



Figures of Interpretation

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The issue addressed in this paper is methodological, and concerns the modes of interpretation that arise in the relationship between the written text and art work that together are submitted for examination for a practice-led doctoral degree. This relationship has been a problematic one for some time, and, together with the status of the knowledge gained through practice, and the status of this practice as research, comprise the main issues with which practice-led doctoral research has had to contend since its introduction. It is generally assumed by the regulations that govern this research that art practice cannot by itself articulate and answer a research question in the proper terms, and therefore needs to be supplemented by a commentary, thesis or some other statement. It is felt that it is only in language that a research question can be posed, a contribution to already existing knowledge articulated, and a methodology justified, in a way that can be compared with research in other disciplines.

The theme of this conference raises the question of whether art practice-led doctoral research should provide the means for a clear interpretation of its contribution to knowledge or whether it is a defining characteristic of art work that it is open to different interpretations, and hence possibly indeterminate when it comes to knowledge. The relationship between art work and written text is clearly central to this question because the text can be seen on one hand as providing the means for clear interpretation or on the other, more negatively, as restricting interpretation. In this paper, I am concerned with the interpretation made of the art work in the written text, and what kind of knowledge it aims at. I am therefore not so much interested in the ways in which a research project as a whole, including both art work and written text, may be oriented at an interpretation of some aspect of the world, or in the interpretations made by the supervisor of the work in progress or examiner of the completed work, which depend on particular contexts that may be subjective or institutional in character. Rather I am interested in the idea that the act of interpretation that takes place between written text and art work is one that involves two distinct interpretative attitudes, effectively two 'selves', and in the possibility that a particular kind of knowledge is produced through the workings of this internal relationship.

I begin with a distinction drawn by the art historian and theorist Richard Shiff in an essay called 'Figuration' between three interpretative attitudes that correspond to the figures of the artist, the critic and the historian, and so to the practices of art, criticism and history:

art is the mode of belief, commitment and overt expressiveness; criticism (which includes theory) is the mode of doubt and irony; history is the mode of observation and dispassionate judgment. (Shiff, 1996: 325)

Shiff thought that each of these attitudes were not found separately in the figures of the artist, critic or historian, but rather that all three were present in each figure, the character of which was only determined according to an emphasis on one or the other. Furthermore, these attitudes did not necessarily correspond to actually existing artists, critics or historians. Depending on intellectual history and conventions, the attitude of an historian, for example, could be predominantly 'artistic', if this historian wrote expressively or explicitly from their own point of view. Similarly, the attitude of an artist could be predominantly 'critical', if this artist's work functioned in the mode of irony, revealing the conventional character of artistic expressionism, for example.

Shiff's artist-critic-historian schema provides a useful way in for thinking through the possible interpretative attitudes that might arise when an artist is asked to produce a theoretical commentary on their own work. I want to suggest first of all that there is a tendency or a temptation, due to the conventions that have informed these activities over time, to make particular kinds of distinction between the written commentary and the art work. The attitude that governs the art work will tend to be determined by the subjective mode of the 'artistic' in relation to the attitude that governs the written text, which will tend to be determined by the 'historical' attitude, that is, the mode of objective judgment. That these are distinctive and opposed attitudes, and can be so in the minds of doctoral students, is perhaps one of the main sources of the institutional 'anxiety' that accompanies practice-led research (Candlin, 2000). Artists, in being required to articulate their practice in the objective terms of academic research, may feel that they are being asked to take on a position that seems to them to be outside of their art work, a position that treats this work as an object of study, as if they had not themselves produced it.

The tendency, or temptation, to assume that the written text has to take on the mode of objective judgment may be exacerbated if models of research are imported into art practice-led research from, say, the sciences, which aim at a verifiable objectivity. It can be argued that verifiable objectivity is foreign to the mode of interpretation that characterizes inquiry in the humanities. Scientific inquiry does not aim at interpretation as such but rather is concerned with how a given phenomenon is determined, or the extent to which it is predictable or measurable. Interpretation, on the other hand, is oriented towards the understanding of an intention, the meaning of something for us. It is concerned first and foremost with human productions. An understanding of interpretation and its workings is therefore crucial in defining research in the humanities.

