

Guiding Your Criticism: The Feldman Method

Outline based on Edmund Burke Feldman, *Becoming Human through Art*. Englewood Cliffs NJ- Prentice Hal! 1970. pp. 348-383. Outline prepared by Patricia A. Renick, Professor of Fine Art. University of Cincinnati

According to Feldman* the four stages of art criticism are:

- I. **Description**-listing what an art object seems to include.
- II. **Analysis**-describing the relationship among the things that were listed.
- III. **Interpretation**-deciding what all your earlier observations mean.
- IV. **Judgment**-deciding the value of an art object.

To Begin: Be specific as much as you can. Discuss the work as if you are describing it to someone who has not seen it. It is crucial that you do not jump to any conclusions about the work.

I. Description

The words you use in description are like pointers. They draw attention to something worth seeing. The words that you use to describe the work must be **neutral**. **Terms that denote value judgments must be banned from your vocabulary** at this stage. Why? They are loaded and tend to influence your judgment too early in the process of looking at the work. In other words, do not use such terms as strong, beautiful harmonious, weak disorderly, ugly, funny-looking, etc. If you are not *certain about how to describe something in the work do not assign a name to it*. For example, it may not be clear whether you are looking at men or women. In this case you should say you see "some people." It is wise to be vague about some detail rather than to make an error that might throw off the final interpretation.

What You Can Describe

1. **Recognizable subjects:** In some descriptions, you can easily get agreement about the names of what you see like a man, a tree, a lake, grass, children, animals, sky, and so on. Agreement is fairly easy to get when you are viewing representational works of art.
2. **Visual elements and their qualities:** Contemporary abstract and nonobjective works rarely show us things that have common or proper names, so we have to describe visual elements--the *lines, colors textures shapes, forms and, shapes* we see. Use adjectives that call attention to the specific qualities of the visual elements such as *vertical, round, oval, smooth, dark, bright, square, horizontal and* so on. Now, combine the above adjectives with the nouns for visual elements-shape, color, line, space, texture, etc. This adds precision to your description of a work of art. It also slows you down so that you are able to see the work more completely without judging or interpreting it.
3. **Technical qualities:** Try to describe the way the art object seems to have been made. See if you can identify what *media* and what *tools* were used. Tell how they were *manipulated* to create the work. (Technique is important for criticism because it is just as expressive as the shapes and forms we see.)

Remember: Description is neutral. Your language should refer to the visual evidence in the work.

II. Analysis

In this stage, we want to find out how the parts of the work interact. What they do to each other? How do the parts affect or influence each other? Describing the *relationships* among the things we see is a process known as formal or structural analysis.

Things to Analyze

1. **Size relationships:** Comparing sizes gives us *clues about the importance* of parts. For example, large shapes usually seem more important than small ones. They seem to have higher "rank" than small shapes. Look for the largest, the smallest, and those shapes that appear to be about the same size. If you are looking at a picture in which spatial depth is represented, size is also a clue to the location of things in a picture space.
2. **Shape relationships:** Study and describe how shapes are combined in a work. This will help you acquire valuable evidence for deciding what the total work of art means. For example, analyze what happens when curved shapes are next to each other, or when they are next to angular or pointed shapes. Notice how *jagged* shapes offset *smooth* ones. Look at the edges of shapes. Describe them as *hard* or *soft*, *even* or *uneven*, etc.
3. **Color relationships:** Notice whether the colors of shapes are similar to or different from each other; whether they *vary slightly* or *contrast strongly*. Look for value relationships. Analyze whether a color area is *lighter* or *darker* than a nearby area. You may discover that colors are different while the values are the same.
4. **Textural surface relationships:** Notice whether the textural treatment is actual and/or *illusionary*. Notice whether textural surfaces of shapes are similar to or different from each other; whether they *vary slightly or contrast strongly*. Through analyzing the surface qualities of a work of art you may discover the emotional qualities as well as the ideas conveyed by the art object.
5. **Space and volume relationships:** When analyzing an artwork look for clues to the location of forms. Notice which forms appear in the *foreground* or the *background*. Describe how the artist implied space (e.g. through the use of perspective, overlap, size, placement, color, light and shadows, etc.). Notice whether the implied space is indefinite, seemingly *open* and *endless*; or whether it has *limits* and is *enclosed*. Pay attention to the empty spaces-negative *shapes* or *forms*-and see if you can determine their effect on

the *positive shapes* or forms in the work of art. The way a sculptor, painter, or architect treats negative space may offer useful clues to the total meaning of the work.

Remember: The intentions of description and formal analysis are:

- To encourage the most thorough examination of the artwork as possible.
- To slow down the viewer's tendency to jump to conclusions.
- To build skill in observation--a skill that is vital for understanding the visual arts and for personal development.
- To accumulate perceptions of the "visual facts" that will be used for a critical interpretation.
- To help a group establish a consensus about the visual evidence-those features of the art object that will become the subject of interpretation and judgment.

III. Interpretation

Now you have to decide what all of your earlier observations mean. At this stage, you are making inferences about the visual evidence. An interpretation is really a set of inferences ("good guesses" or hypotheses) about the meaning of the visual evidence. Don't be afraid to propose an interpretation. You may find that you change or adjust your interpretation until it fits the visual facts. Beginners often make illogical inferences. Be sure that you do not, change or ignore visual facts in order to make your interpretation seem correct.

