

Is the notion of aesthetic distance really bankrupt?

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George Dickie argues forcefully against the notion of ‘aesthetic attitude’, condemning it as a malignant relic which “misleads aesthetic theory.”¹ This paper will consider a popular account of the aesthetic attitude, Bullough’s theory of psychical distance. I will refer in the main to Bullough’s (1912) seminal article as well as two of Dickie’s (1961 and 1964) written responses, though Dickie’s suggestions extend to most similar accounts of distance and disinterest in the aesthetic attitude tradition. I will then consider some more recent contributions from Lyas which I think instructive in mediating the debate. While I remain convinced that Dickie’s arguments (properly supplemented) are correct, I suggest that the notion of distance does not *necessarily* blight the landscape of aesthetic theory.

The concept of psychical distance

In presenting the concept of psychical distance, Bullough asks his reader to imagine a fog at sea. The likely affective response aroused in the reader’s is that of unease or trepidation at the precarious situation. However, Bullough points out that one might plausibly *distance* oneself from the scene. One could, for a moment, disregard the sense of peril, and reflect rather on the *aesthetic* qualities that attend the scene – the smoothness of the water, the delicacy of the light, the thrill of the wind, and so on. These are two outlooks, two ways of considering the same phenomenon; and they diverge in their *psychical distance*. As Bullough puts it, we achieve this distance by placing the fog (or whichever phenomenon) “out of gear with our practical, actual self; by allowing it to stand outside the context of our personal needs and ends.”² This epistemic position is one which prioritizes and focuses our reactions onto the ‘objective’ features of the phenomenon. Furthermore, when ‘distanced’, our subjective affective reactions are interpreted in a way which reflects upon some or other objective feature of the phenomenon, rather than some feature of ourselves. In this way, psychical distance involves the setting aside (to some extent) of our practical or personal concerns, in order properly to attend to the

¹ (Dickie 1964, 800)

² (Bullough 1984)

phenomenon in question.³ Bullough's contention is that this distance is a necessary condition for the aesthetic attitude – the attitude appropriate to artworks.⁴

The parenthetical phrase above ('to some extent') requires some explanation if Bullough's account is to be plausible as an assessment of aesthetic attitude. Certainly, a great many worthwhile responses to art are those which are highly affective; it is the express project of many artworks to evoke sentiments of disgust, shock or bliss. It seems that these responses would be inhibited by the assumption of psychical distance, if psychical distance involves a thoroughgoing discharge of our affective reactions. However, Bullough has no such immoderate conception of aesthetic experience in mind when he suggests that distance is a natural way of understanding 'artistic temperament'. Rather, he recognizes the tension inherent in specifying the appropriate distance between the consumer and the artwork.

Consider the following example, apt to reveal the difficulties in specifying the correct degree of distance: Jones attends a performance of *Othello*, yet all the time dwells on his own suspicions that his wife is guilty of infidelity. Jones is thus specially invested in the performance; he empathizes intently with Othello, more deeply understands Othello's jealousy, and even perhaps concurs that the 'strumpet' Desdemona ought to meet her end at Othello's hands. The distance theorist would suppose that Jones' error here is that *he has not distanced himself appropriately* – his personal and practical concerns have clouded his consideration of the performance, and it is primarily to these matters that he attends. However, it must be noted that any satisfactory assessment of *Othello* will be informed by affective responses of just the same sort that Jones expresses. In our critique we will comment on the success of the performance in representing the anger and resentment that Othello feels; yet in coming to this appraisal, we will naturally consider the extent to which Othello's attitudes *coincide with our own*. Our correct appraisal of *Othello* qua artwork thus appears to require that we consult our personal or practical interests rather than setting them aside altogether. Certainly, we would chastise

³ Goldman explains that "we are to savor the perceptual experience for its own sake, instead of seeking to put it to further use in our practical affairs" (Goldman 2001, 189).

