

Ted Hiebert

Application to Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program (Humanities)
Research Proposal



The Hermeneutics of Nonsense: Interpretation and the Aesthetics of Multiplicity

Truth can indeed stand on one leg; but with two she will walk and travel around.

- Friedrich Nietzsche. The Wanderer and his Shadow. 13. (as cited in Alan D. Schrift, Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation, p.155)

What a picture represents it represents independently of its truth or falsity, by means of its pictorial form.

- Ludwig Wittgenstein. Tractacus Logico Philosophicus. 2.22 (trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness)

I. Introduction:

I believe that the merit of visual art lies in its ability to propose new possibilities for interpretative thinking. My experience in the visual arts indicates a pervasive tendency to reduce art to a singular analytic assertion. This reductive tendency is inconsistent with what I see as the spirit of artistic production. The research I am proposing aims to establish an aesthetic theory that is congruent with the creative and imaginative context of a work of art. It will aim to avoid the unnecessary limitation of interpretive possibility without compromising our ability to find social and philosophical meaning in art. To this end, I propose a project that combines studies in Aesthetics, Hermeneutics and Visual Art in the pursuit of a theory of art that is both inclusive and critical.

II. Summary of Previous Research:

The central idea upon which my past and present research has been built is the proposal of art as an object for the intellectual consideration of possibility. I believe that rather than attempting to decipher the meaning in a work of art, there is merit in the exploration of its possible meanings. Ludwig Wittgenstein proposes “a particular mode of signifying may be unimportant but it is always important that it is a *possible* mode of signifying.”¹ It is in this spirit that both my academic and studio research proceed.

My MFA studies in Art explored an opposition between the making and the interpreting of art. Although several distinct possibilities for meaning may grow from the analysis of a work of art, the articulation of meaning almost always aims to exclude alternative interpretive possibilities. I attempted to acknowledge this paradoxical relationship by placing my studio work and my writing in conflict with one another, opposing an artistic practice claimed as meaningful with an academic paper undermining my artistic authority. In this way I hoped to avoid the assertion of a singular or definitive interpretation of my work and instead to contextualize my exhibition in terms of its possibilities for multiple meanings. My MFA work suggested that the reductive tendency of interpretation, i.e. the determination of a

¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. Tractacus Logico-Philosophicus. 3.3421.

Ted Hiebert

Application to Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program (Humanities) Research Proposal



singular meaning in art, does not bring us closer to an understanding of the work, but rather distracts us from the imaginative merit of artistic practice.

Since graduation I have begun to examine the implications of this attitude on the identity of an artwork. In acknowledging the multiplicity of meanings that can grow from the interpretation of art, the analysis is often reduced to a discussion of uncertainty. If a work of art represents its subject independently of its truth or falsity then the truth of a picture is always uncertain; a picture represents the possibility of truth, but not truth itself.² Nor does this uncertainty necessarily imply a falsity however, leaving the art object in a state of fluctuation. It is through this position of uncertainty that the possibilities of aesthetic interpretation are communicated. There are however, many questions that this thinking has caused me to ask. It is in an attempt to understand more of the intricacies of this aesthetic discourse that I propose my current project.

III. Proposed Methodology:

This proposal begins from a position of dissatisfaction with the manner in which art is analyzed. In my training as a Visual Artist, the most frustrating obstacle I have encountered is a lack of interpretive models that adequately address the Visual Art's ability to serve as object for multiple and independent constructions of meaning. Ultimately the goal of this project will be to establish an aesthetic theory that embraces and is congruent with the idea of interpretive possibility. My current thinking suggests five necessary parts to this project. The first of these would be an analysis of historic aesthetic traditions, aimed at understanding the obstacles put forth by their reliance on a philosophical structure of ideals. The second component would be a similar analysis of contemporary aesthetic models that would discuss the difficulties of determining meaning in a pluralist context. The third section would explore contemporary hermeneutic models, hoping to find potential strategies for coping with pluralist paradoxes of meaning. The fourth section of this project would attempt a reconciliation of hermeneutics with post-modern aesthetics, hoping ultimately to discover an aesthetic model that embraces the paradoxes of interpretive engagement and possibility. Finally, to supplement the academic side of this research project I will propose a body of visual art that embraces the theories discussed and actively seeks the dissemination of an inclusive approach to aesthetics. My current thinking on these aspects of my proposed area of study are outlined below. Undoubtedly these initial thoughts will change as a result of my PhD research, but they serve as an illustration of the point from which this project may begin.

A. Historic and Modernist Aesthetics:

It seems to me that both Historic and Modernist approaches to aesthetics can be categorized by their reliance on a structure of ideals. From my current perspective, which admits to only preliminary research, it seems that the reliance of these models on a singular discourse of ideals compromises the possibilities open to aesthetic interpretation, and consequently may be incongruent with the spirit and potential of contemporary art.