Guides for Interpreting A Work Of Art

1. **Is there a "big" Idea?** See if you can identify a single large *idea* or *concept* that seems to sum up or unify all the separate traits of the work. Do not describe the object (you have already done that). Use words to describe ideas.
2. **How does the work affect you?** Explain the *sensations* and *feelings* you have when viewing the artwork.
3. **Does the work connect with your experience as an artist?** How and why? Reflect on your own *artistic experience*. Perhaps you can recognize technical signs that indicate that the artist is trying to solve an artistic problem that you have struggled with yourself.
4. **How does the work connect with your knowledge about art?** Reflect on your knowledge of art history and artistic styles. Try to identify problems that artists have persistently tried to solve (such as problems of meaning, or form, or social function).
5. **How does the work connect with your knowledge of life?** Trust yourself. Draw upon your *observations*, your *hunches*, and your *intelligence*. Sometimes, impressions may come to you in the form of "looks like" and "feels like" reactions. These reactions may be funny, illogical or absurd, but do not reject them. Sometimes odd impressions can be important to explore and sharpen. They may offer some fundamental insight about the work being viewed.

Why Interpret the Work? If you have been able to let a *thing* (an art object) enter your life and become part of you, if your mental and emotional powers have transformed that thing (that work of art) so that it is yours in a very unique and special sense; then you have discovered what it is like to have an aesthetic experience.

IV. Judgment

The reasons for judging a work excellent or poor are always relative to some context and purpose. Any broad judgment of art should be based on a philosophy of art, not on your personal preferences (likes or dislikes). If you are resourceful, you can develop your own philosophy of art as a basis for judging the merit of any work that interests you. If you have not yet developed a philosophy of your own, you should consider some of the following. They can help you begin to make judgments about works of art that are justified (logical, supported by reasons, not just personal opinions). Feldman identifies and describes three philosophies of art that seem useful for justifying critical judgments.

They are:

- A. **Formalism:** stresses the importance of the formal qualities and visual elements of art.
- B. **Expressivism:** stresses the importance of the communication of ideas and feelings in a convincing and forceful manner.
- C. **Instrumentalism:** stresses the importance of the social intention or utility of the work.
- D.

Examples of Criteria for Judgment

Formalism

1. The formalist critic wants the experience of art to be devoted to contemplation of the relationships of the parts to the whole in-a work of art.
2. Each part should enhance the quality of the parts around it.
3. It should not be possible to change a single element without spoiling the whole work of art.
4. The viewer should feel a unity or wholeness in the work. If you have too much or too little emotion when you experience the work, it is flawed.
5. The Formalist critic wants pleasures in art to come from the art object itself—the combinations of sensations from its surfaces, colors, and other visual qualities.
6. Feelings and ideas should depend only on the way the artist shapes his materials.
7. Art that relies on symbols, or on subject matter, or on the viewer's life-long experience is rejected by the Formalist critic.
8. The Formalist critic appreciates "art for art's sake," and feels that no other reason for creating art is needed or even acceptable.

9. A masterpiece, according to the Formalist critic, is a work of art that has perfect visual organization and technical execution.

Expressivism

1. The Expressivist critic is interested in the depth and intensity of the experience one has when looking at art.
2. An excellent work of art could be ugly.
3. The Expressivist critic believes that the formal and technical organization of the work has to be good; otherwise it would not be able to affect his feelings.
4. The Expressivist critic has two basic rules for judging excellence: a. that work is best which has the greatest power to arouse the viewer's emotions, and b. that work is best which communicates ideas of major significance.
5. Art should look and feel as if it is based on reality, not other works of art.
6. Great art should not look calculated. It should seem to be the inevitable result of what an artist has seen or felt deeply.
7. The Expressivist critic believes that art should make everyday life more meaningful and profound.
8. What matters is the artist's ability to make the viewer believe in what the viewer sees in the work. The *viewer* must experience an emotion before the viewer can believe that the artist also felt and expressed it. The genuineness or actuality of the artist's emotions does not matter and often cannot be determined.

Instrumentalism

1. The Instrumentalist critic believes that art should serve purposes that have been determined by persistent human needs working through powerful social institutions. Art should serve the interests of the church, the state, business, or politics.
2. Art is at its best when it helps to advance some cause that will, presumably, advance the interests of humanity.
3. Art that depends on art or grows out of art is inferior, self-serving, or decadent.
4. The excellence of a work of art is measured by its capacity to change human behavior in public and visible ways. For example, great political art results in greater allegiance to a party. Great religious art inspires faith.
5. The technical and imaginative gifts of the artist need to be organized by an idea that is greater or more important than the private emotions of the artist.
6. The Instrumentalist critic believes that, if the meanings of the work are good and are expressed through perfectly organized forms, then the work is a masterpiece, the phrase *perfectly organized forms* means the closest possible connection between the appearance and the social intention of the work.

A Final Word of Advice

Do not start the examination of a work of art by asking whether it meets your criteria for excellence. That is the last question you should ask. Begin with identification and description. Work your way through analysis and interpretation. By then you will know which type of judgment, which philosophy of art, is most appropriate for the work you are examining. It is better to use these philosophies interchangeably, according to the character of the art object, than to stick rigidly to one philosophy alone and thus lose the opportunity to discover some excellence the work may have. The goal of art criticism is not necessarily to demonstrate how consistent you are in your final judgments. **The real goal is to increase the range of ideas, values, and satisfactions you get from art.**