

Various Applications of the Feldman Method

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The way I see the Feldman Method is as a teaching technique and not as a research tool. The reason I even mention this is that apparently others use it as a research tool. I suppose it could be used that way, but I don't see it that way. I certainly agree, however, that art educators need to do a great deal of homework concerning society, sociology, and art history, especially those art educators who subscribe to the viewpoints of the Caucus--I imagine many of you in here are sympathetic to the Caucus. We're certainly obligated to be well informed in history, art history, and sociology. There's a rather limited literature on the sociology of art. We ought to know that, and perhaps we should develop our own literature regarding the connections between art and society. But I look at the model proposed by Feldman primarily as a teaching technique. As a teaching technique, it can be employed by the teacher in three different ways.

First, the teacher--in front of his or her students--can use the model (or something similar to it) in describing works of art; in other words, the teacher functioning as a role model. Secondly, the teacher can have the students learn the method as a structure to talk or write about art; and I have done this with college-aged students. A third way it can be used is in a seminar discussion with a group of twenty or thirty students, possibly. The students go through the different stages of the model; of course, each one of them talking one at a time. Perhaps, ten or so students use the description phase; and the next ten students or so use the analysis phase and so on. This is a very good method, I feel, of unfolding the meanings or the possibilities or potentialities in a work of art using the Feldman model in a seminar setting. I use it all three ways--to role model, as a structure for student writing, and for group discussion in a seminar.

Now, because of the question posed by the panel--I mean the original question the panel was to consider, "Is the Feldman model adequate for social analysis or is it just adequate for cold formalism?"--I decided to point out how I think it is adequate for social analysis, and that will somewhat duplicate what has already been said. I will also compare Feldman's method to the bracketing method used for phenomenology, which is an entirely different type of ideological position. This position is certainly not--at least to a phenomenologist--one of cold formalism. I am not going to explain phenomenology. I don't know if anybody can, but I'll try to point out how the model used for phenomenology is similar to the one developed by Feldman.

First of all, in case you are not too familiar with phenomenology, it's a philosophical movement that started way back in the early part of this century by Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher. It was initially a reaction against scienticism, or what was called "scienticism" back then, which had to do with a perception that reality was interpreted too much by scientists and by the logical or, I should say, the philosophical handmaiden of science which was logical positivism. The scientific approach to reality was criticized for ignoring subjective feelings and intuitions and for regarding human life as little more than some sort of elaborate machine. Phenomenology was interested in resolving the ancient traditional conflict between the subjective and objective or the mind/body conflict. Another theme placed emphasis on consciousness, which the phenomenologists called intentionality. Phenomenology also attempted to investigate human experience in a very radical way.

In the forties and fifties, phenomenology became linked with the philosophy of existentialism. That gives some idea of the tone of phenomenology--that it could be in cahoots, so to speak, with existentialism. The method of investigation of phenomenology was called the epoche', which is a Greek word for bracketing. What is bracketing? Bracketing is the means to rid the mind of conventional ways of looking at the world--conventional ways like scientific theories, especially popular scientific theories which had become cliches--and to go beyond those to really look at reality in a radical way. When I say radical way, I mean getting to the root of reality through one's own experiences. The

method was called phenomenological reduction which had to do with bracketing out presuppositions as much as possible when analyzing something, for example, an art work. Instead of looking at the art work and falling back on previous training--I'm speaking about art school training such as looking at it in terms of principles of design or art history or something like that--each individual would attempt to really look at what was there. Perhaps later on in the process of investigation, the brackets would be widened a bit to allow some of these other things to be considered.

What about phenomenology and art education? During the 1960s, a number of art educators explored the possibilities of applying the principles of phenomenology to art and art education. Those people were--and I hope I haven't left anybody out, but I know of three of them--David Ecker, Hugh Stumbo, and Eugene Kaelin, who was actually an educational philosopher interested in aesthetics. What are the similarities between the Feldman method and bracketing? Bracketing had four steps, according to Kaelin. The first step was to describe the surface counters or, if present, the representational counters in a work of art. By counters Kaelin meant the things that count, the features in a work of art. The second step was to describe the relationships among the counters. To speculate on the possible meanings and their interrelationships was third, and to make a judgment about the significance of the work was the final step. Well, what is that anymore than really different terms--or different rhetoric--for description, analysis, interpretation, evaluation.

(Interruption by Feldman: I agree with your comparison, but mine was first.)

I don't know; I was just going to say I was unable to locate The National Society for the Study of Education Yearbook; I don't know if it came out before your book or not.

(Feldman: My book came out in sixty-seven.)

I think there was a yearbook discussion of this and I wasn't able to find it at home.

(Feldman: They talked about it but they didn't do it.)

They didn't do it? All right. Anyway, in the CEMREL publication-- which was much later in 1970--The CEMREL Guidelines: Curriculum Development for Aesthetic Education, this bracketing method is all laid out. I guess that it is based mostly on Kaelin or something that Kaelin presented at Ohio state in 1966. That was a year earlier than your publication.

(Feldman: We were both in the same institute. Kaelin learned a lot from me. Stumbo was our student.)

Right, I was just going to say this was used extensively by Hugh Stumbo in his classes at the University of Iowa and Illinois State. That is where I became very familiar with the method of bracketing.

