

Distance as constitutive of aesthetic experience: A rereading of Aristotle and Burke

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of distance as a constitutive mechanism in aesthetic experience, focusing on Aristotle's notion of catharsis and Burke's theory of the sublime. By examining how temporal and perceptual separation mediates emotions such as pity, fear, and terror, I argue that distance is not a passive buffer but an active agent in transforming raw affect into ethical, cognitive, and aesthetic meaning. Through a comparative rereading of classical and early modern frameworks, the paper illuminates the ways in which structured mediation allows audiences to engage intensely with negative emotions by drawing upon contemporary interpretations, including Konstan and Halliwell. The paper demonstrates how temporal and perceptual mediation transforms overwhelming emotions into intelligible, meaningful experiences. This comparative analysis reconceptualises distance as a multidimensional mechanism, bridging affective intensity with cognitive and moral comprehension, and highlights its enduring relevance in discussions of tragedy, terror, and the sublime. Ultimately, the aim is to point to a nuanced understanding of how structured mediation shapes the reception and ethical resonance of powerful emotional content in art.

Keywords: Distance; catharsis; sublime; aesthetics; transformation

One of the central paradoxes in aesthetics lies in the peculiar human capacity to take pleasure in experiences that, in ordinary life, are painful, frightening, or overwhelming. Why do audiences seek out tragic drama or sublime spectacle when such experiences are rooted in pity, fear, or terror? Philosophers from antiquity through the eighteenth century offered different explanations for this paradox, but Aristotle and Edmund Burke remain the most influential in articulating how distance makes negative emotions aesthetically valuable. This paper argues that for both thinkers, distance does not simply mitigate emotional intensity but constitutes the very mechanism by which unbearable emotions are transfigured into aesthetic experience. Aristotle conceptualises distance in ethical and psychological terms, situating pity and fear within the structured frame of tragedy, which yields catharsis and moral illumination. Burke, by contrast, grounds distance in perceptual and spatial separation, emphasising how safety transforms terror into the sublime. By examining these two models, this paper contends that distance is a fundamental principle in the history of aesthetics, functioning as the hinge by which pain and fear are converted into aesthetic insight. Pain, grief, terror, and loss ordinarily repel us, yet within the realm of art and representation, they acquire value. Tragedies move audiences to tears; sublime landscapes inspire awe; even narratives of devastation or horror hold us in rapt attention.

For Aristotle, writing in the fourth century BCE, the paradox of painful art was addressed in his *Poetics*, where tragedy is defined as “an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions” (Aristotle 51) and arouses pity and fear in order to achieve catharsis. Central to this account is the recognition that the emotions elicited are not immediate or overwhelming but mediated by the theatrical frame, which both brings suffering close to the spectator and simultaneously keeps it at a reflective distance. Nearly two millennia later, Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) offered an account of a similar paradox through the sublime. For Burke, the sublime is rooted in terror, a passion that in lived experience is overwhelming and destructive but, when experienced at a safe remove, produces delight: “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime” (Burke 51). Both thinkers, despite their differing

philosophical orientations, identify distance as the crucial principle by which negative emotions are transformed into aesthetic meaning. This paper argues that distance is not merely a protective condition that prevents painful emotions from overwhelming the spectator but the constitutive hinge by which those very emotions become aesthetically intelligible. By examining Aristotle's model of tragic emotion and Burke's theory of the sublime, the objective is to demonstrate that distance, whether ethical, psychological, or perceptual functions as the transformative threshold between pain and pleasure. In doing so, it situates Aristotle and Burke within a broader philosophical lineage that treats distance as a structural condition of aesthetic experience.