Interpretation involves, in its simplest sense, a relationship between two persons, the figures of author and reader. In traditional hermeneutics, the interpretation of a text was concerned with understanding the meaning intended by the author. It was assumed that this meaning was determinate, and that the meaning of a text could be understood through reference to the situation in which the author was writing and, especially in Romantic hermeneutics, through a psychological identification with this author. The interpreter thus understood the meaning of a text by understanding its author. This meant (and this idea derives from Friedrich Schleiermacher) that the interpreter could in principle understand

the author better than the author understood themselves because of their more objective knowledge of the whole situation, and so the meaning of the part-the text-within this whole. It followed that the author-or artist-was not the best interpreter of their own work. (Gadamer, 1975: 169-170) This long-standing idea continues to have some effect on how the position of the interpreter is characterized with respect to a work of art, in spite of later developments in the theory of interpretation and intellectual history more generally.

Hans-Georg Gadamer suggests in several places in *Truth and Method*, however, that the model for the act of interpretation is more clearly that of a dialogue between two persons. (Gadamer, 1975: 330-333, 345-51) Gadamer's own description of the act of interpretation puts it in the more phenomenological, and so more relative, terms of situation and horizon. The understanding of a text was determined by an understanding of its author's situation, which was circumscribed by the limits of the author's experience, their horizon. But it was recognized that the interpreter too was limited by their own situation, and their own horizon. Gadamer thus described the act of interpretation as a 'fusion of horizons', whereby the horizon of the present, that of the interpreter, merges with that of the past, that of the author. In the process, the horizon of the interpreter is widened. (Gadamer, 1975: 269-273) This is a simplification of Gadamer's account, which extends the idea of a 'fusion of horizons' to our historical predicament in a Heideggerian sense and to understanding in general, but it does already contain one important implication that bears on the workings of interpretation, which is that interpreted meaning is necessarily indeterminate and incomplete due to the historically changing relationships between author and reader. This indeterminacy is characteristic of later hermeneutic theory which generally places greater importance on how the act of interpretation by the reader and an awareness of the historicity of this act affects the meaning interpreted. In general, then, there has been a shift in the theory of interpretation from the assumption that meaning is determined by authorial intention to an acknowledgement that meaning can change or be indeterminate. This indeterminacy could be due to historically changing relationships between author and reader, as in Gadamer's hermeneutics, or, more recently and more radically, to a separation of the text and its effects from any authorial intention at all, as in, for example, Derrida's expanded sense of writing, where indeterminacy arises when the meanings of texts, perhaps due to ambiguity or to an excess of meaning, cannot be contained.

The greater emphasis on indeterminacy in interpretation in recent intellectual history returns us to Shiff, and in particular to his suggestion in relation to his artist-critic-historian schema that we live in a time when the dominant attitude of practice, and of interpretation, is that of critical irony and doubt. It is the 'critic' as an interpretative attitude that now tends to dominate. Shiff characterized the critical attitude in the following way:

To act as a critic is to doubt the stability of one's identity and to assume an ironic stance towards objects of study, questioning one's assumptions and conclusions. 'Critics' are insecure and ever wary of the reflexive effects of their own actions. They focus on the play of artistic means, attending especially to rhetoric and figuration. They are the creators of metadiscourses, commentaries on modes of commentary. (Shiff, 1996: 327-328)

Within a situation where critical doubt and irony dominates, the historian has a 'critical' awareness of the impossibility of objective historical knowledge and the artist has a 'critical' awareness of the impossibility of unmediated self-expression. Postmodernist theories in general attest to these impossibilities. An example of a postmodernist artist who has a 'critical' interpretative attitude in Shiff's sense would be the American artist Sherrie Levine. Levine's 'copies' of canonical modernist works of art place into doubt the