² Wittgenstein, Ludwig. Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. 2.22.

Ted Hiebert

Application to Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program (Humanities)
Research Proposal



In *The Wake of the Imagination*, Richard Kearney traces the relationship between the imagination and historic models of aesthetic interpretation. His discussion of the Hellenic Imagination is particularly useful. Kearney observes that Greek aesthetic trends focused principally on the opposition of nature versus culture. This means that the imagination, and consequently the arts, was defined “in relation to something *other* than itself”.³ This external definition of art imposes a structure, from which it cannot be assumed that art is being evaluated according to its own merit. Rather, notions of merit and meaning seem to come from external sources and are imposed and constructed around an equally constructed notion of art. Specific to Greek ideology is the idea of art as imitation of reality. Meaning in art, as a result, must accept a detachment from reality, and a stigma of being, to some degree ‘false’.⁴ The reduction this discussion to one of the true versus the false complicates the search for possibilities of meaning in art.

Kant’s notion of disinterested interest defines the merit of the art object based on aesthetic satisfaction. Kant does not mean satisfaction as an argument for a subjective experience in any emotional or personal fashion, but rather as an argument for an a priori judgment that can be discovered through art. “Every aesthetic experience is a response to a particular object, but this in no way denies its universality.”⁵ Rather, beauty and aesthetic satisfaction result from our experience of a pattern, an absolute or finality of judgment. By setting out a model of this nature, Kant implied a correct and incorrect way of experiencing art. In its reduction of the work to an assertion of universality, Kant’s aesthetic, as in Greek aesthetics, emphasizes the interpretation of art according to a specific philosophical agenda. “The sublimation of the work to absolute form neglects the spirit of the work in the interest of which sublimation was undertaken in the first place.”⁶ The understanding of the work of art is secondary to the correct application of the aesthetic gaze.

Looking at historic and modernist aesthetic theories in terms of their resistance to interpretive possibility is not to dismiss their assertions as invalid. The purpose of this section would not be to suggest that these theories are without merit. Rather I am seeking to illustrate what seems to be a shortcoming with regard to the attempt to establish an open-minded approach to aesthetics. The shortcoming of historic and modernist aesthetics is their exclusivity and their reliance on a pre-determined philosophical structure. I am not suggesting that such theories be dismissed, but rather that they must be seen in the context of a greater aesthetic model that addresses both the merit and incompatibility of these models in conjunction with each other, and with more contemporary approaches to aesthetic interpretation. This discussion is important however, since in acknowledging the history of aesthetic philosophy we come closer to the inclusive theory that I hope to propose. As I hope to show later, the implication of truth in historic aesthetics can be seen as a condition of interpretive meaning. As such, the strategies of historic aesthetics are an integral part of the project I propose. To this end, part of my research will be a more in-depth analysis of aesthetic tradition. From a historic and modernist perspective I feel it will be important to research the writings of Aristotle, Hegel, Greenberg, Kierkegaard and others, in addition to

³ Kearney, Richard. *The Wake of the Imagination*. P. 80.

⁴ Kearney, Richard. *The Wake of the Imagination*. P. 90.

⁵ Kearney, Richard. *The Wake of the Imagination*. P. 173.

⁶ Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. p. 10.

Ted Hiebert

Application to Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program (Humanities)
Research Proposal



Plato and Kant, to provide a more comprehensive basis for the discussion I hope will follow.

B. Contemporary and Postmodern Aesthetics:

Whereas historic and modernist aesthetics may be qualified by their reliance on a structure of ideals, contemporary aesthetics can be identified through a resistance to the modernist approach. Contemporary aesthetics challenge the structures of aesthetic evaluation until any assertion of meaning becomes largely nonsensical. Contemporary aesthetics proposes a multiplicity of possible interpretations, but it does so at the expense of meaning. Although I see merit in this structural unraveling, I resist the idea that a reduction to structural uncertainty necessarily entails an absence of potential meaning.

