

Critical Analysis in the Humanities: Visual Arts

This handout is designed for students in the humanities as *well* as those interested in contemplating the nonliterary arts, specifically those who are concerned with reflecting more deeply on visual art. Intended as a supplement to an instructor's specific requirements, the following information will give the student critic some concepts and terms to consider when analyzing the fine and performing arts in writing critical essays for the humanities.

As with any other writing assignment for college course work, a critical analysis should follow standard practices in essay mechanics, form, tone, and style.

VISUAL ART: *An Outline for Analysis*

1. **Subject:** What is represented in the work? How is this subject presented: *naturalistically* ("realistically"), or with a sense of *psychological or social realism*, or in an idealized form--*symbolically, abstractly*?
2. **Source:** Is the work modeled upon some previous piece or pieces in the artist's personal history or in his or her cultural tradition? More broadly, is the artist's work influenced by classical, medieval, renaissance, or some other style? Is this modeling significant? If so, how is it significant?
3. **Medium:** What materials has the artist used in his or her composition?
 - a. For example, in the case of painting, is the piece in tempera, fresco, oil, watercolor, pastel, or what other material?
 - b. In the case of sculpture, is the statue in bronze, marble, limestone, wood, or what other material?
 - c. Does the artist's choice of medium affect the meaning or the expression of the work as a whole?
4. **Visual elements:** How does each aspect of the piece affect the presentation of the subject and impact the viewer?
 - a. **Line:** Are the lines in the work **geometric** (abstracted) or **organic** (naturalistic)? How are the lines arranged: horizontally, vertically, diagonally, or are they curvilinear?
 - b. **Value:** Is the work, overall, light or dark?
 - i. **Chiaroscuro:** Is there a distinctive pattern of light and shadow?
 - c. **Color:** What hues, values, and intensities of color are utilized in the piece?
 - d. **Texture:** What sort of tactile impression does the surface of the work suggest to the senses?
 - e. **Volume:** Are the figures in the work represented as dimensional and solid, or are they stylized and flattened? Does the volume impact expression or meaning?
 - f. **Proportion:** Are figures and parts of figures in the piece related naturalistically or realistically to one another?

- i. For example, is the head in realistic proportion to the body, are human figures realistically sized to one another?
 - ii. Are buildings and human figures presented in natural proportions? If they are not realistically delineated, how are they presented? Are they abnormally related?--is there foreshortening, elongation?
 - iii. What do the proportions indicate? Do the proportions suggest meanings, or are they merely stylistic--specific to the artist's style or to the style of a particular cultural movement?
 - g. **Space:** Is the space of the work flattened into a particular plane, or is it extended into depth by means of linear or aerial perspective? Is the space open or closed? Does this depiction of space have significance or suggest meaning? How? Why?
5. **Organization:** Is the design **symmetrical** (balanced) or **asymmetrical** (unbalanced)? Is the design organized in a radial, pyramidal, vertical, or horizontal fashion? Does the design of the piece seem formally arranged, naturally arranged, or both? Does the work seem disorganized, perhaps intentionally? Does it accept or reject traditional or commonsensical ideas of order?
- a. How do all these elements of organization--the answers you gave to the items above--contribute to the artist's expression and to the meaning of the work itself as a whole?
6. **Theme:** In your judgment, based on the **overall** analysis detailed above, what is the artist attempting to express or suggest? Is the attempt successful? If so, why is it a success; if not, why is it not a success?

TERMS

- **chiaroscuro:** of or relating to the technique of representing light and shadow in pictorial representation
- **curvilinear:** descriptive of lines that are curved, rounded in contrast to straight
- **fresco:** of or relating to the art of painting with colors mixed in water and applied to fresh plaster
- **pastel:** of or relating to pictures or sketches drawn with a crayon made of a paste of ground and mixed pigment
- **tempera:** of or relating to painting done with pigment mixed with egg yolk or a similar water-soluble material