



Thinking and Seeing: What knowledge can we gain from aesthetic testimony?

**Examined through the medium of film reviews and the knowledge they
can give to audiences, critics and filmmakers**

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Aesthetic Testimony.....	3
3. Experimental Philosophy	6
4. Methodology	6
5. Limitations	7
6. Interview Structure	7
7. Results	9
7.1. Framing Context.....	9
7.2. Personal and Epistemic Value.....	10
7.3. Social Value.....	10
7.4. Autonomy	10
7.5. Trust	11
8. Analysis	11
9. Conclusions	12
10. Bibliography.....	13

1. Introduction

The philosophical debate on aesthetics is one which has existed across various different mediums all the way back from the Homeric poems of ancient Greece through to the blockbuster movies of today. The goal of this paper is to try and tackle a common problem in this field, namely, aesthetic testimony, through the lens of film reviews. Meta-aesthetical philosophy frequently concerns itself with the transmission of aesthetic knowledge. Some suggest the passage of any knowledge by this means is impossible. Those who assert this belief would argue that writing the review “This movie is absolutely beautiful and the acting was phenomenal” can hold no substantive weight. They make this claim because they believe the subjective experience this statement delivers can have no bearing on an individual who has not engaged with the medium themselves. However, there is an entire culture around writing and reading film reviews in the modern age. Websites designed for this purpose like Letterboxd have seen 700,000 downloads in the last month which suggests that there is definitely an appetite for this kind of discussion (Tower, 08/2026). These reviews are a form of what’s called aesthetic testimony and throughout this paper I shall be attempting to analyse why both ordinary people and individuals with experience in the film world find themselves drawn to these expressions of aesthetic judgment. Utilising the empirical research style of experimental philosophy I will attempt to test the ‘Epistemic Facilitation’ and ‘Social Value’ stances of testimony to see if they align with the intuitions of a small focus group.

2. Aesthetic Testimony

Before delving into empirical research it is important to discuss the theory. Testimony more generally is the idea of knowledge being passed from one individual to another through words. An example may be your parents telling you “It is dangerous to cross the road without looking both ways”, in regular life we accept these kind of statements and take in that knowledge as our own. This is because as children we know no better and once we are older we rely on the testimony of those we trust or those with substantial experience in their field. Such as trusting a NASA scientist who tells you the dangers of going to the moon. Although aesthetic testimony is trickier because the evidence is not as clear. Whilst in these examples, we trust because we know no better or because whoever is telling us has experience, there is debate in the aesthetic field on whether there can be someone who objectively “knows better” about which pieces of art are good or bad. Arguably, a child has equal say on what pieces of art they like as an adult whereas in the world of empirical truths there is a much clearer disparity between the informed and the uninformed.

Therefore, aesthetic testimony is divided into the two halves of pessimism and optimism, the former generally asserts that aesthetic judgements must be made entirely on first hand experiences (Robson and Wallbank, 2024, 1.1). Since, according to them, it is impossible to get a true appreciation of a work of art from someone telling you “The acting in the movie is beautiful” they argue that it invalidates the use of testimony entirely. While optimists believe that testimony holds meaningful content for aesthetic discussion. They propose that a second hand experience is not inherently less valuable than a first hand one or that the applicability of testimony depends on the context in which it is used. Either way, these philosophers do not permit a blanket dismissal of the practice.

The pessimist stance is developed further by unavailability pessimism which suggests that first-hand experience must be built into the definition of aesthetic knowledge, meaning that any knowledge gained from second-hand accounts is not aesthetically valuable. For supporters of this stance, claiming to know anything about a work of art through testimony is as substantive as saying “I know this artwork is beautiful because a rat told me it was in a dream” despite never having seen the artwork. Alternatively, aesthetic knowledge is relative and thus one cannot claim someone else’s subjective opinion as their own. Here testimony also holds no weight because it simply showcases someone’s deeply individualised opinion. Through this view the statement “I think this painting is poorly made” holds the same weight as “I don’t like the taste of oranges”. Both are meaningless to someone not making the claim themselves. In either formulation aesthetic testimony seems impossible. (Robson and Wallbank, 2024, 3.1)

However, optimists would respond that we do not need to be familiarized with every example of “beautiful acting” in a movie to understand the concept and apply it. Once we grasp the skills and components required for “beautiful acting” (e.g. a convincingly real performance that moves the audience) then we can recognise the aesthetic knowledge which that points to upon reading it (Robson and Wallbank, 2024, 1.1). In the same way as one may be able to point to examples of an oak tree once they are familiar with all the defining characteristics that make up an oak tree.