⁴ Dickie notes that, for Bullough "Psychical distance is not the whole of the esthetic attitude. Distance is a necessary and sustaining, but not a sufficient, condition of the esthetic attitude, and hence is actually only part of the esthetic attitude" (Dickie 1961, 233).

the critic who focused solely on the players' mastery of iambic pentameter without considering the personal affective components to the production – such a critic we might call over-distanced. Bullough recognizes that the insertion of distance is a matter of degree – a balancing act – as failing to insert the proper *amount* of distance appears to be to fail to appreciate the artwork in the correct way.⁵ However, it does seem that, generally speaking, we know what these parameters are. Bullough proposes that distance is correctly measured where the consumer is involved in the artwork to the greatest extent without excessive self-absorption – the goal is the “utmost decrease of Distance without its disappearance.”⁶

Preliminary issues

Before commencing with Dickie's critique, it will be helpful to head off certain initial hurdles for Bullough's theory, most of which do not go to the heart of his claims. First, Bullough should not be taken to advance the claim that one's practical concerns are never the same as one's aesthetic concerns, or that the two are necessarily in conflict. Certainly Bullough would allow that one may have a series of coincident practical and aesthetic concerns: the curator will consider the average height of her viewers when hanging the paintings in her exhibition, someone attending the opera will hope for seats near the front because of his poor hearing, and so on. Certainly, these practical concerns facilitate aesthetic experience rather than hinder it, and Bullough would certainly allow as much. There is a negative aspect to Bullough's claim, insofar he suggests that we set aside practical interests, but this must be read alongside Bullough's positive claim that we focus our attention primarily on the aesthetic qualities of the artwork. In this sense, we see how Bullough would reply to the supposed counterexample of the person who turns the painting to face the light in order practically to see it properly: the point of psychical distance is not to eliminate practical concerns but to subordinate them, and attend to them only insofar as they afford primacy to the aesthetic. As Goldman helpfully explains

⁵ Bullough suggests that distance “admits naturally of degrees, and differs not only according to the nature of the *object*, which may impose a greater or smaller degree of Distance, but varies also according to the *individual's capacity* for maintaining a greater or lesser degree” (Bullough 1984, 463-464)

⁶ (Bullough 1984, 463)

this aesthetic hierarchy, “we are to savour the perceptual experience for its own sake, instead of seeking to put it to further use in our practical affairs.”⁷

Secondly, it must be allowed that Bullough uses ‘distance’ as a theoretical term, and thus we should look to his stipulated definition thereof in assessing his claim. At one point, Lyas appears to ignore Bullough’s definition and focuses rather on the folk connotations of distance. He objects to Bullough’s theory that “‘Distance’ suggests a non-involvement and cool detachment and is likely to encourage the notion that some sort of icy contemplation is *de rigueur*, so that (and the case of the fog at sea suggests this) one’s posture in front of art ought to be like that of a stiff upper lip at the funeral of a lover.”⁸ It seems to me that Lyas argues here along the following lines: someone could misrepresent/misinterpret Bullough’s claim, the position advanced by this misrepresentation/misinterpretation is absurd, therefore Bullough’s theory is mistaken. Now, perhaps it is unfortunate that Bullough chose the term ‘distance’, which may in some contexts connote the scene Lyas imagines. However, this is no thoroughgoing objection, and in this case Lyas’ has defeated little more than a poorly constructed straw man.

Dickie’s critique

It appears at first blush that Bullough presents a helpful way of explaining the goings-on of correct aesthetic experience. When we attend performances, view paintings, or read fiction, we certainly do appear to put the content of the artwork out of gear with our personal and practical interests; we suspend these concerns and engage the artwork, as it were, at a distance. It must be allowed that this offers a prima facie plausible account of our ordinary aesthetic temperament, and points to an apparently universal feature of artworks. Dickie, therefore, will have to explain away the theory’s initial plausibility when he mounts his attack. On occasion, Dickie’s arguments are less perspicuous or powerful than they could be. Thus I draw from Dickie’s examples but elicit further reasons in support of his conclusions.

