International Journal of Education & the Arts

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http://ijea.asu.edu **ISBN 1529-8094**

Volume 7 Review 2 **April 26, 2006**

The Rewards of Art Criticism in Art Education: A Review Essay

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Barrett, T. (2003). *Interpreting art: Reflecting, wondering, and responding*. NY: McGraw-Hill.

262 pages
$25.31 ISBN: 0-7674-1648-1

Citation: Costantino, T. E. (2006, April 26). The rewards of art criticism in art education: A review essay. *International Journal of Education & the Arts, 7*(Review 2). Retrieved [date] from http://ijea.asu.edu/v7r2/.

In order to facilitate students' meaning making with art there are several models of art criticism developed for art education, such as Feldman's model (1970), the feminist model (e.g., Garber, 1990) and the structuralist educational model (Anderson, 1993). In his book, *Interpreting Art: Reflecting, Wondering, and Responding*, Terry Barrett does not so much put forth a model (he has done this elsewhere, see Barrett, 1997) as model for the reader the rewards, intellectual and emotional, of interpreting art. He asserts, "Self-knowledge can come through interpreting works of art, those that we are drawn to and those that may repel us" (p. xvii). These rewards may be fostered by attending to a set of 19 principles Barrett explores throughout the book.[1]

[1] The 19 principles are: a) artworks are always about something; b) subject matter + form + context = meaning; c) to interpret a work of art is to understand it in language; d) feelings are guides to interpretation; e) the critical activities of describing, analyzing, interpreting, judging, and theorizing about works of art are interrelated and interdependent; f) artworks attract multiple interpretations and it is not the goal of interpretation to arrive at single, grand, unified, composite interpretations; g) there is a range of interpretations any artwork will allow; h)

In this review I will analyze Barrett's approach to interpretation. Through his modeling of the 19 principles, Barrett exemplifies a passion for inquiry and artistic expression that is important to highlight as it may inspire art educators who want to conduct engaging and meaningful criticism with their students. While all 19 principles are critical, I will focus on six, specifically those relating to multiplicity of interpretation, and the need for reasonable interpretations that correspond to a particular work of art.

1. Artworks attract multiple interpretations and it is not the goal of interpretation to arrive at single, grand, unified, composite interpretations
2. There is a range of interpretations any artwork will allow
3. Interpretations are not so much right, but are more or less reasonable, convincing, informative, and enlightening
4. Good interpretations tell more about the artwork than they tell about the interpreter
5. Some interpretations are better than others
6. The admissibility of an interpretation is ultimately determined by a community of interpreters and the community is self-correcting

I have selected to focus on these six because Barrett does a particularly good job of addressing the relativism that might exist in some K-12 art education classrooms where there are "no wrong answers." I think it may be useful to art educators to understand how Barrett encourages a multitude of interpretations while requiring correspondence with the work of art. In order to explicate his ideas I will provide a brief outline of the book. Then, I will present an analysis of Barrett's approach to interpreting art and suggest some practical applications. Next, I will discuss the six principles listed above. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the transformative potential of interpreting art.

A Brief Outline

There are seven chapters that explore the 19 principles of interpretation and an eighth chapter that summarizes the principles and main points of the book. Barrett encourages the reader to go through the book as needed, suggesting that one may start

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meanings of artworks are not limited to what their artists intended them to mean; i) interpretations are not so much right, but are more or less reasonable, convincing, informative, and enlightening; j) interpretations imply a worldview; k) good interpretations tell more about the artwork than they tell about the interpreter; l) the objects of interpretation are artworks, not artists; m) all art is in part about the world in which it emerged; n) all art is in part about other art; o) good interpretations have coherence, correspondence, and inclusiveness; p) interpreting art is an endeavor that is both individual and communal; q) some interpretations are better than others; r) the admissibility of an interpretation is ultimately determined by a community of interpreters and the community is self-correcting; s) good interpretations invite us to see for ourselves and continue on our own.

with the eighth chapter to get an overview of the principles and then focus on another chapter of particular interest.[2] Barrett demonstrates these principles with rich examples, drawing from professional art critics' interpretations, interpretations by scholars of other disciplines, student interpretations, and modeling his own interpretations.

