From Text to Blog: 
The Process of Understanding Ourselves

Human being, Gadamer argues, is a being in language. It is through language that the world is opened up for us. We learn to know the world by learning to master a language. Hence we cannot really understand ourselves unless we understand ourselves as situated in a linguistically mediated, historical culture. (Malpas, 2009)

The hermeneutic circle is a type of understanding that constantly moves back and forth between the ‘parts’ and the ‘whole’ that we seek to understand; it is the process of understanding. Beginning with Schleiermacher and later with Heidegger, hermeneutics was extended beyond the interpretation of texts to the interpretation of all forms and beings. The current state of the study of visual culture describes the object of domain as that which is located between ‘visual’ and ‘culture,’ arguing against a visual essentialism and for an understanding of non-medium specific ‘objects’ of a new cultural (inter)discipline (Bal, 2003). In other words, visual culture is no longer being recognized as purely visual, but instead encompasses our entire sensory and interpretive relationships with our surroundings. In thinking about non-medium specific ‘objects’ that make up contemporary society, we cannot ignore the impact of multimedia and digital technology on our everyday lives. In a paper written earlier this year, I chose to examine the internet as a subject that is both reflective of and constructed by visual culture, applying Nicholas Davey’s understanding of hermeneutical aesthetics (Davey, 1999) as a way to explore what happens to us in our experience of the internet. I addressed the structure of the computer screen through which we access the internet, the relationship between the human body/self, and how it exists as a dialogical space for understanding ourselves through both textual and visual means (May, 2009). Towards the end of the paper I propose the internet be used as a pedagogical tool that allows for rethinking curriculum with an emphasis on critical dialogue, including examples of how I incorporate online forums into university art courses. Since returning to the philosophy of hermeneutics for this course, I have been inspired to further examine our textual interactions with the internet, specifically the act of blogging1, and how the space/place of the internet exists as a process of understanding ourselves in relation to contemporary culture – hermeneutic inquiry in an age of texting2. Below I will explore the idea that text is a process and that online blogs/forums have the potential to facilitate hermeneutic inquiry.

How do we understand “text” in internet culture?
In his seminal essay “From Work to Text,” Roland Barthes (1977) devises a way of analyzing a new form of language, analyzing a shift away from the traditional notion of the ‘work’ towards the new object of the ‘text.’ The concept of text is understood as either written or visual. In comparing the two, Barthes describes the text as “a process of demonstration that speaks according to rules or against rules and occurs in language as an activity of production” (p. 157) whereas the work occupies a space in a book. When reading about Gadamer’s understanding of play, I was reminded of Barthes’ notion of “playing with the text” in contrast to how a reader/interpreter

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1 A blog (a contraction of the term “weblog”) is a type of website, usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, description of events, or other material such as graphics or video. “Blog” can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog. (www.wikipedia.org)

2 Text messaging, or texting, is a colloquial term referring to the exchange of brief written messages between mobile phones, over cellular networks…it has been extended to include messages containing image, video, and sound content…Individual messages are referred to as “text messages” or “texts”. (www.wikipedia.org)
consumes a work. With this understanding of text, the reader/interpreter is a collaborator in its production – a co-determination central to Gadamer’s version of the hermeneutic circle. In his attempt to mediate between the positions of Gadamer and Habermas, Paul Ricoeur has explored the method of text interpretation as an extension to the study of such varied phenomena as metaphor, action and the unconscious (Thompson, 1985), an area I intend to research more fully.

Within writings about digital literacy, N. Katherine Hayles refers to Barthes within her proposal to now consider the text as part of a process, to rethink textuality as a translation from print to digital. Hayles (2004) describes how Barthes’ description of text uncannily anticipates the internet, citing his exact words written twenty years before the advent of the microcomputer: “the metaphor of the Text is that of the network.” Heidegger, Gadamer, Hayles, Barthes….is it merely by chance that these figures have emerged simultaneously in my readings from the past couple of weeks or is Hermes sending me a message? Hayles extends on Barthes, shall I extend on Hayles by examining the interpretive process that occurs when blogging?

In a graduate course I am taking called “Theory and Research in Digital Literacy,” we have been asked to post our weekly reflections in response to the readings on a course blog. With my experience of teaching online, I have been witness to the possibilities for personal insights based on collaborative sharing of ideas via the internet, however, my recent experience as a student allowed me to witness the hermeneutic circle at work through the voice of a fellow student:

“Through my participation in this blog, I am coming to a fuller understanding of the content of the course, not only through the compounded knowledge shared, but by observation of the process itself. What an amazing tool this asynchronous multi-player conversational medium truly is. How revolutionary, that we can hold a conversation over a week’s time at our own leisure, and that I can go back and re-read the ideas stated here, and without a jarring sense of derailment, address an earlier posting thread that interests me, with no limitations on chronological sequence.”

This statement represents knowledge and a sense of being created within a hermeneutic circle. The student attests to an understanding of the content of the course, not through the authors’ texts but rather through the textual process of interacting with the blog. In this case, the text is not as central to the interpretative process as the act of inquiry produced collaboratively, in relation to one another, within the hermeneutic circle. The blog allows for a going back and forth between personal reflection and the larger concepts being explored. In “Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis” (1983), Bernstein describes the hermeneutic circles as “a type of understanding that constantly moves back and forth between ‘parts’ and the ‘whole’ that we seek to understand.” He quotes Geertz when further describing it as “a continuous dialectical tackling between the most local of local detail and the most global of global structures in such a way as to bring both into view simultaneously” (p. 133). The blog excerpt above is just one fragment of a larger process of hermeneutic inquiry amongst a group of graduate students, each encouraged to provide their own “local” interpretations while simultaneously reflecting on the larger “global” perspectives of theory and research in a particular field of study.

The context of the blog allows for a different kind of conversation than that which occurs in the classroom, a kind of conversation that I feel lends itself to self-forgetfulness as individuals work through an understanding of themselves in relation to the content being discussed. I intend to pursue these ideas further in an effort to not only learn more about how we understand the technologies we use in a digital society but to also determine how we use these technologies to understand ourselves.
References:


