

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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Introduction

People love reading film reviews and they love discussing them, but *what can we gain from doing this?*

Reviews are an example of **aesthetic testimony**. (the philosophical concept of *transferring knowledge about art through conversation*)

Throughout my project I have considered various stances on this and tested them on interview participants to see how accurately the philosophy matches to ordinary opinion.

Aesthetic Testimony

Testimony has 2 categories: **optimists** (who believe it can give *us knowledge of the art or some related factor*) and **pessimists** (who believe *first-hand aesthetic experience* is the only useful knowledge we can have).

Below are the specific variations I tested on interview participants:

- 1. Epistemic Facilitation:** Aesthetic testimony is useful when you *don't understand the inner workings* of the art but once you know what to look for yourself then they become redundant. (Wallbank and Reisner, 2020, p. 2)
- 2. Social Value:** Exchanging reviews and discussing them fosters a *sense of connection* between individuals and can strengthen/create bonds. (Wallbank and Robson, 2022, p. 52)
- 3. Autonomy Principle:** Aesthetic appreciation requires firsthand engagement with an object and to use *testimony is to 'cheat'* the whole point of engaging with art. (Nguyen, 2020, p.20)

Limitations

- *Small sample size* (8 total)
- *Narrow breadth of participants:* 6 Laidlaw students, one film critic, one film student
- Interviews sometimes *strayed from reviews* specifically to film culture generally
- Focus on *qualitative data* rather than quantitative

Methodology

Part One:

A film screening of "Spiderman: Across the Spiderverse" for six Laidlaw peers. Followed by film review questions

Part Two:

Two hour-long interviews with an experienced film critique and a third-year film student

Hypotheses

1. Participants value reviews that provide descriptions that enables them to form their own judgements.
2. Participants value reviews because they facilitate social engagement.
3. Participants resist the idea that another person's aesthetic judgement can replace their own experience of the artwork.

Interview Structure

1. How much (/10) do you engage with film reviews?
2. Provide a short review for 'Spiderverse' or one of your favourite films
3. Name 2 qualities you value when reading reviews
4. What makes you trust a review?
5. Participants given 8 excerpts from reviews and asked which they felt they gained the most from reading (each review tested combinations of the theories above)
6. Would the film world be better without reviews?
7. Is a discussion about a movie with a friend worth it even when your opinion doesn't change?
8. What do you think people gain from reading reviews?

Results

- 1. Personal and Epistemic Value**
 - Reviews that balanced personal connection with descriptive qualities were favoured
 - 4/8 noted reviews should offer a "personal take"
 - 5/8- need to provide "in depth analysis"
- 2. Social Value**
 - Engaging with reviews is an "intellectual and emotional experience" that helps you learn about yourself and others
- 3. Autonomy**
 - Insistence from all that preserving individual opinion is important
- 4. Trust**
 - 6/8 mentioned reputability/ knowledge of the reviewer was important to trusting reviews

Analysis

Participants valued testimony as a combination of epistemic knowledge, subjective insight and social connection.

They emphasised a need to understand aspects of a film they didn't pick up on themselves. This mirrors the facilitator idea. Despite this, participants did not feel a need to stop engaging once they understood the theory as they also enjoyed the personal connection they obtained from reading about the impact a film had on someone's life.

They valued engaging with media themselves but also saw value in reviews beyond the descriptive.

Bibliography

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Conclusions

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 took part.

My results lead me to believe that *testimony does not dull the impact of the autonomous experience* but rather enhances it through epistemic facilitation beforehand and a social tool afterwards. Testimony *encompasses aesthetic appreciation* it does not diminish it.

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