**Beauty on Trust: Aesthetic Testimony, Verbal Description and the Impact of the ‘Objectivity Imperative’ on the Experiences of Gallery Visitors with Visual Impairment.**

Concern for the limits of what we can learn from one another about beauty has recurred throughout the history of aesthetic theory. Dividing its attention between literary renderings of blindness and widely endorsed regulatory features of art access initiatives, this chapter positions an exploration of what the experiences of people with visual impairment might contribute to long-standing deliberations about the appropriate weighting of the degrees of epistemological credence afforded to aesthetic and non-aesthetic testimony within a history of philosophical debate from which their potentially instructive perspectives have been regrettably absent. After tracing aspects of the ‘aesthetic testimony debate’ through literary representations of blindness, the chapter shifts focus in order to contemplate potential applications of insights generated by the debate to a review of the potentially impoverishing impact of selected art access guidelines on the aesthetic experiences of gallery visitors with visual impairment. The ‘objectivity imperative’ that is a feature of established verbal description guidelines is accounted for in terms of an ill-supported and distinctly unhelpful suspicion of hermeneutics within the domain of art access. Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s delineation of the threads of mutual causation and justification that fuse experience, hermeneutics and evaluation within the ‘psychological set’ of art engagement is brought into service as a means of challenging the logic and value of the repeated instructional mantra that describers of works of visual art for gallery visitors should merely ‘say what they see’.

**Aesthetic testimony**

Were it not for testimony, a lot of what we consider ourselves to know about the world would remain a closed book to us. Although daily news reports from far-flung corners of the earth indicate that testimony is clearly an indispensable source of knowledge, misgivings persist within the aesthetic sphere about testimonial justification. The aesthetic testimony debate is premised on the question of whether we can come to know the aesthetic value of a particular entity – for example whether it is beautiful, or more or less aesthetically impressive -- on the basis of someone’s say-so. Language and the inherent limitations of its capacity to do justice to beauty is another recurring concern within these debates, culminating, perhaps, in James Elkins’ seminal account of pictures and the words that fail them (1998). Theorists who have contemplated the question of whether it is acceptable to form a belief about the excellence of a movie, a painting, a literary representation or the beauty of a sunset or a human countenance simply on the basis of someone else’s say-so have tended to arrive at less than entirely optimistic verdicts. These aesthetic testimony pessimists can be said to fall broadly into two camps: *Unavailability*pessimists claim that testimony fails to make meaningful, reliable or appropriate forms of knowledge available to its recipient, who is therefore poorly positioned to arrive at aesthetic judgment or knowledge when testimony constitutes the sole source of insight at his/her disposal.  *Unusability* pessimists concede that aesthetic testimony can, in certain circumstances, transmit knowledge; but that certain exacting and non-negotiable conditions of justified belief preclude the full assimilation of the aesthetic insights that have been verbally volunteered to us by another. The snag for pessimists of this ilk lies not in the unavailability of knowledge, but rather in the hermeneutic transgression entailed in availing of the learning opportunity presented by such knowledge.

Although the frequently asked question about whether testimony can generate knowledge or merely transmit it would appear to have an especially pertinent bearing on considerations of the shareability of aesthetic understanding amongst individuals with differing sensory configuration, such isolated and indirect instances as the published epistolary correspondence between Brian Magee and Martin Milligan (1999), Diderot’s brief discussion of the theme in his ‘Letter on the Blind for the Use of those who can See’ (1749), and William Paulson’s fleeting engagement with the issue in his study of blindness and the enlightenment (1988) aside, issues relating to the availability, usability and value of aesthetic testimony have largely evaded interrogation within the specific context of the aesthetic experiences of individuals with visual impairment. My endeavours within the fields of literary disability studies and museum and gallery access have generated concern for the aesthetic cost to individuals with visual impairment of the (seemingly unwitting) regulatory incorporation of the more pessimistic doctrines yielded by these fastidious philosophical ruminations by institutions which undertake art access initiatives. The first section of this chapter draws on literary representations as a means of illustrating these concerns.

**Well of the Saints and the unreliability of aesthetic testimony**

Martin and Mary Doul, two blind beggars living in a rural society in the west of Ireland, are the central protagonists of J.M. Synge’s The Well of the Saints (1905). They have been led by the lies of the townsfolk to believe that they are both exceptionally attractive. When a saint cures them of their blindness with water from a holy well, the disgust each feels for the other’s appearance belies the assurances they have historically been given that their beauty is unrivalled in the village. The indirectness of the way in which Martin and Mary accumulate the information about the world that they take for “truth” is captured in the auxiliary construction “to hear tell,” which is often used to describe the process. Martin becomes aware of strange happenings in the village, such as the killing of an old man for his gold by “hearing tell” of them (*Ibid.:* p. 77). Likewise, Mary is told that “it’s a great sight to see a man hanging by his neck” (*Ibid*.), and is asked by Timmy if she has “heard tell” of the “grave of the four beautiful saints” (*Ibid.:* p. 79). In terms of communicable information, “hearing tell” of a phenomenon is regularly deemed to be an acceptable means of coming to know or understand it. It is regularly deemed otherwise, however, when reference is to aesthetic properties of the phenomenon. In order to learn about visual beauty – and the pair have an insatiable appetite for knowledge relating to their own -- they must subject themselves to the mediatory function of the verbal descriptions. Mary, for example, has “heard tell” that the “splendour” of her appearance is accountable for in terms of the wet south wind to which she has been exposed for so many years (p. 71). In Act I, when Martin questions the beauty of Mary because of her cracked voice, Mary reminds him that he’s heard Timmy the Smith, Mat Simon, “and a power besides” speaking appreciatively of the beauty of her face (pp. 71-73).  Martin’s means of comparing the beauty of Molly, a local woman, to that of his wife is equally based on what he can garner from village gossip. Misgivings about the adequacy of hearsay as a source of aesthetic awareness underpin Martin’s declaration: “I’ve heard him say a power of times it’s nothing at all she is when you see her at the side of you, and yet I never heard any man’s breath getting uneasy the time he’d be looking on yourself” (*Ibid.:* p. 75). Martin also remarks that although the girls of the village lack the courage to approach him, “they do be saying” that he is “a handsome man” (*Ibid.:* p. 87). Mary reminds Martin that he is married “with a woman he’s heard called the wonder of the western world” (*Ibid*.). Martin concedes that he’s “heard tell her yellow hair, and her white skin, and her big eyes are a wonder surely” (*Ibid*.). Toward the end of Act I, when Martin is trying to identify his wife after the restoration of his sight, the role previously played by mediation in his reception of her beauty is illustrated by his decision that he is married to Bride rather than Mary, on the grounds that she is “more the like of what they said” (*Ibid.:* p. 95). Beauty, the play appears to suggest, is not something to have on second-hand authority, especially not the eminently equivocal authority of individuals whose shared conception of fun is deliberate misinformation.

Aaron Meskin is one of several theorists to have argued that unlike non-aesthetic reports, we learn very rarely from the beauty reports of others. His argument is grounded in a deeply held conviction about the innate unreliability of aesthetic testimony. Such testimony can fail the trustworthiness test in one of two ways: incompetence or insincerity. The majority of Meskin’s thesis is dedicated to addressing the first of these two scenarios -- if someone lacks authority a subject matter, then his or her testimony should be received with scepticism – and most people do not have recourse to the necessary expertise to make warranted aesthetic judgments. Meskin’s treatment of dismissals of aesthetic testimony on the grounds of insincerity is not as expansive, but his reflections on this issue are expanded upon by Brian Laertz.

