broader than the other, and in the right sort of way, and it thus suggests where to find the expanded field of attention that our argument needs.

Programmatically, the event-stance renders intelligible expanded statements of a work’s aboutness because it permits us to describe features of a work as being thus and such *so that* some

¹⁶ If talk of artworks as events seems extravagant, recall that there is considerable philosophical literature that equates them with performances and, to a lesser extent, actions. See [Davies \(2004\)](#), [Kivy \(2008\)](#), and [Culler \(2015: 125-131\)](#) for discussion and defense of the art-as-performance model, applied to artforms traditionally contrasted with the performing arts (painting, lyric poetry, the novel, etc.). See [Gibson \(2018\)](#) for a limited defense of the idea that works of art can be evaluated as actions with moral significance.

further goal might be accomplished or point be made: to show the “failure of language,” in Beckett’s case, or that in film “nothing happens,” in Warhol’s. These goals and points often are in no manner stated by the work or to be found within it: they cannot be read off of features of its expressive formal, representational, or expressive properties (see [Gibson 2007: 130-136](#)). Thus, when we grasp what has earned an artwork status as an event—the move it has successfully made in a given creative practice, the importance of its contribution to the world of art or ideas, etc.—we must direct attention away from consideration of the aesthetic features *of an object* to scrutiny of the role a work has come to play in an artistic tradition. The character of the event that a certain artwork represents (or wishes to represent, since failure is always possible) is made present to appreciation when we situate a work in a network of relationships that yields information about historical context, conditions of reception, features of production, standing artistic and political goals, boldness of a work relative to the status quo—*whatever* is needed to bring to relief how a work earned its precise claim to mattering. In some instances, answers to questions of a work’s meaning and significance are exhausted by descriptions of the inherent interest of a work’s form and content, in which case the event-stance effectively collapses into the object-stance.¹⁷ If a work just wishes to be beautiful or pleasing, this distinction won’t get us very far. In other cases, and the ones that matter for understanding the possibility of good boring art, the difference between the two perspectives is essential to appreciation and criticism.

The difference between these two perspectives is made especially clear when a work prompts an audience to search for this contextual and relational information if they are so much as to be able to evaluate its goals and relative success in achieving them. When this occurs, *we are granted access to a distinct mode of aesthetic appraisal and aesthetic experience*. Central to our ability to explain success here is that we can use aesthetic predicates in new manner, not to highlight positive features of the “manifest face” of the object before us but to explain how well or badly a work pulls off its intended coup in the artworld. The move a work wishes to make in the artworld can be executed *sublimely, clumsily, beautifully, tediously, arrestingly, unoriginally, elegantly, shockingly*, and so forth. And each of these predicates describes a potential field of aesthetic experience, something in which attention can be absorbed and on account of which emotion and thought can be enlivened. In cases of this sort, it is not, or not just, a work and its properties that matter to aesthetic experience but something much broader, namely, a happening in the artworld: an event, modest or seismic, in that region of artistic life that itself is a proper target of an audience’s interest, indeed in which interest can be absorbed

¹⁷ See [Goldie and Schelleken’s \(2007\)](#) account of the role of ideas in conceptual art their status as primary objects of aesthetic interest, since the material dimension of much conceptual art defies aesthetic appreciation.

in a recognizably aesthetic manner.

If our popular theories of the aesthetic do not accommodate such an idea, they are all the worse for it. Phenomena such as these are central to criticism, and they identify one of the most basic expectations an informed audience will bring to its viewing of new work of art. We might hope to see a beautiful or otherwise dazzling object, but we are just as likely to desire to bear witness to an event, perhaps momentous, in the artworld, one that to a nonnegligible degree shakes up, propels forward, or represents an innovation in the region of artistic practice that matters to us. Critical reviews often dedicate much more time to highlighting a work's relative success or failure in this respect than they do to commenting on the aesthetic features of its surface. This is what constitutes news in the artworld, and our theories of the aesthetic must take seriously what this implies about the nature and point of our experience of art. In short, and to use the language introduced above, it implies that aesthetic enrichment is not always, and exclusively, of a work. In certain cases, and the ones that we are highlighting here, it is an enrichment of an audience's sense of the character, preoccupations, and creative geography of artistic culture.

