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Hermeneutics, Aesthetics and Gadamer

Nicholas Davey
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Series Editor’s Preface

Two or more currents flowing into or through each other create a turbulent crosscurrent, more powerful than its contributory flows and irreducible to them. Time and again, modern European thought creates and exploits crosscurrents in thinking, remaking itself as it flows through, across and against discourses as diverse as mathematics and film, sociology and biology, theology, literature and politics. The work of Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, Bernard Stiegler and Jean-Luc Nancy, among others, participates in this fundamental remaking. In each case disciplines and discursive formations are engaged, not with the aim of performing a predetermined mode of analysis yielding a ‘philosophy of x’, but through encounters in which thought itself can be transformed. Furthermore, these fundamental transformations do not merely seek to account for singular events in different sites of discursive or artistic production but rather to engage human existence and society as such, and as a whole. The cross-disciplinarity of this thought is therefore neither a fashion nor a prosthesis; it is simply part of what ‘thought’ means in this tradition.

Crosscurrents begins from the twin convictions that this re-making is integral to the legacy and potency of European thought, and that the future of thought in this tradition must defend and develop this legacy in the teeth of an academy that separates and controls the currents that flow within and through it. With this in view, the series provides an exceptional site for bold, original and opinion-changing monographs that actively engage European thought in this fundamentally cross-disciplinary manner, riding existing crosscurrents and creating new ones. Each book in the series explores the different ways in which European thought develops through its engagement with disciplines across the arts, humanities, social sciences and sciences, recognising that the community of scholars working with this thought is itself spread across diverse faculties. The object of the series is therefore
nothing less than to examine and carry forward the unique legacy of European thought as an inherently and irreducibly cross-disciplinary enterprise.

Christopher Watkin
Everything we see, could be otherwise.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.634
Introduction: Images of Movement

If art moves, understanding moves. Schleiermacher and Dilthey showed how within hermeneutics, understanding upholds itself by a constant, irresolvable and inconclusive movement between part and whole. The philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer uniquely transfers insights relating to the movement of understanding to the question of aesthetic attentiveness. In his thought, aesthetic contemplation no longer attends to changeless forms but participates in the movement of a work’s constitutive elements. Aesthetic contemplation is no longer passive but an active participant (theoros) in the bringing forth what a work can disclose. Where Dilthey laments the inconclusiveness of understanding, Gadamer celebrates it. The ceaseless movement between part and whole which for Dilthey renders understanding incomplete perpetuates for Gadamer the play of a work’s disclosive elements, ensuring endless new reconfigurations of a work’s meaning. Such movement is made possible by key communicative elements within a work acting as placeholders in the interplay between the interests of hermeneutic transmission and those of hermeneutic reception. Aesthetic understanding is paradigmatic of this hermeneutic interplay. However, for aesthetic attentiveness to be grasped as a mode of understanding’s movement demands a major shift in how the relations between aesthetics and hermeneutics are conceived. This study reflects on how Gadamer’s thinking achieves such a transposition and explores its theoretical and practical consequences.

This study is the first full-length monograph in English to offer a sustained philosophical reflection on Gadamer’s significant conjunction of hermeneutics and aesthetics, a fusion which has considerable consequences for both disciplines. Tradition has it that hermeneutics is concerned with the apprehension of meaning whilst aesthetics handles the particularities of sensual experience. Gadamer, we argue, reverses
the equation: aesthetics comes to dwell on the visual apprehension of meaning whilst hermeneutics starts to reflect on the singularities of experience. Our concern is not just with charting this reversal but also with exploring its consequences. These include an anti-essentialist account of the relational nature of an artwork’s constitution, a thorough-going revaluation of the theory–practice relationship within art and the humanities, the development of a remarkable hermeneutics of transformative experience and a major philosophical reworking of the nature of aesthetic attentiveness. Mapping these consequences is of wider philosophical interest. It suggests how the problem of ‘excess’ meaning which so exercises Derrida and Žižek can indeed expand rather than constrain understanding of the aesthetic.\(^1\) To demonstrate these points, we have to go beyond Gadamer’s own formulations in constructive but probing and critical ways. This, we claim, offers an appropriate practical complement to his hermeneutical *modus operandi*. Understanding what is entailed in a philosophy is not a matter of reconstructing or re-experiencing its claims: rather, it is learning how to ‘think with’ a way of reasoning by applying it in new and unanticipated ways. Our concern will be to think through the problems of art and aesthetics in a Gadamerian manner rather than to offer an account of Gadamer’s study of art. His arguments are complex and extended. To do justice to them, we shall concentrate on them alone and leave the matter of comparison with other contemporary aestheticians to another volume. However, let us lay out the primary presuppositions of this study.

