

Nehemias Jimenez
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“The Aesthetic Experience of Dewey, Stolinz, and Bullough”

When aesthetic experience is studied in the context of relating to an actual object of art, one can retrace the steps of how the interaction formed from start to finish. In this task, the quality of interactions also seems to be distinguished. And so the question of mapping out an experience and the kinds of interactions acted towards art can diverge towards two conclusions. Herein lies the question I attempt to answer; do we actively engage with art to experience it aesthetically, or do we distance ourselves so that we can perceive the objects of our attention clearly? Here we can arrive at the explanations that are written in the works of Dewey and the likes of Stolnitz and Bullough. I look to use these explanations of aesthetic experience in a description of the Eric Clapton song “Tears in Heaven” while also giving scope to how they may complete each other and arrive at being objective in message.

Before using the example of “Tears in Heaven”, it would be prudent to give form to the belief of Dewey that in basic terms assert that aesthetic experience is reached by an engaged perspective. For Dewey, aesthetic experiences are a subcategory of integral experiences. And in general, integral experience can be divided in the forms of intellectual and aesthetic. It is important that the distinction be made because this gives Dewey’s perspective a full and rounded view of art having context in the world. Both of these experiences are made up of an engaged process with the art piece in the world.

In the aesthetic case, the art is made by an artist who has placed an emotion in the object that originated in him or herself. Usually in the dark of the emotion and the origin of the impulses to create, the artist must engage the world and the substances available to them to give order to the emotions in an art piece. This process has resistance and must be filled with rhythmic tension and release towards the final fulfillment. It is an unbroken process with many smaller events rolling like a snowball to its fullest shape. This object serves as somewhat of a voice that tells the artist they are in control of the deep chaotic parts of themselves. Only then can they pinpoint the roots of their fruit and see the leading of this emotion in their final product. At this point, the artist is now fully level in their headspace and puts the object in the world to be interacted with. Naturally, Dewey believes that the perceiver of the art form has an aesthetic experience when the deep things inside of them connect with the clarity of their emotions on display. In this sense, the art or piece of the world has a context that allows for connection between the artists, the art perceiver and the object of aesthetic experiences. For this to happen there must be an engaged focus to get connection with the painting, song, or poem while balancing the given standards of environment.

Now applying this to the song "Tears in Heaven" starts with what we are fortunate to have; the story of the song. Eric Clapton wrote the song after the tragic death of his 4 year old child in 1991. The emotion of heartbreak conveyed in the song is moving, both musically and lyrically. Regardless if one knows the story or not, one can engage this song and face the heartwrenching reality of "Tears in Heaven". This is because the art already has a context by which to be experienced. The context is one of consolation

and remedy for deep loss and mourning. According to Dewey, the perceiver must actively decide to listen to the intent of the artist in the song to take that away. Those who do so will hear the drop of the bongo on the 4 beat, the somber horns, and the waning cry of the electric guitar convey this message. The emotions of loss and hurt in the perceiver would be fully conveyed in the song for them, giving them the same equilibrium it gave the artist.

The aesthetic experience as explained by Stolnitz and Bullough would emphasize another approach. In the work of Stolnitz, he speaks about attitudes being the factor that determines our experience of the world and art. If one has a practical attitude, the perceiver is seeing objects and art as tools to serve them in self-centered goals. The perceiver would enhance the things useful to him/her and disengage the other. In this sense there is a bias and prejudice that arises towards specific peoples, cultures, or even styles of music. This would ultimately cross over into how we perceive art. If there are colors that one particularly does not like, then the art would be dismissed before getting the proper view. Aesthetic attitude on the other hand will help produce aesthetic experience. In this approach the perceiver views the object not for what it would accomplish for them, but just to see it as it is. It is not something intellectual or with any personal interest. It is very much so the imposition of the art or aesthetic object itself. This connects rather well with Bullough's concept of aesthetic distance that looks towards the same direction; that if one could distance themselves on a physical level from something, a true aesthetic experience is born. In that sense we are too up close to see the bigger picture. But if we step back, whether on an emotional,

mental, or physical level, it would be an experience not based on one's own perception or one's inclination towards something, but it would be produced and come out of the art piece. In this sense contemplation is made evident. The art is not being judged in any way but hopefully being received as it actually is.

"Tears in Heaven", being perceived with an aesthetic attitude would look like not using the song as a consolation or using it explicitly for the purpose of enjoying music even. It would be to listen to the song for what it is, to allow what is in the song to speak as if there was no context, that way our opinions do not get in the way. This would mean hearing the song rhythm and the melody choice that are invoking this sense of loss. The lyrics themselves seem to create a vast chasm of time and space between someone and someone lost. With aesthetic attitude, Stolinz would assert that one can get this message of pain and loss and experience it without having ever felt it. This is because if the perceiver has truly stepped out their biases and preferences, they will have received what the art wants to say.

After looking at these two explanations of aesthetic experience, I would conclude that both complete each other. What seems to make them oppose each other is that Stolinz and Bullough appear to condemn the emotions of the Dewey process. But for Dewey, the experience is not quick and fast like the practical attitude of Stolinz. One can't run and listen to a song and actualize the aesthetic experience no more than one can throw a tantrum and actually find relief. And the resistance of Dewey is actualized for Stolinz and Bullough to fight off the urges to quickly dismiss the object as well. Both views are fighting off the urge to be completely controlled and get a quick fix or a

completely subjective perspective on aesthetic objects. Most importantly, because the artist is so important for Dewey and the art object so important to Stolinz and Bullough, the same message is received. The paths of one's upbringing or preferences may trigger and make easier the arrival to aesthetic experience, however the very emotions that relay these experiences are universal. These are irrevocably universal feelings that we all understand and can experience in art. We receive them from the world in aesthetic experience because they are in us as well.

In conclusion I believe that both views seem to complete each other. The overall blueprint of Dewey is compatible with Stolinz and Bullough. In the experience of "Tears in Heaven", the message and aesthetic experience is realized when one allows the context of the art in the world to speak. The only difference is that Dewey's method is tailored to those who have the need inside of them and fight the resistance to calm it, and Stolinz and Bullough's method is for those who can see the message and receive the experience even without presently needing or wanting it by stepping into an aesthetic attitude or distance. This tension of release and resistance are the very germ of experience and cannot be washed away but can only be explained in different forms. In the aesthetic form, it seems that the art and its message cannot be manipulated but must be received and bring about true experience to the perceiver.