stability of the identity of the artist as well as the possibility of artistic originality. A written statement by Levine from 1982, which consisted entirely of appropriated phrases from the critic Roland Barthes, including his well-known text, 'The Death of the Author', added another level of ironic reflection to that already present in her artistic practice. (Levine, 2003: 1067) The term 'irony', which Shiff uses to characterize the 'critical' interpretative attitude, is meant in a particular way. It means not only that of the common definition of irony as saying the opposite of what one means but signifies the act of reflection that allows such a duplication of meaning to take place. One way of defining it is to say that the duplication of meaning that is characteristic of irony occurs by means of an act of reflection in which there is a duplication of self. There is a self that sees or understands a state of things that is unreflected upon-it is, as it were, immersed in this state of things-and there is a self that sees or seeks opposing states of things or meanings, according to context, finding that these work just as well as, or are truer than, what was first understood or seen. (Muecke, 1982) Irony can thus be considered a critical interpretative attitude involving a reflection that distances and undermines a previous position or self, or as Shiff put it, an attitude in which one's assumptions and conclusions are questioned and placed into doubt.

Earlier I considered the interpretation by the written text of the art work in practice-led research as suggesting two distinct interpretative attitudes that could be identified, following Shiff, with the mode of subjective expression that characterized the figure of the 'artist', and the mode of objective judgment that characterized the figure of the 'historian'. In a time of critical doubt and irony one would expect this potentially retrograde interpretative relationship to be subjected to critical doubt and irony. In some ways it is, as is signalled in Katie MacLeod's (2000) study of the different approaches practice-led doctoral students adopt to the written text, which she divides into three main types. The first, and the most 'historical' in Shiff's sense, is the approach whereby an artistic practice is simply positioned within the context of other practices. The second occurs when the artist takes on the position of the 'theorist', so that the practice is positioned within a theoretical context, or that theory functions as a kind of artistic material. The third is where a reciprocity between theoretical writing and art practice emerges, so that each affects the terms in which the other is elaborated. It is clear that these types move progressively towards a 'critical' interpretative attitude in Shiff's sense. In the third type there is the potential for an ironic reflection on the interpretative attitude or figure that corresponds to, on one hand, the written text and, on the other, the work of art, doubting the stability of the identity of the 'self' associated with each.

I want now to consider the interpretative attitude of critical doubt and irony within the broader contexts of understanding and knowledge. The American critic Hayden White (1978) has suggestively argued that the understanding of fields of experience tends to proceed through a series of turns, or tropes, that govern all interpretation. White's work involves a reflection on historiography through literary theory, and in this sense, he could be called an historian working in the 'critical' mode. The tropes he identifies are the four so-called 'master tropes' named as such by the literary critic Kenneth Burke-metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. (White, 1978: 72-73). According to White, these tropes can be found as stages of thought in the writings of thinkers as diverse as Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, though they were given different names by them. For instance, the terms established by Freud for the interpretation of dreams-'condensation', 'displacement', 'representation', and 'secondary revision'-corresponded to, respectively, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. (White, 1978: 13-14) White suggested that these four tropes-metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony-constituted four metadiscursive figures of thought according to which a given 'reality' was shaped and given meaning. Metaphor

corresponded to the initial apprehension of a 'reality', whereby a hitherto unknown realm of experience was identified through the perception of similarity in difference (like the figure of metaphor as usually understood). Metonymy and synecdoche were both figures that arranged the 'reality' apprehended by metaphor according to relationships between part and whole—metonymy through the contiguity of parts and synecdoche through relating part to whole. Finally, irony was the figure that doubted the relationships established by metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche, suspecting that what we think we know or understand is really only a product of the imposition of these figures. (White, 1978: 6, 72-73)

These metadiscursive figures of thought determine the extent to which the representation in discourse of a given reality can be said to be true, or believable, and hence they determine the extent to which this representation constitutes a knowledge of this reality. In terms of historical narratives, for example, which were the main objects of White's analysis, the extent to which it was admitted that the writing of history was a literary endeavour rather than a scientific one affected the epistemological status of the historical fact, since the meaning of this fact was determined by its position within the overall narrative imposed by the historian. In any discourse that necessarily involves interpretation, such as history, its epistemological status will be determined by the ways in which the material that comprises its reality is arranged or shaped. This arrangement or shaping, however, may be derived more from the figural capability of language than anything that inheres in the reality itself. It is this shaping capability of language that produces what we perceive to be relationships within our field of experience, and, according to White, they account for such modes of interpretation and explanation as those that deal in, for example, relationships between part and whole (as in synecdoche) and between cause and effect (as in metonymy).