This is a fair rebuttal to make and yet the pessimist would not be satisfied. They may address how the concept of beautiful acting is not consistent across all cases unlike the characteristics of an oak tree. For example, a brilliant comedy performance would require a very different set of skills to a brilliant tragedy and even within these genres there is variation between every single instance that one line of writing cannot embody whereas scientifically oak trees have a very specific type of bark, leaves etc. This seems to reasonably outline the sheer variety of conditions that go into making an aesthetic judgement.

Nguyen highlights this through his insistence on the autonomy principle. He suggests that we can gain knowledge through testimony but that the experience of making the judgement is more valuable than just having the ‘answers’ by skipping straight to reading a review. He compares this act to a marathon runner taking a taxi to the finish line or a puzzle solver googling the answer to their puzzle (Nguyen, 2020, p.1). Here you have reached the end goal but have failed to engage with the purpose of the activity. Another helpful analogy is that of a sports match. The “goal” of the match may be to win but the “purpose” is to try and win. Similarly, for aesthetic endeavors he argues that the “goal” is to reach the aesthetic judgement whilst the “purpose” is to enter a state of “loyalty to the details” where you create your own interpretations from a piece of work (Nguyen, 2020, p.20). Nguyen suggests that to take aesthetic testimony as true aesthetic knowledge is to leave yourself “half asleep at the wheel”. (Nguyen, 2020, p.14). However, the theory does not dismiss testimony entirely, merely the idea that you can adopt someone else’s view as your own.

Building from this view, one can employ the idea of testimony as “a reason of epistemic facilitation”(Wallbank and Reisner, 2020, p. 2). Here testimony is not adopted because a speaker is necessarily the most reliable but because it can be a very helpful tool for novices in advancing

their own epistemic achievements. Taking the example of a student teacher relationship, the latter lacks the evidence to judge if their teacher is an expert (e.g. when a teacher must read to the students before they have learnt to) but by trusting their testimony, the student can begin to learn even if they cannot verify their teacher's claim. By this process, testimony closes the gap between the truster and the trusted acting as an "epistemic reason to believe" until the trustee gains "appropriate access to evidential reasons"(Wallbank and Reisner, 2020, p.16).

In the context of film, you can read reviews to gain knowledge of things you may have little understanding of such as specific acting techniques or cinematography yet Nguyen purports that once you have had these pointed out, it is your duty to verify them with evidential reasons of your own for it to count as true aesthetic knowledge. This feels like a strong use of aesthetic testimony which convincingly parallels academic endeavours, although the concept also proposes that once an individual has gained enough competence to access the evidence then the testimony becomes redundant which seems in contrast to the general public consensus that reviews are still valuable beyond being a stepping stone. Websites like Letterboxd and IMDB would not be thriving as they are today if people ceased contact with these forms of testimony as soon as they had gathered the skills to address aesthetic qualities themselves. Therefore, some further purpose to aesthetic testimony in these contexts is needed.

Wallbank and Robson argued beyond the epistemic facilitator idea and advocated for aesthetic testimony as something that carries social value in a variety of ways. They liken the concept to puzzle solving, highlighting that

"The portrayal of the aesthetic appreciator as a lone puzzle solver who ignores the word of others in a purist pursuit of aesthetic truth simply neglects the valuable interpersonal interactions that we can have with others in a shared pursuit of an aesthetic goal." (Wallbank and Robson, 2022, p. 52)

For them, testimony is not just a stepping stone or an individualised process but a shared goal like "team games which function as a group exercise"(Wallbank and Robson, 2022, p. 52). By having these widespread interconnected exchanges, they argue that it fosters a sense of community between the artists and the art community. Such an idea definitely feels in line with the heavy social-media tactics these websites employ (e.g friend and comment systems). Furthermore, they postulate that if you were to engage with testimony from a friend, the act of accepting their 'review' and engaging with it meaningfully demonstrates a recognition of their sincerity and competence and in doing so, forms a deeper bond between the two of you. On the other hand, if you dismiss their review in favour of one from another source, this could be harmful to the bond. The hypothetical demonstrates how there are definitely social values at play in these cases which should be considered as vital parts of testimony (Wallbank and Robson, 2022, p. 51). This view only builds on "epistemic facilitation" by addressing how the discussions which act as stepping stones are themselves valuable even if they do not lead to any further aesthetic knowledge. There is great enjoyment to be had in discussing film reviews with a friend. Moreover, these exchanges can help to forge new relationships as they can give you a sense of who another

person is and the types of things they enjoy or find valuable even if you don't take their opinion as your own.

