"'Self-Portrait' by Layne Staley: Portrait of Generation Grunge through Iconology and Structuralism"

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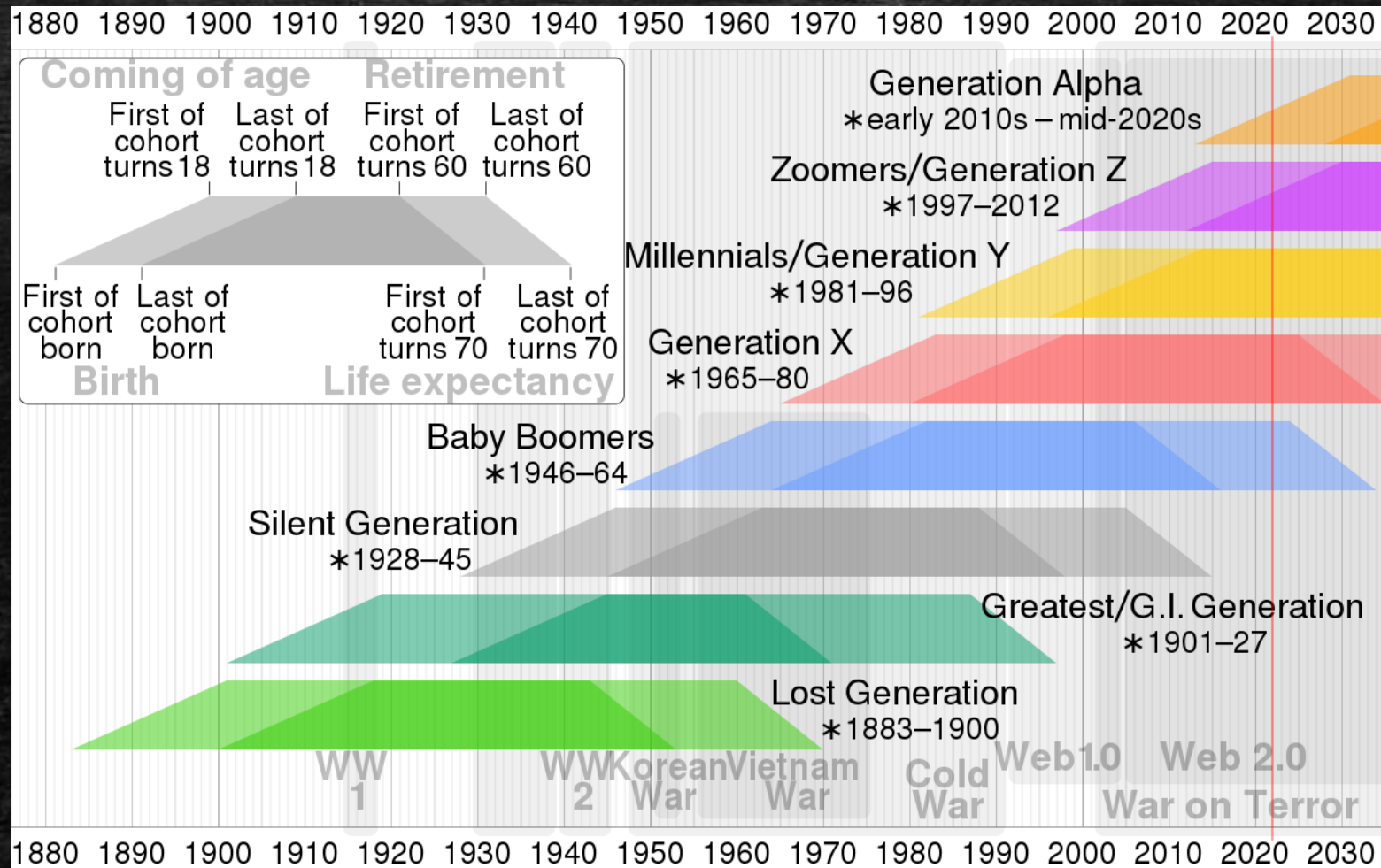Academy of Art University
Fall 2021