It does happen that people are less than entirely genuine when relaying aesthetic testimony. We may feel compelled to tell a potential partner that an artwork or a movie towards which we feel ambivalent was utterly compelling, for example, because we happen to know that such a verdict aligns with their opinion and so may enhance the prospect of the emergence of a sympathetic connection. As a manifestation of the phenomenon known to reluctantly coerced clothes-shopping companions as the highly perilous ‘does my ass look big in this?’ quandary, our familiarity with the capacity of aesthetic judgments to generate personal upset amongst sensitive or particularly vain acquaintances can prompt us to approve of a radical makeover although the we inwardly believe it to signal a marked disimprovement, or make us feel inclined to tell an ill friend that (s)he is looking well, even though their appearance has triggered an intensification of our concern for their wellbeing. Parents amongst you will be familiar with those scribbled wall hangings and with a reluctance to let a child know that their creative output is cherished on no other basis than sentiment. Young people might feign aesthetic appreciation, prompted by peer pressure to avow wildly affirmative evaluations of music that actually leaves them unmoved, while certain adults will employ a similar strategy in the belief that demonstrating appreciation for certain artworks will generate an impression of sophistication and discernment. However, although disingenuously volunteered aesthetic testimony and the various motivations that might prompt insincerity in this regard are not entirely unheard of, it is hard to countenance that it is such a persistent or significant occurrence as to have a meaningful bearing on the epistemic value of such testimony. Within a museum or gallery context, I would suggest, while concern about the competence or credentials of the member of the access team tasked with the challenge of describing paintings for visitors who cannot see them may represent a genuine concern, it is difficult to imagine how concerns about the honesty of a museum or gallery docent might account for the resistance to aesthetic testimony that continues to prevail within that domain. It seems noteworthy, I this and other regards, that existing critical engagement in Synge’s play tends to dismiss Martin and Mary as ‘dreamers’ for investing faith in anything other than the ‘reality’ that unfolds when their vision is restored by a wandering saint.

**On Baile’s Strand and the (old) acquaintance principle.**

Yeat’s On Baile’s Strand might be said to represent an ableist reverse engineering of the literary tradition of ‘romantic agony’ documented by Mario Praz, Frank Kermode and others. In his study of the “cult of isolated joy,” and the cost of the “Image,” for example, Kermode details the “sense of irreconcilable difference and precarious communication” and the ultimately unbearable torment of alienation imposed on the single beholder of the “romantic image” (Kermode 2002: p. 9). The emergence of this torment in the warrior Cuchulain is evidenced when his appeal to Conchubar, the High King of Ireland about the impact of the legendary beauty of Aoife is informed by a keen sense of the value of such an appeal when addressed to someone who has not witnessed this beauty at first hand:

A fierce woman of the camp!

But I am getting angry about nothing.

You have never seen her. Ah! Conchubar, had you seen her,

With that high, laughing, turbulent head of hers

Thrown backward, and the bowstring at her ear,

Or sitting at the fire with those grave eyes

Full of good counsel as it were with wine,

Or when love ran through all the lineaments

Of her wild body – although she had no child,

None other had all beauty, queen or lover,

Or was so fitted to give birth to kings **(p. 487).**

What is most notable about Yeats’s rendering of this phenomenon is that the only thing that threatens to save the fearless and otherwise invincible warrior Cuchulain from being undone by the “romantic isolation” traditionally the lot of the solitary witness of a site of visual beauty is that the play’s Blind Man has encountered it too. The opportunity to spare himself a form of mania-inducing agony born of “the very costly matter of beatific imaging” and “the sacrifice of a thousand possible sympathies” (Kermode 2002, pp.4-5) presents itself to Cuchulain only when he happens upon the unlikely solace of the company of Blind Man’s who bore witness to Aoife’s beauty before losing his vision. The representation of blindness primarily in terms of visual memory, as Yeats was also to do with Hanrahan in “The Tower,” is likely to be deemed problematic in many ways by literary disability studies scholars. Epitomising the concept of narrative prosthesis, Blind Man, an otherwise irreducibly peripheral figure, assumes an authority as a consequence of being able to alleviate the quarantined torment of the play’s central protagonist – although the influence he commands is entirely uninformed by or indebted in any way to his contemporary sensory configuration. Blind Man assumes the substantial significance he comes to wield purely on the strength of what he has previously seen. The element of the aesthetic testimony debate to which the play seems to me to most directly relate is what has become known as the ‘acquaintance principle’. The ableism underpinning Yeats’s rendering of blindness manifests in the apparent assumption that in instances of individuals who are adventitiously blind, the only acquaintance that is of any interest or value is old acquaintance.

Richard Wollheim (1980) explains the rationale underpinning his scepticism about the value and credence of aesthetic testimony in relation to the afore-mentioned Acquaintance Principle, which “insists that judgments of aesthetic value, unlike judgments of moral knowledge, must be based on first-hand experience of their objects and are not, except within very narrow limits, transmissible from one person to another” (p. 233). Positioning the issue inadvertently within a context that is more specifically aligned with our current focus, Alan Tormey contends: “[i]n art, unlike the law, we do not admit judgments in the absence of direct or immediate experience of the object of the judgment. We require critical judgments to be rooted in ‘eye-witness encounters, and the epistemically indirect avenues of evidence, inference and authority that are permissible elsewhere are anathema here” (Tormey 1973, p.39). Bertrand Russell’s treatment, in 1910, of the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description arguably remains the definitive one, although it has been very usefully complemented by Richard Fumerton (2008). Language and description assume a central importance within this element of the aesthetic testimony debate, as second-hand, verbal accounts of somebody else’s direct experience with a site of beauty represent, for advocates of the acquaintance principle, a poor and misguided basis for aesthetic judgment.

Brian Laertz (p.357) lists remembered acquaintance alongside photographic evidence of beauty and aesthetic engagement in recorded musical performance within a suite of aesthetic experiences which seem to cast into jeopardy the validity of the acquaintance principle’s insistence that only direct forms of experiential engagement can warrant aesthetic judgments. He concedes, however, that subscribers to the principle might, by means of a considered application of the ‘transparency thesis’ argue that engagement with the effectively diaphanous media of photography, audio recording and memory might constitute so slight a remove from immediate contact as to represent a negligible compromise of the rationale underpinning the acquaintance principle. From a purely philosophical perspective, acceptance of aesthetic knowledge via memory, as such acceptance pertains within the relationship between Cuchulain and Blind Man, represents a distinctive challenge to acquaintance principle advocates. Whether one deems remembering that something has an aesthetic quality to constitute direct experience of it, depends on whether the conditions of directness are deemed to be met by the fact that one was once acquainted with an entity. “Sometimes,” Laertz suggests (p.357) “our memories are so dim all we recollect is our assessment of a work but none of the details that compelled us to make it. We often decide to revisit a work, simply because we remember that it was good.” Reflecting on this challenge within the context of the aesthetic experiences of individuals with acquired visual impairment generates even more intricate convolutions. Were an individual to resume, after losing their vision, engagement with an artwork to which they attributed significant aesthetic value as a fully sighted person in the past, there is no guarantee that the favourable verdict arrived at in the past would survive the transition to less ocularcentric forms of beholding. Were Blind Man to encounter Aoife in ‘real time’, the fate of her legendary beauty would be in the balance.

The assumption that the aesthetic sensibility of an individual with acquired visual impairment is inevitably or necessarily residual brings to mind Raymond Williams’ (1977) treatment of the often definitive influence wielded by historical lineaments over the transition from past to future cultures, and of the debilitating impact of tradition and long-won convention on the emergence of alternative or oppositional forms of cultural expression. The hegemony afforded to residual convention can, according to Williams, “exert its pressure as a static and exclusionary prototype against which all real cultural progress is measured”, resulting in the advocacy of perspectives supportive of traditionally dominant practices and the exclusion of the marginally emergent (p.121). Subordination happens, according to Williams, because the emergence of diverse perspectives is rarely accompanied by a corresponding emergence of accommodating infrastructures. Applying these sweeping epochal observations to Yeats’s rendering of blindness yields insights into Yeats’s apparent disregard for the capacities of individuals with acquired impairment to forge new standards of ontological, epistemological, and aesthetic value as they renegotiate their experiential contracts with the lived realities of their surroundings.

