

Contemporary Visual Culture First Critique Help Sheet

Listed below are some suggestions and questions to guide your semiotic analysis of a work of art. This is by no means an exhaustive list of possible interpretations, nor should it be used as a checklist for your critique, due next week. These are just some alternative interpretations to help you approach the object effectively.

1. Consider the art historical connotations of the object: what are its formal properties? How does it work as a graphic object?
2. If the painting or sculpture has a specific narrative, consider its iconographic significance. How is it tied to a narrative (in other words, how does the image illustrate the specific narrative in question)? How is the narrative the product of cultural experience and/or tied to cultural narrative?
3. How is this image a sign of the period in which the object was made?
4. How is the image a sign of the artist? In other words, how does it function as a sign of his/her particular style? More specifically, how does the painting recall the physical presence of the artist who made the image?
 - a. If the painting or sculpture is a portrait, how does it establish identity? Who does the image tell us that the sitter is? What conventions allow us to read this image as a portrait (pose, objects or attributes, etc.)
 - b. If the portrait is a self-portrait, how has the artist constructed his/her self-identity? How is he/she costumed? What differences exist between a portrait and a self-portrait? Self-portraits are often read as autobiographical; how does this image tie into the constructed biography or autobiography of this artist?
 - c. How does the gender of the artist and the sitter factor into the way this image is read? Who is meant to look at this image, and in what context?
5. What are the cultural connotations that surround this image? How is our recognition, appreciation or understanding of this image grounded in a specific, learned cultural experience?
6. How does the image related or connected to its location? Where was the image originally installed and for what kind of audience? How does the physical structure of the museum effect the way we see the image?

- a. What role does the museum play in our perception and understanding of art?
What connotations surround the idea of the art museum? How does the physical structure reinforce or challenge these connotations?
 - b. Consider the way the image is curated. What surrounds it? How is our experience of looking at the image shaped by its location and the other objects in the room?
7. Consider the image as a commodity sign? How does it represent an object of value, whether material, social or cultural?
 8. How is the image an ad?
 9. How is the image different from a photograph, or an advertisement?
 10. Consider the Benjamin essay: what role does mechanical reproduction play in our response and recognition of the image?
 11. What role do your personal experiences and aesthetic tastes play in your response to this image?