Dickie’s argument has two thrusts: he denies that there is a mode of attention which is peculiar to the aesthetic attitude, and thus he denies that there is a voluntary act of distancing which anyone ever performs in order to adopt the

⁷ (Goldman 2001, 189)

⁸ (Lyas 1997, 22-23)

aesthetic attitude.⁹ Dickie begins his critique by examining the conclusion, asking, “Are there actions denoted by ‘to distance’ or states of consciousness denoted by ‘being distanced?’”¹⁰ If he can show that these terms do not succeed in referring to phenomena in the world, then his case against distance will be established. As we will see, Dickie finds it likely that these terms in fact *do* refer, in the limited sense that attending to an artwork is different to attending to a non-art object. (Certainly, he quips, he will not consider the painting in the same way as he considers the marks on the wall around it.) However, this difference lies in the *object* of attention, not in the attention itself. Dickie contends that if this is all we understand by ‘distancing’, then the term appears simply to refer to actions for which there are extant perfectly serviceable terms, such as ‘focus’, or ‘attention’. He denies that there is anything more to the notion of distancing, that there is nothing substantively peculiar about the aesthetic attitude.

In this sense, it seems that Dickie’s account is *reductive*; why use the term ‘distance’ when we have perfectly adequate ones at our disposal? Indeed, I think it sensible that we should not introduce new terms of art if they are truly redundant – that is, if they perform no genuinely new function (such as referring to a new object or property), or assist us as useful shorthand. Certainly this stipulation seems basic to ordinary philosophical practice: countenancing a profligacy of redundant terms would obfuscate rather than clarify the subjects of our enquiries. But is this the case with distance? That is, does the term ‘distance’ convey no novel meaning or function as useful shorthand? It is Dickie’s suggestion that discussions of distance (or *disinterest*, as Stolnitz prefers)¹¹ are better described simply as *attending* or *failing to attend*

⁹ Odin (2001,95-96) supposes that these are two distinct lines of argument, and this is due largely to the way in which they are presented in Dickie’s article. However, I suggest that Dickie’s argument is most forceful if the first argument is taken to support the second, and that is how I present it here.

¹⁰ (Dickie 1964, 57)

¹¹ Cf. (Stolnitz 1961). I will take distance and disinterest to be two closely related ways of understanding the aesthetic attitude. Though the two notions have subtle differences and preoccupations, they clearly bear sufficient similarities to admit of simultaneous treatment. Cf. Lyas (1997, 23): “Talk of aesthetic distance from a work is of a piece with that whole tradition that makes aesthetic experience a matter of detachment and disinterestedness. The notion of detachment, I suspect, collapses to the notion of distance and is prey to its ills.”

properly to the artwork. Jones, suspicious of his wife throughout the performance of *Othello* merely failed to attend to the artwork; insofar as he attended to some other matter (say, thoughts about how his wife may have deceived him) he did not attend to the play. There is no use or sense in explaining Jones' error in terms of psychical distance, since we need look no further than the notion of attention properly to assess the matter. Dickie's contentions in this regard are compelling, and he offers a series of further examples to illustrate his claims. His arguments here are directed especially at Stolnitz's account of 'disinterest'; however, as mentioned, such arguments are apt to figure against any of the usual accounts of 'distanced' aesthetic attitude, thus I will discuss Dickie's examples in turn.

Stolnitz elaborates upon his own conception of distance by casting *disinterest* as a stance which demonstrates "no concern for any ulterior purpose."¹² It is this component which Dickie scrutinizes first. In aligning disinterest with the absence of ulterior purpose, Stolnitz advances the thesis that it is one's motives or intentions which determine whether one has the proper aesthetic temperament. This analysis admits of several counterexamples, all of which appear to support Dickie's original claim that the notion of distance is bankrupt or redundant. Consider two individuals listening to Mussorgsky's *Promenade*, one of whom is a music student listening in order to prepare for an examination on the piece, and the other of whom is listening simply for pleasure. Although the first individual plainly has some ulterior motive – he wishes to fare well in his examination – we can nevertheless imagine that he might *attend* to the music properly, quite irrespective of his motives. Dickie's contention appears to be that we should deny the applicability of the term 'interested' to the *listening*. Quite plausibly, it is the music student that is interested (insofar as he has ulterior motives towards the listening to the piece), but *the listening* itself is not a subject of which interestedness could properly be predicated – the student could certainly *listen* in quite the same way as the man who listens for pleasure. Stolnitz has conflated action with intention, and thereby misconstrued the conditions necessary for the aesthetic attitude. Note that this example is not intended to show that the student *necessarily* attended to the music properly – he may have been so distracted by the stress of the impending exam that he did not attend to the music at all. Dickie's point is to

¹² (Stolnitz 1960, 35)

show that, notwithstanding the student's interest or intentions, he *may* still attend to the artwork correctly.