"Self-Portrait"

Layne Staley

Pen and Ink Drawing

Seattle, WA

1994

Introduction

- Generational Aesthetics and Ideologies
- Generation X
- Generation Grunge
- Layne Staley
- "Self-Portrait"
- Hypothesis

Generational Aesthetics and Ideologies

*Photo source, Wikipedia

Generational Characteristics and Examples

Greatest Generation, 1901 - 1927

- Great Depression, World War II
- Work ethic, patriotism, glamour

Silent Generation, 1928 - 1945

- McCarthy era silence, post-war conservatism
- Head down, status quo, wholesome

Baby Boomers, 1946 - 1964

- Vietnam, social movement
- Revolution, counterculture, change

- Aesthetics
- Experiences
- Ideologies
- Examples

Generation X, 1965 - 1980

- Prosperity
- Desert Storm
- MTV Generation
- Social dynamic shift
- Latch key
- Autonomy
- Conflict
- Addiction
- Identity

Generation Grunge
Seattle
Mid- 1980s – mid 1990s

Generation Grunge

- Subculture
- Social challenge
- Reflection
- Vulnerability
- Accountability
- Individuality

Seattle Grunge
Nirvana Blew

Layne Staley

- August 22, 1967 – April 5, 2002
- Seattle, WA
- Alice in Chains, Mad Season
- Artist
- Lyricist
- Musician
- Performer
- Philosopher
- Poet

*Photo taken by Karen Mason Blair

"Self-Portrait" Visual Analysis

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What is Visual Analysis?

Visual analysis is a method of understanding art that focuses on an artwork's visual elements, such as color, line, texture, and scale. In its strictest definition, it is a description and explanation of visual structure for its own sake. Yet the purpose of visual analysis can also recognize the choices that an artist made in creating the artwork, as well as to better understand how the formal properties of an artwork communicate ideas, content, or meaning. Visual analysis is often used as a starting point for art-historical writing.

"Ferris Bueller's Day Off", 1986

Johnson Museum, Cornell University
https://museum.cornell.edu/sites/default/files/Johnson%20Museum%20Visual%20Analysis%20101.pdf
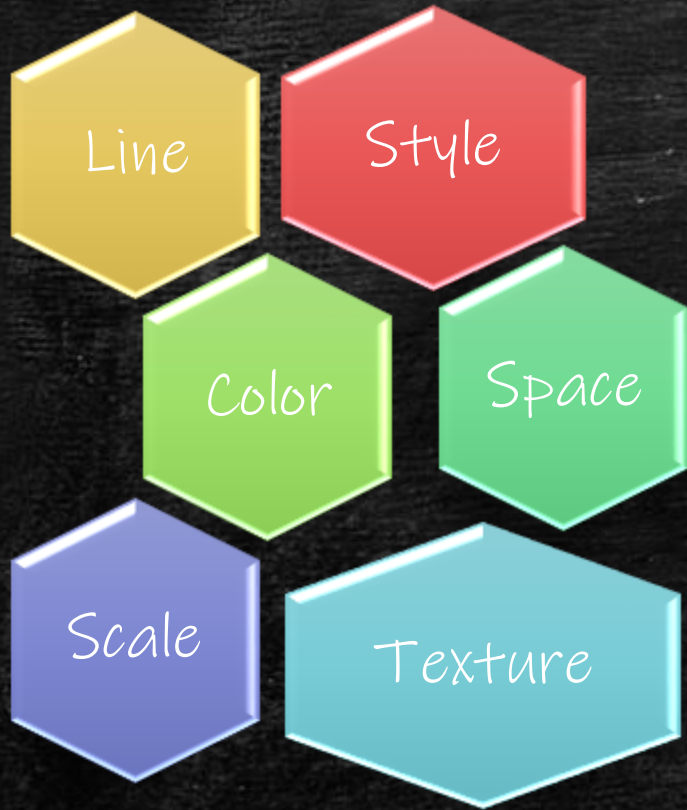
Why Visual Analysis?