In the first chapter Barrett models his approach to interpretation (to be discussed below) by focusing on *The Postcard* by René Magritte. In this chapter he includes interpretations by art historians as well as fourth grade and high school students. In chapter two, utilizing the interpretations of art historians, Barrett demonstrates how one work of art (Edouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*) can have multiple reasonable interpretations. Chapter three explores interpretations of controversial art, emphasizing how interpretation and judgment are interdependent. Chapter four investigates how to interpret abstract art. Chapter five discusses interpreting old and foreign art. Chapter six concentrates on interpreting a particular medium, photography, which draws on Barrett's expertise in this art form (see Barrett, 2000). Chapter seven provides interdisciplinary interpretations with, for example, a short story inspired by Edward Hopper's painting *Cape Cod Evening*, an interpretation of a dance, and a critique of visual culture, including *The Little Mermaid*. In this chapter Barrett ensures he has provided a pluralistic perspective in the book as he rounds out the kinds of art discussed throughout with a look at popular and visual culture, architecture, cartoons, decorative arts, and a wonderful interpretive vignette by Spalding Gray of a conversation between parent and child. Indeed, Barrett stresses that, "This book supports a pluralistic approach to art and aesthetic values as liberating and expansive" (p. 86).

The eighth chapter is a summary and concrete discussion of the 19 principles and the rewards of interpreting art. It is as a strong conclusion of Barrett's ideas about interpreting art, and his intentions for this book, that is "to encourage readers to make art relevant to their lives through interpretations" (p. 119). He encourages readers by modeling the intellectual and emotional engagement of interpretation and explicating the 19 principles as guidelines.

Barrett's Approach to Interpretation

In chapter one Barrett uses a think-aloud process while interpreting Magritte's painting *The Postcard*. He begins by discussing what he knows about the painting—historical information about Magritte and Surrealism. Barrett emphasizes that Magritte's painting is of his time—it is from a Western European culture and painted during the twentieth century; therefore he is more comfortable undertaking this

[2] I first approached the book in this way as I was doing research on methods of art criticism in art education, but I found it much more compelling to see these principles demonstrated consecutively through the chapters of the book instead of out of context in the last chapter.

interpretation. If it were from another time and very different culture, he would need to be oriented to the artwork through contextual clues found in others' knowledge (p. 4). His process is guided by a series of questions, beginning with what he calls a literal reading of the painting: "What do I see? What do I feel when I look at it? Does it have personal significance for me?" (p. 2). These questions are similar to the descriptive stage in other models of art criticism, but Barrett does not restrict himself by exhaustively listing observations, but quickly starts to construct an interpretation based on a summary statement of what he sees in the painting, "In *The Postcard*, I see a large green apple in the sky above the head of a man wearing a black coat and standing before a stone wall that is between him and a mountain range" (p. 4). He wonders about the relationship between the apple and the man, "Maybe the apple is in his imagination, and that is what I am seeing. Perhaps the apple imagines him!" (p. 4). Barrett then moves on to a metaphoric reading of the painting, concentrating on the apple as symbol. He brainstorms about various symbolic connotations of the apple, from the symbol of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, to the apple that fell from the tree onto Newton's head, symbolizing gravity. He decides on the Newtonian reference as the most plausible, "The most notable properties of this apple are its incongruously huge size, its placement in the sky, and especially its seeming ability to be airborne, suspended in denial of gravity" (p. 6). This interpretation is further supported when one considers the Surrealists' challenge to the dominance of reason since the Enlightenment, with Newton being a leading figure of this era. Hence, Barrett unites his literal observations of the visual characteristics of the apple in the painting with his knowledge of the apple as a contextualized symbol to develop a plausible interpretation. Looked at differently, he attempts to develop an interpretation that makes sense with the visual evidence in the painting and within the context of its creation.

At this point, Barrett has drawn on prior knowledge and observations of the painting to construct his interpretation. Cognition is fundamentally metaphoric (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) and to understand an image one moves between the literal and symbolic. Therefore, Barrett moves back and forth between "the denotational and the connotational" (p.5), which is especially important with such an ambiguous image as the Magritte painting.

