

Is Dickie right to dismiss the aesthetic attitude as a myth? Explain and assess his arguments.

Introduction

In this essay, I criticise the arguments made in Dickie's article "The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude". I begin by introducing the idea of the "aesthetic attitude", and then go on to describe first Bullough's and then Stolnitz's versions of it, explaining their significant points and assessing how Dickie argues against them. I conclude that Dickie is not justified in his dismissal of the aesthetic attitude as a myth, and that he has in fact misunderstood, or misrepresented, Stolnitz's arguments.

Background

One way of exploring the nature of aesthetic appreciation is to consider the objects which are associated with aesthetic experiences, and to try and establish what properties they might have in common. This type of enquiry is often seen as a promising way to investigate the question "what is art?" (Dickie himself adopts this approach in formulating his "institutional theory" of art). Another way that aesthetic appreciation might be investigated is to focus not on the objects, but on the subject who is experiencing them: i.e., to consider not what kinds of things in the world can generate aesthetic experiences, but what it is about such experiences which gives them an aesthetic quality. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive, and each may generate insights which benefit the other.

When it comes to investigating the nature of aesthetic experience, an appeal is often made to the idea of an “aesthetic attitude”. Although using the term in a broadly similar sense, different people have offered different explanations as to what exactly constitutes an “aesthetic attitude”.

In his article “The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude”, Dickie sets out to discredit it. Dickie describes problems with two influential definitions, and concludes by acknowledging that while the concept has been valuable, the “aesthetic attitude” is nothing more than a myth, and as such, it “is no longer useful and in fact misleads aesthetic theory” (Dickie 1964:28). In the next sections I will consider the objections that Dickie makes and evaluate whether they are justified.

Bullough's “Psychical Distance”

One definition of the aesthetic attitude is supplied by Bullough, who suggests the idea of “psychical distancing” as a process which involves “separating the object and its appeal from one's own self, by putting it out of gear with practical needs and ends.” (Bullough 1912). Bullough gives the example of a fog at sea which, while typically cause for alarm, may in fact be a source of aesthetic pleasure for someone who is able to introduce sufficient “distance” between himself and the fog. In the context of an artistic performance, an audience member who has too little psychical distance might leap on to the stage to prevent an actor “killing” someone. For Bullough, the key to an aesthetic attitude is that the

appropriate amount of psychological distance be employed.

Dickie argues that to say that someone is “distanced” in a particular situation is to say only that his attention is more or less focused on some aspect of it. So in the example of the fog at sea, to be “distanced” from the situation is equivalent to saying that one's attention is focused on certain aspects of it, such as the fog's opaqueness and tendency to distort shapes. In this case, “what is the point of introducing new technical terms and speaking as if these terms refer to special kinds of acts and states of consciousness?” (Dickie 1964:29). Dickie goes on to give examples of what might be regarded as acts of “distancing” which he argues can be explained simply as cases of attention or inattention.

While Dickie's argument is fairly persuasive here, it does seem that he misses something about what it means to have an aesthetic experience. For example: I recently went to the cinema to watch a film. The film was thrilling, and I became absorbed in it. At one point, it suddenly occurred to me that I was sitting in a large dark room, in the middle of the afternoon, surrounded by other people. The moment passed and shortly I forgot where I was again. Now, I think that Dickie might argue that all that happened was that my attention, having been focused on the film's story, wandered for a moment and took in my surroundings, before being once again returning to the film. But this explanation doesn't seem to capture the nature of my personal experience and the way that I felt caught up by the sensations and emotions evoked by the sights and sounds in the theatre. Simply saying that I am attending to something “does not carry within it the rich phenomenological

possibilities that are traditionally associated with aesthetic perception” (Collinson 1992:164). Specifically, I think that the idea of “psychical distance” at least acknowledges these phenomenological possibilities, in a way that Dickie's description of “attention” doesn't.

But as Lyas says, the idea of distancing “gives no answer to the fundamental questions about the source of the power of art and the aesthetic” (Lyas 1997:20). A more promising definition of the aesthetic attitude in this respect is put forward by Stolnitz, and it is to this definition that Dickie now turns.

Stolnitz's definition of Aesthetic Attitude

Stolnitz defines the aesthetic attitude as a “disinterested and sympathetic attention to and contemplation of any object of awareness whatever, for its own sake alone” (Stolnitz 1960:19).

In his article, Dickie quotes Stolnitz's definition, but in criticising it, concentrates almost exclusively on the meaning of “disinterested”, which, in his opinion, is “the key term” (Dickie 1964:31) (even though Stolnitz says that “the truth of the account must be found in the total analysis and not in any single part of it” (Stolnitz 1960:19)). In my view this means that Dickie misinterprets and distorts Stolnitz's argument, and so while a discussion of Dickie's article must focus on the issue of “disinterest”, I will include other parts of

Stolnitz's definition as they relate to Dickie's arguments in the discussion below. I concentrate primarily on the first section of Dickie's case against Stolnitz, since the discussion which follows later in Dickie's article relies on his early arguments; arguments which, I claim, are flawed.