This volume explores Gadamer’s assertion that artworks address us. This entails the supposition that artworks have a meaningful cognitive content. Philosophical hermeneutics contends that meaning is relational. The experience of art addressing us is a transformative one which entails the cognitive relations within a spectator’s outlook being transformed by those which constitute the work. This is made possible because of the surplus of meaning attached to visual signs and symbols as well as to the images of literature and poetry. Symbols and poetic ideas can serve as placeholders in a variety of discourses such that the meaning of a central term in one’s own framework of understanding can be transformed when that term meets different deployments within a foreign horizon. In a transformative encounter the spectator’s horizon is not displaced but achieves a new and significant permutation of its form. The transactional capacity of symbols, poetic ideas and what Gadamer terms subject-matters (*Sachen*) to act as placeholder terms across and between contrasting frameworks of meaning offers not just an insight into how transformative experiences of art are structured
but also an understanding of how the transformative capacity of interdisciplinary study depends precisely upon the movement of shared placeholder terms between different practices. Philosophical hermeneutics suggests an account of aesthetic attentiveness as a practice, a practice not concerned with the passive appreciation of art and its aesthetic qualities in any standard sense but with actively facilitating movement between significant semantic placeholders in the horizons of both the artwork and the spectator so as to promote the possibility of transformative experience.

This study primarily concerns the relationship between philosophical hermeneutics and visual art: it is not an examination of Gadamer’s analysis of the ‘poetic word’, which has been ably treated by other scholars. What is attempted here is a Gadamerian ‘poetics’ of the visual, an exploration of the antecedent cultural and historical conditions which allow an image to communicate effectively. Whilst this poetics must uncover analytically the elements at play with a work, it must also consider how they combine to render the work an effective communication. The notable value of this hermeneutical poetics lies in the answer it offers to a question raised in Heidegger’s essay ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ – how do artworks ‘work’ and how is this ‘working’ to be understood? The answer proposes a response to the riddle at the heart of Gadamer’s aesthetics: how do silent images speak? If the response succeeds, the claim at the heart of his magnum opus can be vindicated: art does indeed have a demonstrable cognitive content. Two motifs, then, guide our reflections: what does it mean to be addressed by a speechless image; and what are the formal conditions of receiving that address?

In a post-modern climate, Gadamer’s hermeneutical aesthetics is instructive. Aesthetic experience confronts the spectator with something ineffable. Such experience challenges philosophy’s general ambition of bringing clarity to the objects of its reflection. The complexity of intense experience quickly compromises the adequacy of words. Yet, Gadamer’s position refuses despair: profound experience may elude linguistic capture but instead of insisting on silence before what transcends speech, it demands the seeking out of new words that better approximate and do justice to the complexities of experience. This places Gadamer’s hermeneutical approach to aesthetics at the interstices of experience, language and reflection. Practitioner and theoretician need no longer confront each other as opponents but as dialogical partners able to draw out, exchange and mutually realise different aspects of their experience of a work. Because an aesthetic object will formally exceed all interpretation, neither practitioner nor theoretician
can monopolise its understanding. Taken together, the two approaches enable a greater understanding. As well as offering a make-weight to post-modern scepticism, Gadamer’s hermeneutical aesthetics suggests a dialogical rapprochement between theoretician and practitioner, the implications of which have been inexplicably overlooked in contemporary aesthetic education. This study will address this oversight.

