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Love Art Review Essay

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Dr. Bridges
English 1302

Review Essay Assignment: The Art of Love

Due in class Thursday, September 11, 2008

Page limits: 3 to 4 pages

This writing assignment is designed to help you begin thinking about what it means to write a critical assessment of a text for an academic audience. Compose a 3- to 4-page review essay of a visual image that represents some aspect of love (love for/by a parent, child, family member, spouse, lover, friend, pet, career, idea; correlatives of love, like desire, sex, etc., are also fair game). The visual text can be of any genre: painting, drawing, sculpture, photograph, or film. Choose your text wisely: you will be writing a separate assignment on this same text, so select a piece that really intrigues or challenges you!

Where to Find Images

- ☞ ArtSTOR (Coates Library access)
- ☞ Oxford Art Online (was Grove Art Online; Coates Library access)
- ☞ Art Index Retrospective (<<http://www.hwwilson.com/Databases/artretro.htm>> with links to Art Museum Gallery and Art & Cinema Image Gallery)
- ☞ Individual museum Web pages
- ☞ Internet Movie Database (IMDb.com)
- ☞ Ask a Reference Librarian at the Coates Library

What is a Review Essay?¹

A review is a critical evaluation of a text, event, object, or phenomenon. Reviews can consider books, articles, entire genres or fields of literature, architecture, art, fashion, restaurants, policies, exhibitions, performances, and many other forms.

The most important element of a review is that it is *an evaluation, not merely a summary*. You can agree or disagree and identify where you find the work exemplary or deficient in its knowledge, judgments, or organization. Unlike other kinds of essays, a review should clearly state your *opinion* of the work in question, and the rest of the review will be organized around providing *reasons* for your opinion.

Reviewing can be a daunting task. You may feel unqualified to evaluate the text. You may not be (or feel like) an expert, but your careful observations can provide you with the raw material to make reasoned judgments. Tactfully voicing agreement and disagreement, criticism and praise, is a valuable, challenging skill, and like many forms of writing, reviews require you to provide concrete evidence for your assertions.

Structure and Content of a Review Essay

1. Introduction. Since most reviews are brief, many writers begin with a catchy quip or anecdote that succinctly delivers their argument: “Last night, the New York Philharmonic

¹ Adapted from “Book Reviews,” a UNC Writing Center handout: <<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/review.html>>.

played Brahms. Brahms lost.” But you can introduce your review differently depending on the argument and audience. In general, you should include:

- ☞ The name of the author (or director, artist, composer, etc.), the text’s title, and the main theme. You could also discuss how the work’s title comments on the work’s subject matter.
- ☞ Relevant details about the author and where he/she stands in the genre or field of inquiry.
- ☞ The context of the text and/or your review. Perhaps you want to situate *The Two Towers* in the context of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Another reviewer might want to consider the film within the framework of current political and social events. Your choice of context informs your argument.
- ☞ The thesis of the text: what is the work’s message, argument, or purpose? Identifying the thesis in fiction, film, or art can be difficult since these kinds of texts rarely make explicit arguments. But identifying the text’s particular novelty, angle, or originality allows you to show what specific *artistic contribution* or *social statement* the piece is trying to make.
- ☞ Your thesis about the text: what is your reaction to the work under review? What strikes you as noteworthy? Was the work effective or persuasive? How has it enhanced your understanding of the issues at hand?

2. Summary of Content. Describe what the image looks like (e.g., use of color, perspective, shadowing, framing), or describe the film (e.g., character arcs, actors’ performances, cinematography, lighting, *brief* plot without giving the ending away). This should be *brief* since analysis takes priority. In the course of making your assessment, you will be backing up your assertions with concrete evidence from the text, so some summary will be dispersed throughout other parts of the review as well.

3. Analysis and Evaluation of the Text. Authors, composers, and artists want you to experience their creations in a particular way. Did the documentary-makers choose wisely when by studying penguins instead of flamingos? Did costuming the actors in the campus production of *Antigone* in drag rather than togas influence the drama’s reception? Does the painting work best as part of a series? The answers to the following questions will help you to examine the text in detail and support your critical assessment.

N.B. Don’t feel obligated to address all of these questions; some will be more relevant to the text you choose than others. Feel free to evaluate other elements of the text as well in order to support your overall thesis.

- ☞ Is his or her implicit argument persuasive? Why or why not?
- ☞ Does the author use effective images, words, and devices to express his or her ideas? Does any of the author’s representation conflict with other texts you’ve read, courses you’ve taken, or previous assumptions you had of the subject?