Having conducted a thorough visual analysis of the painting supported by prior knowledge, Barrett looks beyond *The Postcard* to further his understanding of the painting. He asks, "Has Magritte used apples in his other works, and would they be informative in interpreting this work?" (p. 6). Barrett does not interpret this painting in isolation, but considers it within the context of Magritte's *oeuvre*. He does an Internet search for Magritte images with apples, a research technique familiar to many students, and compares them to *The Postcard*. Significantly, Barrett decides this research is both helpful and unhelpful, as it reveals the diversity with which Magritte used apples in his

work, but without offering a unifying theme. This is confounding, but revealing of the complexity of an artist's artistic production. Yet, the research has been worthwhile, as it has given Barrett a much larger context within which to understand *The Postcard*, and, importantly, stimulates his interest in Magritte's art so that he desires to learn more.

Barrett turns to scholarly interpretations of Magritte's work for further insight, reading interpretations by Suzi Gablik, and the following authors whose work builds on hers: Todd Alden, Jacques Meuris, and A.M. Hammacher. According to Barrett, this type of research helps the interpreter gauge the importance of *The Postcard* in Magritte's *oeuvre* and provides "a kind of scaffolding for understanding by which we can apprehend Magritte's work" (p. 30).

He concludes his investigation of *The Postcard* by presenting the interpretations of Magritte's art by elementary and high school students and their teachers. He wants to emphasize that the viewer does not need to be an art historian or other scholar to develop a meaningful and plausible interpretation. His point is especially persuasive when he demonstrates that the students' interpretations were comprehensive and compatible with those by the scholars of Magritte's work (p. 31).

Reviewing the above discussion, certain characteristics of Barrett's approach become evident. First, Barrett exhibits an engagement with and sincere intellectual curiosity about the artwork. This fundamental quality that Barrett exemplifies is "a disposition to interpret, a positive willingness to engage in thought about a work of art" (p. 36). If art educators can demonstrate this kind of engagement and intellectual curiosity in their classrooms they will create an environment primed for dynamic critical discussions of art.

Secondly, Barrett's approach is centered on inquiry and knowledge. Barrett begins by reflecting on what he knows about Magritte and the artistic milieu in which he worked. He then analyzes the painting, moving back and forth between a literal and metaphoric reading. During this analysis he draws on prior knowledge and considers how other works by Magritte and the interpretations of others' might inform his understanding of the painting. He conducts research to mine these resources for insight and then constructs an interpretation based on this work. This relates to the instructional strategy of KWL (Know, Wonder, Learn) used in constructivist learning approaches such as Problem-Based Learning (PBL) [for an application of PBL to art education see Costantino, 2002]). Art educators could apply this strategy to help students conduct the kind of research integral to Barrett's approach to art criticism. KWL is useful for developing a conceptual map for inquiry—what does a student know about a topic, what does the students wonder about, and what has the student learned through research? It is an iterative process, so that KWL can provide a structure for the cyclical nature of research. Furthermore, it is through this inquiry that Barrett sees the rewards of interpreting art, "those who interpret [art] seem rewarded

in their efforts with intrinsic enjoyment of the pursuit, gain new insights into the world and their experiences of it, and are even inspired to change how they live" (p. 36).

Finally, for Barrett it is critical to articulate one's response to the artwork. He facilitates this with the elementary and high school students when he asks them to write their interpretations of Magritte's paintings. He explains, "When writing or telling about what we see and what we experience in the presence of an artwork, we build meaning; we do not merely report it" (p. 202). Articulation of visual and verbal inquiry is part of the interpretive process. Barrett does not discuss how an artistic response might also be an articulation of an interpretation (although he does reference artistic responses in the last chapter).

Barrett's approach may be summed up by the words that are central to the title of the book—reflecting, wondering, and responding. He reflects on what he knows about the artist, the context in which he worked, and what he sees in the painting, literally and metaphorically. He wonders what he can learn through research guided by inquiry questions. Based on prior experiences and new knowledge he constructs an interpretation and articulates it verbally—this is his response to the painting.