The second example concerns the applicability of Stolnitz's theory to painting. What would *interested viewership* of a painting even look like? Perhaps Jones could be said to be viewing interestedly if a painting reminded him of his grandfather, and Jones then spent his time recounting stories about his grandfather's life, with the painting left, as it were, in the background. However, when Jones looks at the painting and then directs his business primarily to the telling of stories, is it accurate to say that he has failed to *distance* himself properly from the painting? Certainly this seems to be an odd locution, and, oddness aside, quite the wrong way of characterizing what has transpired. The notion of distance offers no helpful way of understanding what Jones has failed to do with the painting. Certainly it is not obvious whether he had over-distanced or under-distanced himself (was he too close or not close enough?). The suggestion of *interested viewing* offers no assistance either, as Jones does not appear to have an ulterior motive regarding the painting. He appears to have no motive concerning the painting at all, as it is not the painting that concerns him. Thus, we ought relinquish speaking about distance or disinterest, and rather simply say that Jones no longer *attends* to the painting – he attends to the story he is telling.

Dickie then considers whether the notion of disinterest might gain more traction if applied to the realm of theatre. Consider Smith, the theatre owner who sits in the audience but keeps his eyes on the till; surely this is a case of an *interested* outlook towards the play! Or consider Susan, the parent whose child is in the play – by no means is Susan disinterested in the play. However, is disinterest the best way of understanding the aesthetics of these situations? It seems not. It does not seem proper to say that the theatre owner Smith is *attending to the play with interest* – he is not attending to the play at all. He is distracted from the play and attends only to the numbers in the audience. We might suppose that the play could be quite different (say, the two players exchange parts) but Smith's response be unchanged if the house is similarly empty. This seems to demonstrate that what is going on is not a special kind of attention to the play – a case of *interested* attention – but rather it is a case of distraction from or inattention to the play. Likewise, Susan is not attending interestedly to the play when she watches her child perform in it. Certainly, Susan hopes the play will be a success, that her child's performance will be a triumph. However, these factors do not create in Susan a special kind of interested attention in the play; rather they serve to undermine and distract her

attention to the play. She appears to watch the play intently, but her attention is not on *the play*. This is made plain by the fact that she is inattentive to the aesthetic details of the play: if the other characters missed their cues but her child performed as convincingly, Susan's view would be precisely the same.

Thus, we appear to have good reason to doubt the usefulness of the notions of distance or disinterest after all. In these examples, making reference to disinterest missed the point. We wished to explain what was missing, how it is the individuals in the examples had failed *properly* to listen to the music, to look at the painting, or to watch the play. It seemed that, at least in these instances, the notion of disinterest did not clarify the matter: each case that was ostensibly a case of interested attention turned out to be a case of distraction, or inattention, since the attention was not attention *to the artwork* at all. The proponents of distance or disinterest theories appear to confuse the motivation of perception with the manner of perception, moving from premises about the former (e.g. the theatre owner has an interest in the success of the show) and drawing conclusions about the latter (e.g. when the owner attends to the show, he does so *interestedly*).

Feeble, uninformative, noxious? Lyas on psychical distance

For the remaining portion of this paper, I wish to examine a recent and instructive attack on psychical distance mounted by Colin Lyas. I will not canvas again his earlier objection, that distance is a noxious notion since the term 'distance' might be misunderstood; this is plainly to beg the question against Bullough, and there are more pressing objections in his arsenal to consider.

"That the account is feeble is easily shown,"¹³ says Lyas. Here, in the main, he has in mind the objections already raised by Dickie that (1) there is no special action that one performs when attending to art ("I simply attend, often with no sense of effort, to the aesthetic features of the situation"),¹⁴ and (2) that distance theorists appear to mischaracterise what transpires when one attends to an artwork ("What makes my attention aesthetic, then, is *what* I attend to, not *how* I attend to it.").¹⁵ These objections, while not new, are cogently argued.

