ENGLISH FOR ART PURPOSES: INTERPRETING ART

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ABSTRACT. English for Art Purposes: Interpreting Art. Although communication in the field of art may be mainly characterized as visual (since it is centered around image), it is nonetheless true that in this post-(post)modern era there must be some linguistic form of communication both amongst art specialists, on the one hand, and between them and the audiences/public, on the other. A number of genres have been devised for this purpose, with specific structures and specific discourse strategies. Probably the most important strategy refers to the linguistic (and extra linguistic) choices for interpreting art. Our concern is here with some aspects of the specific English language put to work for interpreting art and with how these aspects may be dealt with in classroom procedure.

Keywords: ESP, Genre Analysis, communicative purpose, genre, structure, discourse strategy, task, linguistic peculiarities, specific vocabulary, ‘Artspeak’.

Thinking, speaking, and writing about Art. Why do it?

Why should anyone think and, even more, speak and write about art? One common sense reason would be simply, because it is there. It surrounds

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us, not necessarily in the classical sense of the word *Art* – that is, “Fine Art” – but in its postmodernist meaning, as part of our reality. The traditional roles attributed to the artist\(^2\), therefore to Art, refer to such things as recording the world and representing it (the artist-reporter); giving form/image to ideas, philosophies, feelings (the artist who experiences); revealing truths which are not easy to reach due to their hidden or universal nature (the artist-analyst); helping people to look at the world in a new, innovative way, never thought of before (the activist artist.) Thus, our way of perceiving reality is influenced by the way it is mediated by art and artists. We shall endow ourselves with a much more complex understanding of things than we might think, if we allow ourselves to dive into the looking glass which is placed by art in front of our eyes.

We have adopted so far the point of view of the art public (or art audience.) There are other points of view from which thinking and writing about art are performed. There is the point of view of art criticism and there is also the point of view of the artist himself/herself. How many times haven’t we felt puzzled in front of an artwork? How many times have we not asked ourselves questions like What’s that all about? What did the artist mean? What am I supposed to understand? How should I assess this? Art critics (if they do their job well) are there to help us develop what is called visual literacy and critical thinking about art. In fact, they try to help us appreciate art, a term preferable to criticizing art. It is true that critics all over the world debate their more specific roles in relationship to art and which are the best ways of performing such an activity as making good critique (another term for criticizing art). Criticizing art is always culture-specific, it depends on the chosen ideology and aesthetics, it is influenced by general politics and cultural politics; economic interests (money) may also influence criticism. Therefore we cannot ignore its strong subjective character. But in spite of all these possible drawbacks which may alter the very process of appreciating art, to a lesser or higher degree, everybody agrees with such a definition of criticism as “language about art that is thoughtful and thought-out, for the purpose of increasing understanding and appreciation of art and its role in society.”\(^3\)

It is common usage today for the art gallery owners and art museums to offer their current and potential public a great number of texts helping them to understand and value what is being exhibited, therefore encouraging them to visit and appreciate, and purchase (!) works of art. Specialized magazines,
gallery bulletins, but mostly their Internet sites display an impressive amount of information of this kind.

More recently, artists themselves shared the critics’ opposition to a widely adopted, now obsolete, opinion in the art field, according to which “art speaks for itself” and began thinking, speaking, and writing about art, that is, they started to communicate with their public, not just through their works, but also through their words. They seem to finally understand that, especially in these troubled post (post)-modern times, language and communication through language facilitate a better reception of their art by the public. So they very often produce artist’s statements accompanying their exhibitions or works in different individual or group exhibitions. But this is not the only genre they make use of. They also perform art criticism and make formal analyses on numerous occasions, in different media, and especially on their blogs, or any other Internet-hosted spaces. A simple Google-search of artist’s blogs will result in an impressive number of such products.

Kirsty Hall, an artist based in Bristol, England, describes herself on her blog⁴ as an artist and a “purveyor of mad obsessive objects” and shares with us what she intends to post on her blog: descriptions of her own art process, helpful advice for artists, discussions on art issues, reviews of exhibitions, books and other artists. One of her posts encourages her fellow artists to blog, because: blogging can be a very useful promotional tool; it raises the artist’s Google profile (sic!), so it brings more visitors to the artist’s site; “reminds people you exist...improves your website numbers...connects you with people”; makes one less isolated; breaks down barriers; reaches wider audiences; empowers; strengthens the artist’s voice; generates new opportunities; it’s cheap, and last but not least, it’s fun. These are just as many reasons why artists should and do think and write about art.