Irony is a special case, however, since it is the figure that reveals the possible priority of the shaping capability of language over the reality it shapes. An important trigger for irony lies in the failure of language to adequately represent its object. (White, 1978: 207) The ironic attitude thus arises when the identifying and organizing figures of metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche fail to account for the entire field of experience whose understanding is being aimed at. The focus then shifts to language itself. A doubt arises whereby the inadequacy of language as representation points to the possibility that language is as capable of producing a false representation as a true one. This doubt obviously has epistemological consequences. It involves not only an indeterminacy in meaning, which later theories of interpretation point to, but an undecidability as to the truth and falsity of knowledge in those areas where knowledge is a matter of interpretation.

As I have suggested, different interpretative attitudes may be present in the relationship between written text and art work, which range from the 'artistic' to the 'historical', with the 'critical' standing for the mode of doubt and irony with respect to the other two attitudes. These interpretative attitudes arrange the material of interpretation in particular ways that I am suggesting correspond to the figures of thought pointed to by White. For example, the kind of commentary that might appear in a practice-led doctorate that aims to situate the art produced within the context of other art practices might be said to interpret it in terms of metonymy, that is, its nearness in place and time to similar practices, and perhaps also in terms of cause and effect. Or if an artist resists interpreting their own work, preferring instead to 'comment' on it by means of a parallel 'artistic' written text, then they are attempting to maintain the metaphorical orientation of the art work as a mode of initial apprehension of an unexplored area of experience. Or if the written text aims to situate or

integrate the art work in broader social, political, or theoretical terms, then it is adopting the mode of synecdoche, which relates parts to wholes.

The arrangements of the material of 'reality' that these three interpretative approaches produce will determine the kind of knowledge that is arrived at. The art work concerned will be oriented as an inquiry, situated, contextualized, articulated in methodological terms, and so on, through these means of interpretation. Critical doubt and irony, however, enter into the situation once such arrangements of the material of interpretation have already taken place. It asks whether the interpretation of the art work is really attributable to the art work itself or whether it is rather attributable to the mode of interpretation. It might question, for instance, the extent to which the placing of art work within a context of other art practices shapes its meaning in ways that conceal its own particularity. Or whether adopting a structure of inquiry from another discipline can only produce a conclusion in the terms of that discipline. Since modes of interpretation derive from language, the mode of critical doubt and irony questions the extent to which the definition of the art work can be contained in language. It thus considers the extent to which the meaning of the art work is indeterminate, that is, the extent to which it is uninterpretable. It would point to those places where the 'fusion of horizons' that describes the act of interpretation in Gadamer's sense is lacking or incomplete. This would seem to be undesirable for a project that is oriented at knowledge, but nevertheless uninterpretability may be an aspect of the mode of existence of the work of art, what one might call its 'materiality', or perhaps its 'autonomy'. It is possible that it is only through adopting an attitude of critical doubt and irony with respect to the interpretation of art works that their actual mode of existence can be approached.

The emphasis placed on modes of interpretation as opposed to the object of interpretation may not be very comforting, but it should not be surprising. There are numerous instances in recent intellectual history in which similar shifts in attention from what is interpreted to the mode of interpretation, from what is represented to the mode of representation, from the theorizing of practice to the practice of theory, and so on, have taken place. In the pragmatic terms of art practice-led doctoral research, one of the things this suggests is the necessity of a 'critical' commentary on the mode of commentary in the written text. A written text might identify, organize and situate the art work, that is, interpret it in various ways, but there should also be a critical metacommentary that questions the extent to which this art work is defined by these essentially figural modes of interpretation. In Stephen Scrivener's (2004) eminently pragmatic suggestion regarding the structure for practice-led research, six 'stages' in the development of a project are envisaged, starting from an initial identification of issues and interests and a review of existing knowledge, before passing on to the production of work. This work is then reflected on, and the final stage consists in what is described as a 'critical reflection on one's reflecting'. In a sense, this discussion of the interpretative attitude of critical doubt and irony can be seen as a kind of long footnote to this last requirement.

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