In cases of success, appreciation of the event that a work represents is appreciation of the innovation, creativity, and sheer daring of the move it makes in the artworld. Such appreciation by necessity directs attention to, and demands consideration of, the standing habits and conceits of the artworld, so that we can grasp, by virtue of a work's intervention, how certain of the practices that define it have been liberated, reinvigorated, or set on a new trajectory. It is true that success is often modest or unattained, but even the ambitions that underwrite a certain artworld move can be proper objects of artistic and aesthetic interest, since the possibilities they imply, regardless of whether they are made actual, can be *stunning*, *genius*, *revolutionary*, *mind-blowing*, and so on. The possibilities are effectively descriptions of the creative possibilities of a given artform, and they can make a claim on our interest and establish grounds of positive appraisal even when the artworld isn't quite ready for them. In cases such as these, a fair picture of aesthetic experience is not that of a relationship between an isolated subject and a discrete object but an image of each as already situated in a specific context of artistic production and reception. To use an impressively apt term from the jargon of fandom, this context effectively specifies a "scene" that can be characterized in varying degrees of determinacy: expressionism in classical music, post-war Parisian jazz, high modernist poetic objectivism, or SoCal punk of the early 1980s.¹⁸ It is entirely intuitive to think that scenes, as indicating more or less tightly organized regions of artworld activity, can be "objects" of

¹⁸ See Jesse Prinz's work on punk aesthetics for a discussion that develops this general idea in a novel direction. For Prinz, "[b]eing "into art" or part of the "artworld" is itself a subculture" (2014: 11).

artistic and aesthetic involvement, indeed that particular artworks are at times of primary interest because it is *through* them that we are granted experiential access to this more general field of interest: the artworld and the various subcultures of it in which we are often intensely invested.

An example would help. Assume *Empire* is resolutely boring in the sense elaborated here. Now consider the profile of an audience that is plausibly of the sort to view it in its entirety. First things first, our imagined audience, like nearly any audience, will arrive on the scene with standing interests and concerns in the corner of the artworld to which the film intends to contribute. They will have a stake in this and be possessed of a respectable amount of knowledge of its history and invested in seeing its future unfold. The film certainly bores, as the audience will readily aver. But that does not exhaust the possibilities, and we can easily provide them with an expanded field of attention. For one, the institution of film and the practice of film-making, and how *Empire* contributes to them. Or perhaps it is experimental art, the avant-garde, the work and career of Warhol himself, among many other possibilities. Whatever it is, if they remain in their seats,¹⁹ their interest will concern features of the culture and future of an artform they care about deeply, and this suffices to explain why they would be inclined to watch unfold, over more than eight stultifying hours, a new chapter in its history, and to say of the *total* experience that it was valuable.

Note that the audience's avowal is compatible with their insistence that the film is thoroughly boring. In fact, it is by being boring that *Empire* makes its exact point, and that the point has been successfully made is part of what they are avowing. Their response is neither contradictory nor does it imply that the film, because of their affirmation of the value of the total experience, is somehow now transformed into an object that is no longer boring. Unlike the above examples of internal varieties of reconciliation, the way in which this audience is here prompted to find meaning and value leaves the object just as it was, and in fact demands that it be experienced as resolutely boring for the experience to be intelligible as the kind of experience that it is. The manner of reconciliation does not change the affective valence of the work but the conditions of the work's reception, and it does so by expanding the notion of the relevant aesthetic situation so that it includes contextual information. It is this experience, complex and inclusive of more than just a mere the object, that

¹⁹ A reviewer contended, surely rightly, that most viewers likely never stayed in their seats for the entire duration of the film. In our argument *Empire* is intended as a placeholder for an artwork that is resolutely boring, many of which do not require quite so much time or effort. Be that as it may, many of the scores of professional critics and scholars who have celebrated (and helped secure the status of) these resolutely boring works, including *Empire*, certainly suffered through them and on occasion offered a good-faith account of why they found the experience valuable. This is all our arguments needs.

the audience presumably affirms and is willing to describe as valuable, even as aesthetically rewarding.

It is true that much of what is functioning as the foci of interest and immersion here are external to *Empire*, but it would also be wrongheaded to say that now something *other than* the film is affirmed as aesthetically valuable, say features of the artworld that are wholly beyond the object. This is wrong for the obvious reason that it is not some other thing called the artworld that one is attending to, because the artworld is here considered as inclusive of the boring film. It is the film itself that frames and gives content to whatever sense of the artworld and the significance of an event in it that the audience is appreciating. It is an expanded field of attention, not a different one. If the audience were called on to articulate their experience of *Empire*, we would expect constant reference to the thorough boringness of the film. All we have added to this is the expectation that reference to the features of artworld practices and their history will be made, too, in order to provide relevant context for their positive appraisal of Warhol's apparent achievement.

To pull a series of general points out of this, the possibility of boring art rests on the possibility of a complex but not atypical form of aesthetic experience. The kinds of pleasure and immersion typical of this experience are unlikely to be of the positively charged and intensely felt pleasure of the rapt audience beholding a sublime object. We should not expect that. In the examples we have adduced, from Andy Warhol and Samuel Beckett to John Ashbery and David Foster Wallace, the works effect their particular magic by way of creating a heightened state of boredom, since this is how they make vivid to thought and feeling the point they wish to make about the value of human communication, the condition of modernity, the nature of film, or the difference between art and everything else. A generous measure of tedium must be served if their points are to be brought fully home, since in each case it is the precise affective quality of the experience their works are intended to produce that gives substance to the precise point their works wish to make, and thus boredom is an ineliminable feature of it, indeed the very thing that makes their points *felt* and so objects of genuine experience and not merely of understanding.