Beside blogging, artists have these days their own sites, where they promote themselves and sell their works, making an honest living by not depending so much on galleries, collectors, and other “gate-keepers”, as Kirsty Hall calls these agencies, to discover them and offer them a chance to exhibit. Obviously, beside pictures of their works, visitors to their sites will find different texts through which the artists communicate with their audience. They have to do it if they want to sell, and they even enjoy doing it.

No matter where they place their writings, artists also write to discover themselves, to better understand themselves and what they are doing. “Once you get rid of the normal baggage you carry in looking at art, things happen: you find yourself liking what you hated a while ago” says the artist Chuck Close.⁵

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⁵ Quoted in Terry Barrett, op cit, p. 27-28
Even artists to be have their reasons to think and write about art. These are art students mainly. They usually do it as tasks for their academic obligations, seminars, exams, symposia, a.s.o.:

I had to review and interpret at least 3 given art pieces for an assignment for my Visual Literacy module this semester (in essay format), and seeing as I need to update my blog I thought I’d post my interpretations here for the world (or at least my readers) to see. Enjoy!6

No matter who the thinker and writer about art is, the reason why art is written about is probably that so intuitively confessed about by Marcia Siegel7, author of books on dance criticism. She seems to have put the finger on the very “why”:

Very often it turns out that as I write about something it gets better. It’s not that I’m so enthusiastic that I make it better, but that in writing, because words are instruments of thinking, I can often get deeper into a choreographer’s thoughts or process, and see more logic, more reason.

In terms of art, that would be called gaining visual literacy; that is, trying to establish relationships between words, images, and objects in the real world. Obviously, one cannot communicate about how art affects him or her without using language. Developing an appropriate discourse suitable for this purpose begins with acquiring a specific vocabulary (terms, phrases, also known as nomenclatures), getting acquainted with different approaches to looking at art, possessing the specific knowledge of the genres used in writing about art.

Writing about art. How it is done

Acquiring a specific type of discourse for writing about art naturally leads toward developing knowledge about the genres established in the specific domain.

In teaching English for Art Purposes a very reliable approach has proved to be Genre Analysis, since, as Dudley Evans notices “The findings of genre analysis […] bring together the insights of […] earlier approaches to text analysis, but also a greater sophistication in the examination of the writer’s purpose”.8 The moves and steps suggested by Swales in 19819 with reference to introductions to scientific articles and enlarged upon in his 1990 book10 have been since widely used in the teaching of English for Specific Purposes due to their great potential to combine discourse and text analysis, rhetoric and stylistics, grammar and

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7 Quoted in Barrett, op. cit., p. 28
8 Tony Dudley-Evans: Genre analysis: a key to a theory of ESP? in Iberica, No.2
9 In the article “Aspects of article introductions”
10 Genre Analysis. English in academic and research settings
vocabulary in logical structures subordinated to the communicative purpose a writer belonging to a specific discourse community might have in mind. The concept of task devised for an optimal application of the theory of genre analysis has also proved of enormous help in classroom work. Bhatia, his disciple, stresses upon the importance the communicative purpose has for establishing the structure and rhetorical moves of a genre and notices that just as a genre has its communicative purpose, so do each move and step have their own communicative purposes, subordinated to the main purpose of the genre.\textsuperscript{11}

After most of the genres developed by the artistic discourse community were researched and described, they were put to work in teaching English for Art Purposes. Therefore, students (the second year of study) have been made aware of the genre features of the texts they are supposed to come across in their academic education so that when they are asked to produce texts for both the English class and for other disciplines they should be able to apply the theory of genre analysis to fit their purpose.

A thorough study of a number of texts belonging to different genres tried to offer the students a good insight into the specific purposes, structures, the specific moves and steps and possible discourse strategies genres may make use of. The many tasks imagined for each such genre-text were meant to gradually lead the students to the general picture of how art is written about, in an attempt to develop both critical thinking about art subjects and language competences. After distinguishing the specific purpose a text was written for and after recognizing the standard (or altered) move-structure and discourse strategies, rhetorical-stylistic and grammar and vocabulary choices employed for each step, students feel much more confident when writing such texts themselves.