"Saved by the Bell", c. 1989

Visual analysis is not just for art. It is also a critical part of visual literacy, a skill that helps people read and critically interpret images, whether in a museum, on social media, in entertainment, advertising, or the news. As citizens of the 21st century, we are constantly confronted with visual media. Practicing visual analysis sharpens critical judgment skills and helps people seek out answers instead of passively receiving information. This is especially important when exposing hidden ideologies that may motivate seemingly neutral images.

Johnson Museum, Cornell University
https://museum.cornell.edu/sites/default/files/Johnson%20Museum%20Visual%20Analysis%20101.pdf

Art Historical Visual Analysis:
The Three Keys

Observe → Analysis → Interpretation

Observe

Line

Style

Color

Space

Scale

Texture

"Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark", 1981

Analyze

"Weird Science", 1985

| Technical attributes | → | Viewer effect | → | Cohesive elements | → | Artist intent | → | Apply observations |

Interpretation

"Stand and Deliver, 1988

Form

Symbols

Ideas

Meanings

Subjective Viewing
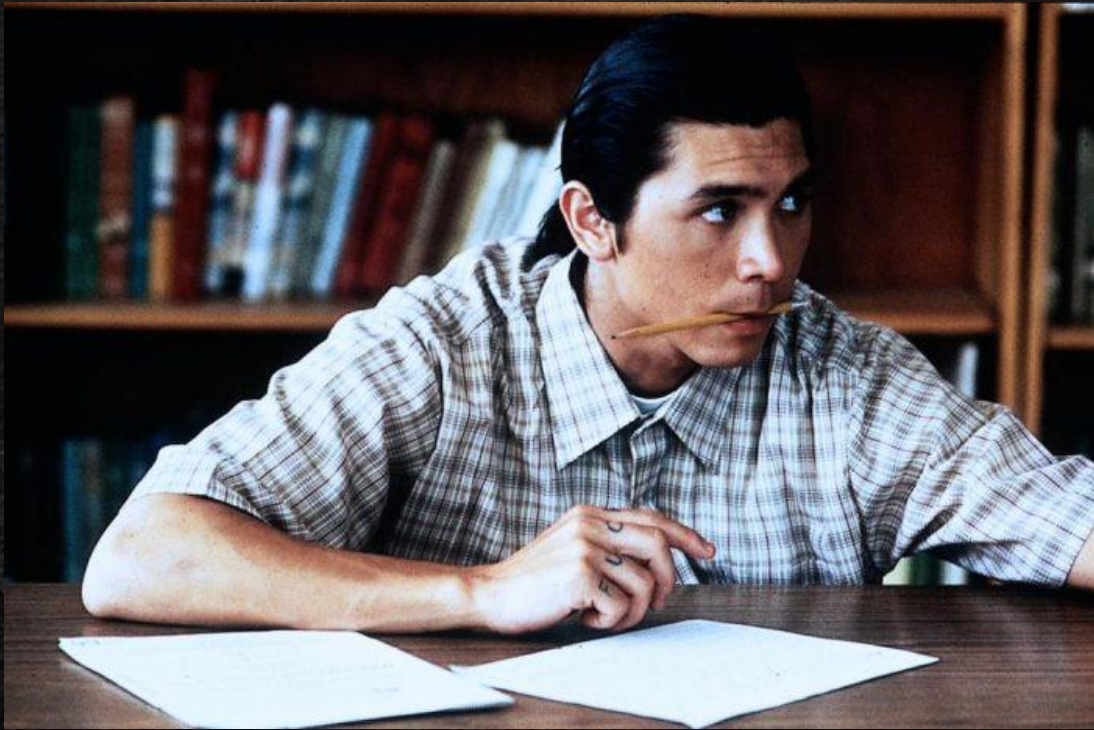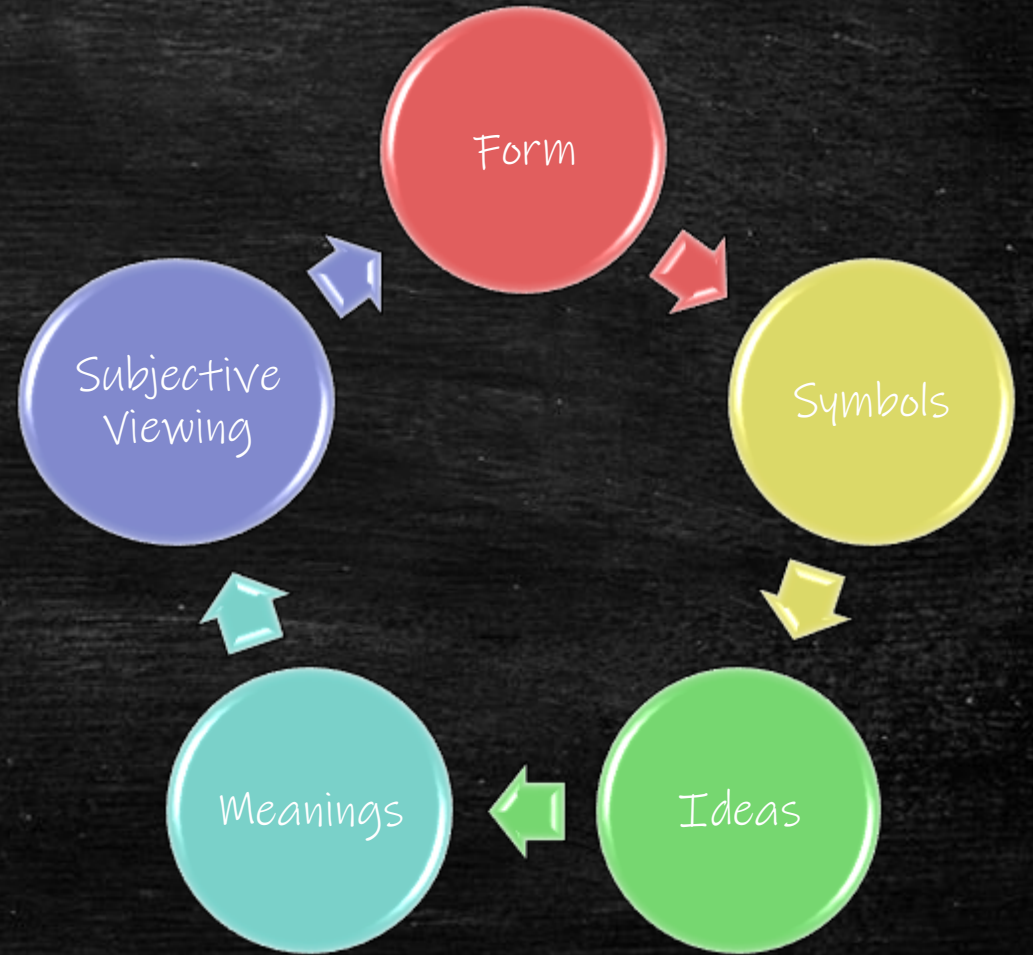
"Self-Portrait", Visual Analysis

Observe

- Abstract
- Human male
- Self-portrait
- Pen and ink drawing
- Black and white
- ¾ profile view
- Downcast demeanor

