

Procedural Reading of Paintings

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Abstract:

Procedural reading represents a methodological practical approach aimed at simplifying the interpretation and understanding of visual artworks. This reading serves as a fundamental pillar in art criticism, constituting the first step toward the systematic and in-depth analysis of artistic works. Its importance is not limited to the superficial interpretation of visual elements but extends to include an understanding of the artistic structure and the aesthetic expressions embedded within the artwork. This process often occurs implicitly within art studies, integrated into the stages of analysis without being explicitly referenced. Just as the reading of linguistic texts relies on specific guidelines to grasp deeper meanings, the interpretation of visual artworks necessitates the application of principles and guidelines that facilitate the viewer's reception and comprehension. These principles not only enhance the aesthetic experience but also equip the viewer with the necessary tools to conduct a thoughtful and critical reading that goes beyond initial impressions, leading to a more profound and accurate analysis of artworks. Through this process, the recipient can establish an effective connection with the artwork, enabling them to extract the artistic and cultural values inherent within it.

Keywords: Procedural Reading, Critical Reception, Art Analysis, Study of Artistic Works, Visual Comprehension, Aesthetic Criticism, Plastic Arts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Paintings tell a story through colors and shapes, reflecting the artist's emotions. Viewers enjoy these artworks to varying degrees based on their cultural background, interests, and personal perspectives.

In order to make plastic artworks easy to perceive by ordinary people, art criticism aims to valorize and value them by revealing their secrets to interested viewers. Both the art critic and the ordinary viewer engage in the act of reading a painting, but to varying depths. It is possible to refer to a deeper

and more precise reading of an artwork through specialized or procedural reading. This kind of reading mainly relies on a methodology that serves art studies, whether in their critical or analytical context. This gives it great importance and raises questions about the nature of this procedural reading. Does it have specific guidelines adopted in various visual art studies? Or is it simply an individual effort accessible to everyone? Or even an automatic and systematic practice carried out by a selected group of art scholars?

This study aims at exploring this significant aspect that we all share when looking at a plastic artwork, without necessarily focusing on the nature, quality and guidelines of this reading. Therefore, we have relied on description and analysis in order to achieve the intended aims of this research.

2. Directions of reading paintings

When we experience a visual artwork, we do not always need to read it instantly in the ideal way. It may take some time to look at the work in its intricate parts, but this viewer cannot detect all the elements of the composition at once. Instead, they start from a specific point and continue in a specific direction to explore a certain amount of visual information in the painting.

2.1. Gyroscopic reading

It is one of the most important contributions in the context of reading a picture that mainly focused on the structure within the picture. The research revealed that the human eye acts in a more gyroscopic manner. This allows the eye to move along all axes and in nearly all directions inside the visual frame. The brain then makes the required changes to clarify and organize what the eye perceives. (Gaskell, 2007, p. 65)

If we divide the space of the painting into three vertical sections and three horizontal sections, the leftmost vertical third is what initially grabs the attention of the eye. With the same importance, we notice the bottom horizontal third from the same side. Therefore, the first area that catches the recipient's eye is the bottom left of the frame.



Figure 1: Women from Bousaada dancing, ETIENNE DINET (1861-1929)

Oil on canvas, 65 × 81 cm.

Catalogue Tajan - Orientalist Paintings, Paris, 2005, p. 47.

2.2. Clockwise reading

Other studies on visual reception have shown that “ the point that grabs the viewer's attention first is often located in the bottom left of the picture. Then, the points of attention are distributed in a clockwise direction, i.e.; the spiral exploration gradually draws the viewer's attention towards the depth of the screen” . (Al-Sudani, 2009, p. 38)



Figure 2: Wedding procession in Southern Algeria

EUGÈNE-ALEXIS GIRARDET (1853-1907)

Oil on canvas 129×184 cm

Catalogue Tajan - Orientalist Paintings, Paris, 2005, p. 57.