"We have seen that in many cases, we do come to a richer appreciation of artworks through our interactions with others, but this isn't a necessary condition of these activities being valuable. Imagine that, after having a long conversation with a friend about the putative merits of a film you have previously dismissed, you rewatch the film in question and still find nothing there to appreciate. This may be a disappointment, but we find it implausible to think that it is enough to render the whole process worthless" (Wallbank and Robson, 2022, p. 53)

These latter theories are the ones that seem to hold the strongest against traditional philosophical scrutiny. I am deeply passionate about film as an artistic medium and so it seems like the best way in which I can articulate the usefulness of these theories in the modern day when they are also arguably one of the biggest forms of entertainment for general audiences. Applying them directly to this world, people may engage with reviews in order to inform themselves of what to look out for in their future artistic encounters. Additionally, they may choose to engage with reviews for the social aspect, building friendships and gaining a deeper understanding of one another. However the goal of this paper is to take the discussion beyond 'armchair reflection' and outwards to see the general consensus of the public and of people more involved with film reviews. This is because I believe that for this topic, it is hard to get a true appreciation for how accurate these theories are without engaging with people on a direct level. While ethical studies can discuss the moral implications of an act according to one theory or another, the matter of aesthetic judgements and film more specifically is deeply personal which I feel would benefit highly from a direct examination of the non-philosopher perspective.

3. Experimental Philosophy

Experimental philosophy is a fairly new philosophical field which aims to do as described above and investigate the psychological motivations behind human intuition on various matters. Through the research process I uncovered how others in the field of aesthetic philosophy have conducted such projects. For example, Kamber looked into "Which works count as art?" by presenting research participants with a group of images and asking them to select which they consider 'art' with each image testing a different definition of art. (Mikalonytė, Elzé Sigutė et al. 2024, 2). From this he discovered that no definition entirely mapped onto the common intuitions about what is considered art as answers varied significantly between participants. He proceeded to conduct a follow up study, asking people to justify their decisions by selecting some of 14 possible reasons, here he found that the definitions which emphasised intentionality were most common. This is the general process by which one conducts experimental philosophy, laying out a key question and conducting a scenario to test the intuitions of non-philosophers.

4. Methodology

For me, the key question is "What do people think they gain from aesthetic testimony, and do their intuitions support the epistemic-facilitation and social-value accounts of aesthetic testimony? "

and thus I have conducted interviews to answer this. There are three hypotheses from the philosophical backing I wish to test:

1. Epistemic facilitation: Participants will value reviews that provide descriptive information that enables them to form their own aesthetic judgements.
2. Social value: Participants will value reviews because they facilitate social engagement and shared discussion, independently of whether the review changes their ultimate judgement.
3. Autonomy: Participants will resist the idea that another person's aesthetic judgement can replace their own experience of the artwork.

In order to get a more encompassing understanding of attitudes towards this area I have split my empirical research into two parts. Firstly, I conducted a film screening of “Spiderman: Across the Spiderverse” for six of my Laidlaw peers. I chose this film as it has been acclaimed by critics and general audiences alike for a variety of reasons depending on the individual. After this, I asked them a series of follow up questions, focusing on that film and then extracting to wider questions about film reviews generally. Secondly, I conducted two, focused, hour-long interviews with an experienced film critique and a third year film student both of whom have had a substantial amount of exposure to the inner workings of film reviews and the film industry. I shall refer to them throughout as the informed participants. From here I was able to draw parallels and distinctions between these various perspectives. For the sake of anonymity, everyone involved has been given pseudonyms.

