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SCREEN-TEST AUDIENCE AS ARTIST?

In a pivotal scene in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), whose tagline reads, “a silent film star falls for a chorus girl as he and his delusionally jealous screen partner are trying to make the difficult transition to talking films in 1920s Hollywood,” a screen-test audience boos and heckles the quickly revised production of the *Dueling Cavalier*.¹ The audience laughs, guffaws, and mocks the changes in the film where the machinations of silent film are revealed to be trite. At this plot point, the film within the film *The Dueling Cavalier* appears to be doomed. The heckling at the screen-test made it clear (within the realm of the narrative) that more needed to be done to make the transition from silent to talkie successful. While this is but one dramatic representation of the Hollywood practice of screen-testing, one might argue that the screen-test audience blurs the lines between artist and audience.

The moving image makes a compelling test case for the nature of art because so much of the early twentieth century in both film theory and filmmaking was dedicated to establishing the artistic nature of this (at the time) new artform.² While dramatic representation of the Hollywood practice of screen-testing near final versions of films, one might wonder philosophically whether the screen-test audience might be considered part of the artists of the film? For at least at first blush, one might argue that because the screen-test audience can make or break a film's success as well as the content of the film, they are integral part of the poesis or artistry of the film.

One of the deep and abiding questions of the philosophy of film is whether film is art, and if it is considered art, then who are the artists? Feminist film

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¹ “Singin' in the Rain,” IMDb, accessed July 16, 2022, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0045152/>.

² Noel Carroll, *Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 4–20.

theory as well as Auteur theory answer the question affirmatively that film can be art and identify the director as the artist. This, of course, ignores the fact that most films require actors, sets, camera operators and sound crew in addition to all of the work involved in screenwriting and film editing. Are they all artists? If so, then what are we to make of the artist's intentions? One way around the identification of a single artistic intention is to argue that each artist has a role in the production much like an artistic exhibition in a museum may have many individual artists but still has a cohesive theme realized through multiple intentions. An institutional argument for the case of multiple artists of a single film is that there are many categories of artists eligible for the Academy of Motion Pictures Awards. Given all of these categories of awards where each has a substantial impact on the work of art itself as film, one might wonder whether the screen-test audience might be considered among the artists of a film?

An additional example, aside from the fictionalized *Dueling Cavalier in Singin' in the Rain*, is an adaption of Nick Hornby's book *High Fidelity* (2000).³ In contrast to the English setting of the novel, the film is reimagined as set in Chicago, Illinois at the turn of the millennium. It is a coming-of-age film of sorts which centers on the quarter-life crisis of its main character Rob (John Cusack) as he negotiates the contours of his most recent break-up by comparing and contrasting it to all of the girls and women he has broken up with or who have broken up with him previously. The novel ends with Rob coming to terms with his bachelor status and embarking on life as a singleton. However, when the film was shot with the exact same ending, the screen tests came back indicating that the audience hated the ending.⁴ The audience had read it as a romantic comedy and was disappointed when the expectations they had given the genre conventions were upended.

The screenwriters, D.V. DeVincentis, Steve Pink, John Cusack, and Scott Rosenberg, went back to the drawing board to develop an alternative ending; one that conforms to the genre of romantic comedy. The ending of the film was re-shot, edited, and additions to the soundtrack were made.⁵ All of this effort was as a result of the audience's screen test reactions. In short, the experience of the audience, or at least one audience, had a profound impact on the content, and arguably the success of the film. While all of this is true, I do not think it is sufficient to render the screen-test audience as artists.

³ Nick Hornby, *High Fidelity* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).

⁴ *High Fidelity* Stephen Frears, 2000, Core Production Files, Margaret Herrick Archives in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts.

⁵ Ibid.

In classical rhetoric's stock issues debates, there is a distinction between a negative construction and a positive construction in public policy debates. The negative construction simply highlights and argues about what is wrong with the proposal set forth in the positive construction of the debates or what is wrong with the proposed policy without any substantive arguments about what ought to be done about a particular issue. The positive construction actually offers concrete policy proposals and articulates reasons why it is a good solution to a specific problem, even if there does not exist a perfect solution to the problem.⁶ We might think of the stock issues debate formulas as an analogue to the filmmakers' whose costume design and acting, directing and film editing all have a positive effect to what appears on screen. The screen-test audience offers only negative constructions because even when they like the film, they are not positively impacting what is on screen, and moreover when they don't like the film, they are not offering alternative stories that then will appear on the screen. By pointing out what is going wrong, screen-test audiences do alter the course of the production of the film, in the case of *Singin' in the Rain*, the screen-test audience's reaction leads to the change in the *Dueling Cavalier* from a drama to a musical. In *High Fidelity* they screen-test audience leads the screenwriters to add the conventions of romantic comedies into the narrative. In both cases, the screen-test audiences are not artists but rather critics whose negative construction influences the debates about what the final art product should look like. This does not mean that the convention of the screen-test audience is irrelevant to the artistry of film, they just occupy a slightly different role in the artworld — that of critic.

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