Questions relating to the perceived availability and usefulness of elements of an outlived sensorium also afford opportunities to reengage with central tenets of the aesthetic testimony debate. One of the instances identified by Jon Robson (2017) as representing grounds for aesthetic testimony optimism, for example, is when the beauty of an entity stands the test of time. We can assure an acquaintance that Yeats was an exquisite poet, though a shockingly poor dramatist, because that consensus has persisted amongst learned scholars for a considerable period of time. If our approach to aesthetic value is more inclined towards conceptions of it being the product of the relationship between an entity and an individual sensibility, however, rather than being conceived of in terms of the cultivation of good taste by ushering aesthetic preference into contrived alignment with that commonly espoused by proven experts, the truth value of any endorsement by Blind Man of Cuchulain’s affirmations of Aoife’s beauty when that beauty has become, for the former, a remembered feature of an outlived sensorium, seems highly contestable.

David Bolt (2019) has commented on the tendency of blind characters to be represented as tolerating a “residual existence whose only pleasure is in the past” (p.8). Claire Penketh argues that ascription of an irreducibly retrospective aesthetic sensibility to those with acquired impairment is inevitably premised on the invalidation of an epistemology embedded in the lived contemporary realities of life with an impairment (Penketh, 2016). I have elsewhere identified at the core of a history of “visually-biased meta-narratives” of blindness a recurring assumption that, in the case of characters with acquired visual impairment, “the beautiful thing has always already been and gone” (Feeney, 2007: p. 279, p.125). Disability studies scholars tend to be less interested than pure philosophers in the question of whether the epistemic value of reports of remembered beauty can be rationalised, being generally more inclined to concern themselves with the potentially debilitating impact of such rationalisations. My involvement in the domain of museum and gallery access provision, however, has prompted a certain tempering of my wariness of the perils inherent in indulging a residual aesthetic in a way that I am sure will frustrate or disappoint many of my colleagues in the field of critical disability studies. My work in that field generally brings me into regular contact with individuals with acquired visual impairment. Many of these individuals are artists. They are self-selecting gallery visitors, and retain an interest in, and usually a passion for, visual art. For these individuals, the suggestion that indulging a residual interest is not in keeping with the principles underpinning contemporary work in socially-oriented academic approaches to disability identity tends not to readily register itself as a pressing concern, as visual memory becomes one of several modalities exercised within their comprehensive and fervent engagement with exhibited artworks.

**Molly Sweeney and the asymmetry thesis.**

Within philosophical treatments of the issue, the imbalance between willingness to believe, assimilate or epistemologically operationalise the yield of aesthetic and non-aesthetic testimony is often referred to in terms of an asymmetry thesis, which holds that aesthetic testimony is epistemically inferior to its non-aesthetic counterpart. This asymmetry is evidenced In the opening monologue of Friel’s Molly Sweeney, where we gain an insight into the type of tuition to which her father subjects Molly as a young girl. It may be instructive, for our current purposes, to consider the patterns of distinction and attempted fusion that pertain between aesthetic and non-aesthetic elements of her father’s pedagogical endeavours. Mr Sweeney tells Molly, for example, “at the bottom of the pedestal there is a circle of petunias. There are about twenty of them all huddled together in one bed. They are–what?–seven inches tall. Some of them are blue-and-white, and some of them are pink, and a few have big, red, cheeky faces”. (p. 14). In the immediate aftermath of this tuition, the following test ensues:

 ‘Now Molly. Tell me what you saw.’

 ‘Petunias.’

 ‘How many petunias did you see?’

 ‘Twenty.’

 ‘Colour?’

 ‘Blue-and-white and pink and red.’

 ‘Good. And what shape is their bed?’

 ‘It’s a circle.’

 ‘Splendid. Passed with flying colours. You are a clever lady.’ (*Ibid*.)

Her father’s methodology entails rewarding Molly with high praise for the memorizing and repetition of his descriptions of the visual features of the garden. Molly’s capacity to produce what her father hails as ‘excellent testimony’ (p.15) is where her education begins and ends. It is also one element of Friel’s exposition of the blindness that he appears, for all of his exquisite wordsmithery, to identify at the heart of language. Molly finds herself bound to the corrective and compensatory designs of another who instinctively attributes aesthetic frustrations to her condition and thereby creates them. As part of a misguided indoctrination into the formal domain of aesthetic appreciation, Mr Sweeney resolves to make his blind daughter a witness to all of the beauty he describes. Although Molly is encouraged to touch and smell the flowers, when their beauty is in question, all that she derives through these sensory channels is subordinated to or translated into the terms of her teacher’s visual perspective. As Molly’s education progresses, it becomes evident that the imparting of information about the features of the family garden is also intended as a component of her aesthetic education, which seems premised on an active discouragement of the pupil’s capacity to exercise or express preferences or forms of discernment that are aligned with her experience. “I know you can’t see them,” Mr. Sweeney informs Molly about the nemophila, “but they have beautiful blue eyes. Just like you” (p. 14). When considered within the wider context of the play in its entirety, the scene juxtaposes conceptions of the purpose of aesthetic education as the cultivation of good or proper taste, with approaches underpinned by the recognition volunteered by Ralph Alexander-Smith (1989) and other aesthetic theorists, that aesthetic value, like any other, is the product of the interface between an entity or phenomenon and a particular sensibility. The lesson underscores the soundness of Santayana’s argument:

It is absurd to say that what is invisible to a given being *ought* to seem beautiful to him. Evidently this obligation of recognizing the same qualities is conditioned by the possession of the same faculties. But no two men have exactly the same faculties, nor can things have for any two exactly the same values. (Santayana 2005: pp. 19-20)

The shortcomings of testimony as a means of transmitting aesthetic value are further exposed later in the play, when Molly reflects on her own genuine aesthetic experience. In keeping with the play’s recurring illustration of the limitations of verbal mediations of direct sensory experience, Molly is reconciled to the ineffability of the experience to which she endeavours to do descriptive justice (p.24):

And how could I have told those other doctors how much pleasure my world offered me? From my work, from the radio, from walking, from music, from cycling. But especially from swimming. Oh, I can’t tell you the joy I got from swimming. I used to think–and I know this sounds silly–but I really did believe I got more pleasure, more delight, from swimming than sighted people can ever get. Just offering yourself to the experience–every pore open and eager for that world of pure sensation, of sensation alone–sensation that could not have been enhanced by sight–experience that existed only by touch and feel; and moving swiftly and rhythmically through that enfolding world; and the sense of such assurance, such liberation, such concordance with it…. Oh, I can’t tell you the joy swimming gave me. I used to think that the other people in the pool with me, the sighted people, that in some way their pleasure was actually diminished because they could see, because seeing in some way qualified the sensation; and that if they only knew how full, how total my pleasure was, I used to tell myself that they must, they really must envy me.