2.3. Zimmerman reading

Another field study focused on dividing the picture into four equal sections: top left, top right, bottom right, and bottom left. In this study, Zimmerman discovered that the top left corner of the picture is the first item that the viewer identifies, while the bottom right corner is the last. (Ibrahim, M., 2009, p. 196)

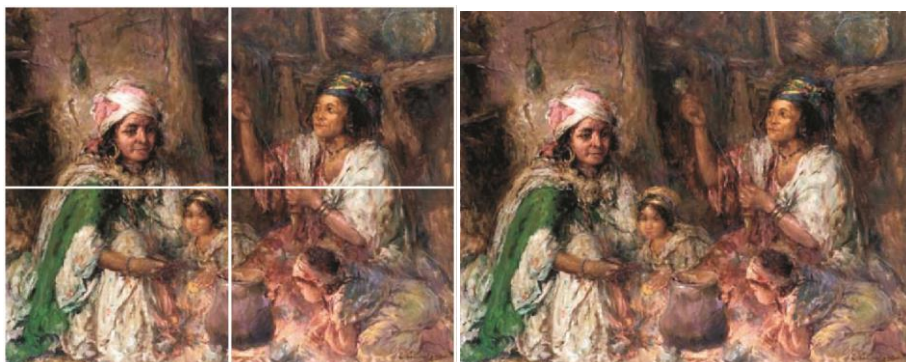


Figure 3: A family scene in Algeria
(1955-1874) ÉDOUARD VERSCHAFFELT
Oil on canvas 80× 101 cm

Catalogue Tajan - Orientalist Paintings, Paris, 2005, p. 115

3. The process of selecting paintings to deal with

Pablo Picasso once said, within the framework of reading paintings: "If you want to distinguish between great and poor paintings, think about looking at thousands of ones. There are, of course, important criteria in the world of professional art; however, don't worry too much about what they deem a 'good' qualification". (Livneva, 2019)

The artist enjoys total freedom in choosing the subject matter and style of their painting. Similarly, the recipient has the freedom to choose the painting they wish to deal with based on the way it attracts them. This can be done through exploring its key visual elements, ultimately leading to the aesthetic judgment of the artwork.

4. Visual scrutiny

Visual scrutiny is performed through focusing on intricate details and paying attention to both specific and overall data. It involves breaking down the overall visual shape into its basic components, exploring the relationships that connect the parts to the whole, and then identifying and categorizing the characteristics of those relationships.

Visual scrutiny primarily focuses on the form of the artwork and the visual choices employed by the artist as expressive elements and visual features that convey their message. Secondly, it explores the utilization of eye movement within the artwork through the arrangement of colors and formal components in a scientific manner based on academic theories and principles.

5. Elements of an artwork

Elements of an artwork are the components or parts of the artwork that can be isolated and captured individually. They are the fundamental building blocks that create a complete work of art.

These elements do not acquire artistic value except through composition and the way the artist deals with many of them aesthetically and expressively, the denotative values they add to them, and the relationships the artist creates between these elements and their distribution within the artwork as a whole. This also includes controlling the arrangement of shapes and spaces. Through skillful employment of these elements, which can serve as fundamental building blocks, the artist constructs

an aesthetic experience that the viewer undergoes during contemplation of the artwork, leading to their actual and aesthetic perception.

As a result, these elements become essential in producing an artistic aesthetic experience and a source of the desired aesthetic or expressive value. (Ibrahim, A., 2017)

The elements of an artwork include point, line, space, shape, size, color, texture, and other components that form the artwork as a whole. We do not really need to delve into all of these aspects, giving that this study is intended for a category of people and researchers who have acquired prior knowledge of these elements through previous art practice or study.

In every artwork, some elements may come into view more than others, forming the fundamental building blocks that the artist uses to create their artwork in the form of a precise design characterized by creativity and uniqueness. It is from this perspective that design appears as a special recipe adopted by the artist to shape their artwork using these elements.

6. Principles of design

The principles of design are defined as the techniques by which an artist employs visual creative components such as visual balance, depiction of movement, unity and variation, repetition and proportion, rhythm and harmony, and dominating focal point within an artwork. It also entails managing light, shadow, and perspective...etc.

Procedural reading in principle deals with the components of the artwork, its formal aspects and design in purposeful sequential phases that lead to the intended level of analysis and interpretation in each study of artworks. Therefore, procedural reading is sufficient for taking observations without making judgments, interpretations, or extrapolations to other models.