A special attention has been paid to the genre of the critical essay, since it allows a variety of texts to be written, belonging to a number of subgenres, such as the formal analysis, the expository essay, the compare and contrast essay, the argumentative essay. We have considered art review a separate genre, since its communicative purpose proves much more complex than those of the subgenres of the critical essay (it may even be looked at as a “blurred” genre, combining features of both critical essay and advertisement.)\textsuperscript{12}

Thinking and writing critically about art is a process similar to the creative process performed by the artist himself. Such activities as questioning, exploring, trial and error judgments, revising, and discovering new aspects make a creative endeavor out of writing about art. Professor Henry Sayre advises his students upon a number of steps to take in order to think and write about art\textsuperscript{13}:

\textsuperscript{11} In Analysing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings, Preface; pp 29-30
\textsuperscript{12} Also see Anda-Elena Crețiu: Genre-Structured Discourse in Art Texts, pp. 51-54
\textsuperscript{13} Henry Sayre, op.cit. p. 4
identify the artist’s decision and choices (e.g. what color, what kind of line, what style), then ask ourselves why these choices were made

- ask questions; be curious (e.g. the title—does it tell us anything about the piece? Is there any written material about the work, what is its context and what does it tell us; what information about the artist might be helpful to understand the work?)

- describe the object (e.g. subject-matter, form, the relations between parts)

- question assumptions (especially any dislike we may have and why others like it)

- avoid an emotional response (explain the emotions aroused by the work; were they intended by the artist himself?)

- don’t oversimplify or misrepresent the art object (thinking critically about an art work means to look beyond what is obvious; our reading of the work should cover a full range of possible meanings; sometimes the work may be resistant to interpretations which are arbitrary).

- tolerate uncertainty (the critical process is a discovery process, it tries to uncover possibilities, not necessarily to reach truths or “right answers”, which may not in fact exist).

These pieces of advice may prove quite insightful when approaching an art work; they in fact try to develop a critical thinking attitude in people who may be interested in understanding and appreciating art. However, the start point should probably be that of acquiring a specialized art vocabulary as a foundation to any dealing with art. After such a vocabulary becomes familiar enough one can think about how the discourse about art should be structured according to specific communicative purposes, therefore one can choose among the genres established in the art domain. Once the genre is selected, the standard move-pattern should be adapted to fit the more specific purpose of one text or another. Then some decision on the most appropriate discourse strategy for each move and step should be made. Such discourse strategies one may find useful in achieving particular goals are:

- describing: an element of the subject-matter (e.g. the main character, a landscape, an event); a formal element (e.g. one or more types of line, shape, a dominant color, light vs. dark, texture, volume, space, perspective); a principle of design (e.g. symmetrical balance, scale, proportion, rhythm); the medium used for a work of art (e.g. oil on canvas, acrylic, silverpoint, bronze cast, clay model, glass, metal, silkscreen printing); the style or “ism” (both personal and period style)\(^\text{14}\) chosen by the artist (e.g. Realistic, Abstract Expressionist, Post-Impressionist, Surrealist); the purpose of

\(^\text{14}\) The question “What is the artist’s ‘ism’?” means “What is the period style or movement in which the artwork was done?” as suggested by Suzanne Hudson (University of Colorado) and Nancy Noonan-Morrissey in *The Art of Writing about Art*, pp. 39-40
creating the specific work (to record an important historical event, as a tribute to royalty, worshipping)

- **interpreting** (we shall focus on this strategy later on)
- **evaluating** an element or the whole (according to some clearly stated or just implied aesthetic criteria or to personal criteria)
- **narrating** (e.g. historical events that may be referred to in the work)
- **comparing and contrasting** (works of art in order to distinguish similarities or differences or to prove that one work belongs to an art movement based on these similarities)
- **exemplifying** (to clarify ideas or to bring more evidence to what has been claimed)
- **quoting and paraphrasing**
- **using** **stylistic and rhetorical devices** (metaphors, allegories, euphemisms and understating, hyperboles, ambiguity, rhetorical questions, paradox, irony, sarcasm)