A rich history of aesthetic theorists, including Immanuel Kant (1998), Frank Sibley (1965), Mary Mothersill (1984) and Richard Wollheim (1980), have been reticent to attribute any epistemological value to aesthetic testimony on the general grounds that nothing can be learned from it. These arguments represent iterations of what is referred to in the literature as the asymmetry thesis – the contention that aesthetic testimony is epistemologically inferior to its non-aesthetic counterpart. Arguably the most robust slight against the epistemological credence of aesthetic testimony is ventured by those, such as Frank Sibley (1965) and Alan Tormey (1973) who hold that there is no such thing as aesthetic knowledge, thereby rendering anomalous the very idea of the generation or transmission of knowledge through aesthetic testimony. Related arguments amount to either a denial of the truth-aptness of aesthetic claims, or to an applied subscription to John Leslie Mackie’s (1977) error theory, culminating in the contention that all aesthetic claims are necessarily false. Others still fall short of denying the existence of ‘aesthetic truth’ but do deny that such truths can be known. In the course of these philosophical debates, the epistemological status of aesthetic testimony has been targeted on the grounds that aesthetic judgments are broadly perceptual, subjectively evaluative, or effective or attitudinal. Those few theorists, such as Brian Laertz (2008), Rachel McKinnon (2016) and Jon Robson (2022), whose interrogations of aesthetic testimony demonstrate a semblance of optimism, have suggested either that these misgivings do not represent grounds for a wholesale dismissal of aesthetic testimony as a source of knowledge or belief, or that as these characteristics are also regularly properties of non-aesthetic claims or concerns, their influence does not render aesthetic testimony uniquely problematic. Even these more optimistic theorists, however, tend to identify a unique set of challenges related to arrival at aesthetic understanding via testimonial means, their arguments often resting on semantic distinctions between knowledge and belief, while also remaining embedded in quite a severely delimited set of circumstances within which transmissions of aesthetic judgment may secure a degree of epistemic purchase. As a fully sighted Brian Friel devotee with a background in critical disability studies, I realise that Molly is spot-on when she suggests that it is beyond even her remarkable powers of description to do justice to richness of her aesthetic sensibility through words or to render through that medium the precise nature of her aesthetic experience available to me. As someone who is now very familiar with the play, however, I feel richer and even more knowledgeable, for the fact that she nevertheless endeavoured to communicate it.

**The cost of aesthetic testimony scepticism within a gallery access context.**

Guidelines for the generation of verbal descriptions have historically emphasised the importance of refraining from the incorporation of any semblance of subjectivity within descriptions of artworks. Although a detailed rationale for this aversion has not been forthcoming, it would appear that the fixation on objectivity harboured by those who assume responsibility for the regulation of art access may be accounted for in terms of a combination of an intuitive, if unknowing adoption of aesthetic testimony scepticism, an unwarranted suspicion that gallery docents might for their own reasons have designs on the aesthetic inclinations, preferences and predilections of individuals with visual impairment, and a vague and misplaced instinct of protectiveness towards these visitors. Verbal description has become big business. Prohibitively expensive international workshops are facilitated on the cultivation of the capacity for objective description, promoted on the premise that anybody who does not facilitate access according to the objectivity imperative is doing it wrong by compromising the sanctity of a form of art engagement from which the self has somehow been extracted (Snyder, 2014). Josh Miele, a blind San Francisco-based scientist who has set up a freely accessible online audio-description platform as a means of democratising the domain of art access – thereby threatening the profit-making potential of the afore-mentioned initiatives – is included among the perpetrators of crimes against objectivity who get art access wrong by not prohibiting the incorporation of subjectivity within verbal descriptions (Kleege 2018, p. 107).

Although Joel Snyder’s approach to verbal description – outlined with a certain authority in his treatise/training manual ‘The Visual Made Verbal ‘(2014) demonstrates an alignment with the various forms of aesthetic testimony pessimism that recur through the philosophical literature, there is scant indication that he has familiarised himself with any of these abundant critical sources. Similarly, his insistence on the strict maintenance of objectivity when describing art for those who cannot see it very well demonstrates an apparent disregard for a rich history of philosophical rumination on the complex interplay between objectivity and subjectivity in the generation of aesthetic meaning. Snyder’s antipathy towards the transmission of insights relating to the perceived aesthetic qualities of the artworks being described would appear to reflect a wider cultural affinity with one side of the aesthetic testimony debate. Malcolm Budd (2003), for example, suggests that the paucity of existing philosophical justifications of the acquaintance principle belies how deeply entrenched it has traditionally been within and outside the rarefied domain of formal philosophical investigation. There appears to be a prevailing innate scepticism towards aesthetic testimony, an intuitive disclination to afford to it the degree of trust that we more readily invest in examples of its non-aesthetic counterpart. Or, as Brian Laertz expresses it, the perceived inferiority of aesthetic testimony “seems to be a fixture of the folk theory of rationality, which underlies our doxastic practices” (Laertz 2008, p. 361). I would suggest that the widely corroborated common-sense diktat of aesthetic testimony pessimism also underlies traditional approaches to the regulation of art access initiatives for gallery visitors with visual impairment in a way that has an impoverishing effect on the depth, vigour and liveliness of the experiences such undertakings are capable of affording. Rather than subscribing to the historically accepted truism that, to use Laertz’s expression, aesthetic reports are ‘epistemologically handicapped’ (p.355), the argument presented here is that the historically widespread inclination to give subjectivity a wide berth when facilitating art access actually adds yet another layer to the already multi-dimensional forms of disablement to which individuals with visual impairment are subjected when they endeavour to indulge their innate interest in art.

From experience, I would suggest that a standpoint of determined aesthetic ambivalence serves poorly as a starting point for discussion or experiential exchange within a museum or gallery access context. Alleviating such ambivalence by means of volunteering subjective opinions about the aesthetic merits or demerits of a particular painting can seem both an act of enlivening mercy towards an art access session that might otherwise die on its feet, and a useful portal through which participants with visual impairment can reflect on distinctive features of their own forms of aesthetic engagement with the exhibited artefacts. Thankfully, more recent scholarship in this area has challenged the feasibility, efficacy, and appropriateness of the strict maintenance of aesthetic objectivity within the art access domain. For one thing, the practical impossibility of observing the stipulation that describers be completely objective is undermined by the inevitable fact that in order to avoid generating descriptions of a length that render sustained attention challenging, these professionals have to select what they describe, and differences between components prioritised by different describers inevitably emerge. Similarly, as Floriane Bardini (2016) points out, differences in compositional styles are also likely to manifest a degree of inter-describer subjectivity. Contemporary scholars have also begun to appreciate the extent to which the practice of purging all interpretive elements from description may prove counter-productive by precluding the vital element of imaginative or experiential connotation (e.g. Orero 2012; Bardini 2013). International divergences of convention in this regard have begun to emerge, as illustrated by Mazur and Schmiel’s (2012) comparative review of the art access practices that prevail in the US and Europe. European guidelines for audio description (Remael et al. 2015; Fryer 2016) are increasingly inclined towards the conclusion that the historically practiced fetishization of clinical objectivity can be both counter-productive and radically misaligned with the unapologetically subjective elements of creative expression.

Although many of the most widely applied description guidelines continue to recommend describing only that which is seen as a means of avoiding subjective interpretations, evidence, such as that provided by Soller Gallego (2019) increasingly suggests that many people with visual impairments prefer more subjective descriptions (Soller Gallego 2019). Although Joel Snyder’s forcibly volunteered recommendations demonstrate what might be argued to be a healthy and sensible disregard for philosophical hypotheses, as a fully sighted individual, he does claim to have consulted with individuals with visual impairment when formulating his guidelines. I can only say that my undertaking of such consultation has consistently yielded conflicting feedback. As part of their reflections on patterns of difference and similarity between the ways in which they receive aesthetic and non-aesthetic testimony within a gallery environment, these visitors told me that they enjoy receiving subjective insights from a describer, on the condition that these insights are not volunteered as matters of incontestable fact (Feeney 2017). This finding chimes with those generated by research conducted by Orero (2012), Bardini (2013) and Soler Galego (2019), which suggest that a total lack of subjective interpretation may actually impoverish the engagement of individuals with visual impairment in the artworks explored within gallery access sessions.