7. Circumstances of procedural reading

Indeed, studying the aspects of reception is essential as a preliminary step in the procedural reading of an artwork. There is no doubt that the general conditions of reception have an impact, to some extent, on the process of reading.

For example, the experience of viewing an artwork in a specialized gallery exhibition is not the same as seeing the work via a digital medium. The interested individual should check the location where the artwork is exhibited, the contextual framework, and all surrounding circumstances. Regardless of their apparent insignificance in terms of reception, they undoubtedly have their impressionist influence on the viewer.

For instance, if the artwork is exhibited in a gallery, careful consideration is given to its placement inside the gallery space, whether it is in the foyer, the center, or at the entrance of the

gallery. The height at which the artwork is presented, the type of lighting employed, and its size in relation to the surrounding area are all taken into account. Additionally, whether the artwork is an original piece or a reproduction, as well as any accompanying linguistic references and interpretations, and the general exhibition conditions are also taken into account.

8. Description of the painting appearance

Every painting or artwork has its own unique external appearance, standard dimensions, and the shape and type of its frame or support. For example, a vertical painting has a completely different character from a horizontal one or one that takes on another geometric form. The overall size of the artwork has a clear influence on the viewer, which is why it is very important to address these formal and qualitative details. They have a classificatory value for both the viewer and the artist.

9. Artistic movements and styles

It is important to classify artworks within artistic movements and styles through exploring the signs and characteristics of the movement or style within the artwork itself, regardless of the artist's career path and artistic inclinations. It is worth noting that an artwork can combine two or more movements, but one movement will inevitably dominate over the others, helping interested individuals place the artwork within an artistic context that allows for its interpretation accordingly.

10. First and direct impression

Every aesthetic experience has an initial reaction that develops a mental image of the artwork for the viewer, resulting in a first impression. The development of this experience during the reception of the artwork influences how this first impression might change. It is critical for the viewer not to really care about this stage of reception and control it as possible as they can in order to reduce its impact. In the next phases of procedural reading, it is worth highlighting that the importance of this first impression resides in its position as a beginning point for either confirming this impression through attentive reading of the artwork or replacing it with a later viewpoint. The viewer cannot get to this stage without experiencing that first impression.

11. Circumstance of the artistic work

Indeed, there is a difference between the conditions of exhibiting an artwork and the conditions of its creation, as well as its contextual and chronological, spatial, and intellectual associations. The artwork cannot be isolated from its surrounding factors in any way. The artist themselves are a product of their society, era, and the prevailing culture in their life, and their artwork, in some way, serves as a vivid record of how the artist was influenced by their surroundings. Through visual art, we can infer the history and conditions of previous societies and how they lived and interacted with one another. Romantic and Impressionist paintings, for example, can serve as vivid examples of the lifestyles of the societies in which they were created.

12. The sacred or the spiritual aspect in the painting

There is often, for any artist, a sacred belief that is reflected in their work, willingly or unwillingly. This is evident in religious art, such as church art or Buddhist ritual art, and even in Islamic Sufi art. However, the sacred can also appear as a parallel theme to the main subject, either implicitly or explicitly. The belief can be spiritual, political, or even sectarian, and it requires the viewer interested in the artwork to contemplate, focus, and search for these characteristics and draw upon them in their interpretation of the artwork as a whole. This is because beliefs have a profound influence on the artworks produced by an artist, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

This is clearly apparent in the painting produced by the Algerian artist Azoui Maamri (1890-1954). The painting depicts his society that divinizes one of the deceased by constructing a dome above their graves in a square chamber that they visit at specific times to seek blessings.

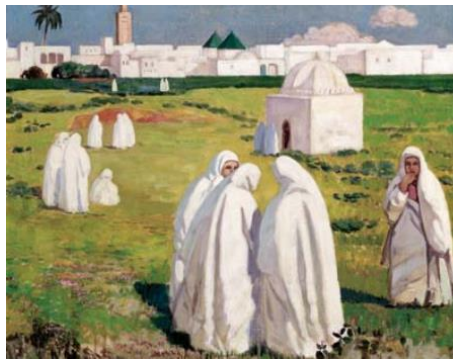


Figure 4: Women next to the Dharih (tomb), Azoui Mammeri

Oil on canvas 55×65 cm

13. The subject matter

The secret of success of many artistic paintings lies in establishing a balance between unity and diversity in the subject matter of the artwork. This diversity is expressed through the richness of the sub-themes that are all connected to the overall subject of the artwork. The peculiarity of these connections can be studied by exploring the relationships that link the various parts of the artwork together. In this stage, procedural reading can lead us to delve deeper into the artwork and extract the ideas it contains, even in its smallest details. These details often hide secrets and ideas that are more susceptible to interpretation than the general subject matter itself. By closely examining the nuances and intricacies of the artwork, we can uncover hidden layers of meaning and gain a deeper understanding of the artist's intentions and messages.