**Interpreting art**

Probably the most important and the most complex discourse strategy in writing about art is **interpreting art**. By interpreting works of art we give our responses to them a verbal shape; it is language which helps us articulate the feelings aroused by art, our intuitions, denials and even first rejections of certain works (that after some more insight and analysis may even change into admiration). Interpreting art (as a strategy) almost always follows (and should follow) describing art and together with that may be referred to as **formal analysis**.15 Terry Barrett 16 considers this sequence a "hermeneutic circle" and suggests a very simple method to apply in interpreting art, a method he uses himself in class: he asks two generic questions about any work of art: “What do you see?” and “What does it mean?”, the first one descriptive, the other one, interpretive. The two processes (discourse strategies, in our terms) almost always intertwine and overlap. A third question is added, “to further a speaker’s thought and to remind all of us that claims ought to be grounded in evidence”: “How do you know?”. These three are in essence the stirring questions from which any interpretation starts. There are, of course, further, more elaborate, principles to any good art interpretation Professor Barrett formulates17. They are more or less the following:

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15 Formal analysis can also be a subgenre of the genre of the critical essay; as a subgenre, its communicative purpose is to analyze a work of art and in order to do that it follows a standard move-pattern. When the sequence Describing + Interpreting is used to serve the communicative purpose of other genres, or when it is used as one step belonging to a move, we shall consider it just a discourse strategy.


Artworks are always about something, even those which seem very difficult to understand. They have “aboutness” and therefore they ask for interpretation. So, in spite of our puzzled first reaction to a work of art, we should not feel discouraged and we should still search for some meaning.

The meaning of a work of art can be derived from a thoughtful scrutiny of the subject-matter (title included), medium, form, and content. In order to understand what the work is about we must analyze these elements and see how they work separately and then how they work together to build the whole meaning.

Interpreting a work of art is always about trying to understand it in language, since language is our most reliable instrument for thinking; feelings may be sometimes guides for interpretations, but they also have to be put in words. Our first response to an art work is almost always emotional, but it must be given word form in order that we ourselves better understand it and that we share our response with other people. Giving form to our understanding of a work of art presupposes such intertwining activities as describing, analyzing, interpreting, judging, and theorizing.

Artworks are open to more than just one interpretation. No one interpretation can be exhaustive and its purpose must not be that. Interpretations of the same work may be competing, even contradictory, personal or communal, diverse, so as to encourage the reader to “see for himself/herself”. The meaning of a work may not necessarily be that given by the artist himself. We are allowed and encouraged to attribute our personal meaning to a work of art, based on our personal experience and/or on the critic’s approach.

Interpretations are not right or wrong. They may however be more or less convincing, reasonable, informative, and enlightening. They should be supported by evidence from within the work or from without it. They are based on the author’s view upon world and the critic’s theory of art. We may accept all these or we may reject them, depending on our own personal experience, cultural background, education. In spite of the fact that they imply certain worldviews, good interpretations tell about the work of art, and not about the interpreter. This principle seems a bit difficult to understand by some self-appointed art critics who try to “enlighten” us so that in the end we do not recognize the work of art anymore. This is called by some “Artspeak”. Interpretations are about artworks, and not about artists. Sometimes the artist’s biography occupies a space too vast for the purpose of an interpretation. This practice still exists; biographical elements should be evoked only if they bring some meaning to the work itself.

In interpreting a work of art we should consider the context in which it appeared, social, political, and cultural and the artistic context as well. Artworks are products of the place and time they appeared in and these
should somehow be reflected in their content just as other works of art may have been sources of inspiration for the one under scrutiny. Finding these reflections could round a good interpretation.

Good interpretations are always coherent statements and correspond to the artwork. The arguments brought to them make sense and convince us. Inclusiveness is also a feature of good interpretations, meaning that everything that is worth mentioning has been accounted for.

And, of course, “some interpretations are better than others” if they refer to the relevant aspects in the work, are better argued and better grounded with evidence, are more acceptable, less subjective and narrow.