Aristotle's *Poetics* remains foundational to the study of tragedy and its emotional dynamics. His central claim is that tragedy, unlike mere storytelling, is an art form that arouses pity and fear in order to achieve catharsis. These emotions, however, are not raw or uncontrolled. They are carefully structured by the conventions of the stage and the moral configurations of character. For Aristotle, pity arises when we witness undeserved suffering. The tragic protagonist is neither wholly virtuous nor utterly depraved, but a morally mixed figure who falls from fortune due to a *hamartia*. The fall of such a character elicits pity because it appears unjust yet understandable. Crucially, this pity is not identical to direct grief. The spectator does not share the protagonist's pain as if it were their own. Instead, pity arises at a mediated remove, in recognition of another's suffering as both proximate and distinct. As Konstan observes, "we must pity from a distance, as onlookers, if we are to pity at all" (Konstan 8). Fear, likewise, functions through a balance of proximity and distance. The spectator perceives that the calamities on stage could, in principle, befall anyone, including themselves. This recognition universalises the experience of fear, making it intelligible as part of the human condition. Yet the fear elicited in tragedy is not terror in the ordinary sense, for the spectator is aware that the events are fictional and safely contained within theatrical performance. This duality allows the spectator to recognise danger without being paralysed by it. Without the mediating frame of drama, fear would collapse into immediate panic. Within tragedy, however, fear becomes reflective, pointing to the vulnerability of human fortune. The stage thus performs a double operation: it brings the spectator close enough to identify with the sufferer, yet maintains enough distance to prevent emotional collapse. This mediation is what makes catharsis possible. While the precise meaning of catharsis has been much debated, purification, purgation, or clarification, it clearly involves a transformation of emotion through structured representation. Rather than being overwhelmed by grief or fear, the spectator processes these emotions in a form that yields insight. As Halliwell notes, tragedy "renders

emotions intelligible by embodying them in an artistic medium, thus transmuting their force” (Halliwell 174). In Aristotle’s account, this structuring is primarily temporal, the tragic narrative unfolds in a deliberate sequence, with a beginning, middle, and end, allowing the audience to apprehend the causal and ethical dimensions of human suffering. The temporal distance created by the plot’s progression ensures that the spectator is neither overwhelmed by immediacy nor disengaged from intensity. By witnessing the trajectory of events to their inevitable reversal or conclusion, the audience experiences catharsis: emotions are felt deeply yet are simultaneously processed cognitively and ethically (Aristotle 51). In this sense, the embodiment of emotion within tragedy’s temporal structure functions as a mechanism of transmutation, converting chaotic affect into intelligible, ethically resonant experience. Distance is therefore not incidental in Aristotle’s account but essential. Without distance, pity would collapse into grief and fear into terror. With distance, these emotions become material for reflection and moral instruction. The spectator is moved, not devastated, enlightened, not shattered. Tragedy, in this sense, is not a mirror of raw suffering but a carefully framed representation that transforms human vulnerability into knowledge.

If Aristotle emphasises the moral and psychological mediation of painful emotions, Burke’s *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* approaches the problem from a different angle, rooted in perception and sensation. For Burke, the sublime is the category that explains how experiences of terror, vastness, and overwhelming power can produce pleasure when contemplated at a safe distance. The foundation of the sublime is terror. Unlike beauty, which is associated with harmony, proportion, and love, the sublime arises from what threatens annihilation or exceeds comprehension. Burke identifies qualities such as obscurity, vastness, and power as the primary triggers of the sublime because they impress upon the imagination its own finitude. Terror, however, in its immediate form, is unbearable. “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible” (Burke 36). Direct exposure to destruction overwhelms the senses and annihilates reflection. What converts terror into sublimity is distance. The storm at sea, when observed safely from shore, produces awe rather than panic. Ruins of ancient empires, contemplated centuries after their fall, provoke wonder rather than immediate grief. The crucial condition in each case is safety. The observer must feel secure in order to contemplate terror without being destroyed by it. Distance, therefore, is not merely protective but constitutive, without it there is no sublime, only suffering. As Fogarasi notes, “in Burke’s

account, distance is not an accident of perception but the very mechanism that turns pain into aesthetic pleasure” (Fogarasi 87).