14. Character in the painting

Every painting comprises "characters," and by "characters", we do not only mean human beings. A character may also be anything that may be recognized from others in a way that gives it its own identity within the painting. Accordingly, a flower, for example, might be considered a different character from the vase in which it is kept, just as the vase is a unique entity from its surroundings. Of course, the human character continues to be one of the most important aspects in visual art. In general, this figurative approach enables us to establish the relationship between the many components of the artwork and their individual characters, resulting in a story or numerous tales inside the painting.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) was fascinated by vibrant scenes of cafes, gardens, and ballet. In this painting, he captured the atmosphere of popular dance and the lively, joyful characters in a Parisian garden. It is one of his significant works from the 1870s and was first exhibited at the Third Impressionist Exhibition in 1877.



Figure 5: Dance at Le Moulin de la Galette, 1876, Pierre-Auguste Renoir

The Musée d'Orsay- Paris, France

15. The dramatic story of the painting

The story is the collection of events that bring characters together in any setting. It can be created based on the visual reading of the formal elements found in any artwork. The story that is understood by the viewer is not necessarily the same story intended by the artist. Interpretation by the viewer is allowed in most artworks and is even desirable particularly when the depicted story is not known to everyone. Indeed, interpretation remains present in the details of the story's events at the time of its depiction in the painting and extends to what happened before and after that moment, depending on the society's culture and the circumstances and time of the exhibition.

And we see that dramatic stories are extremely present in Renaissance artworks, such as Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper" and the painting made by the Belgian artist Jean-Joseph Weerts (1846-1927). Weerts' picture depicts a dramatic scenario narrating the assassination of Jean-Paul Marat, who gained political influence during the French Revolution through his publication "The Friend of the People". The picture narrates his killing by Charlotte Corday, who supported the

governing authority and saw Marat as a threat to the Republic. She thought that his murder at her hands would put a stop to the political violence across France that day.



Figure 6: Assassination of Marat, California, 1880, Jean-Joseph Weerts

Musée de la Piscine- France

16. Time and place in the painting

The absence of time is time itself, and the absence of place is place itself. Therefore, every subject in any artwork has its own time and place, which can be explored through the visual clues that indicate it and by connecting the subject of the artwork with its spatial and temporal context to facilitate its understanding within its environment.

A painting by the Orientalist artist Charles-Théodore Frere (1814-1888) depicts a bustling commercial alley in the heart of an Islamic Arab city. We can recognize this from the minaret of the mosque in the depths of the painting, the clothes of the passersby, and the way the alley is shaded. The painting portrays an Arabian Desert city, and based on the urban style and means of transportation depicted (camels and donkeys), we can proximately determine the time period of the depicted event, which was in the 19th century. All of these indicators help the viewer in identifying the place and time more and more accurately. The visual artist can also utilize deeper elements to determine place and time in a deeper way.



Figure 7: "Street in Cairo" by Charles-Théodore Frere

Oil on panel, 35 × 26.4 cm

Catalogue Tajan - Orientalist Paintings, Paris, 2004, p. 55

17. Direct and indirect expression in the artwork

Fine art works are distinguished by a prevailing characteristic. They use connotation rather than direct language in communicating the visual message of the painting. This does not diminish the timeless works that excelled in realistic representation and thrived before the invention of high-resolution cameras. “expression of thought in all branches of art can be either direct or indirect. When direct it conforms with concepts such as mimesis, reflection, simulation and imitation; when indirect it engages in concepts like implication, message, association evoking and fantasy”. (Asasoğlu, 2010)

Art is not merely a tool for conveying events as they are, but rather a recording of a poetic state experienced by the artist and embodied through the subject of the artwork. Although artworks may reveal some news or information, the artist does not intend to convey that information in itself, but rather seeks to express their feelings towards the depicted event. Information is often presented in a suggestive manner that requires skill in its use, perceptiveness and interpretation, unlike direct and explicit journalistic style.