But how exactly can we attribute meaning to a work of art? How can we find the keys to unlock the door to any work of art? Probably the most important approaches are those of iconographic interpretation and iconologic interpretation.

Iconography (from Greek “image or symbol writing”) refers to the careful study of the image to identify images with symbolic content or meaning. These are clues we find in the work itself under the form of themes, signs and symbols that we should identify, describe, categorize and explain. Signs (from Latin *signum*) are usually defined as “something transmitting a specific information”, while symbols (Lat. *symbolum*) may be interpreted as “something that stands for something else”. Sometimes the symbols are common knowledge (they are overt), sometimes they are quite obscure (hidden), and sometimes the symbols are the creation of the artist himself/herself who will probably explain them in his/her artist’s statement (e.g. Mondrian considers the right angle to embody the unity of all opposites in the Universe and the diamond shape to unite the three material elements – earth, air, and water – with the fourth, non-material – the transcendent spirit.) The meanings attributed to the different signs and symbols are culture and time-specific (e.g. the image of an eye is for Christians and masons – as inscribed in a triangle – the symbol of the Divine Essence and divine Knowledge; the Cyclops’s only eye stands for a subhuman condition, while Argos’s many eyes represent an outwardly oriented vigilance; it is the symbol of the sun for the peoples of Celtic origin, and it indicates the all-seeing Buddha or the “eye of the world” in Hinduism; the swastika meant for ancient Hindu people “that which is associated with well-being” while many other ancient peoples also used it at different times as a symbolic sign for dynamism, suggesting movement around an important fixed pole, an idea present as well in the Nazi ideology supporting the

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18 As suggested by Sylvan Barnet in his *A Short Guide to Writing about Art*, pp. 10-11
19 Translated from Clare Gibson: *Semne si simboluri*, (*Signs and Symbols*) p.7
20 According to Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant: *Dicționar de simboluri*, (*Dictionary of Symbols*) Vol 2, pp. 362-364
prevalence of the Aryans.21) Those symbols shared by all cultures through time are archetypal images22. (e.g. the mother image, the shadow, the sleep, the tree, the charlatan, the image of a skull which is associated with death and danger in all cultures, the hero figure, the sun and the moon as male/female principles)

**Iconology** (Greek for “image study”) refers to the interpretation of a work of art in the light of its cultural and historical background, “especially through literary and philosophical texts [...] for evidence of the cultural attitudes that produced what can be called the meaning or content of the work”23. Sometimes, in order to understand what the work of art tries to tell us we need more information than just that offered by the study of the symbols in the work. We may need to place the work in a meaningful context, historical, social, and cultural. For that we need to study a number of texts on that subject and by doing it we come to build a more complex meaning of the work.

**Applied study in classroom**

In order to see how the mechanisms of genres work for the suitable choice of one discourse strategy or the other, a number of texts belonging to different genres have been selected for in-class work. For the study of formal analysis we have chosen the classic text written by Erwin Panofsky in 1934: “Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait”.

The Arnolfini Portrait; Jan van Eyck, 1434, oil on oak, 32.4x23.6 in, National Gallery, London24

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22 Carl Gustav Jung defines archetype as “a tendency to form such representations of a motif – representations that can vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern [...] They are without known origin and they reproduce themselves in anytime or in any part of the world…”, in Man and his Symbols, p. 67
23 According to Barnet, op cit, p. 11
24 Reproduced. from Wikipedia; the author of the paper takes full responsibility for this reproduction.
This is a wonderful sample of analyzing a work of art by using both iconographic and iconologic interpretations. While reading the text, students are asked to discern the typical moves and steps of the genre as sequenced by the author. When reaching the move of “Analyzing de-constructed elements”, the students are asked to distinguish exactly what elements are analyzed in each step. They will find out that there are elements belonging to the subject-matter of this painting (e.g. the characters, their appearance, their gestures, the interior). The students have to distinguish the discourse strategies employed in each step. They will notice that each element is firstly described, and then interpreted. There are many signs and symbols Panofsky distinguishes to interpret the work: the burning candle is the symbol of all-seeing Christ (for this interpretation he offers the readers an iconological approach, that is, he mentions some religious dogmatic practices, some historical facts – also used for explaining the apparent solitude of the marrying couple); the apparent middle-class interior is interpreted as a nuptial chamber, therefore a sacred space, due to the many symbols present there: crystal beads and the “spotless mirror” with a frame adorned with scenes from the Passion, the statue of Saint Margaret – symbol of childbirth, the fruit on the window sill speaks of the “state of innocence before the Fall of Man”; the little griffon terrier symbolizes marital faith; the discarded pattens (shoes) warn us that the couple is standing on holy ground (for this interpretation Panofsky adds a footnote to quote from The Bible the words of God speaking to Moses: “Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place where on thou standest is holy ground” – therefore an iconologic interpretation). It is nonetheless worth mentioning the fact that after reading this text, almost all of the students confessed that they see that painting with other (more open) eyes and that its meaning has become more complex now, than what they had previously believed to be just a portrait. That is exactly the purpose of interpreting art: make you see more than it may have met the eye.