Let me begin by illustrating the idea of multiple and independent interpretive possibilities. To do so I will use an example from Derrida's Aporias which examines the French phrase "il y va d'un certain pas:

This phrase may mean several things, each of them literal and independent from the others. "For example, ... one can paraphrase it in this way: he is going there at a certain pace, that is to say, someone, the other, you or me, a man or walking animal, in the masculine or the neuter, goes somewhere with a certain gait. ... But, *secondly*, one can also understand and paraphrase the same sentence, *il y va d'un certain pas*, in another way: ... what one is talking about here, is the question of the step, the gait, the pace, the rhythm, the passage, or the traversal. ... *Thirdly* and finally, this time in inaudible quotation marks or italics, one can also mention a mark of negation, by citing it: a certain "not".⁷

Here we have a phrase that can mean several things, depending on how it is interpreted. The phrase itself is none of these things singularly, nor is it properly a combination of them. Meaning in this phrase is non-determined and paradoxical. Each possibility of meaning is whole, that is to say not incomplete without the others. Yet at the same time, it is impossible to say that these words mean only one thing.⁸

Jean Baudrillard makes a similar assertion in his notion of transaesthetics. Baudrillard asserts that there are no longer any criteria through which to separate the real from the false in art. Rather there are simply levels of simulation, signs that no longer have referents. "It is this confusion, with its model (that) allows each time for all possible interpretations, even the most contradictory – all (to be) true."⁹ Baudrillard's conclusion to this is that because we no longer have grounds for any judgment, we are "condemned to indifference".¹⁰ In this reduction of truth to uncertainty, Baudrillard challenges notions of reality and meaning, asserting that there can be neither.

⁷ Derrida, Jacques. Aporias. P. 10.

⁸ Caputo, John. Radical hermeneutics. P. 145.

⁹ Baudrillard, Jean. Simulacra and Simulation. P. 17.

¹⁰ Baudrillard, Jean. The Transparency of Evil. P. 18.

Ted Hiebert

Application to Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program (Humanities) Research Proposal



Roland Barthes uses similar post modern methods to challenge the notions of originality and authorship. In his “Death of the Author” Barthes attacks the notion of the author, proposing a replacement of “the modern notion of the book (as a project of the authorial imagination) with the postmodern notion of the text (as an impersonalized process of writing where the author is absent)”.¹¹ Barthes notes that to assign an author to a text is to imply that the author’s intention defines the meaning of the text.¹² Resisting the idea of original or integral meaning, Barthes argues that a reader’s freedom to interpret comes at the expense of authorial ownership of the words written. This interpretive freedom fragments the possibility of underlying or overlying meaning in the text. Meaning is sacrificed in order for meanings to profuse.

Postmodern aesthetics have in common an assertion that meaning, in any true sense of the word, is impossible. They propose a fragmented and chaotic co-existence of truths, each philosophically relative and consequently meaningless. It is within this arena of simulation, deconstruction and authorial absence that contemporary aesthetics situates itself. Postmodern interpretive strategy is compelling and efficient. However, I believe the postmodern aesthetic conclusion, that multiple possibilities for interpretation exclude the possibility of meaning, may be premature. As in the case of historic and modernist aesthetic models, I feel that further and more in-depth analysis of postmodern theorists will be a necessary part of the research I propose. Writers such as Danto, Adorno and Foucault, as well as those mentioned here, will make an important addition to this section, and to the discussion that follows.

C. Contemporary Hermeneutics:

My current thinking on this section arises from a resistance to the conclusions of postmodern aesthetic theory. While the unraveling of structural truth is an insightful strategy for proposing possible meanings, I am not convinced that the multiplicity of possible interpretations precludes the possibility of meaning. In the attempt to reconcile a multiplicity of interpretations we are faced with what James Winchester calls the perspectivist’s paradox, that is the paradox of asserting truth from a perspective acknowledged as relative.¹³ Alan Schrift discusses this question, asserting that perspectivism can be considered an epistemic rather than an ontological position. This means that rather than concerned with ‘what there is’ perspectivism is concerned with ‘what we can know.’¹⁴ This is a useful distinction for in it we acknowledge that our question is about the way in which we understand an object or idea rather than in a supposition of truth. Yet it is important to mention that when we assert an interpretive position, that assertion is not contextualized by the possibilities that exist beyond it. These possibilities would not be possibilities if they did not also imply themselves as true.¹⁵

¹¹ Kearney, Richard. The Wake of the Imagination. P. 275.

¹² Barthes, Roland. “Death of the Author” from Image, Music, Text. P. 147.

¹³ Winchester, James. Nietzsche’s Aesthetic Turn. P.65.

¹⁴ Schrift, Alan D. Nietzsche and the Question of Interpretation. P.145.

¹⁵ Adorno, Theodor. Aesthetic Theory. p. 12.

Ted Hiebert

Application to Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program (Humanities)
Research Proposal



Deleuze and Guattari understand this state of affairs and attempt to draw a model which represents the multiplicity of meanings that an object, or in the case of their discussion, a concept, holds. Every philosophical structure constitutes a plane of immanence, a “One-All” which is related to other philosophical structures through an interleaving; instances of overlap between subjects or “conceptual personae” of distinct planes.¹⁶ This interleaving in no way compromises the integrity of its distinct planes but rather constitutes a model through which instances of agreement and disagreement of philosophies may be described. The problem then of truth, or discussion, relates not so much to the identity of the object discussed but due to the disagreement and displacement between the structures used in the analysis. That there can be no agreement in conclusion stems from the attempt to assign consistency to a subject that exists in a state of conceptual paradox.