In any consideration of aesthetics, confronting the question of subjectivity is unavoidable. Its methodological challenges have shaped the development of modern hermeneutics from Schleiermacher to Ricoeur, who famously analysed Heidegger’s response to the problem in his ontological turn. Gadamer’s hermeneutical aesthetics relies on the specific tension between his defence of the subjective immediacy of our experience of art and his demand that the cognitive claims of such experience be rendered legitimate. Though Gadamer’s thought about aesthetics bravely starts with the reality of subjective experience, he is more concerned with the substantialities that underwrite it. As a mode of consciousness, aesthetic awareness is unknowingly shaped by the objective horizons of language and tradition. The latter form subjectivity’s cognitive content and shape art’s claim to truth. Evidential experience provides the gateway to a phenomenological reflection on the objectivities that sustain it. Though a plausible ploy to rid aesthetics of ‘the scandal of subjectivity’, it poses too crude a reversal: overtly emphasising the ‘objectivities’ of transmission underestimates the hermeneutic processes of reception. Michael Kelly implies that in his rush to proclaim the objective element of aesthetic experience, Gadamer’s aversion to aestheticism leads him to underestimate the role of subjectivity in the formation of aesthetically communicated meaning.

This book explores how subjectivity plays a constructive role in Gadamer’s account of aesthetic experience and the relationality that informs it. Five points are salient. (1) Transformative experience is dependent upon shifts in the objective horizon of a tradition which have no significance in themselves other than in relation to the subjectivities that embrace it. (2) Though Gadamer dismisses Kant’s notion of aesthetic disinterestedness, he has to reinvent it in a phenomenological framework in order to defend the constructive role of subjectivity within aesthetic experience. (3) The role of subjectivity within Gadamer’s aesthetics is pertinent to current debates about art’s alleged displacement of established religion. Aesthetic experience emerges as a way of negotiating what is entailed in being-in-the-world. (4) We shall argue that the spiritual dimension of Gadamer’s position involves an intensity of experience occasioned by an artwork intervening in, changing and thereby inducing a sense of expansive movement in understanding. (5)
Aesthetic subjectivity is of enormous importance for what it reveals of its objective ground. The ontological preconditions of aesthetic experience concern Gadamer the most. What must be assumed as being already in place for an experience of art to be possible? What are the preconditions of art’s effectiveness? What comes to being within a work and what does it reveal of Being itself?

The principal value of a hermeneutical aesthetics lies in its participatory account of an experience of art. Gadamer’s dialogism is acknowledged but its consequences for a relational aesthetics are not understood. Focusing on the cognitive content of an artwork, dialogism deprives the theoretician and practitioner of any privileged interpretative power. This is not just because Gadamer’s ontological orientation transfers effective agency from subjective consciousness (the part) to its ground in language and tradition (the whole). Emergence, transformation and transmission demand participation. Aesthetic subjectivity is not dissolved but serves as a catalyst for the reception, mutation and development of the cultural subject-matters that both inform and transcend it. This suggests that intense aesthetic insight does not transcend its informing language but must be interpreted as a transformative variant. Dialogism implies that the content of such insight is expressible in public terms.

Dialogism implies conversation and conversation points to a ‘mode of living’, ‘a form of acquaintance or being familiar with’, as in being ‘conversant with’. A convert assumes a mode of familiarity. Conversation is, in effect, already under way. Its start presupposes a tacit acquaintance with a set of cultural norms and expectancies. Conversations have a dual character, assertive and expressive. They involve assertions about their central subject-matters and give indirect expression to aspects of the cultural horizon which ground them. Conversational utterances prompt other insights, revealing tacit aspects of the hermeneutical horizons of the interlocutors. The vital point is that without participation in the conversational exchange of assertions or viewpoints, the cognitively expressive aspects of a subject-matter – what Gadamer refers to as its speculative dimension – would not emerge. Participation in cognitive exchange (whether in a conversation or dialogical reflection) focused upon the content of an artwork is a condition of the spontaneous emergence of what is implicitly or tacitly understood about it. The ‘said’ occasions the emergence of the ‘unsaid’; the ‘seen’ brings forth the ‘unseen’. Gadamer’s dialogism is shaped by a speculative aesthetic, the central intuition of which is that words, symbols and images all point beyond themselves. All mean more than initial acquaintance suggest. Its hermeneutical logic
is easily summarised: $x = x^+$. This explains why Gadamer’s aesthetic is dominated by figures of movement, especially the passage from first understanding a topic to understanding it better. This also reveals why Gadamer’s aesthetics places such emphasis on dwelling with an image, that is, taking the time to allow it to unfold its complexities of meaning.