In her study of blindness and the visual arts, Georgina Kleege (2018) relays an anecdote that encapsulates the core of the argument presented here – that the fixation on objectivity within the development of guidelines for verbal description is representative of a wider tendency towards the unnecessary and counter-productive withholding of vital elements of aesthetic experience in the name of access. Kleege describes her attendance of an accessible screening of Ben Lewin’s film The Sessions, facilitated as part of a disabled student-led disability awareness initiative at Berkeley. During the screening, the captions and audio-description were turned on for the entire audience. The film is based on the autobiography of Mark O’Brian, a poet and journalist who became dependent on the artificial respiration administered by an iron lung after an accident in childhood left him paralyzed from the neck down. One of the scenes of the film involves Mark embarking on a shopping trip with one of his assistants in search of some new shirts. One of the garments selected was audio described as being “a dark paisley button up”. A student within earshot of Kleege took the initiative of supplementing the description provided with the hollered avowal “and it’s really ugly”. The experience prompted Kleege to reflect on how this instance of faithful compliance with the established guidelines for effective audio description lead to an impoverishment of aesthetic engagement. In a later scene, Kleege tells us, Mark’s newly acquired item of clothing is commented on by Cheryl, a sexual surrogate employed by Mark as part of his endeavour to lose his virginity at the age of thirty-eight. “Is it racy and sophisticated?”, Mark asks – to which Cheryl responds: “you took the words right out of my mouth”. At this point, Kleege notes, the relevance of the shirt-purchasing scene becomes clear. His feelings for Cheryl have prompted Mark to allow his resolve to make a striking impression to get the better of his customarily understated or under-developed sense of sartorial taste to hilarious effect. The “failure of the describer to make an aesthetic judgment about the paisley shirt,” Kleege observes, “made it hard to assess the characters’ banter about it” (Kleege 2018, pp. 99-103). Kleege’s account of the failure of forms of access provision that are predicated on a slavish compliance with the diktat that facilitators should steer a wide berth of any avowals that bear a semblance of subjectivity or evaluation illustrate the wrong-headedness of regulating art access at a remove from informed reflection on the nature of artistic expression.

**The explicatory and functional ambiguity of verbal description guidelines**

Among the most notable features of the verbal description guidelines in common usage is the dearth of sustained or critically informed rationalisation of normative directives relating to the verbal mediation of the impression generated by visual artefacts. In the absence of any discernible attempt to justify the recommended terms of art access provision, what appears to connect these guidelines with the misgivings about the epistemological credence of aesthetic testimony outlined above is the sense that both entities seem to be grounded in suspicion. In the case of verbal description guidelines, this suspicion would appear to manifest primarily in two ways: 1) A suspicion that a gallery docent might, for some reason, be inclined to dupe gallery visitors with visual impairments into some form of sightist aesthetic ideology; and 2) An unfounded conviction that these gallery visitors (most of whom are self-selecting and have an interest in art) are aesthetically inept in the sense of being incapable of receiving information about art in a suitably discerning fashion or exercising judgement in a manner that demonstrates an appreciation of the contingent nature of aesthetic value and its verbal transmission. In what remains of this chapter I will endeavour to outline why elements of the forms of aesthetic impoverishment that contemporary theorists have begun to attribute to certain elements of institutionalised art access guidelines can be traced back to the ‘bad faith’ on which these guidelines appear to be predicated, while also indicating why the regulatory demarcation of art engagement as a hermeneutic-free zone seems predicated on a misguided conception of aesthetic experience.

Another notable feature of art access guidelines is a lack of specificity about their intended function. It is not clarified with any degree of precision, for example, either in Joel Snyder’s (2014) audio description training manual, nor in many of the extant institutional verbal description guidelines, whether the experiences afforded by compliance with these recommendations are intended to be formally educational, primarily sociological, aesthetic, or to serve a combination of these or other ends. Openness in relation to this issue is not necessarily regrettable. Whatever particular objectives are anticipated when verbal description training is delivered, one assumes that art access is facilitated with some form of aesthetic or experiential enrichment in mind, the realisation of which one would expect to be informed by a resolve to operationalise certain conditions for knowing and appreciating artworks as art. The wilful extraction of any semblance of subjectivity seems an unlikely condition of the realisation of a capacity for art appreciation, yet that is precisely the core edict upon which verbal description guidelines tend to be predicated. In place of sustained reflection on the modes of perception and forms of understanding entailed in art appreciation, those who devise and canvass verbal description guidelines offer little apart from the repetition of the brute sermonic mantra that describers should ‘say what they see’, accompanied, on occasion, by the supplementary directive that the describer should be the eyes, rather than the brain, of a gallery visitor with visual impairment. In this way, the architects of these guidelines behave as though they had somehow settled centuries of aesthetic debate without giving any indication that they have familiarised themselves with the sources of contention underpinning these complex deliberations. It seems likely, if not quite inconceivable, that this apparent lack of concern for the nature of aesthetic experience is unrelated to the aesthetic impoverishment identified by several contemporary critiques of institutional approaches to verbal description.

It would be admittedly difficult to mount a credible defence of gallery docents who conceive of their purview as incorporating responsibility for the emancipation of the gallery visitor from ignorance while ushering them into a state of cultural erudition through the cultivation of good taste while also applying correctives to the artwork’s obliviousness to its own meaning. In the absence of a volunteering of any credible form of justificatory rationale, it remains unclear whether a perceived alignment between the figure of the gallery docent and these critical portraits of the cultural analyst might constitute the precise foundation of the suspicion that has prompted the formulators of verbal description guidelines to supress interpretive discourse. My experience of working in the domain of art access suggests that the positing of such a performative coupling is extremely tenuous, and that gallery docents do not approach their roles in the grip of any preformulated designs on the aesthetic predilections of visitors with visual impairment. I have been repeatedly told by gallery visitors with visual impairments that art access sessions become most animated and engaging when differing opinions about the quality and significance of particular artworks are aired in ways that directly contravene verbal description guidelines.

**The depletory impact of the objectivity imperative on approaches to art access**

There is definitely something to be said for the maintenance of an objective approach to verbal description. The trouble, or at least part of the trouble, with the canvassing of such an approach by Joel Snyder (2014) and others is that they do not say it – or at least do not do so in a manner that is particularly persuasive. Although Snyder’s treatise on the issue is peppered with an obligatory array of isolated quotations from such celebrated thinkers as Ruskin, Goethe and Valery, there is little evidence that his a-contextual incorporation of a sporadic array of aphorised insights represents more than a superficial treatment of a long-debated and potentially vital issue. The proposition of objective modes of engagement and appraisal has certainly received a sufficient degree of critical attention since the introduction of aesthetics as a formal philosophical discipline in the eighteenth century to inform a compelling argument for a considered rationing of subjective insight within art access provision. But the directive that we predicate access provision on a largely unjustified belief, however much that belief might happen to lend itself to potential rationalisation, seems less than entirely reasonable or satisfactory.

The most direct challenge to the logic and feasibility of the ‘objectivity imperative’ relates to the obvious impracticality of deciding, in the first instance, which artworks to describe if a wide berth of subjectivity is to be vigilantly steered. Related responsibilities, such as discerning which components of a selected artwork to emphasise within description, or formulating accounts of the nature of the impression generated by the internal relationships pertaining between selected components, seem equally dependent on subjective insight. Even the most rudimentary of trawls through the history of aesthetic theory reveals an assortment of subsidiary forms of aesthetic impoverishment generated by the imposition of strictly objective descriptive parameters. These poorly conceived and largely unjustified prohibitive stipulations obstruct several channels of potential aesthetic exploration and collective discovery that would otherwise be a valuable characteristic of encounters between people with differing sensory configurations within art access ventures. In this way, the prohibition of subjectivity effectively disqualifies the differential iterations of aesthetic experience the promotion of which art access initiatives are presumably designed to facilitate. In their apparent resolve to prevent the inequitable imposition of sighted criteria on the engagement of individuals with visual impairment with works of visual art, the guidelines serve to preclude the emergence of distinctive features of a differential aesthetic by disbarring aesthetically oriented forms of discursive and experiential exchange. In this way, dogged insistence that access facilitation is strictly beholden to an objectivity mandate serves primarily to render innately relative features of aesthetic value a closed book rather than a portal of reciprocal aesthetic discovery.