Deleuze and Guattari’s model is useful in understanding that the apparent contradictions of interpretive instance do not stem from a conflicted nature of the object of interpretation. Rather this model suggests that they may stem from conflict in the interpretive gaze itself – an attempt to assign linear consistency to an object that does not subscribe to this sort of interpretation. By turning to a discussion of hermeneutics, it may be possible to re-direct what seems an inescapable pattern of confusion.

In Radical Hermeneutics, John Caputo navigates this issue as it relates to the idea of repetition or existential movement. Caputo attempts to reconcile hermeneutics with Derrida’s philosophy of deconstruction. He suggests that the impossibility of meaning may not necessarily mean the impossibility of engagement. “The only honest thing to do, indeed the only thing to do, honest or not, is press forward.”¹⁷ In this way Caputo re-directs the goal of deconstructive analysis. Rather than focussing on the fragmented outcome of deconstruction, Caputo focuses on the deconstructive act itself. “If there is such a hermeneutic it does not come after, or alongside, but only in and through ceaseless deconstructive analysis. Radical hermeneutics does not pass through a moment of deconstruction in order to get to the other side of the flow. Rather, deconstructive criticism belongs to its very makeup.”¹⁸ With this suggestion Caputo proposes that hermeneutic meaning may be possible through engagement with the very process that seeks to unravel the structural meaning of its object.

D. Aesthetics of Multiplicity:

It is through the application of this notion of hermeneutic engagement that it may be possible to build an inclusive model of aesthetics. In Caputo’s hermeneutic model, the engaged *act* of deconstructive criticism is more important than the reconciliation of differing analyses. The aesthetic model that I propose would rely on this form of hermeneutic activity to remain engaged with aesthetic possibility. The merit of interpretation would become, not one of deciphering what art means but of engaging with its possibilities for meaning. This model would rely on the paradoxical state of the art object as the impetus for engagement. I hope to be able to articulate an aesthetic that would be dynamic in its attempt

¹⁶ Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. What is Philosophy? P. 50.

¹⁷ Caputo, John. Radical Hermeneutics. P. 130.

¹⁸ Caputo, John. Radical Hermeneutics. P. 147.

Ted Hiebert

Application to Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program (Humanities)
Research Proposal



to reconcile paradoxical ideological structures and inclusive in that exclusivity of truths would no longer be a barrier to active participation in aesthetic discourse.

E. A Studio Component:

Integral to an aesthetic theory that speaks of engaged action is an artistic practice that seeks to actively disseminate the aesthetic possibilities it discusses. For this project to be properly hermeneutic I feel that my continued studio production is crucial, as well as active efforts to exhibit and speak about both artwork and theory.

The slides that I have enclosed with this proposal are samples of work from past and current projects that illustrate my attempt to emphasize the plurality of interpretation discussed in this proposal. The first of these projects is a series of self portraits. Through the use of make up, negative images and multiple exposures, these portraits fragment the notion of a static self or singularity of perspective. The resultant profusion of selves alludes to the difficulty of reconciling art with deconstructive techniques and authorial absence. The second project is more conceptually based, evoking an opposition between belief and reality. These works, titled 'Exercise in Psychic Photography', suggest a process through which I claim to be actually attempting to psychically influence the photographic image. The crucial point that these works raise is not the real or actual possibility of psychic phenomena but rather the confrontation of disbelief with regard to artistic possibility and consequently ideological inclusiveness.

Both these projects have received some degree of recognition for their artistic and theoretical merit. The first project has received support from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, the Alternator Gallery in Kelowna, and will be exhibited in a more recent form at the Centre d'Artistes Vaste et Vague, in Carleton, QC this April. The second project has received support from the Banff Centre for the Arts and Articule Gallery in Montreal where these works will be shown as part of a group exhibition in September. In both cases I hope to speak on behalf of my work as part of the dissemination of these projects.

The work that I would propose as part of my PhD research would contribute in similar ways to both the development and dissemination of the academic paper I propose. I hope to continue with the two projects already mentioned and to initiate several new bodies of work still in developmental stages.

IV. Conclusion:

The project I propose for my PhD studies is one which engages strongly in interdisciplinary research and that actively seeks to discuss and disseminate its discourse. Combining Studio Art with research in Aesthetics and Hermeneutics, this project seeks to understand not only the ideas, philosophies and theories of its contemporaries, but also to actively contribute to contemporary aesthetic and artistic discourse.

Ted Hiebert

Application to Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program (Humanities)
Research Proposal



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Ted Hiebert

Application to Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program (Humanities)
Research Proposal



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