This distinction marks Burke’s departure from classical aesthetics. While Aristotle emphasised tragedy’s moral function, Burke insists on the physiological and perceptual basis of aesthetic response. The sublime arises when the imagination oscillates between recognising danger and affirming safety. This oscillation produces what Burke calls “delightful horror,” a paradoxical mixture of fear and pleasure. The sublime, then, does not offer moral instruction in the Aristotelian sense but instead confronts the human mind with the limits of its power, producing humility before forces greater than itself. In this account, distance functions as the hinge between destruction and delight. Too close, and terror is annihilating; too far, and it loses its force. At the proper remove, however, terror becomes sublime, offering not only aesthetic pleasure but also an expanded sense of human limitation in the face of vastness or power.

When Aristotle’s and Burke’s accounts are placed side by side, a remarkable continuity emerges. Both grapple with the paradox of how negative emotions like pity, fear, and terror can yield aesthetic value. Both resolve the paradox by positing distance as the crucial mediating factor. Aristotle’s distance is primarily ethical and psychological. The audience must be close enough to identify with the tragic figure, yet distant enough to avoid dissolving into grief. Burke’s distance is physical and perceptual the observer must be secure enough to confront terror without succumbing to it. Despite these divergences, both accounts demonstrate that distance is not ancillary but constitutive. It is not a buffer added onto emotion but the very mechanism that transforms raw affect into aesthetic experience. Without distance, there is no catharsis in Aristotle and no sublime in Burke. Distance is the threshold where the unbearable becomes bearable, where pain is transfigured into pleasure, and where art achieves its peculiar power. This remains relevant beyond the confines of tragedy or the sublime. Contemporary aesthetics, from film theory to trauma studies, continues to grapple with the ways in which representation frames suffering. Aristotle and Burke, though separated by centuries and philosophical traditions, converge on the recognition that art does not shelter us from painful emotions but offers them back to us at the right remove. Distance, therefore, is not the negation of emotion but its transformation, the very principle by which art makes suffering meaningful.

The concept of distance in aesthetic theory thus occupies a central role in both Aristotle’s and Burke’s accounts of emotional engagement. Whereas traditional readings often interpret

distance as a buffer that moderates the intensity, a closer analysis reveals that distance is not merely a protective mechanism, it is constitutive of the very possibility of aesthetic experience. In Aristotle's *Poetics*, tragedy achieves its transformative power through catharsis, which purges emotions of pity and fear. Crucially, the effectiveness of catharsis depends not on mere observation or detachment but on temporal and structural mediation. The audience recognises the causal chain, witnesses the reversal and recognition, and apprehends the moral significance of the narrative. The temporal distance afforded by the completed plot enables the spectator to experience emotions fully, yet with reflective comprehension, thereby converting raw affect into an ethically and aesthetically meaningful encounter (Halliwell 87).

Similarly, Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* posits that terror and fear can be sources of delight when mediated by distance (Burke 40). This distance is the condition under which the sublime emerges; it allows terror to be apprehended aesthetically rather than experienced as unmediated horror. In this sense, distance does not mitigate emotion, it constitutes the very transformation of fear into pleasure, of raw intensity into aesthetic insight. Burke writes that "terror is in all cases whatsoever, the ruling principle of the sublime; it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling; and the passion caused by it is agreeable" (40).

When Aristotle and Burke are considered together: distance, whether temporal, cognitive, or perceptual, functions as a transformative process that convert untamed emotions into a controlled and culturally intelligible form. In Aristotle, this conversion is achieved through the curation of narrative events. In Burke, it is accomplished through imaginative positioning and perceptual security. Both mechanisms demonstrate that aesthetic engagement is not simply a passive reception of an emotional response but an active negotiation with it. Distance, in other words, produces a synthetic space in which emotion is simultaneously experienced and comprehended, where the mind and senses participate in a dialectical interplay between affect and its object. In Aristotle, the audience's capacity for moral reflection depends upon the temporal separation between themselves and the events of the plot. The spectator recognises Oedipus' error, experiences pity for his suffering, and fears vulnerability in human life, yet these emotions are aesthetically productive precisely because the plot's temporality allows integration and comprehension (Nussbaum 124). Likewise, in Burke, the mind can confront terror in miniature, in the imagination, without being overwhelmed, the emotional intensity is maintained, yet rendered aesthetically meaningful. Distance, therefore, is not a limitation on