After distinguishing the exact strategies used by the author for each step of his analysis (describing, interpreting, narrating, comparing, evaluating/judging, quoting, paraphrasing), the next task students are asked to fulfill is that of recognizing linguistic devices signaling that we are dealing with a description, or with an interpretation. By doing it they become aware of the semantic load some words, phrases, expressions have to imply the fact that a description or an interpretation is being made.

Similar tasks and activities are performed for other texts belonging to different genres. In art reviews, for example, the students will always distinguish the same sequence (describing + interpreting) realized in different linguistic forms, followed by evaluating. They are encouraged then to write their own sequences in which to choose from the many possibilities the linguistic form that best serves their purposes, with reference to certain works of art we
together choose to analyze; then they will combine those sequences according to a standard move pattern and make whole texts, marking in all the moves, steps, and strategies they have made use of as well as their linguistic manifestations.

The linguistic choices to signal interpretation have been grouped as follows25:

**ADVERBS**

- apparently
- like [...and all this in an atmosphere like a devil’s furnace of pale sulphur] van Gogh about his painting The Night Café, 1888, p. 148
- perhaps [...]since behind her on the wall is a painting of The Last Judgment...,
  **perhaps** she is weighing nothing less than the worth of her own life] J. Vermeer’s Woman Holding a Balance, (1632-75), p. 169
- seemingly
- symbolically [...transformative force...symbolically turning the person interned within into wine]

**SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS OF MANNER:**

- as if [The halos of new electric lights made colors and shades turn and vibrate, as if yet unidentified objects fell out of the sky around us] p.146; [...]they = the shapes suffuse the atmosphere with color, as if to overwhelm and dominate the nervous black lines...] p. 149
- as though

**NOUNS (NOUN PHRASES)**

- hint of [The work is virtually nonobjective, though a hint of landscape can be seen in the upper left] p. 149
- make-believe
- metaphor of/for
- sense of: can easily lend a ~ [So strong is the grid’s sense of orderliness... that it can easily lend a sense of rational organization ... to even the most expressive compositions] p. 91 [The numbers repeat regularly and...they impose a sense of logic where none necessarily exists] p. 91; be ~ [While there is a sense of opposition in Vassily Kandinski’s Black Lines as well, the atmosphere is nowhere near so ominous] p. 149
- resemblance of
- suggestion of

**VERBS:**

- allude [The imagery alludes to many kinds of meaning, without being restricted to a particular iconography]
- appear: ~ to be[...three mountain-like forms rise in front of and above what appear to be a horizon line] p. 149; [...]and fundamental to this process, it would