The aesthetic detriment caused by the purposeful elimination of subjectivity from aesthetic engagement within an art access context extends to the removal of the encounter between the aesthetic sensibilities of fully sighted gallery docent and visitor with visual impairment from opportunities for forms of inter-cultural transfer that may otherwise be ideally primed for the cultivation of creativity. Citing Gertrude Stein’s professed belief that creative writers need to reside in two countries, for example, Angela Ka-yee Leung and colleagues (2018) suggest that increased exposure to multi-cultural experience is positively related to such features of creative performance as the generation of insights and ideas and the capacity to conceive of remote associations that would be otherwise unlikely to occur. Inter-cultural exposure was also found by these researchers to be positively related to the development of a tolerance for and capacity to assimilate unconventional forms of knowledge while expanding on creative ideas. Within the same study, the cultivation of these creative attributes was found to be contingent on an openness to foreign cultures found to prompt an imaginatively productive relaxation of instinctive determination to conclusively resolve existential concerns. In addition to being predicated on a dubious conception of the nature of aesthetic experience, the deliberate purging of subjectivity from aesthetic encounters between fully and partially sighted participants in art access initiatives depletes opportunity for such collective inter-cultural fostering of creative approaches to the negotiation of any evaluative impasse that might be generated in the course of the collective engagement of individuals with differing sensory configurations in exhibited artworks. While fully-sighted access facilitators clearly need to remain vigilantly mindful of the aesthetic jeopardy that might be occasioned by the wilful imposition of exclusively visual criteria (Feeney 2017), operating on the assumption that aesthetic experience is an exclusively objective phenomenon seems an unlikely and counter-productive means of circumventing such ableist forms of aesthetic imperialism within an art access context.

The casualties of aesthetic experience generated by these guidelines are too extensive to be enumerated here. A shortlist of ten issues whose pursuit might help to delineate the scope of the impoverishing impact of the prohibition of subjectivity from art access initiatives is presented below. As the objective here is to re-open the portals of inquiry that the objectivity imperative would appear to firmly close, these issues are formulated as open-ended questions rather than categorical indictments:

1. In what way is compulsion to proceed with verbal. Description as though artworks are bereft of such vital qualities as mood, attitude or tone, and to refrain from relaying to gallery visitors any information that might renders these qualities or the intensity of their manifestation discernible, compatible with engagement with art as art?
2. How is the mandated omission of insights into how a particular work is regarded – either by the describer or within the artworld more generally – reconcilable with the facilitation of interesting and potentially fruitful and constructive discussion about whether the rationale underpinning any discrepancies between communicated and directly experienced forms of appraisal are primarily critical, affective, objective, etc in nature, or whether any patterns of (dis)continuity of aesthetic preference might be predicated on any conflicting perceptions of stylistic merits or defects whose identification might be central to the delineation of a differential aesthetic?
3. How might one refute the claim that imposing a blanket veto on subjectivity precludes discussion between docent and visitor about how dependent, emergent and tertiary qualities of artworks might be related to the subjectivity/objectivity divide and about the degree to which features of art engagement might be attributable to the artwork and/or the beholder, and how these ambiguities might be meaningfully accommodated within an art access context?
4. When artworks are reduced to the status of quotidian objects through the wholesale dismissal of subjective elements as vacuous or impressionistically extraneous, how are certain tenuously perceived features of form, texture and style to be communicated, how are features of an artwork to be distinguished from features of a beholder’s response to it, and how might any meaning or value be attributed to the fusion of these inextricably related phenomena?
5. How are the lineaments of a differential aesthetic to emerge if the compelled withholding from description of such perceived qualities as strangeness, irony, joyousness, etc, or received formal standards of art appreciation deemed by the describer to be salient removes the recipient from any opportunity to reflect on the degree to which his/her overall impressions of the painting and the evaluative criteria from which these impressions emerge are distinctive?
6. In instances where the primary thematic content of a work stems from a congruence or incongruence of subject and design or form and content, how is this to be relayed when description is volunteered in the grip of a studied absence of subjectively evaluative insight?
7. If the impression of a painting is more than the sum of its constituent elements, how is this feature of the painting, or such related features as aesthetic unity, to be communicated through a sequence of objective descriptive accounts of these isolated components?
8. How can objective description do affective justice to the impact that paintings are capable of registering on the appreciative capacities of the beholder?
9. How might a semblance of creativity be salvaged within art engagement processes if description is confined to the relaying of objectively verifiable information?
10. If subjectivity is outlawed within the domain of art access, how are fully sighted docents expected to learn from the experiences and preferences of gallery visitors with visual impairment?

**Beauty on Trust**

Informed reflection on the nature of the aesthetic experiences afforded by art engagement does not constitute the only reason to harbour misgivings about the repeated decree that subjectivity is to be stringently avoided when describing works of visual art for people with visual impairment. The relational nature of access provision constitutes equally compelling grounds for scepticism in relation to the logic and feasibility of this command. Contemplating verbal description in terms of the credibility of aesthetic testimony raises the issue of trust or ‘good faith’ as it pertains to the relationship that develops between the describer and the gallery visitor in art access scenarios. While this is clearly not the place to embark on an expansive exegesis on the richly researched phenomenon of trust, it is worth noting that many of the existing approaches to this concept emphasise both its interplay with risk perception and the innately subjective nature of the interface between these entities. Gambetta (1988, p.217), for example, discusses trust in terms of subjective probability, asserting that “[w]hen we say we trust someone or that someone is trustworthy, we implicitly mean that the probability he will perform an action that is beneficial or at least not detrimental to us is high enough for us to consider engaging in some form of cooperation with him”. When considered in relation to a probabilistic conception of trust, risk – discussed by Fischhoff (1985), Luhmann (1993) and others in terms of “calculated probabilities under conditions of uncertainty” (Das & Teng 2004, p.98) and its perceived role within an art access context suggests itself as a possible motive for the acute apprehension generated by subjectivity within an art access context.

Das and Teng (2004, pp.95-96) outline the theoretical consensus that trust is “a perception about others in relation to oneself”, describing how trust is earned by the trustee by virtue of demonstrations of characteristics such as responsibility, competence, goodwill and judgment that incite the confidence of the trusting party. Subjective trust therefore emerges as a feature of art access in the guise of the visitor’s appraisal of the likelihood that a gallery docent might be inclined to act in any way other than one which serves his/her best interests. When considered in this context, regulatory insistence that art access should be purged of any semblance of subjectivity deprives gallery visitors with visual impairment of opportunities to make independent judgments about how any evaluative insights that might be volunteered by a fully sighted describer might be optimally received, about the degree to which the describer should be trusted, and about whether subjecting oneself to the vagaries of the aesthetic preferences of a fully-sighted describer might constitute a risk that is worth taking. By depriving gallery visitors of self-determination in relation to judgments of risk and trust in terms of the anticipation of favourable or unfavourable hermeneutic outcomes, and of opportunities for discussion of how such a distinction might manifest in relation to aesthetic experience, the architects of verbal description guidelines are impoverishing the aesthetic experience that art engagement is capable of yielding in at least two ways. Their dubiously substantiated aesthetic strictures reduce the artefact to object while their presumptuous resolve to decide on behalf of gallery visitors with visual impairments that docents are not to be trusted to handle aesthetic value responsibly deprives these visitors of aesthetic agency by discounting their capacity for aesthetic discernment. In this way, verbal description guidelines contribute to a wider social tendency towards an ultimately inhibiting instinct towards over-protectiveness with which many disabled people are all-too-familiar.