emotional experience but the enabling condition of its ethical, cognitive, and aesthetic transformation. Further, the constitutive role of distance creates a liminal space where the affective and the reflective coexist. This liminality is central to the aesthetic experience as it allows for both immersion and critical detachment. In Aristotle, the liminal space is temporal, structured by the completeness of plot. In Burke, it is spatial and imaginative, structured by perceptual and cognitive mediation. This transfiguration is what allows art to achieve its “peculiar power,” as the unbearable becomes bearable, suffering is rendered legible, and terror becomes pleasurable insight (Halliwell 91). In this sense, distance is an active agent in the aesthetic process rather than a passive precondition. Without such mediation, catharsis would collapse into unrestrained grief, and the sublime into paralysing horror. Distance is therefore constitutive in the strongest sense: it is the mechanism through which art transforms raw human experience into symbolic and cultural meaning. This perspective foregrounds distance as the generative principle of aesthetic power, capable of producing ethical and emotional insight and clarity.

Both Aristotle and Burke demonstrate that distance is integral to aesthetic experience, not ancillary to it. Distance is the threshold where the raw, overwhelming, and potentially destructive intensity of emotion is transfigured into art, where pity and fear in tragedy become catharsis, and where terror in the sublime becomes pleasure. By framing distance as constitutive, we gain a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which aesthetic experience operates, highlighting the interplay between immediacy and mediation, affect and reflection, intensity and comprehension. Distance, then, is the engine of aesthetic transformation, the site where the unbearable is rendered intelligible, and the chaotic energy of emotion is harnessed into cultural and ethical meaning. The exploration of Aristotle’s and Burke’s respective theories of emotion, tragedy, and the sublime illuminates the centrality of distance in the transmutation of feeling into meaning. While traditionally interpreted as a mere moderating factor or a protective buffer, distance emerges, upon closer analysis, as a foundational mechanism that defines the very possibility of aesthetic engagement. Both thinkers grapple with the paradoxical nature of extreme emotion, whether pity and fear in Aristotle or terror in Burke, and both demonstrate that without distance, such affect cannot be apprehended in a form that is cognitively, morally, and aesthetically meaningful. This paper shows that distance is essential. Understanding distance as a governing principle reframes our engagement with both emotion and art. Distance is neither a weakness nor a compromise, it is the condition of possibility for aesthetic transformation. The unbearable becomes bearable, terror becomes pleasurable insight, and intense human emotion becomes morally and

cognitively intelligible. This perspective foregrounds the active role of the spectator or observer. Aesthetic experience is co-constituted by the mechanisms that mediate affect and the participant who interprets it, enabling the participant to apprehend the constitutive structure and the conditions that shape perception. Understanding distance in this light reframes the role of the aesthetic agent.

Conclusions

The concept of distance emerges not merely as a classical or philosophical construct but as a vital lens through which contemporary understandings of emotion, ethics, and aesthetic engagement can be re-examined. By foregrounding the interplay between intensity and mediation, this paper seeks to highlight how the careful calibration of proximity, whether temporal, perceptual, or imaginative, enables audiences to navigate experiences that might otherwise be destabilising. Distance, therefore, functions as a form of cognitive and moral scaffolding, allowing art to operate simultaneously as a conduit for affect, a site of ethical reflection, and a medium of imaginative expansion. In recognising its generative and transformative potential, scholars and practitioners alike are invited to reconsider how narratives, visual forms, and performative arts harness distance to foster critical engagement, cultivate empathy, and shape perceptual acuity. This perspective opens new avenues for interdisciplinary inquiry, suggesting that the deliberate structuring of interactive space between observer and experience is central not only to classical notions of tragedy and the sublime but to all forms of humanistic inquiry where emotion and insight converge.

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