What is the aim of phenomenological criticism? The aim is to perceive a work as purely as possible, free of preconceived notions-- although to be fair to the Guidelines explanation of it, it does make some allowance for historical information. At any rate, Stumbo constantly said, "Be true to your experience," which means, of course, forget about any other ideas or any other notions that are outside the immediate experience with the object. Be true to your experience. Ecker and Kaelin, in the article in which this is discussed, say that an art work "is a shareable public object, the very structures of which control all relevant responses to it." I underline all myself to point out that the emphasis is on the observable properties of the art work.

Now, I am critical of the aims of phenomenological criticism. I feel that it is too narrow. I don't believe that aesthetic experience of necessity must be confined to just the observable properties, the seen things in an art work. Ecker and Kaelin downgrade the theoretical terms of historical analyses. They refer to historical pursuits as the art historical fallacy; and I disagree with that. All three of them in their emphasis on liberating the experience of art from presuppositions seem to fall prey to a major modernist presupposition which is that art works should be conceived as autonomous objects removed from the concerns of the world. I feel that to locate an art work in its temporal and social nexus does not detract from the aesthetic experience. However, I do approve of the phenomenological approach as a strategy.

Now, turning to the question of using the Feldman method for social analysis, I have already pointed out that I think it is adequate. The aims of social analysis are to investigate the relationship between art and the cultural context, to enhance not only the viewer's understanding of a work but also his or her aesthetic appreciation of a work. Indeed, I think the more that one knows about a work, even the things that can't be seen in it, the greater or more intense the aesthetic experience will be. Not everybody agrees with that, but that is the way I feel. Social analysis can also determine the social messages and/or social implications of works of art. They don't all have clear messages, but I think almost all of them have social implications.

Now, I'd like to turn to the kind of art examples to use, because, after all, what we're talking about is how this method could be used in the classroom, and this gets down to using art, or having art exemplars, or whatever you want to call them, to use. I had an article in Studies about using popular art versus fine art. I think that this is going to be an issue. If ever we do have programs of aesthetic literacy in which we use the Feldman method, I think we are going to have problems dealing with what kind of art to use, because there is definite disagreement about what art is appropriate. I think it is something that should be considered. I think we should also recognize that almost all art is unfamiliar as far as kids are concerned; and I am talking about university students, too. To us it is familiar, to them it's alien--fine art, especially, and even folk art, say, Pennsylvania Dutch art. It is just as alien and foreign to probably even the kids in Pennsylvania as far as that goes. African art, Polynesian art, any kind of preliterate art is also equally unfamiliar. About the only familiar art to students is popular art: comic art, television, movies, and so forth. So, I think that the decision of which art to use will be an issue.

I would like to describe a teaching situation using the Feldman method for social analysis. The example I'm going to use is the seminar approach. I selected a picture to use for this; but I left it in Fort Worth, unfortunately. I'll just have to describe the picture. Is there a chalkboard I could draw on, or something? The strategy, the way I would use the Feldman method to really bring out, unfold the sociological

meaning, would be to initially employ only what I call internal evidence. I think this is the way it is actually presented--in your book or your books. First, look at the picture and describe it; next, analyze the things that are in the description and then base an interpretation upon the evidence found in the description and the analysis.

(Feldman: Right.)

O.K., I think that is one way. I am going to stop at interpretation and call that "interpretation, subhead one." Let me describe a picture, if I may, one that I have used. I played a little game with this particular picture with college-level students; the picture is Rembrandt's "Return of the Prodigal Son." It is one of the parables of Jesus. The son comes back and instead of being scolded by his father for being a wastrel, he's pardoned. The parable says a great deal about Christian pardon as well as family bonds in general. It's very touching and so is the painting by Rembrandt which was done in his later years, very psychological and humanistic. Well, I have shown this painting to art students, including graduate art students at ISU. Even they didn't know it was by Rembrandt, so it worked fine; in other words, it was unfamiliar to art students at all levels.

(Feldman: They don't read the Bible either.)

I guess they don't read the Bible either. It's interesting to see how they arrive at a meaning and talk about, perhaps, the, well, the, I can't really physically describe the picture too well, but it shows the son kneeling before his father. The students recognize that possibly the kneeling figure is a servant, but they don't make a father/son association. They do recognize that the older gentleman is a wealthy, rich gentleman, because they can see his brocaded sleeves, jewelry, and the other figures in the background. The students do arrive at a meaning that isn't too far, perhaps, from the parable itself. At that point, I introduce the outside evidence or the external evidence and point out when the painting was made and who made it; I explain that it was based on the parable. The students are then asked to rewrite their interpretations in light of the additional evidence. Sometimes this is a revelation to them and they come up with richer interpretations, in other words, "interpretation, subhead two." My general method is to use two

interpretations: interpretation, subhead one, following description and analysis. Stop the process and introduce the outside evidence which, I think, enriches the entire experience and allows for a more sociological interpretation.

I think this could be done with popular art as well as fine art. In that case, the students would know something about the context of the work; but the teacher could interrupt their interpretation and bring in other themes that they may not have considered--having to do with contemporary society: racism, sexism, the environment, the economy, and so forth. Have them look at that comic strip in light of some of those themes they may have overlooked.

(Feldman: Generational antagonism.)

Perhaps, right. Anyway, this is how I see the Feldman method used in a sociological way. What the phenomenologists used was essentially the same, but theirs was an existential position--not a sociological one.

References

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