Barrett concludes the first chapter by describing what he considers to be a good interpretation of a work of art. It is worth reproducing here as it lays out, in general, the principles he will explicate in the rest of the book.

> In general, good interpretations are those that satisfactorily provide answers to questions of meaning posed by viewers in response to works. A good interpretation is one that satisfies your curiosity about the artwork that is of interest to you. It is one that clearly relates to what you can see in the work, one that expands your experience of the work, one that leads you to think further about artworks and ideas, and one that motivates you to explore more artworks and ideas on your own. A good interpretation is one that gives you knowledge about the work and about the world and about yourself as an explorer of works and worlds, one that is satisfying to others who are interested in the work, and one that allows you to make meaningful connections between Magritte's work, for example, and the thinking of others as expressed in [other disciplines]…
>
> The position of this book is that there is no single right interpretation for *The Postcard*, for example, nor will there be one forthcoming, but that some interpretations of *The Postcard* are nevertheless better than others: that is, more insightful, better conceived, more responsive to what is in the painting and in harmony with the societal and intellectual milieu in which the painting was produced. (p. 37)

Thus, a good interpretation is personally meaningful while also corresponding to the work's visual elements and socio-cultural milieu. It is intellectually and emotionally satisfying and generates knowledge and insight. Also, the interpretation has communal relevance—it makes sense to others interested in the work and has interdisciplinary applications. A good interpretation is developed through openness to the act of interpretation, a sense of wonder, keen observation, inquiry, and a construction of understanding that can be shared with others. This aspect of community, which draws on and provides a pluralism of ideas in a collaborative effort to understand art, will be examined more closely by discussing six of Barrett's 19 principles.

Focus on Multiplicity and Reasonableness: Principles for Interpreting Art

Barrett states the premise of the book on the first page, "Anyone can engage in meaningful interpretive thought and in meaningful interpretive talk about works of art and that multiple interpretations are better than single interpretations" (p. 1). This statement introduces the valuing of pluralism central to Barrett's approach to art criticism and his emphasis on interpreting art as a lifelong pursuit in which anyone can engage with insightful and rewarding results. However, within this valuing of pluralism, or multiplicity, is a clear commitment to the "rights of the text." Here Barrett cites Umberto Eco, who argues that every artwork sets limits as to how it can be interpreted (p. 209). The following six principles relate to the importance of developing an interpretation reflecting what may be seen in a work of art, and corresponding with what is known of the social, historic and intellectual context from which the artwork developed,

1. Artworks attract multiple interpretations and it is not the goal of interpretation to arrive at single, grand, unified, composite interpretations
2. There is a range of interpretations any artwork will allow
3. Interpretations are not so much right, but are more or less reasonable, convincing, informative, and enlightening
4. Good interpretations tell more about the artwork than they tell about the interpreter
5. Some interpretations are better than others
6. The admissibility of an interpretation is ultimately determined by a community of interpreters and the community is self-correcting

The first five principles emphasize that artworks encourage multiple interpretations and assert that it is not desirable to develop one "correct" interpretation. According to Barrett, "Differing interpretations of the same work of art stand alongside each other and can attract our attention to different features of the

same work" (p. 206). In fact, the goal is not to be "correct," rather the central goal for an interpretation has three main tenets:

1) it makes sense with what one sees in the artwork and knows about the artist and artwork's milieu,
2) the interpretation is presented with evidence (e.g., observational, art historical) allowing for the development of a convincing argument, and importantly,

3) the interpretation is meaningful and insightful to both the interpreter and others.

While it should be meaningful to the interpreter, and reflect the interpreter's knowledge, the interpretation should not be more revealing of the interpreter than the artwork. Barrett explains, "An interpretation that is too personal is one that does not shed any light on the object that is being interpreted" (p. 224).