¹³ (Lyas 1997, 20)

¹⁴ (Lyas 1997, 21)

¹⁵ (Lyas 1997, 21)

However, Lyas' third objection is novel, and supplements his overall critique of psychological distance. He says that "the notion that I spend my time at a play holding myself back from intervening is plain daft. I learn the notion of fiction as involving the logical impossibility of intervention and that is all there is to it."¹⁶ Sadly, Lyas does not elaborate much on the details or structure of his objection, but it strikes me as a point of some importance, and one worth taking up here. Like Dickie, Lyas affirms that he has never undertaken a particular stance or attitude when considering art, and he has never paused before attending to an artwork in order first to 'insert the appropriate distance'. However, Lyas goes further by suggesting that the very idea of distance misunderstands the notion of fiction.

If Lyas is correct, then we perhaps we have a better model for understanding what happens when the 'unsophisticated yokel' rushes the stage to save the damsel he believes actually to be in distress. Like the man after seeing the campus, piazza and classrooms before asking, 'yes, but where's the university?', the chivalrous yokel has committed a category mistake.¹⁷ He has misunderstood the nature of the occurrence on the stage in thinking that he *could* intervene; he has attempted to ascribe a property to the phenomenon which, as a matter of logical certainty, could never truly be so predicated. If he had understood that it was fiction, he would have understood that rushing the stage would be a futile mistake, since the very definition of fiction precludes intervention. His error is not an error of distance, but of misunderstanding or delusion. This certainly seems a more apt way of explaining the yokel phenomenon than distance, but can it assist us in understanding the activities of more typical audiences?

It seems clear that this objection has somewhat limited application, since most artworks do not even *appear* amenable to intervention as fiction does. However, Lyas' suggestion puts an interesting spin on the *Peter Pan* problem. Critics have diverged about how to understand what happens when Peter invites the children in the audience to clap their hands if they believe in faeries in order that Tinkerbell may live. Certain distance theorists suppose that this moment ruins the art, as the distance requisite for the aesthetic attitude is lost. Presumably other distance theorists would suggest that it is possible to

¹⁶ (Lyas 1997, 21)

¹⁷ Cf. (Ryle 2009)

maintain one's distance even while clapping, just as one may remain distanced from a performance even when profoundly emotionally moved. That both theorists are mistaken is made clear by Lyas' instructive, if simple, point. *Peter Pan* is a fiction – from start to finish. There is no problem here, since there never was any *possibility* of intervention in the first place. The moment for the children's participation does not rupture the ontological fabric that separates fiction from reality, since the whole performance is fictitious. When the children clap, it is *as though* they are intervening in the fiction, but, as a matter of logical necessity, they are not.

Concluding remarks

It is clear that there are significant and persuasive reasons to believe that the notion of psychical distance fails. In the examples discussed above, the notion of distance appears at best misplaced, and at worst, misleading. Most pressing among the criticisms of distance is that it does no good theoretical work in aesthetics. The theory explains nothing about what aesthetic experience is, not even that to distance oneself is to have an aesthetic experience.¹⁸ The theory, after all has been stripped away, says simply that certain things can distract our attention from the aesthetic properties of things. However, this is plainly not to tell us anything peculiar about aesthetic experience. Worrying about my ill parent will distract me from attending to my examination, but this doesn't illuminate the nature of my parent, the exam, or me. Similarly, psychical distance appears to fall radically short of illuminating the nature of aesthetic objects or experience.

However, I have steered clear of suggesting that the notion of distance is entirely bankrupt. While I believe that there is no way of salvaging the theory to make it do the solid theoretical work that we had hoped, it is not (entirely) as misleading or misguided as Dickie suggests. The theory, it must be admitted, certainly seemed to be on to something, and this consists in its recognition of certain *typical causes and effects of satisfying aesthetic experience*. The aesthetic experience, when satisfying, typically conjures in us the sense of being immersed in another world, one in which our practical and personal concerns are attended to only insofar as they fall within the ambit of our attention to the artwork.¹⁹ This truth, it seems to me, is neither universal nor detailed enough

¹⁸ Cf. (Lyas 1997, 21)

¹⁹ Cf. (Goldman 2001, 191)

to provide a satisfactory account of the aesthetic attitude. However, insofar as it is substantially weakened and hedged – that it says simply what *some* of the *typical* causes and effects of satisfactory aesthetic experience are – then it is not as insidious as Dickie suggests.

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