- ☞ What is the text's genre? Does it conform to or depart from its genre's conventions? These questions can provide a historical or literary standard on which to base your evaluations. For instance, in a film, how do factors such as lighting, cinematography, sets, costumes, choreography, score, and props work to send a particular message? Are these elements employed in an appropriate manner, given the characters and themes of the text?
- ☞ Who is the author? Nationality, political persuasion, training, intellectual interests, personal history, and historical context may provide crucial details about how a work takes shape. Does it matter, for example, that a biographer was the subject's best friend? What difference would it make if the director participated in the events depicted in her documentary?

4. Conclusion. Make your final judgment regarding the text: how has this text helped you understand its subject? Considering the evaluations in the body of your review, do the text's strengths outweigh its weaknesses or vice versa? Would you recommend the work to your readers? Who would most likely appreciate or benefit from seeing the text? Do not introduce new evidence for your thesis in the conclusion. You can, however, introduce new ideas that go beyond the text if they extend the logic of your own thesis.

Some Important Considerations

- ☞ Review the text in front of you, not the text you wish the author had created. You can and should point out shortcomings or failures, but don't criticize the text for not being something it was never intended to be.
- ☞ Use precise language, controlling the tone of your review.
- ☞ Never hesitate to challenge an assumption, approach, or argument. Be sure, however, to cite specific examples to back up your assertions carefully.
- ☞ Try to present a balanced evaluation about the value of the text for its audience. You're entitled to voice strong agreement or disagreement, but every author deserves fair treatment. Harsh judgments are difficult to prove and can give readers the sense that you are being unfair in your assessment.
- ☞ Organize your analysis and evaluation into paragraphs that deal with single aspects of your thesis. This arrangement can be challenging when your purpose is to consider the text as a whole, but it can help you differentiate elements of your criticism and pair assertions with evidence more clearly.
- ☞ You do not necessarily need to work chronologically through the text as you discuss it. Given the thesis you want to support, you can organize your paragraphs more usefully by themes, methods, or other elements of the text.
- ☞ If you find including comparisons to other texts useful, keep them brief so that the text under review remains in the spotlight.

Three Examples of a One-Paragraph Book Review

- 1) Judith Bennett's *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600*, investigates how women used to brew and sell the majority of ale drunk in England. Historically, ale and beer (not milk, wine, or water) were important elements of the English diet. Ale-brewing was low-skill and low-status labor that was complementary to women's domestic responsibilities. In the early fifteenth century, brewers began to make ale with hops, and they called this new drink "beer." This technique allowed brewers to produce their beverages at a lower cost and to sell it more easily although women generally stopped brewing once the business became more profitable.

The student describes the subject of the book and provides an accurate summary of its contents. But the reader does not learn some key information expected from a review: the author's argument, the student's appraisal of the book and its argument, and whether or not the student would recommend the book. As a critical assessment, a book review should focus on opinions, not facts and details. Summary should be kept to a minimum, and specific details should serve to illustrate arguments.

- 2) Judith Bennett's *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* was a colossal disappointment. I wanted to know about the rituals surrounding drinking in medieval England: the songs, the games, the parties. Bennett provided none of that information. I liked how the book shows ale and beer brewing as an economic activity, but the reader gets lost in the details of prices and wages. I was more interested in the private lives of the women brewsters. The book was divided into eight long chapters, and I can't imagine why anyone would ever want to read it.

There's no shortage of judgments in this review! But the student does not display a working knowledge of the book's argument. The reader has a sense of what the student expected of the book but no sense of what the author herself set out to prove. In other words, the student does not judge the book on its own terms—on the goals that the book sets out for itself. Instead, the student judges the book solely according to his/her own criteria, which may not have been a part of the author's project. Finally, although the student gives several reasons for the negative review, those examples do not clearly relate to each other as part of an overall evaluation—in other words, in support of a specific thesis. This review is indeed an assessment but not a critical one.

- 3) One of feminism's paradoxes—one that challenges many of its optimistic histories—is how patriarchy remains persistent over time. While Judith Bennett's *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* recognizes medieval women as historical actors through their ale brewing, it also shows that female agency had its limits with the advent of beer. I had assumed that those limits were religious and political, but Bennett shows how a "patriarchal equilibrium" shut women out of economic life as well (55). Her analysis of women's wages in ale and beer production proves that a change in women's work does not equate to a change in working women's status. Contemporary feminists and historians alike should read Bennett's book and think twice when they crack open their next brewsky.

This student's review avoids the problems of the previous two examples. It combines balanced opinion and concrete example, a critical assessment based on an explicitly stated rationale, and a recommendation to a potential audience. The reader gets a sense of what the book's author intended to demonstrate. Moreover, the student refers to an argument about feminist history in general that places the book in a specific genre and that reaches out to a general audience. The example of analyzing wages illustrates an argument, the analysis engages significant intellectual debates, and the reasons for the overall positive review are plainly visible. The review offers criteria, opinions, and support with which the reader can agree or disagree.