Methodology Matrix

Using the Art Historical Methodologies

A matrix is an environment or material in which something develops. With that definition in mind, think of this assignment as a means of getting to know these new interpretive tools and practicing how to use one of them with comfort. To begin, read “Approaches to Art” from the book, *Looking at Art* by Laurie Schneider Adams. You may also find the website, www.writingaboutart.org/ and the “Understanding the Methods” on the class “Assignments” page on The Slide Projector helpful.

By this point in the semester, you should have an approved research paper thesis and identified three works of art that relate to your central points. The heart of your research paper will be an in-depth analysis of these three works of art utilizing at least two of the art historical methodologies learned this semester: biography, feminism, formalism, iconography, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and semiotics. In addition, you will be required to provide consideration of the historical context of each work, and a visual description that assists your arguments.

To practice using the art historical methodologies, choose one of the artworks identified on your Research Paper Plan that you intend to analyze in your Research Paper. Next, choose the art historical methodology that seems best suited towards breaking down the work’s components and better understanding its meaning and read the appropriate methodology explanation and example of its use. You might find it useful (but not required) to print out the sample writing and underline or highlight the areas in which the author directly applies the art historical method you are using. Finally, apply the methodology to your work of art assuming that your reader has already read your visual description (it is not necessary to provide an introduction or conclusion).

Remember that you may need to / want to cite credible sources to support your analytic claims. If you use sources (even if they are just paraphrased, or you are simply employing an author’s idea) you need to cite your source in MLA style, and provide a Works Cited page with your analysis. Please also be sure to provide the artist’s name, title of the work, and the date the work was made in your discussion.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methodology Matrix Rubric</th>
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<th>out of 25 points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The basics (artist, title date)</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suitability of method to the work</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrated understanding of methodology</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Application of method to convey understanding of the work</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing style</td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>_______</td>
<td>25</td>
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When using **biography** as a method for interpreting meaning, the writer uses facts concerning the life of the artist as well as significant events, and personal reflections made by the artist (when available) to better understand the work.

As you view a work with the intention of using biography as a method for understanding, ask yourself:

- What elements of the artist's life may have inspired them to create this work?
- Under what personal contexts was the work made?
- What do the details of the artist's life reveal about the work?
- What associations or themes do we identify in the work that may be associated with this personal context or the artist's biography?
- How did the important events of the artist's life influence their choice in subject matter, and the manner in which they expressed their subject?

**Example uses of biography as a method:**
- [http://www.theartstory.org/artist-rothko-mark.htm](http://www.theartstory.org/artist-rothko-mark.htm)

**A feminist approach** considers the form of the artwork and its purely visual characteristics.

When discussing an artwork's form the writer should:

- Begin by brainstorming descriptive words/ adjectives that identify important qualities and elements of the work.
- Identify the period or art historical style the photo adheres to.
- Decide whether the work is abstract, representational, or includes elements of both.
- Describe line and shape quality (for example, hard & thick or light and delicate).
- Identify important compositional features like rhythm, balance, and repetition.
- Discuss remarkable or eye catching features.
- Be sure to also discuss elements like texture, contrast, use of blur and space.
- Also, describe the quality of the materials or media used.

**Example uses of a feminist approach:**

**A formalist approach** considers the form of the artwork and its purely visual characteristics.

When discussing an artwork's form the writer should:

- Begin by brainstorming descriptive words/ adjectives that identify important qualities and elements of the work.
- Identify the period or art historical style the photo adheres to.
- Decide whether the work is abstract, representational, or includes elements of both.
- Describe line and shape quality (for example, hard & thick or light and delicate).
- Identify important compositional features like rhythm, balance, and repetition.
- Discuss remarkable or eye catching features.
- Be sure to also discuss elements like texture, contrast, use of blur and space.
- Also, describe the quality of the materials or media used.

**Example uses of a formal approach:**
- [http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/building_lessons/formal_analysis.html](http://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/building_lessons/formal_analysis.html)
An **iconographic** approach considers the meaning of the artwork during the time period in which it was made. When using an iconographic approach, the viewer must first identify visual elements (identifiable objects and subjects) in the work, then define what those elements might mean on a symbolic level. While attempting to identify and define the visual elements of a work, the viewer must consider the artist's intent, the patron's desired meaning, and the audience for whom the work was intended to be seen. Remember that multiple meanings, or definitions, may exist for the same visual element, and those meanings may contradict each other. Therefore, when using an iconographic approach, it is important for the viewer not to take any understanding for granted. One must ask whether a definition is universally accepted, if that meaning has always been understood, and what other meanings may also be offered?

Example uses of an iconographic approach:
- [http://www.haberarts.com/campin.htm](http://www.haberarts.com/campin.htm)
- [http://monoskop.org/images/1/1d/Jan_van_Eyck_Arnolfini_Portrait.pdf](http://monoskop.org/images/1/1d/Jan_van_Eyck_Arnolfini_Portrait.pdf)

**Diego Velázquez: Las Meninas, 1656.**

**Semiotics** as an art historical method begins with structuralism, which is a philosophical approach that analyzes society by looking at cultural phenomena, particularly signs, that have hidden underlying meanings that can be decoded. Semiotics is the study of signs, and why they mean what they mean. It relates to an iconographic approach, but differs in that it goes beyond identifying symbols and understanding their meaning in context and considers socio-cultural context. When using a semiotic approach, the viewer of a work deconstructs the meaning of signs within written language, speech, sounds, gestures, objects, etc.

Example uses of a semiotic approach:
- [http://faculty.washington.edu/dillon/rhethtml/signifiers/sigsave.html](http://faculty.washington.edu/dillon/rhethtml/signifiers/sigsave.html)
**Marxism** is the ideological and socioeconomic theory developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels including the belief that the struggle between social classes is a major force in history and that there should eventually be a society in which there are no classes. The fundamental ideology of communism, it holds that all people are entitled to enjoy the fruits of their labour but are prevented from doing so in a capitalist economic system, which divides society into two classes: non-owning workers and non-working owners. Marx called the resulting situation “alienation,” and he said that when the workers repossessed the fruits of their labour, alienation would be overcome and class divisions would cease. The Marxist theory of history posits class struggle as history's driving force, and sees capitalism as the most recent and most critical historical stage because at this stage the proletariat will at last arise united.

Example uses of a Marxist approach:
http://www.arthistoryunstuffed.com/marxism-art-artist/
http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/kitsch.html

A **psychoanalytic** approach uses Freudian theory on the development of personality (the iceberg, and the id, ego, & superego) while considering how the artist's decisions may have been influenced by drives outside of their awareness. Freud theorized that an artist makes a work of art as an attempt to resolve developmental conflicts and as a means of obtaining pleasure. When using psychoanalysis to understand the meaning of a work of art, the viewer examines an artist’s psychological development as it relates to the work and the perceived (or demonstrated) pleasure associated with the making and viewing of the work. When using psychoanalysis, it’s important to understand that Freud theorized that our behavior reflects a persistent battle between the id, the ego, and the superego. We are born with instinctual drives, but as our personalities develop, we fail to resolve conflicts at particular stages, which may cause us to develop fixations and inhibitions. As well, the viewer may also consider their own experiences and how they color their understanding of the work of art.

Example uses of a psychoanalytic approach:
http://www.oswego.edu/Documents/wac/Art%20History%20Honorable%20Mention%203.pdf
http://evergreen.loyola.edu/bmrygren/www/Honors/freud.htm