Dialogism clearly governs the productive aspect of Gadamer’s hermeneutic operation: within conversation there is no telling when and where one thought will summon another. Gadamer’s procedure is, in effect, to set our understanding at play, inserting words and images into on-going cultural conversations to induce further reflections to come to the fore. Gadamer’s work should not be judged on its formal argumentation but on its rhetorical effectiveness, that is, on what it brings about and its effectiveness in altering our understanding of a subject-matter. Such work is not the work of a detached analyst. It demands participation in the conversations between horizons so that further insights can be drawn into the open. For Gadamer, remaining aesthetically neutral achieves nothing: what is key is participation, participating in the movement of experience and reflection, for only through such participation can we become reflectively aware of what is performatively at play within our experience of art. Concerning the experience of art, the task Gadamer suggests is to ‘Begreifen, was uns ergreift’ – to grasp what has taken hold of us. This study will debate what is entailed in this claim and consider whether its linguistic analogies are appropriate to the task of understanding the ‘speechless image’.

The vitality of a tradition can be judged by the degree to which its ‘continuities of conflict’ assert themselves. Aesthetics is certainly ‘quick’, riven by arguments between those who, like Ernst Gombrich, regard its alleged subjectivity as a continuing methodological scandal and those who, like Terry Eagleton, value its subjectivity and expressive spontaneity as an important moderation of reason’s singular claim for a universality of method. The analogical value of aesthetics for hermeneutical reflection immediately asserts itself: twentieth-century hermeneutics is almost defined by its epistemological struggle with method. Gadamer’s contribution to this debate within aesthetics and hermeneutics has been considerably underestimated. He is universally recognised as a severe critic of methodological reductivism but by no means is he an iconoclast of anti-method. His thinking offers to both contemporary aesthetic and hermeneutic debate a singular capacity to bring the argument for method and the case for spontaneity into mutual dialectical reflection. On the one hand, Gadamer’s commitment to a speculative theory of meaning undermines the universal claim of method to capture all aspects of an image’s meaning. The majority of commentators on
Gadamer fail to note that how this does not undermine the limited use of the methodical within interpretation. To the contrary, recognising the speculative excess of meaning suggests that methodical devices can be knowingly deployed to probe undisclosed aspects of experienced meaning. Method is not the antithesis of aesthetic spontaneity but a potentially disruptive device for prompting established meanings to disclose more of what they contain. This study will accordingly challenge the view that Gadamer’s hermeneutical approach to art is a conservative apologetics for received meaning. On the other hand, his rejection of method does not justify a laissez-faire approach to aesthetic interpretation. Whilst rejecting universal method, he nevertheless insists on the validity of art’s truth claim. What makes Gadamer’s writing on art compelling for hermeneuticians and aestheticians alike is that it offers a post-modern case study of how art’s cognitive claims might be made on a non-foundational basis. Without this demonstration, the antithesis of his challenge to the universality of method amounts to a vapid subjectivism.

The dialectical dexterity of Gadamer’s philosophy is indicated by the fact that method and spontaneity are not treated as opposites but as reflections of each other. His hermeneutical thought is characteristically speculative. Thesis and antithesis are not regarded as formal opposites but as speculative modes of one another. Hermeneutical engagement allows each position to re-describe itself in the language of its other. The being of a subject is moderated when another reveals how it can effectively reflect on its own being by using the language of the other. This is not a case of a subject assimilating its other but of a subject becoming-other-to-itself as a consequence of learning how, in Peter Duerer’s terms, to walk on the wild side, to think of itself in the other’s terms. We shall argue that Gadamer’s speculative thinking outlines a distinctive doubled hermeneutics for aestheticians, art theoreticians and practitioners alike, in which the self-understanding of each party is moderated by a subtle exchange: the process of becoming different to oneself by learning to think about oneself in the language of one’s other. Transformation, not translation, is the issue. The aesthetician or artist theorist is not rendered a practitioner but is brought to understand that theory can be as spontaneous and playful in its interventions as art practice. Gadamer’s doubled hermeneutics suggests that theory’s credibility relies upon what is, in a certain sense, its opposite: the ability to disclose itself in practical instances. Nor is the practitioner translated into the theoretician. Practice is not theory’s opposite but displays a reasonableness of its own. Elements in Gadamer’s hermeneutics suggest how this reasonableness might be articulated. This asserts the value of
Gadamer’s hermeneutics for aesthetic education: it demonstrates the informing and guiding of practice by the theoretical components of its environment. The operational force of this doubled hermeneutics shapes the character of Gadamer’s quest: to determine art’s cognitive claims on a non-foundational basis.