Analyze

- Color choice
- Subtractive skill
- Aesthetically pleasing
- Facial and postural detail
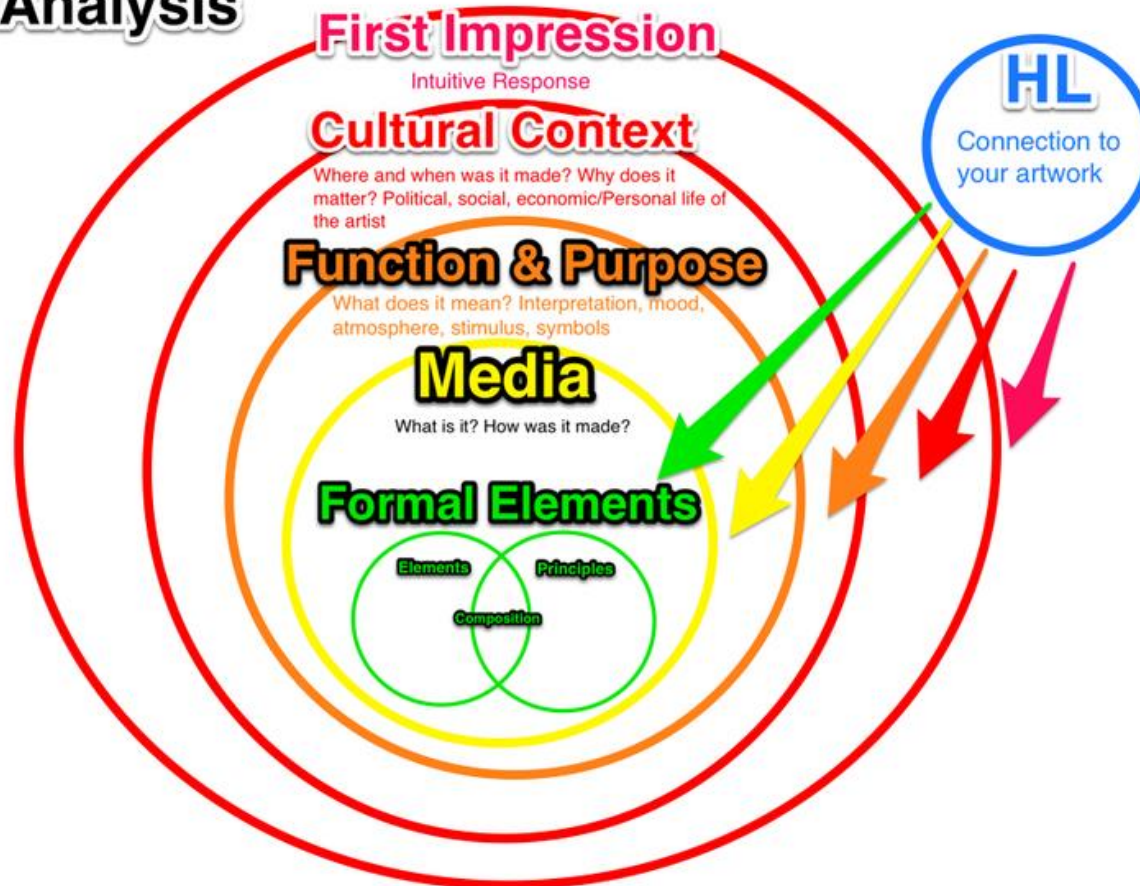- Realism
- Layne's intent

Interpret

- Duality
- Emotions conveyed
- Symbols
- Internal conflict
- Deprecation and doubt
- Audience connection
- Subjective reflection and interpretation

Art Historical Visual Analysis

Thesis

Using the characteristics of Generation X's Grunge movement, Layne Staley's self-portraiture represents the solitary journey of self-discovery through doubt and struggle, experienced by Generation X, through its iconology and structuralist presentation. Members of Generation Grunge can identify its relevance in their own journeys, while revering the artist whose journey ended prematurely. The tragedy of Layne Staley is memorialized in his self-portrait, which acts as a lifeline to his fans for its symbolism and semiotics.