Disinterest

Prefacing his definition of the aesthetic attitude, Stolnitz describes what he calls “the attitude of practical perception” (Stolnitz 1960:18), in which my concern when I attend to an object relates to how “it can help me to achieve some future goal” (Stolnitz 1960:18). In contrast, the aesthetic attitude is one in which “there is no purpose governing the experience other than the purpose of just *having* the experience” (Stolnitz 1960:20). In his definition, the word “disinterest” is intended to capture this particular feature of an experience which has some aesthetic quality. A given object may be the subject of either interested or disinterested attention (or presumably a mixture of both); to adapt two of Stolnitz's examples: I might enjoy looking at my painting because of the prestige and wealth I think it could bring me (i.e. in an interested fashion) or because it is a beautiful painting (disinterestedly). In thinking of a pen as a writing implement, I have an interested attitude; a disinterested attitude would be one in which I become preoccupied with the distinctive colour and shape of the pen itself. I pick these two examples because they highlight the way that the idea of disinterest applies to things which are not, as well as things that are, generally considered as “works of art”. This issue is emphasised in the last part of

Stolnitz's definition, namely that the aesthetic attitude can apply to “any object of awareness whatever”. As Stolnitz says, “no object is inherently unaesthetic” (Stolnitz 1960:24).

In his discussion on “disinterest”, Dickie gives various examples to illustrate how he thinks the term “disinterest” might be applied, and then uses these examples to argue that it, like the idea of psychological distance, adds nothing to our understanding of what it means to attend to something. In talking about music, he says that “There is only one way to *listen* to (to attend to) music, although the listening may be more or less attentive and there may be a variety of motives, intentions, and reasons for doing so and a variety of ways of being distracted from the music” (Dickie 1964:32). Paraphrasing, this gives:

- there may be different levels of attention
- there may be different motivations for the attention
- attention may wander

I don't think there is any need to discuss the first point: it seems to me to be self-evident.

What is relevant to the idea of “disinterest” is Dickie's suggestion that it is no more than a fancy way of expressing the second and third cases. In Dickie's music example, Jones listens to music as preparation for an examination, and Smith listens without any ulterior purpose. Dickie says that just because they have different motivations, “this does not mean Jones's *listening* differs from Smith's” (Dickie 1964:32).

In this case, I think Dickie is correct to say that the only difference between Jones's attention and Smith's attention is that it is motivated by different factors: there may be

nothing different about the attention *per se*. But I don't think that Stolnitz would disagree with this claim: recall that he says “there is no purpose governing the experience other than the purpose of just *having* the experience”. Stolnitz is not arguing (as Dickie seems to suggest) that the attention itself has a special quality called “disinterest”, but that an aesthetic attitude is *governed by* a different kind of motive, intention or reason from that which governs a non-aesthetic attitude.

In an example to illustrate “wandering attention”, Dickie says of someone looking at a painting that “an example of an alleged interested viewing might be the case in which a painting reminds Jones of his grandfather ... [but] Jones's thinking or telling a story about his grandfather is no more part of the painting than his speculating about the artist's intentions and ... cannot properly be described as attending to the painting interestedly” (Dickie 1964:32). If this is an example of “interested viewing”, it's not a very good one. Or at least, I think it is reasonable to argue that Jones's has some degree of “interested” attention as he approaches and first looks at the painting, but that this is lost as he begins to daydream and reminisce.

I think a better example of “interested viewing” can be given using the book “Masquerade” by the artist Kit Williams (see “Masquerade page by page”). This book, which includes a set of paintings and a somewhat ambiguous story, contains clues to the location of a piece of jewellery hidden somewhere in England. It is possible to read the book and derive pleasure from the artwork whether or not you have any intention of solving the puzzle (this

is what David is doing). Or it is possible to read the book specifically in order to solve the puzzle (Ian does this). Both David and Ian have the same degree of attention, and neither suffers from wandering attention: the difference is that while Ian's attention is interested, David's is disinterested.

In the case of (what I believe is) a more reasonable example of “interested” and “disinterested” viewers of art, does Dickie have a response? I think he would use the same argument as for his example of music, namely that “there is only one way to *look* at a picture, although ... there may be a variety of motives, intentions, and reasons for doing so”. In other words, Ian and David are both looking at the pictures in the same way, but from different motives. But as mentioned earlier, I don't think this conflicts with Stolnitz's concept of “disinterestedness”.

In summary, I think that it is fair to characterise “disinterest” as a motivating factor for attention, rather than an intrinsic quality of the attention, but I don't think that this is in conflict with Stolnitz's meaning of the term. And, crucially, “disinterest” is only *part* of Stolnitz's definition.