Barrett gives the example of the countless number of scholarly, written interpretations of *Hamlet*, as well as the artistic interpretations by directors and actors. Since Shakespeare did not write about his own work or life, relying on artist intent would not yield relevant or insightful interpretations. Instead, the scholarly and artistic interpretations have been guided by different interpretive questions, yielding different, but relevant interpretations. These varied and insightful interpretations, "are to be valued and…it would be a great loss to art and to humanity if they were all somehow replaced by one interpretation…" (p. 206). Barrett emphasizes that we all come to works of art with certain cultural constants as well as individual life experiences and that these experiences affect our interpretations.

This is a good thing. We are varied, and our responses to works of art will be varied. When we share our individual responses to works of art with others, we offer what can be uniquely nuanced responses that can enlarge understandings of the work of art for all who hear us. (p. 208)

For art educators concerned about valuing their students' diverse ideas and not discouraging them with admonitions of right or wrong, Barrett explains how a plurality of ideas can enlarge understanding of a work of art. Art educators can guide their students to apply their diverse understandings in a plausible interpretation by recognizing that, "history and culture limit the range of interpretations that are allowable" (p. 209). In other words, it is important for students and art educators to keep in mind that an artwork is made at a certain time and in a specific culture by an individual person with a particular life experience. In addition to the formal elements and iconography of an artwork, all of these things must be considered. An art educator can help his or her students develop insightful and reasonable interpretations by

closely "reading" the literal and symbolic elements of an artwork and conducting research on the context in which it was made. The new knowledge generated through observation and inquiry joins with students' prior knowledge to create a unique and insightful interpretation grounded in the artwork. Consequently, students may share interpretations of an artwork to develop a communal understanding. As Barrett recommends, "One task of an interpreter that is stressed throughout this book is to seek communal understanding of works of art and to make personal meaning from aesthetic objects" (p. 134).

This communal understanding is related to the sixth principle: "The admissibility of an interpretation is ultimately determined by a community of interpreters and the community is self-correcting." Barrett discusses this in relation to the community of the art world made up of artists, art historians, art critics, "and other serious interpreters" (p. 226). He explains that it is important to consider the history of interpretations of an artwork as one develops a new interpretation as both the historic and the new interpretation can be illuminating. For example, in chapter three Barrett discusses the reexamination of Norman Rockwell's art, which was dismissed during his lifetime as superficial, but is now being reconsidered as worthy of investigation. According to Barrett, "In both the long and the short run, a community of interpreters, composed of individuals, sorts out what it holds to be true at any given point in time" (p. 227). This ongoing reexamination of interpretations and the evidence upon which they are founded would be an excellent way to develop students' analytic, critical thinking and research skills, for example through a research assignment investigating the historical and contemporary criticism of a work of art.

Conclusion: The Transformative Potential of Interpreting Art

In the last chapter of the book, Barrett cites scholars, such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, who value the transformative power of art to develop self-knowledge through interpretation. Richard Rorty, an American Pragmatist philosopher, goes further to state that one may improve their life through interpreting art. Barrett adds, "For Rorty, *a meaningful interpretation is one that causes one to rearrange one's priorities and to change one's life*" (emphasis in the original, p. 221). Rainer Rilke, the German poet cited by Gadamer in his discussion of aesthetic experience (which for Gadamer is synonymous with interpretation) asserts the transformative nature of art in his poem *The Archaic Torso of Apollo*, "for here there is no place that does not see you/You must change your life" (Mitchell, 1995, p. 67).

The potentially life-changing power of art is a heady reward for including art criticism in art education. Barrett provides compelling, practical examples to persuade the reader, such as the story of a third grade student from his wife's class who physically, emotionally, and intellectually engaged himself in experiencing the sea before interpreting his experience artistically. The student explained his behavior, "he

said he watched the water and wanted to feel it, to be it, to draw it, and to write a story about it" (p. 222). Examples such as this are throughout the book, underscoring the ability of young children and non-art expert adults to engage powerfully with works of art and develop insightful interpretations meaningful to them and those with which they share their ideas. In addition to the emphasis on knowledge construction and inquiry, Barrett's demonstration of the rewards of interpretation from his experience and those he has encountered and worked with make this book a valuable contribution to the literature on the role of art criticism in art education.

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