Wolfgang Iser eloquently describes hermeneutic doubling as a function of recursive looping within hermeneutical reasoning. He emphasises that it is not the multiplication of opposite positions per se that is hermeneutically effective but the cognitive and experiential movement of doubling back between them. Active doubling back is a figure of thought in Schleiermacher’s and Dilthey’s hermeneutics, activated to achieve a movement of understanding within classic part–whole relationships. For Schleiermacher, to understand a particular linguistic expression requires a broader understanding of the linguistic forms within which the expression is made. Similarly, access to linguistic forms is possible only through particular expressions. For Dilthey, the particularities of experience presuppose the generalities of understanding, whilst understanding presupposes experience. For both thinkers it is the movement between part and whole that is crucial. This announces a leading theme of our study: the way aesthetics, in particular, exhibits understanding and its movement. Gadamer’s predecessors bring attention to a related recursive figure in his own thought which we will identify as a doubled hermeneutics in an additional sense: to understand what a work is saying is also to understand how it is able to say what it says.

What a work says and how it is able to say what it does are not opposing concerns reflecting a sterile opposition between fine art practice and art criticism. Gadamer’s doubled hermeneutics claims that to understand the truth claim of a work is also to understand how the enabling conditions of a work are manifest in its claim. This offers a significant ontological reworking of the part–whole relationship within hermeneutics. Whilst Gadamer offers sensitive ‘readings’ of the paintings of Paul Klee and the writings of Paul Celan, his thought also offers a ‘poetics’ of aesthetic communication. This entails the claim that to understand what a work is saying is also to understand how it works as a work of art. Indeed, Gadamer’s discussion of the hermeneutical context of art tables a significant response to an issue raised by Heidegger in his essay ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’: what work does an artwork do?

The doubling effect within Gadamer’s hermeneutics involves the continuous interplay between two levels of hermeneutical operation, grasping what a work asserts or claims and understanding what the
assertion indicates or signifies. This is a distinction between what a work expresses (or states) and what comes to expression in it (what it discloses). Grasping the first requires a hermeneutical analytics whilst the second demands participation in a speculative hermeneutics. (1) Understanding what a work asserts demands an analytical or grammatical approach, demonstrating how the meaning of a literary or visual statement arises from the interplay of the components within a constituent discourse. An analytics of artistic assertion endeavours to demonstrate how what a work is ‘saying’ is configured by different part–whole relationships within a given expressive language, whether verbal or visual. (2) A speculative hermeneutic approach to the same declarative meaning is also required because, despite their singular force, literary or painterly statements lack autonomy: they arise in broader hermeneutical fields upon which their significance depends. These fields operate as the enabling conditions of aesthetic statements, transcending the utterances they enable and enabling them to communicate more than they state. The symbol exemplifies this exchange between the analytical and speculative dimensions of meaning. Though a functioning symbol may be attributed a determinate meaning within a work, its broad meaning remains indeterminate. Nuance, allusion and profundity depend on this excess. It permits artists to subvert or undermine a particular meaning by invoking its other determinations. The double entendre, intended or not, exemplifies what is, within philosophical Hermeneutics, a crucial interplay between analytical and speculative aspects of meaning.

Though an artist may mean something specific by a word or image, it can, by virtue of belonging to spoken or visual language, come to mean something more. Gadamer’s deployment of the speculative depends upon a part–whole structure but not in any fixed sense. As any word or image arises, ontologically speaking, from language as a whole, each reflects differently the (changing) totality of meaning it is inflected with. This gives a word or image its centrifugal force, pushing us towards wider semantic frameworks. Images and words function as placeholders for such pluralities of meanings, setting into play more meanings than an artist might intend. The placeholder function of words and images also has a centripetal capacity, which allows pluralities of meaning beyond what an artist intends to flow back into a work, deconstructing its initially intended meaning. A practised artist will know how to deploy the speculative charge or ‘excess’ of a given image, allowing it to bring forth nuances of meaning which transcend those initially articulated. Such a work can hold various meanings in creative tension and interplay. A less accomplished practitioner, one who cannot control the hermeneutic interplay which placeholder images
allow, will suffer his or her communicative intentions becoming over-
whelmed by the force of contrary meanings. The consequence is a work
that will appear incoherent, confused or inconsistent. In conclusion,
what comes to expression in a work are those speculatively revealed
dimensions of historical and cultural meaning which transcend (yet
enable) any individual artistic statement.