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25 Most of the examples have been selected mainly from Sayre: A World of Art (where pages are indicated), the others have been construed
appear, is his =Velazquez's interaction with the royal family itself...] about Velazquez's Las Meninas, 1656, p. 179
 ✓ be [This hidden, almost secret fragility is the ‘self’ of Puryear’s title] p.101; [Blue is the heavenly color...yellow, the color of the earth;] Kandinsky about the meanings of colors, p.149
 ✓ be almost [ "My paintings are almost a cry of anguish" wrote Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo a year before he shot himself in the chest, dying two days later at 37, in 1890, a year after he painted “The Starry Night”-1889] p.87
 ✓ be a metaphor of/for
 ✓ be as if [It is as if, wanting to represent his longing for the infinite, ...van Gogh himself returns to the most fundamental element in art – line itself.] p. 89; [it is as if, in her every gesture, she cools the atmosphere, like rain in a time of draught, or shade at an oasis in the desert] p. 137
 ✓ be associated with
 ✓ be comparable to [The candle light here is comparable to the Divine Light, casting an ethereal glow across the young boy’s face] about Georges de La Tour’s Joseph the Carpenter, 1645, p. 175
 ✓ be compared to [...green, passive and static can be compared to the so-called bourgeoisie – self-satisfied, fat and healthy] Kandinsky about the symbols of colors p. 149 ;
 ✓ be equivalent to [the lines generated here are equivalent...to the lines created by a dancer moving through space] p.84
 ✓ be interpreted as
 ✓ be meant to represent : [it is not just a “fun” line drawing. It is meant to represent the fatal shooting of] John Lennon...] p. 83
 ✓ be regarded as ["They =Pollok’s paintings may be regarded as a parallel to what the alchemists called the massa confusa, the prima materia, or chaos...]
 ✓ be the symbol of/for [the sower is for van Gogh the symbol of his own “longing for the infinite” as he wrote to a fellow painter, Emile Bernard] p.89
 ✓ become clear [As Ingres sacrifices...female anatomy to meet the demands of his circular design, the sexist implications of his work become clear] The Turkish Bath, 1862, p.99
 ✓ convey (the meaning)
 ✓ define itself as [The dramatic division between light and dark defines itself as a division between male and female spaces] p. 127about Mary Cassatt’s In the Loge 1879
 ✓ evoke [when both warm and cool hues occur together in the same work of art they tend to evoke a sense of contrast and tension] p.137
 ✓ express [So I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green] van Gogh about his painting The Night Café, 1888, p. 148
 ✓ function like [The giant vases that loom over them=the girls ...function like parental hands, at once threatening and caressing, but dominating their social world...] about JS Sargent’s The Daughters of Eduard Darley Boit, 1882, p. 181
 ✓ hint at
identify...as ["they =the artists Gomez-Pena and Roberto Sifuentes dressed as Mexican workers and crucified on wooden crosses identified themselves as Dimas and Gestas, the two small-time thieves who were crucified along with Jesus Christ" to protest against the American immigration policy] p.77

imply [This formal repetition =of one character, Adam...implies that Adam is not merely the father of us all, but, in his sin, the very man who has brought us to the Gates of Hell.] about Rodin's The gates of Hell with Adam and Eve, 1880-1917, p. 189

look as though [It looks as though it might have been created by erosion, like a rock worn by sand and weather until the angles are all gone] M.Puryer as qtd. at p.101

point out that [the project = Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit London and perform such "authentic and traditional tasks" like writing on a laptop, watching TV, sewing voodoo dolls and doing exercise pointed out just how barbaric the assumptions of the Western culture sometimes are] p.77

purport; ~ to be [These structures purported to be the traces of an imaginary race of "Little People" who once inhabited them.,] about Charles Simonds’ Dwelling, East Houston Street, New York, 1972, p. 182

recall [the harmony of red and green...recalling for him=Kandinsky not “the powers of darkness”...but the simplicity and pastoral harmony...] p. 149

regard as [Plato regarded this proportion as the key to understanding the cosmos] p. 187

replicate [for Buglaj, perceptual illusion replicates cultural illusion] p. 131

represent [African art was conceived to represent the higher forces in nature] ; [The Tower of Babel is a well-known symbol in Western society, representing both the dangers of pride and the disruption of human unity]

resemble

see ... as [...]it was not hard to see this head, with its suggestion of long hair, as another image of Christ]

seem to [ ...the grid here seems to contain and control it = the line] p. 91; [...]whose gaze = the nude’s, unlike any other in the painting, seems to engage the viewer, p. 99] [it=the sculptural mass made of wood seems to satisfy the other implied meanings of mass—that is, it seems to possess weight and density as well as volume] p.101 [The round shapes that dominate the painting seem to burst into flowers] p. 149

serve to [implied lines that create simple...symmetrical triangles that serve to unify the worlds of the divine and the mortal] p.84

suggest [It is color not locally true, but color to suggest the emotion of an ardent temperament] van Gogh about his painting The Night Café, 1888, p. 148

symbolize [ in front of each of them there is an actual birdcage... symbolizing the women’s spiritual captivity.]p.94/5; [Light here (= in Tintoretto’s The Last Supper 1592-94) symbolizes the spiritual world, and darkness our earthly home] p.123