Sympathy

Sympathy “refers to the way in which we prepare ourselves to respond to the object...If we are to appreciate it, we must accept the object “on its own terms.”” (Stolnitz 1960:21). It seems to me that this is a key aspect of the theory: many examples spring to mind which illustrate its importance. I remember an occasion when, after hearing positive reviews, I arranged a trip to Feydeau's “A Flea in Her Ear” with some workmates. The play is a farce, and includes frantic chases, mistaken identities, and a rotating bed (which people typically end up in with someone they shouldn't). This type of production is perhaps especially sensitive to the disposition of its audience, but it was clear before we entered the theatre that my friends were anything but prepared to accept it “on its own terms”. Referring sarcastically to the play as “Whoops, there go my pyjamas” they asked me how many vicars would appear semi-clothed, etc.. While I am sure that the play has its strengths, it did not work very well as an aesthetic experience for me: I was uncomfortably conscious of the contrived setting and the implausibility of the plot. If my friends enjoyed the experience, it was more a result of my discomfort than because of the play's dramatic or comedic merit.

In the case of the Feydeau piece, it seems to me that in order for it to have been a satisfying aesthetic experience, it was necessary to have adopted a sympathetic attitude – in this case, suspending disbelief and accepting the premise of the slightly unreal world in which the play is set – something that neither my friends nor I were able or willing to do on this occasion. It is not enough *simply* to be disinterested.

As mentioned earlier, Dickie concentrates on “disinterestedness” as the key component of Stolnitz's definition, and does not specifically mention “sympathy” other than in when quoting the definition. Perhaps Dickie feels that “sympathy” is just another case of focusing one's attention, but he does not say this. I think though, that the idea of sympathy can cast light on some of Dickie's other examples.

To take a specific case, “The example of a playwright watching a rehearsal or an out-of-town performance with a view to rewriting the script” (Dickie 1964:34) is suggested as an example of interested attention. Dickie asks “how is our playwright's *attention* (as distinguished from his motives and intentions) different from that of an ordinary viewer?” (Dickie 1964:34). Well, Stolnitz can say that in the case of an ordinary viewer, the attention is sympathetic (in the sense that the viewer is suspending disbelief, etc.), while in the case of the playwright, it is not. As well as being an interested viewer (which, as I have already agreed, may be considered as just a way to characterise the motivation for his attention), the playwright is an unsympathetic one. The same point about sympathy applies to the example of Smith and Jones listening to music, and to other examples Dickie uses such as reading poetry.

“Any object of awareness whatever”

One striking feature of Dickie's article is that all of the examples he cites relate to what I think it is fair to classify as “artistic works” - poems, paintings, music, theatre. This means

that he does not address the claim in Stolnitz's definition that the aesthetic attitude may be directed to any object (Stolnitz, for example, talks about pens, warehouses and telephone directories). But it seems to me that this is an important aspect of the definition.

I said earlier that investigating what is it about an experience which makes it an aesthetic one may provide some insight into the question “what is art?”. And I think that the “aesthetic attitude” can help explain why people derive aesthetic satisfaction from viewing objects whose classification as “art” is controversial. For example, Carl Andre's “Equivalent VIII”, an arrangement of 120 bricks, is not universally accepted as being “a work of art”. But whether it is or not, approaching the work sympathetically makes it more likely that we find aesthetic interest in it: for example, the variation in colour and texture of the bricks, the pleasing effect of repeated shapes, etc.. That Stolnitz's definition stipulates aesthetic attitude as being something that can be directed to *any* object is helpful in explaining the appeal of “Equivalent VIII”: when placed in a context (an art gallery) that tends to promote the aesthetic attitude (disinterested, sympathetic), *any object* is capable of giving rise to aesthetic satisfaction (whether or not it is “art”).

It is difficult to know what Dickie thinks about this part of Stolnitz's definition: the only place that he references it is at the start of his article where he quotes the definition, and at the end where he claims that it can be paraphrased as “Being in the aesthetic attitude is attending closely to a work of art (*or a natural object*)” (Dickie 1964:44; my italics). I conclude that he does not think that this is an important aspect of the theory, although I

have offered my own reasons why I think that it is significant.

Conclusion

Dickie's article addresses two versions of the theory of "aesthetic attitude", but I don't think he is completely effective in his arguments against either of them. While I think he is on fairly solid ground in his objections to psychical distancing, I do not think his suggestion that it is nothing more than the focusing of attention does justice to the phenomenological aspects of aesthetic experience.

When it comes to Dickie's arguments against Stolnitz, I hope I have shown that Dickie fails to address all of the aspects of Stolnitz's definition, and that the greater part of his argument focuses on one aspect (despite Stolnitz's explicit caution against so doing), which I believe he misrepresents as being its only significant component.

So I don't think it can be said that Dickie is justified, on the basis of his article, in dismissing the aesthetic attitude as a myth. To do this he must address all the aspects of Stolnitz's argument.

In closing, I would also like to add a postscript recalling Lyas's objection to the aesthetic attitude (in the context of distancing) that it "gives no answer to the fundamental questions about the source of the power of art and the aesthetic" (Lyas 1997:20). I believe that the

aesthetic attitude as defined by Stolnitz does at least provide us with a “foot in the door”:
namely, that it is the aesthetic attitude which enhances, even if it is not the source of, the
power of art and the aesthetic.

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