The kind of pleasure that is compatible with this is the sort we have when we can affirm, sincerely and without hedging, that an object must be just as it is for an experience we deem valuable to be the experience that it is. This is to say that we desire the experience, and that its character is not only accepted but, in effect, willed. This is not at all like physical therapy, where we would greatly prefer to have the pleasure of recovery without the pain of achieving it. The experience the successful work of boring art makes possible is not just attenuated but unintelligible if shorn of the element of boredom. In the successful work of resolutely boring art, the particular trick is to present

the audience with a thoroughly tedious object that prompts considerations of, and directs attention to, a context in which we find a point to the suffering. Our account does not wash away or cancel out the pain; it makes it essential for placing further things of value within our reach. Thus, we haven't snuck a new, distinct object of pleasure in through the backdoor so much as shown boredom to be an essential ingredient in a much more complex recipe of aesthetic experience. This is a modest rather than bold version of literalism about the possibility of resolutely boring art, but modesty is preferable to boldness when the latter leads to nonsense and exaggeration. Our account does not treat boredom as something that is clearly not, say a positive emotion that in certain contexts we desire for its own sake. But we have shown that a resolutely work, understood against an informed theory of the nature of boredom, is one that is part of a total aesthetic experience that we can very well desire for its own sake.

The functional characterization of boredom that we offered in the previous section highlights the distinctive aesthetic affordances that the experience of boredom makes possible. Boredom is neither apathy nor, more broadly, a state of equilibrium. It motivates us to escape our felt discontent. That is, when we are bored, we are not *just* bored (dissatisfied, uninterested, or unengaged). We also wish to find meaning, engagement, or interest where meaning, engagement, or interest evidently are not. It is this motivational aspect of boredom that functions as the prompt to find an expanded field of attention. We become concerned, nonplussed, frustrated, or intrigued by the fact that a work is resolutely boring. We can't find any surface or material qualities that make the work interesting or engaging but, at the same time, the experience of boredom refuses to allow us to rest. We do not declare that the work is *simply* boring and stop at that. And this presents us with a way of thinking about what an aesthetics of boredom might be. It is an aesthetics of unease. Like suspense, boredom has a tensed anticipatory dimension that is freighted with aesthetic and artistic possibilities. On account of this uneasiness, we search for contextual features that illuminate how a work enlists boredom for proper aesthetic and artistic ends. When our efforts bear fruit, a new horizon of meaning and ultimately aesthetic engagement is both constituted and revealed to us.

In a sense, our solution is "formally" identical to the solutions to nearly every puzzle of art and negative emotion, since at *some level* we save the day by identifying an act of meaning-making or value-conferral that renders pleasure and appreciation intelligible. At the right level of generality, this is also how critics and scholars account for the market of "difficult" modernist art, our willingness to engage with the avant-garde, and much else. Since the link between appreciation and meaningfulness is so intimate, it is hardly a surprise that this is this is the case. What is

distinctive about our argument is the extent to which it situates the conditions of meaning-making in contextual features that surround, but are not internal to, an artwork. This is a much more radical move than we find in Gaut- or Carroll-type solutions, or in the many approaches that treat aesthetic pleasure and affective interest as a second-order response to a fraught first-order experience, since all such moves see properties of a work itself (and features of our experience of them) as providing the raw material of their solutions. Regardless, each of the paradoxes of negative emotion and art must offer an account of the particular ways an artwork explores and manipulates phenomena specific to the affect at the heart of the puzzle, lest we have no answer to the *why horror (ugliness, disgust, tragedy, etc.)?* question. Our argument in this section explains how art can be good because boring by showing the crisis of meaning and call to agency distinctive of state boredom to be key, and we have made our case by arguing for a greatly expanded sense of the scope of aesthetic appreciation.

VII

Like many studies, part of the value of ours consists in motivating a new problem. If our standing theories of the aesthetic suggest incoherence in the very idea of a good work of boring art, many notable works of last century show that our theories lag far behind the very artistic practices they ought to be able explain. We hope to have made a case for the reality of the phenomenon we have explored and the need to get our theories of art on the right side of it. We have also ventured a solution to the puzzle we have exposed, one that shows that our theories of the aesthetic need to be responsive to a much more complex sense of the nature of aesthetic appreciation and experience. We have no illusions that more work needs to be done to develop this into a proper theory of art and the ways provocative artworks often call on us to find creative grounds for enriching our aesthetic experience of them. But boredom can play a privileged role in such an account. No affect seems as constitutionally opposed to the concerns of art, and if we can enfranchise boredom in our theories of the aesthetic, the long list of other negative emotions that tax philosophers of art will seem less intractable.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are indebted to Aaron Meskin for helpful feedback on the paper. We would also like to thank the two anonymous referees who have read and extensively commented on a previous version of

this paper.

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