**From a hermeneutics of suspicion to a suspicion of hermeneutics**

Another dubious feature of widespread approaches to verbal description is the tendency of guidelines to collapse the distinction between a hermeneutics of faith and a hermeneutics of suspicion into what presents as an uncannily visceral suspicion of hermeneutics. It would be understandable were the wariness of interpretation that has been persuasively articulated by several cultural theorists in exasperated response to postmodern critical tendencies to command a certain empathy among architects of verbal description guidelines. The suspicion that appears to underpin their approach of the authorities who have assumed responsibility for the regulation of art access, however, bears scant indication of having been influenced by these critical debates. It is conceivable, for example, that Susan Sontag’s (1966) celebrated take on the impoverishing and depleting impact of interpretation on the world, for example, her treatment of interpretation as the revenge of the intellect upon art, and her appeal to the need to replace hermeneutical exegesis with an erotics of art, might have been brought into service to support an argument that interpretation should be beyond the brief of a verbal describer. Rita Felski’s reworking of Sonntag’s misgivings might also have been appealed to as a point of supportive reference. Drawing most fundamentally on Paul Ricouer’s concept of a hermeneutics of suspicion, Felski’s misgivings about contemporary cultural analysis (2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2015) highlight several ways in which the distrustful nature of contemporary approaches to critical interpretation, born of an ostensibly suspicious or resentful attitude towards creative expression, has an impoverishing impact on art engagement. Equally intolerant of ambiguity and mystery, the role assumed by the contemporary critic, as Felski sees it, is as the ultimate arbiter of aesthetic axiology, a figure of authority who knows an artwork more intimately than it can possibly know itself. The task undertaken by these self-appointed cultural connoisseurs is to demystify an artwork by resolving for the uninitiated its internal and often unwitting contradictions and disclosing its guilefully cloaked truths in the manner, as Terry Eagleton (2017, n.p.) expresses it, of a “seasoned cop browbeating a shifty suspect”.

It would be admittedly difficult to mount a credible defence of gallery docents who conceive of their purview as incorporating responsibility for the emancipation of the gallery visitor from ignorance while ushering them into a state of cultural erudition through the cultivation of good taste while also applying correctives to the artwork’s obliviousness to its own meaning. In the absence of a volunteering of any credible form of justificatory rationale, it remains unclear whether a perceived alignment between the figure of the gallery docent and these critical portraits of the cultural analyst might constitute the precise foundation of the suspicion that has prompted the formulators of verbal description guidelines to supress interpretive discourse. My experience of working in the domain of art access suggests that the positing of such a performative coupling is extremely tenuous, and that gallery docents do not approach their roles in the grip of any preformulated designs on the aesthetic predilections of visitors with visual impairment. I have been repeatedly told by gallery visitors with visual impairments that art access sessions become most animated and engaging when differing opinions about the quality and significance of particular artworks are aired in ways that directly contravene verbal description guidelines.

The folly of requirements to purge art access facilitation of any semblance of interpretation and of all perspectives that are other than entirely objective can be revealed by contemplating these directives in the context of Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s (1979, 1991) treatment of the inescapable contingency of aesthetic value. In the course of her reflections on this issue, a number of conditions under which certain potential meanings and values of artworks become more or less realisable are delineated. Primarily addressing literary works in a way that seems applicable to artworks more generally, Herrnstein Smith suggests that interpretation of a work is an inextricable component of our experience of it, and that hermeneutics and evaluation are two “interloping” circles (1979, p. 16). Presenting experience and interpretation as mutually dependent components of the “psychological set” of our encounters with artworks, she contends that the nature of art is such that our assumptions, expectations, capacities and interests cannot be extricated from our experiences of art. In this way, experience, interpretation and evaluation cause and justify themselves and one another. The pertinence of Herrnstein Smith’s treatment of these issues to the rationale underpinning verbal description guidelines become most apparent when she attests:

While these circles are no doubt logically vicious or at least epistemologically compromising, they are also … both psychologically inevitable and experientially benign. Undue distress at their philosophic status coupled with a failure to appreciate their inevitability will produce misguided and futile attempts to escape from them, as reflected in the familiar searches for “true” or objective value and for uniquely “correct” interpretations or determinate meanings. There is, however, no way out of these circles for the individual reader: only the recognition of their existence and, of course, the pleasure and interest of the particular experiences they yield – and, for the theorist, the possibility of describing and explaining the dynamics of their interrelation (1979, p, 17).

Herrnstein Smith prefers to discuss aesthetic experience in relation to its relativity, contingency or variability, rather than in relation to the concept of subjectivity which appears to strike such terror in the hearts of those who assume responsibility for devising guidelines for verbal description. Her preference is informed by a critical tendency whereby fixation on subjectivity firmly closes doors of inquiry rather than opening them. She accounts for her weariness of the history of concern for subjectivity within aesthetic contexts in terms of the epistemological and experiential stalemates to which the pursuit of such concern inevitably leads. Critical consensus about subjectivity invariably assumes one of two forms – either the blanket contention that individual taste is indisputable or the misguided conviction that there exists a converse to subjective value – an objective value that must somehow be unearthed by those with the appropriate aesthetic expertise. Within the context of art engagement, Herrnstein Smith believes the concept of objectivity to be a vacuous one, although she is at pains to emphasise that the contention that aesthetic value is entirely dictated by the whims and predilections of individual subjects is not the logical corollary of this belief.

Granting to these reflections the degree of extended reflection they merit would entail positioning existing verbal description guidelines within an expansive framework of aesthetic axiology of a scale that is unfeasible here. In place of such a substantial project, I suggest here only that, provided it is undertaken as part of an equitable experiential exchange (Feeney 2017), the incorporation of insights that are not entirely objective within the verbal transmission of information about works of visual art is not the calamity that Joel Snyder and other advocates of an exclusively dispassionate approach to description appear to take it to be. I would suggest, on the contrary, that the affordance of mutually enriching experiences of art engagement to fully and partially sighted participants in access initiatives is contingent on a creative transgression of the objectivity-fixated regulations outlined in verbal description guidelines. Such a transgression can be accommodated by displacing the suspicion of hermeneutics that appears to underpin access guidelines by a more trusting regulatory disposition.

**Concluding reflections**

Autarchic determinations of apposite distinctions between forms of art engagement that can be legitimately pursued from those deemed to lie unequivocally out of bounds represent a dubious basis for the facilitation of absorbing aesthetic experience within a gallery environment. The imposition of a wholesale injunction against subjectivity, combined with the decree that any aesthetic elements that the entity being described may possess must remain unspoken, appear to be measures designed to withhold any sense that the entity being described is a humanly fashioned artefact that has amongst its characteristics a capacity to occasion in interested percipents a degree of aesthetic experience. On these grounds, it might be argued that verbal description guidelines can, as a potentially debilitating form of aesthetic gatekeeping, be added to a substantial list of normalising myths about aesthetic experience that have historically impeded or delegitimised the emergence of a differential aesthetic amongst individuals with visual impairment (Feeney 2007). For all of Joel Snyder’s denunciation of the verbal transmission of subjective interpretations of aesthetic value, nowhere in his various pontifications on the subject does one encounter a persuasive argument that the prohibition of such practice is either the logical or the optimum practical corollary of any belief one might be inclined to invest in the dictum that no visual rendering of creative expression that can be described with exhaustive precision warrants the denotation of beauty.

For all of their canvassing of disinterest, the tendency of the architects of description guidelines appear to ride slipshod over a rich history of aesthetic debate about such issues as perception, attitude, gratification, judgement, experience, justice, opportunity, skills, understanding, value, wealth and welfare in a way that appears to have been designed precisely with the promotion and nurturing of their own interests in mind. Snyder’s dismissal of Josh Miele’s attempt to democratise the domain of access provision (Kleege 2018) seems born of an anxiety about the potentially catastrophic consequences for an industry that feeds on the purposeful screening behind a paywall -- that can be permeated only by individuals who are prepared to purchase a book or attend a prohibitively expensive training course -- of resources designed to initiate these paying customers in the mastery of the only access-facilitation interventions that Snyder deems to be acceptable. A minority of authors (McKinnon 2017, Robson 2022) on aesthetic testimony have suggested that there is reason to be optimistic about the human capacity to learn from one another about beauty. Regardless of whether one shares the enthusiasm of these authors in relation to the feasibility of the verbal transmission of aesthetic qualities, a defence of the incorporation of evaluative elements within the verbal description of artworks might be persuasively developed in relation to the twofold compulsion to circumvent the double standards underpinning the art access industry while avoiding the unjustified embedding of art access in a groundless and distinctly unhelpful suspicion of interpretation. Whether such practice is discussed in terms of subjectivity or relativity, prevailing insistence that art description should be a hermeneutic-free zone can be countered by more compelling and research-informed appeals to the inextricable fusion of experience, interpretation and evaluation within the ‘psychological set’ of art engagement.