5. Limitations

Given the nature of my project and my existing reach, the sample size for this experiment is not as wide spread as I would have liked and thus cannot be definitively used to gauge an overarching consensus on the intuitions of the public or the industry. If I were to conduct this project again, I would streamline the interview process and make a bigger push to acquire more data but within my existing pool there is still a wide variety of opinions and perspectives that have given me a lot of valuable insights into how non-philosophers feel about this topic.

6. Interview Structure

Throughout this part of the paper I shall outline the questions asked and how they map the theories onto real life engagement with movie reviews. It is worth noting that the structure of the interview varied slightly between the group discussion and individual interviews given the nature of the participants in each, but for the most part the key themes have been kept constant.

1. For all interviews, I began by asking “On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you feel you engage with film reviews?” in order to gauge context for the following discussion.
2. From here I asked the informed to name me two of their favourite films with a short review in their own words. Similarly, I asked members of the group to each write a review of the Spiderman film.

3. I then proceeded to ask participants for 2 qualities they valued when reading film reviews and whether any of these were present in their own pieces.
4. This was followed by an investigation into “what makes you trust the claim a review is making?” and for the informed “Do you think your experience in the film world has shaped what you value in a film review?”. Both of these serve to dig deeper into the nature of aesthetic testimony and whether there is something beyond the content itself (such as the person delivering it) that makes one testimony more valuable than another.
5. Here we reach the main test which was influenced by the work of Kamber. I provided the participants with 8 excerpts from reviews and asked them to tell me which they thought they gained the most from reading and what it is they thought they gained. Each may be interpreted in multiple ways by the interviewees given the multi-faceted nature of testimony but was designed with these ideas in mind:
 - a. “I loved the film, as a big fan of the main character in their other projects since I was a kid, getting to see them again on the big screen was amazing!” (*Testing the concept of **aesthetic expressivism**: where testimony should showcase the emotions felt by the writer*)
 - b. “This was beautifully shot, the slow pan onto the character’s face as they began to cry in the closing monologue was truly profound and really moved me” (***Epistemic Facilitation** theory: where reviews should convey descriptive information for the reader to explore themselves*)
 - c. “I could not get into the art style at all. I found it too distracting and jarring to watch. The characters also did not grip me” (***Autonomy principle**: showcasing the value of individual experience in testimony*)
 - d. “The topics this touches on still resonate strongly in today’s society with light comedy, strong emotive themes and a tone of storytelling that has the greatest respect for its audience, this will always remain a film that is close to my heart ”
(*A balanced piece that **combines personal and descriptive qualities** to see if this is favoured. Also whether the personal aspects convert to a **form of social connection** between the audience and the reviewer*)
 - e. “This is another excellent piece for the director’s portfolio and only furthers their inventive style and wonderful world building. You can really see how their technique has only improved from their first film through to now.” (***Epistemic facilitation**- Wider context of the film world to encourage someone to seek out these other works themselves*)

- f. “Half way through I decided to start doing sudoku as it was a better use of my time” (*A **deeply subjective** take to see if people gravitate towards reviews of this nature or if it is too narrow*)
 - g. “pardon my french but absolutely get lost if you don’t think these movies are perfect” (*A **pure testimony** with no external justification*) (Robson and Wallbank, 2024, 1.1)
 - h. “This film really parallels my own life and brought me to tears so many times throughout. It shines a light on my own struggles and makes me feel represented in a way very few other pieces of media ever have” (*Review focused on fostering a **social connection** between the reviewer and the audience*)
6. Afterwards I asked the informed “Do you think the film world would be better without reviews?” To understand whether the total pessimist stance has any ground.
 7. I then asked them “if you were to discuss a movie with a friend and then go to rewatch the movie and didn’t find any change in opinion, was that discussion still worth having?” To test whether the act of testimonial exchange is valuable in and of itself.
 8. Finally, I concluded the interview by asking all participants what they thought people gain from engaging with film reviews.

7. Results

7.1. Framing Context

In the group interview I received a range of scores from 8 through to 2 for engagement. 4/6 participants gave a score of 4-5/10 with one outlier at either end of 2 and 8. This gives a mean score of 4.6/10 within the group. Those in the mid-low score range cited that they’d rather get recommendations from a friend than look at formal reviews whilst those at the higher end reasoned that they enjoyed reviews to get a grasp of what’s worth-seeing or to gain a deeper understanding of things they may have missed in the film themselves.