18. The relationship between the subject matter and the artist in the painting

An artist may express various interconnected subjects in their artworks, which we refer to as the artist's interests. Some artists may find it challenging to completely detach themselves from certain recurring artistic elements present in most of their works. Additionally, some artists may have a unique characteristic that is consistently evident in their works. This compels the viewer of the

artwork to track and observe these distinctive qualities in order to discover and validate the inclinations and interests of each artist.

And the example here is Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), who was characterized by distinct artistic periods, with the African art influence that is apparent in most of his works, which laid to the foundations of his artistic approach and his Cubist style.

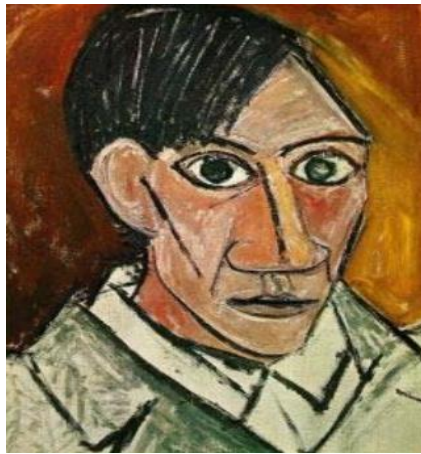


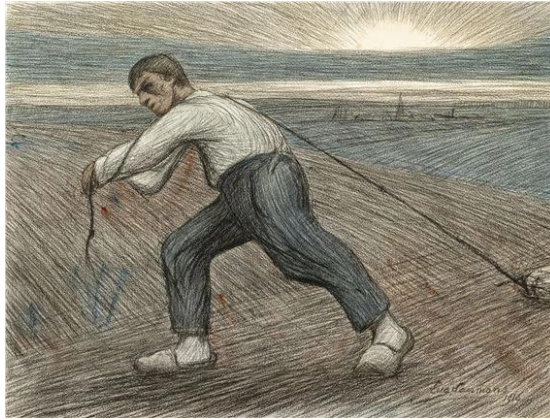
Figure 8: "Portrait of a Person, 1907" by Pablo Picasso

Oil on canvas [picture]

19. The technique

Technique here, refers to the way of controlling the artwork through comprehensive formal and color relationships, making the process of viewing the painting an enjoyable experience, guiding the viewer's attention or drawing their attention to the most important element among the formal elements in the painting by using light, lighting and shadow, defining the depth of fields and perspective, utilizing compositional placement according to the golden ratio, or exploiting color relationships such as color harmony or color contrast. It also includes the usage of diagonal composition to evoke a specific visual mood in the viewer's reception of the subject matter of the artwork. Other techniques are also used by the artist to enhance their subject matter, according to various scientific studies on visual reception.

The painting below shows how the artist used diagonal composition to persuade viewers to respond to the state of oppression and injustice in difficult professions. The painting is a depiction of immigrant workers made by the Belgian visual artist Eugène Jules Joseph Laermans (1864 – 1940).



Diagonal composition in a great painting

Figure 9: "The Immigrant" by Eugène Jules Joseph Laermans

Watercolors and black chalk on paper 50.5×68 cm

20. Conclusion:

The reading of any painting requires a meticulous examination and deep investigation of its details, regardless of the identity of the artist or any surrounding information about the painting. The purpose of this isolation is to avoid external influences that may affect the interpretation of the artwork and the aesthetic messages it contains.

However, this process should include a set of important elements proposed in this study, with the aim of making the artwork more accessible and understandable for the public and students in the field. Through these elements, the artwork becomes a clearer and more objective subject for critical analysis.

The procedural reading discussed in this study serves as a fundamental basis for any artistic analysis or interpretive reading of the artistic messages embedded in paintings. It provides a structured framework that can be relied upon for a deeper understanding of the artistic content, enhancing the recipient's ability to engage with the artwork with awareness and critical understanding.

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