**Texts cited**

Arnheim, R. *The Power of the Center: A Study of Composition in the Visual Arts*,London: University of California Press 1982.

Bardini, F. Audio Description of Cinematic Language: A Comparative Study of Describers' Approaches. Conference presentation: Advanced Research Seminar on Audio Description 2013. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301748125\_Audio\_Description\_of\_Cinematic\_Language\_A\_Comparative\_Study\_of\_Describers'\_Approaches](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/301748125_Audio_Description_of_Cinematic_Language_A_Comparative_Study_of_Describers%27_Approaches) (last accessed 25/10/2023).

Bardini, F. Audiovisual Translation for the Blind and Partially Sighted: Audio description, an indispensable access mode. Conference presentation: International Research-to-Practice Conference and Summer School of Audiovisual Translation 2016. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323907256_Audiovisual_Translation_for_the_Blind_and_Partially_Sighted_Audio_description_an_indispensable_access_mode> (last accessed 25/10/2023.

Bolt, D. The metanarrative of disability: social encounters, cultural representation and critical avoidance. In D. Bolt (ed.). Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies. London: Routledge 2019, pp. 337-347.

Budd, M. The acquaintance principle, The British Journal of Aesthetics 43 (2003), pp. 386–392.

Das, T.K. & Teng, B-S. The risk-based view of trust: A conceptual framework. Journal of Business and Psychology 19(1) (2004), pp. 85-116.

Diderot, D. *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature and Other Philosophical Works*, ed., David Adams, Manchester: Clinamen Press 1999.

Eagleton, T. Not just anybody. London Review of Books 39(1) (2017). Available at <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v39/n01/terry-eagleton/not-just-anybody> (Last accessed 30 July 2024).

Elkins, J. On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them. New York: Cambridge University Press 1998.

Feeney, D. Toward an Aesthetics of Blindness: An Interdisciplinary Response to Synge, Yeats and Friel. New York: Peter Lang 2007.

Feeney, D. A modest defence of disability simulation within an arts access context. MuseumEdu: Education and Research in Cultural Environments., 5. (2017), pp. 83-106.

Felski, R. After suspicion. Profession (1) (2009), pp. 28-35.

Felski, R. Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion. *M/C Journal*, *15*(1) (2011a). Available at <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.431> (Last accessed August 3rd 2024).

Felski, Rita. “Suspicious Minds.” *Poetics Today* 32.2 (2011b), pp. 215–34.

Felski, R. The Limits of Critique. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2015.

Fischoff, B. Managing risk perceptions. Issues in Science and Technology 2(1) (1985), pp. 83-96.

Friel, B. *Molly Sweeney*, Oldcastle, Co. Meath: The Gallery Press 1994.

Fryer, L. An Introduction to Audio Description. London: Taylor & Francis 2016.

Fumerton, R. Knowledge by acquaintance vs. description,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2008)*. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-acquaindescrip/> (last accessed Oct 22nd 2023).

Gambetta, D. Can we trust? In D. Gambetta (Ed.), Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations. New York: Basil Blackwell (1988), pp. 212-237.

Goethe, J.W. Travels in Italy, together with Second Residence in Rome and Fragments on Italy. London: George Bell & Sons 1885.

Hagberg, G. Art and the unsayable. Langer’s tractarian aesthetics. British Journal of Aesthetics 24(4) (1984), pp. 325-340.

Herrnstein Smith, B. Fixed marks and variable constancies: A parable of literary value. Poetics Today 1(1/2) (1979). Special Issue – Literature, Interpretation, Communication, pp. 7-22.

Herrnstein Smith, B. Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1991.

Hopkins, R. Beauty and Testimony, in Philosophy, the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, ed. Anthony O’Hear, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2000), pp. 209–236.

Kant, I. Critique of Judgment, trans. James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1988.

Kermode, F. Romantic Image. London: Taylor & Francis 2001

Kleege, G. More than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art. New York: Oxford University Press 2018.

Laertz, B. A modest defence of aesthetic testimony. The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 64(4) (2008), pp. 355-363.

Leung, A. K.-y., Maddux, W. W., Galinsky, A. D., & Chiu, C.-y. Multicultural experience enhances creativity: The when and how. *American Psychologist, 63*(3) (2008), pp. 169–181.

Luhmann, N. Risk: A Sociological Theory. New York: Aldine de Gruyter 1993.

Mackie, J.L. Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1977.

Magee, B. & Milligan, M. *Sight Unseen*, London: Phoenix 1998, 1st pub. as *On Blindness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Mazur, I. & Schmiel, A. Towards common European audio description guidelines: results of the Pear Tree Project, Perspectives, 20 (1) (2012), pp. 5-23

McKinnon, R. How to be an optimist about aesthetic testimony. Episteme 1 (02) (2016), pp. 1-20.

Meskin, A. Aesthetic testimony: What can we learn from others about beauty and art? Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 69 (2004), pp. 65–91.

Meskin, A. Solving the puzzle of aesthetic testimony, in Knowing Art: Essays in Aesthetics and Epistemology, ed. Dominic McIver Lopes and Matthew Kieran. Dordrecht: Springer (2006), pp. 109–124.

Mothersill, M. Beauty Restored. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1984.

Orero, P. Audio description behaviour: universals, regularities and guidelines. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2 (2012), pp. 195-202.

Paulson, W. R. *Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Blind in France*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1987.

Penketh, C. Special educational needs and art and design education: plural perspectives on exclusion. Journal of Education Policy, 31(4) (2016), pp. 432–442.

Praz, M. The Romantic Agony: New York: Oxford University Press 1993.

Remael, A., Reviers, A. & Vercauteren, G. Pictures Painted in Words: ADLAB Audio Description Guidelines (2015). Available at: <https://repository.uantwerpen.be/docman/irua/99e3cf/130865.pdf> (Last accessed 3rd August 2024).

Reid, L.A. Education and aesthetic meaning, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 9, (1969), pp. 271-284.

Reid, L.A. Knowing that and knowing this. British Journal of Aesthetics 20(4) (1980), pp. 329-339.

Robson, J. Aesthetic testimony and the test of time. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 96(3) (2018), pp. 729–748.

Robson, J. Aesthetic Testimony: An Optimistic Approach. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2022.

Russell, B. Knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 11 (1910-11), pp. 108–28.

Santayana, G. *The Sense of Beauty*, New York: Barnes and Noble 2005, 1st pub., 1896.

Sibley, F. Aesthetic/nonaesthetic, Philosophical Review 74 (1965), pp. 135–159.

Smith, R.A. The Sense of Art. New York & London: Routledge 1989.

Snyder, J. The Visual Made Verbal. Arlington, VA: American Council of the Blind 2014.

Soler Gallego, S. Defining subjectivity in visual art audio description. Meta, 64(3) (2019), pp. 708–733.

Sontag, S. Against Interpretation and Other Essays. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux 1966.

Synge, J.M. *The Well of the Saints*, ed. Nicholas Grene, Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe/The Catholic University of America Press 1982.

Tormey, A. Critical judgments, Theoria 39 (1973), pp. 35–49.

Williams, R. Marxism and Literature. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977.

Wollheim, R. Art and Its Objects, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1980.

Yeats, W.B. *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B.Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach, London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd. 1966, reprinted 1989.