What should be noticed about all these instances which linguistically signal the discourse strategy of interpretation is the very fact that they are synonyms of the verb to interpret.
Beside the two methods of interpreting artworks (iconographic and iconologic), attention should be paid to other aspects like the artist’s style and the process of creation. The artist’s style “is essentially the mark of the artist’s individual creativity on the canvas. Some artists follow well-established styles [...] while others go out of their way to be different and challenging. Some artists create closely detailed, finely controlled works; others slap paint around almost haphazardly creating a wild, ecstatic effect”.26 The process of creation, or “How did they do it?” may also tell viewers something about the meaning of a work: “For example, Jackson Pollock’s famous drip paintings convey the motion and freedom of the artist in the act of creation, despite being completely abstract. Vermeer’s Milkmaid, on the other hand, is notable for its incredibly fine detail and careful application of thin glazes of oil paints [...] which create a luminous quality, imparting a kind of nobility and even divinity to the simple act of a servant pouring milk.”27

**Beware (or should one not?) of “Artspeak”**

The term artspeak has been construed within linguistic theory to refer to the peculiarities of the discourse used in relation to art. Professor Roy Harris28 underlines the controversial quality of this kind of discourse. While skeptics consider that its main function is “to create a mystique surrounding the work of certain artists”, the less skeptical believe that it “bears witness to the heights human civilization has reached [...] as a language forged in order to express lofty truths about human creativity and spiritual goals”. Professor Harris confesses that he focused on this subject due to some artists’ complaints that the public seems not to be attracted by the work of art itself, but by what the critics/experts say about it. He also observes that linguists have been reluctant to deepen the study of this phenomenon leaving it to aestheticians, which is wrong, since the language of aesthetics is only a relatively recent dialect of artspeak. This language has existed for centuries, although some of its terms and their meanings may have changed with time. The role of artspeak has proved to be salutary for some works of art which otherwise would have been ignored, in spite of their real value. Artspeak has power to change the fate of artworks; it has power to turn what had previously seemed nonsense into rational and self-evident. And it has power “to articulate the social structures of culture”.

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26 According to Dustin M. Wax, editor, freelance writer, and university instructor at University of Las Vegas, NV (How to Read a Painting)

27 ibidem

28 (Emeritus Professor of General Linguistics at the University of Oxford and editor of the journal Language and Communication) in The Necessity of Artspeak, Preface, p. IX-X
More often than not though, it has a negative connotation which refers to how both artists and critics speak about art in ways which are anything but illuminating, ultimately leading to a demeaning of the possible value of works of art. Sometimes it is used exactly to hide the lack of value of some works of art.

**Complication is what artspeak is all about.** It seeks to confer status and worth on an artist's work by insisting on its obscurity, which it conveys through a grey porridge of abstract nouns. [...] You might think that if an artist's work is difficult, those who write about it might want to make it more comprehensible. You might be wrong.²⁹

When artspeak and works of art do not connect neither of them make any sense for the public who will feel rejected and will lose any interest in both of them. This is exactly why attention must be paid to developing the right artspeak in students, as future artists and art experts.

**Concluding**

Artistic education should probably be a more important goal in any educational system, since art is part of our lives. Understanding art is a prerequisite to it, just like possessing the right discourse is to thinking and speaking about art. We shall now get back to Ed, the student who had a task to interpret three works of art and who thought of sharing his experience with us, by posting it on his blog:

When looking at art, there can be millions of different views on one particular artwork. This comes to show how much we, as individual beings, are not alike. [...] This is why artwork, then, needs to be interpreted at times. Not by one individual (that is the artist him, or herself,) but also by the viewers, the readers, or even the listeners. There would not always be a set criticism, and there won’t always be shared opinions. But that is what makes it art.

Three artists from South Africa have revealed their work to the world. Like all art, this needs (or as other might say: this is open to) interpretation.³⁰

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³⁰ Edward Swardt, op cit


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