

From
“Psychical Distance’ as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle”
by **Edward Bullough**

from *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology* by George Dickie, Richard Sclafani, & Ronald Roblin. 2nd Edition.
1989. New York: St. Martin’s Press, ps. 320-333.

“A short illustration will explain what is meant by ‘Psychical Distance’.... It is a difference of outlook, due—if such a metaphor is permissible—to the insertion of Distance. This Distance appears to lie between our own self and its affections, using the latter term in its broadest sense as anything which affects our being, bodily or spiritually, e.g. as sensation, perception, emotional state or idea.... The transformation by Distance is produced...by putting the phenomenon...out of gear with our practical, actual self; by allowing it to stand outside the context of our personal needs and ends—in short, by looking at it ‘objectively,’ as it has often been called, by permitting only such reactions on our part as emphasize the ‘objective’ features of the experience, and by interpreting even our ‘subjective’ affections not as modes of *our* being but rather as characteristics of the phenomenon.

The working of Distance is, accordingly, not simple, but highly complex. It has a *negative*, inhibitory aspect—the cutting-out of the practical sides of things and of our practical attitude to them—and a *positive* side—the elaboration of the experience on the new basis created by the inhibitory action of Distance.... Consequently, this distanced view of things is not, and cannot be, our normal outlook.... We are not ordinarily aware of these aspects of things which do not touch us immediately and practically.... The sudden view of things from their reverse, usually unnoticed, side, comes upon us as a revelation, and such revelations are precisely those of Art. In this most eneral sense, Distance is a factor in all Art.... Distance...is *obtained* by separating the object and its appeal from one’s own self, by putting it out of gear with practical needs and ends. Thereby the ‘contemplation’ of the object becomes alone impossible. But it does not mean that the relation between the self and the object is broken to the extent of becoming ‘impersonal’....

Distance does not imply an impersonal, purely intellectually interested relation of such a kind. On the contrary, it describes a *personal* relation, often highly emotionally coloured, but *of a peculiar character*. Its peculiarity lies in that the personal character of the relation has been, so to speak, filtered. It has been cleared of the practical, concrete nature of its appeal, without, however, thereby losing its original constitution. One of the best known examples is to be found in our attitude towards the events and characters of the drama: they appeal to us like persons and incidents of normal experience, except that that side of their appeal, which would usually affect us in a directly personal manner, is held in abeyance....

It will be readily admitted that a work of Art has the more chance of appealing to us the better it finds us prepared for its particular kind of appeal. Indeed, without some degree of predisposition on our part, it must necessarily remain incomprehensible, and to that extent unappreciated.... What is therefore, both in appreciation and production, most desirable is the *utmost decrease of Distance without its disappearance*.... Loss of Distance [altogether]...means loss of aesthetic appreciation.... There are two ways of

losing Distance: either to 'under-distance' or to 'over-distance.' 'Under-distancing' is the commonest failing of the *subject*, an excess of Distance is a frequent failing of *Art*, especially in the past.... The consequence of a loss of Distance through one or other cause is familiar: the verdict in the case of under-distancing is that the work is 'crudely naturalistic,' 'harrowing,' 'repulsive in its realism.' An excess of Distance produces the impression of improbability, artificiality, emptiness or absurdity....

Many an artist has seen his work condemned, and himself ostracized for the sake of so-called 'immoralities' which to him were *bona fide* aesthetic objects. His power of distancing, nay, the necessity of distancing feelings, sensations, situations which for the average person are too intimately bound up with his concrete existence to be regarded in that light, have often quite unjustly earned for him accusations of cynicism, sensualism, morbidity or frivolity....

Spatial distance separating objects of sight and hearing from the subject has contributed strongly to [Distance].... In a similar manner *temporal remoteness* produces Distance, and objects removed from us in point of time are *ipso facto* distanced to an extent which was impossible for their contemporaries. Many pictures, plays and poems had, as a matter of fact, rather an expository or illustrating significance—as for instance much ecclesiastical Art—or the force of a direct practical appeal—as the invectives of many satires or comedies—which seem to us nowadays irreconcilable with their aesthetic claims. Such works have consequently profited greatly by lapse of time and have reached the level of Art only with the help of temporal distance, while others, on the contrary, often for the same reason have suffered a loss of Distance, through *over*-distancing....

It is Distance which makes the aesthetic object 'an end in itself'.... In particular, it is Distance, which supplies one of the special criteria of aesthetic values as distinct from practical (utilitarian), scientific, or social (ethical) values.... Distance becomes one of the distinguishing features of the 'aesthetic consciousness,' of that special mentality or outlook upon experience and life, which, as I said at the outset, leads in its most pregnant and most fully developed form, both appreciatively and productively, to Art."