

Hermeneutic Approach as an Art Research Methodology

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Summary

Art is an important vehicle for communicating meaning and hermeneutics is a highly regarded methodology of understanding and interpreting meaning. Art and hermeneutics therefore have an essential connection that makes it profitable to explore the hermeneutic approach as an art research methodology.

This paper begins by discussing six aspects that support the appropriateness of hermeneutics as an art research methodology: (1) That it is the opposing forces of inter-subjectivity and individual inner difference make the hermeneutic circle move forward and upward; (2) An art work can be seen as “writely text” that always has potential for “the third meaning”; (3) A text consists of an internal dynamic and external projection that make the objective interpretation of a text possible; (4) The intentionality in phenomenology keeps the structure of text stable and allows various interpretations to have a common unity; (5) Ricoeur’s establishment of interpretive theory through reading in the late 1960s granted freedom of interpretation; (6) The threefold present and the three components of mimesis (pre-configuration, configuration and re-configuration) make interpretation meaningful and feasible.

The second part of this paper is a brief history of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics has a long history and its meaning has evolved over time. Traditional hermeneutics focuses on the interpretation of written texts of literature, religion or law. Contemporary hermeneutics encompasses not only understanding of written texts but everything in the

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interpretative process. The evolution of hermeneutics can be described as a shift from the pursuit of ultimate meaning to the objective meaning of an original text, then to the ontological meaning given by the person who interprets a text, and lastly to multiple interpretations centered around a text.

The third section of this paper maps out the relations between art and hermeneutic ideas through such concepts as: (1) the pursuit and creation of meaning, (2) the hermeneutical circle, (3) dialogue and dialectics, (4) history and “fusion of horizons”, and (5) criticism and reflection. While in the fourth section an overview of various applications of the hermeneutic approach as a research methodology is given. Betti provides four “theoretical moments” within the interpretive process: (1) the philological, (2) the critical, (3) the psychological, and (4) the technical-morphological moment. Betti also grounds interpretation in some principles. Hirsch (1967) articulates the validity of interpretation and moreover differentiates between meaning and significance. The former is stable and derived from the text to convey the intention of the author; while the latter is changeable and derived from the relation of the meaning to other persons, things, etc. Madison (1988, 29-30) proposes some principles of interpretative methodology; coherence, wholeness, transparency, thoroughness, appropriateness, contextuality, agreement 1, agreement 2, suggestiveness, and effective application of interpretative results. Danner (1994, 94-105) proposed four stages for the interpretative methodology of educational text, while Klein and Myers (1999, 72) addressed the principle of interpretive field research, and Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000, 99) reconstructed the hermeneutic process.

In the fifth section we reify the hermeneutic process and mode in terms of interpretation in the field of art. This involves pre-interpretation, interpretation and re-interpretation, which are emblematic of the three components of mimesis. Then in the sixth and final section, after reflecting on the limitations of hermeneutics as a research approach in art research, it is concluded that there are four things that cannot be achieved in hermeneutics, namely; absolute objectivity, ultimate declaration, ultimate understanding, and ultimate meaning.

An examination of the suitability and limitations of the hermeneutic approach for visual art research is very helpful to the understanding of hermeneutics and in assessing its contribution to this field. Irwin wrote: “[Art] is about seeing-about seeing, ‘feeling’, and determining aesthetically..... It doesn’t happen to us-we make it happen” (1985, 20). In a

similar spirit, we bring forward hidden meaning in artworks through interpretative acts. Ricoeur said: “the symbol gives rise to thought” (1967, 352). Art making, as a symbol making activity, is a non-discursive thinking process. The act of interpreting art makes it possible for us to construct a theory of understanding. Art making and art interpretation give rise to thought. Therefore, hermeneutics as an art research methodology is an ideal vehicle for art educators and art researchers to use in their journey into the art world.

Keywords: hermeneutics, art research methodology, the hermeneutic process