On the other side are the two informed members who shall be referred to as Jeff (the third year film student with experience writing scripts, editing and acting) and Todd (the individual with experience running a review YouTube channel in addition to paid free-lance work as a critic). The former gave a score of 7/10 arguing that “while I like seeing what other people think, I prefer forming my own opinion first and reading reviews after the fact”. Conversely, Todd gave a score of 9/10, stating that he writes more than he reads but that he often checks reviews before engaging with the media himself. These almost opposite viewpoints do not give a consensus on testimony but give helpful context for the following discussion.

7.2. Personal and Epistemic Value

Across my study I found data pertaining to four key themes: personal and epistemic value, autonomy, trust, and social benefit. Therefore I shall group the results along these lines. This will not cover all the responses but I will be sure to address when any data contradicts the points made.

Throughout the interviews I found there was a general inclination that reviews need to balance personal and epistemic values. This means that participants consistently favoured reviews that preserve some individuality whilst also providing descriptive qualities. When asked in the group interview to give 1 or 2 qualities they value in a review, 3/6 group members mentioned the need for a “personal” take that is “self-aware about subjectivity” and “honest”. Additionally, 4/6 emphasised the need for reviews to provide an “in-depth analysis” of the piece that is “aware of the wider contexts of that film and its genre” with “balanced arguments that are not too extreme”.

Further evidence to this point was found in the review excerpt exercise (Q.5). Here the group was in consensus that (h.) was favourable for the personal connection it offered to the author. However, Todd noted that it was too personal and lacked “a bridge to the audience”. On the other side, (d.) was praised by all parties for covering descriptive qualities about the film as well as the emotional impact it had on the author. Additionally (e.) was outlined by Todd for its use of wider context to create a comparative piece between other artworks.

7.3. Social Value

Across the data I also found evidence to suggest people value the social aspects of testimonial exchange. Both experienced individuals answered “yes” to Q7. stating that the personal connection is still valuable even if it doesn’t change your viewpoint. Furthermore, Todd postulated that engaging with reviews is an “intellectual and emotional experience” that helps you learn more about yourself and your tastes. The group reacting positively to the human perspective of (h.) in (Q5.) also further illustrates this desire for human connection through testimony. Additionally, in (Q8.) all parties made explicit mention of how reviews offer “access to a worldview outside your own” (in the wording of a group member). On the other hand, all participants were critical of review (f.) as it provided too subjective of a stance that didn’t foster any connection to the audience.

7.4. Autonomy

I noticed as well that there was a strong trend of participants wanting to ensure the authenticity of their own opinion without being swayed by a review. This was most evident in the informed responses to the question “Would the world be better without reviews?” where both answered no definitively.

Jeff made the case throughout his interview that people often go into movies with bias based on the reviews they have read and thus remarked for this question that whilst reviews do take away from the viewer's own autonomous experience, they are still very helpful for discussions and learning about people after the fact. However, we should “stop relying on [reviews] to decide [our] own opinions before seeing a movie”. Contrastingly, Todd argued that people will “ultimately

remember their own experiences more than an opinion they read” and thus as film reviews afford films longevity in the public consciousness and make people excited to watch them then they are an essential component of the movie world.

7.5. Trust

The final trend I noticed is an extension of the social value theory. When asked what would make you trust a review, Jeff outlined a need for some connection to the reviewer, whether it be knowing them as a friend or consuming enough of their content to understand their perspective and what they are likely to say about a film. Moreover, 5% group participants and Todd exclaimed that the reputability of the outlet and the use of technical jargon to support one’s point further adds to their ability to engage with a review.

8. Analysis

These are the key pieces of qualitative data I found throughout the interviews. I have not touched on every response to every question but these felt the most pertinent to the discussion at hand and can definitely be mapped onto some ideas mentioned earlier in the theory. My new working hypothesis based on the data I have gathered is that in this sample, testimony was never used as a substitute for first-hand experience or a direct source of aesthetic knowledge. Rather, the individuals valued testimony as a combination of epistemic knowledge, subjective insight and social connection while simultaneously making a distinction between learning from another’s perspective and adopting that judgement as their own.

