

How to Pass the Test of Time?

Discussion of Temporal Axiology

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Summary

The current article tackles the issue of the criteria of passing the test of time. I first focus on whether the criteria of passing the test of time can be formulated aesthetically. I then analyse the 'temporal weaknesses' of the test of time and possibilities of getting rid of them (e.g. abandoning the precondition of finalism). Finally, I consider the role of the test of time as a judgement of merit.

1. Introduction

People always seem to cling to the conviction of the power of time to settle everything ('time will tell' etc.). Art-theoretical disputes have regarded the 'test of time' as the true indicator of the merit of art. However, there are at least five different opinions of the meaning and role of the test of time (see Savile, Peyre, Silvers and Godlovitch):

What would be the reason anyway to suppose that 'time'/some following generation is the last instance to determine the value of a work of art? (*the issue of justification, or reasoning*) Does the test of time apply to individual works of art or art trends or the entire body of work of one artist? (*Issue of the object of application*) Is a work of art that has passed the test of time 'great art', 'outstanding art', 'classic art', 'real art', or merely 'good art'? (*Issue of evaluation term*) Is the test of time the most significant means of judging the merit, or an auxiliary means appealing to future generations to solve current disagreements? (*Issue of role/status*) What should 'happen' to a work of art to enable it to withstand the test of time? (*Issue of the criterion of the test of time*)

The latter is indeed the main topic of the current article. I first explain the issue of the criterion of passing the test of time, focusing on the question of whether the criteria of passing the test of time can be formulated, for example, aesthetically. I then analyse the 'temporal problems' of the test of time, and possibilities of getting rid of them, and finally determine the role of the test of time in judging works of art.

2. Criterion of passing the test of time

What conditions (necessary and/or sufficient) must be fulfilled to enable us to say that a work of art has passed the test

of time? Despite considerable differences in opinion, there is consensus on a certain *type* of characteristics (see Logan, Richards, Rowe and Fenner). For example, a work of art that has passed the test of time, ‘remains the focus of interest of many (critics)’, ‘an ability to continuously charm us and thousands of subsequent generations’ etc. We should probably not be surprised by the presence of such Chronos-type features in the test of time, for how else could we talk about the test of *time*. Although the idea that the core of the test of time is artistic durability (permanence??) seems to be an analytical truth, opinions nevertheless differ on *how long* and *how* a work must last.

Longevity itself is not enough. For a work of art to pass the test of time, it must not only be the object of interest for many generations, but it must also attract interest in *a certain manner*. Disputes emerge immediately when people try to characterise the manner in which a work of art should be constantly interesting.

3. Aesthetic reasons

According to various theoreticians (see Beardsley and Savile), the fact that a work of art has been ‘famous’ or ‘fashionable’ etc is not actually a decisive value indicator, if the continuing interest was not motivated by *aesthetic reasons*.

The problem arising with this approach can be described through the notion of the conditions of experiencing a work of art. These conditions constitute a set of epistemic (knowledge about the artist, art history and art theory etc) and psychological (mindset of people experiencing art) conditions that serve the ‘correct’ interpretation and evaluation (see Khatchadourian, Ziff and Zemach). The content of the

set depends on contingent art theoretical and art historical circumstances.

The latter circumstance in particular does not quite suit the universalistic claim that the criteria of passing the test of time should be formulated aesthetically. Let us suppose that there is a work of political art which several generations have highly appreciated because of aesthetic considerations. Thus, according to the aesthetically understood criteria of passing the test of time, this work of art should definitely have passed the test of time. However, this conclusion is erroneous, because the aesthetic ‘taking’ of the work stands in stark contrast with the correct conditions of experiencing works of art of this type, where the political drive of the work must not be aesthetically ‘bracketed’ but, on the contrary, considered as its main artistic content (see Brand and Carroll).

The above shows that the moment we try to formulate the conditions of passing the test of time, we find ourselves in the middle of a battlefield of the conditions of experiencing art determined by different art ideologies.

4. The problem of several eras and shifts of judgement

Supporters of the test of time are worried about the problem of how many eras (epochs or generations) should evaluate a work of art before we can say that it has passed the test of time? In order to discover the judgement of an era, art history must be divided into relatively discrete units (eras, epochs etc.), and only if we redefine a unit can we see whether an individual work of art has passed the test of time or not. Deciding on an era’s judgement is especially difficult because of the differing opinions of famous critics (e.g.

regarding Millet), or because of gaps in how a work of art has been seen in history.

Most importantly – even in the case of the greatest artworks, the eras have not agreed in their evaluation! The judging of artworks has oscillated like a pendulum from one extreme to the other – long-time contempt is followed by an active period of rediscovery (see Hallas, Kellett and Kennick). The supporters of the test of time thus find it equally annoying to face the consensus of positive judgements throughout eras, as well as cardinal shifts of judgement, which they, as a rule, consider obvious. If we choose the judgement of one era and not another, then how do we justify our preference? Trying to formally establish one era as the basis would only lead to trivialities and absurdities, and it would be easy to overthrow this kind of approach. The test of time people need to seek their defence tactics among three types of choices: they can present convincing arguments to justify the judgements of one era, they can abandon the need for deciding, or they can claim that the shifts of judgement are only illusory.

5. Finalism and shifts of judgement

One possible way out of the problem of shifting judgements is to abandon the supposition that at some point in time the value of an artwork has been finally and irrevocably determined. By relying on ‘new times, new judgements’, the tiresome episodic problem of establishing a final judgement could be abandoned. Some might, of course, doubt whether such a castrated test of time is really an informative indicator of the merit of art because, whatever might happen, merit and judgements emerge in time, whether the judgement of an artwork is prenatal, postnatal or even posthumous.

The third way to manage the problem of judgement shifts would be to deny them. It might appear on closer inspection that the judgements have been made not on the same but on *different* bases (see Stolnitz and Zemach). A work of art (e.g. a painting) can, for example, successfully imitate reality and thus be good on a mimetic basis, although following generations might regard this work as inferior from the point of view of emotional expressiveness. It can thus be claimed that, in this case, we are not dealing with a judgement shift in various eras, but simply with applying different standards of judgement. This discussion leads us to the problem of judgement-identity – indicating that a sensible solution in the test of time discussion requires the parties to reach a consensus in how they determine the terms ‘the same judgement’ and ‘judgement shift’.

6. The role of the test of time in a critic’s stock of judgements

If a work of art cannot pass the test of time in its own era, then can the test of time play a role at all in an art critic’s stock of judgements and what role? The main weakness of the test of time as a standard of judging art is obvious: the test of time is too slow. To merely say about a new work of art that ‘time will tell’ seems a bit mean coming from someone who is reputedly able to judge an artwork properly. The critic has no choice but to turn his gaze towards much older works of art and hope that it is now him who has the honour to confirm whether it has actually passed the test of time or not.

Could the passing of the test of time be provided with an interpretation which would make it possible to apply it to *new* works of art? I doubt it, because the result

could easily be such a devalued and 'thin' theory of the test of time that it would be completely wrong to call it the test of time.

Another possibility would be to re-interpret the role of the test of time. For example, to abandon the precondition of finalism and claim that diachronic approval gives a work of art a high inductive confirmation (see Shusterman and Pratt). Or one could apply more suitable judgement standards in evaluating new works of art, using the test of time as a meta-standard only when a certain work of art is suffering in the crossfire of contradictory judgements (see Stolnitz and Slote). However, this approach would employ the test of time only in the case of judgemental differences. Besides, we must make sure that we do not support the (Wilde-style) opinion that discordant judgements themselves prove the high value of a work of art.

*Translated by Tiina Randviir
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