All of these aspects suggest that, for participants, reviews ought to convey a sense of epistemic knowledge and personal experience which lines up with Wallbank and Reisner’s facilitator argument. Participants consistently emphasised a need to understand aspects of the film they didn’t pick up on themselves. They showed less interest in reviews that simply restated things they already understood. This heavily mirrors the facilitator idea that testimony becomes futile once you have enough information to judge these things for yourself. Despite this, participants did not feel a need to stop engaging once they understood the theory. Evidenced by the inclusion of the personal aspect. Here there is clearly more to the engagement than purely descriptive knowledge since all participants noted a need to feel connected to the review through an honest and genuine account rather than simply to learn facts. This points to testimony being indeed useful for these dual purposes beyond the stepping stone analogy.

The evidence for social value builds upon the desire for a personal account, emphasizing a sense of community in two ways. Firstly, if a review itself mentions personal aspects, the test sample seemed fond of it as a way of relating to the author and understanding them as people. This is very much in line with Wallbank and Robson’s idea that testimony is a “shared goal” between the artists and the art community. By curating their pieces to include personal accounts and perspectives it strengthens the bond between all those who choose to engage with the art itself and the discussion around it. On the contrary, some did mention that they felt disinclined by reviews that were too personal and lacked connection to the audience. I do not believe this dismisses the philosophical value of the social aspect altogether as there is a balance to be struck

between a personal insight and an opinion too subjective for anyone to gain anything. As evidenced by the reactions given to review (f.).

Secondly, exchanging reviews and discussing a piece of testimony helps foster a bond between the two where you enter into a state of mutual respect. An idea very clearly outlined by Wallbank and Robson. Here they illustrate how the sharing of testimony and acceptance of another's opinion can build strong bonds while dismissing it can lead to fracturing relationships. This idea is reflected heavily in the responses I received. Many participants addressed how they enjoy receiving testimony from a friend even if they disagree with it for the discussion is valuable in and of itself. Once again this evidence stretches the utility of testimony beyond the constraints of clashing opinions. That clash is valuable in and of itself even if it leads to no change in aesthetic stance.

Moreover, these responses seem to align themselves with the autonomy principle where they prioritise a direct aesthetic experience. The autonomy principle states that proper aesthetic appreciation requires firsthand, independent engagement with an object whilst Ngyuen added to this that testimony bypasses valuable engagement with the media. Jeff's arguments seem very much in line with Ngyuen's view but his additional comments that reviews remain useful as a secondary source of knowledge and social bonding demonstrate an important counter argument to the restrictive stance Ngyuen offers. Additionally, the film critic Todd proclaimed that individuals are more than capable of separating the testimony they received from their own opinion. Whilst these two informed perspectives seem to differ slightly, with one aligning more to Ngyuen's perspective, they both maintain that testimony is useful for the social function and the attention it draws towards the film industry. Therefore, drawing a clear line between the value of direct experience and the separate gains of testimony.

9. Conclusions

I emphasise again that my research covers a very small sample size, but it is still incredibly useful to see what individuals feel about these philosophical ideas. I began this paper with an instinct that reviews are useful beyond being a pure source of aesthetic testimony and the empirical data does seem to agree with this but not in the way I would have thought. Throughout the process I saw an overwhelming positivity towards the social bonding that film reviews offer both in the responses I received and the way in which participants fully engaged with the discussion and seemed genuinely excited to answer.

The philosophical theory sought to make a clear distinction between optimist and pessimist stances about testimony but I have found much more complexity in my results. Whilst it is true that individuals very much valued different things in reviews, as you have seen above there were absolutely some common threads that point to why individuals feel so passionate about engaging with movies and art in general in this way. Those on the pessimist side are keen to outline how testimony can detract from the experience of engaging with art. Though I did find some evidence to support this, I found far more evidence in my experience that individuals are absolutely capable of separating their own opinions and experiences from those they read while still using them to gain some aesthetic appreciation.

Overall, none of the hypotheses I wanted to test at the start ended up being right but the process of engaging with testimony appears to involve a variety of purposes that do not align with one simple theory. It is entirely possible for an individual to read a review that makes claims such as “I found this deeply moving” “the cinematography was extremely well done” “it reflects back on my own life in a very sensitive way” and connect with those statements on a meaningful level despite not being the same person who wrote them. Testimony does not appear to dull the impact of the autonomous experience but rather enhances it through an epistemic facilitation beforehand and a social tool afterwards. Testimony encompasses aesthetic appreciation it does not diminish it.

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