This study argues that the key contribution philosophical herme-
neutics makes to understanding how an artwork works concerns its
articulation of the interplay between the analytical and the specula-
tive dimensions of meaning. Exposing the elements of that interplay
offers an intelligible account of what a work expresses and how it
does so. The interplay offers a twofold revelation: how an artwork
communicates effectively beyond what a writer or visual artist intends;
and how dimensions of historical cultural meaning which transcend
any individual artistic statement nevertheless come to expression with
it.

A ‘poetics’ of how artworks effectively work may properly identify
the analytical and speculative components of an artistic discourse but
these should not be considered as opposing but rather as different reflec-
tions of the doubled nature of all meaning. The analytical dimension of
assertions cannot, as Pannenberg has shown, be understood other than
in relation to the wider unstated dimensions of linguistic practice that
inform them.16 His argument reflects a maxim of classical hermeneu-
tics: it is not possible to understand the part (the particular expression
or idiom) apart from the whole field of expression of which it is a part.
Though that whole (what Gadamer calls a totality of meaning) cannot
be brought to statement without contradiction, its existence is made
discernible in the particular statements it informs. The argument pre-
supposes a major ontological assumption, the consequences of which
will dominate this study: the existence of the whole is not independent
from the totality of its parts. Understanding involves thinking of the
enabled part and the enabling whole as the reversed doubles of each
other. Were this all to Gadamer’s position, it would amount to little
more than a reworking of the analogical hermeneutics of William
Blake and Johann Goethe: to discern the universal in each particular;
and to see in each particular the universal particularised. By contrast,
it is the continual doubling back and forth between the analytical and
the speculative that is crucial to Gadamer’s account of the meaningful
within the experience of art. Such experiences subject us to the further
effects of such interplay.

Confronting a written or visual statement initiates such interplay but
is not its beginning. The formal grounds of an experience of art’s effects
lie in the condition of existential thrown-ness, which casts each and every individual adrift on already formed currents of meaning. These pre-reflective historical and cultural horizons form an individual’s expectancies: they influence what might or might not be perceived as an artwork. Such pre-reflective horizons are far from static. They are acquired and adapted through processes of acculturation, providing individuals with the hodological maps to navigate their experienced environment. The extent of this pre-reflective stock outstrips what we are conscious of. Its signs and symbols, whose significances we are vulnerable to, have a content greater than any moment of reflection can capture. Such ‘excess’ of meaning establishes the effective ontological base for an experience of art’s address. The task of Gadamer’s doubled hermeneutics is to reveal how the enabling speculative horizon becomes effective within the customary analytic of everyday meanings.

In the pursuit everyday tasks, the operation of signs and symbols is constrained to render the communication of instructions and guidance as uncomplicated as possible. The most important thing, as Wittgenstein would say, is knowing how to go on. Though the execution of ordinary tasks demands that the language of a given practice be highly circumscribed, their constituent signs and symbols do not lose their intrinsic hermeneutical excess. The meaning of an instruction depends upon a prior understanding of the figure–ground relationship for key terms in any given practice. Acquaintance with the contextual frame of that practice grounds the appropriate foreground determinations of a word’s or image’s meaning. The risk of any slippage of meaning or contamination from hermeneutic excess is marginalised. A practice’s conventions establish an analytics of control over its key signs and symbols. The experience of art, however, occasions a return of the speculative dimensions of meaning to the foreground of awareness.

Gadamer’s interest in visual art lies neither in the formalities of aesthetic objects nor with analysing how an artist manipulates a figure–ground relationship in order to bring an image or symbol to the centre of a visual field. He emphasises above all the experience of art. The experience of art is when an artwork ‘speaks to us’ and this, he insists, is the event of art, the occasion when it makes a claim upon us, irrespective of our willing and doing. This is effected when an established analytic of meaning is disrupted by its speculative entailments.

The importance of Gadamer’s hermeneutical aesthetics lies in the suggestion that the power of an artwork resides not in itself, as an autonomous aesthetic object, but in its dialogical capacity to ‘effect’ change in a spectator’s field of understanding. We might appreciate
a work for its painterly confidence and compositional strength but, Gadamer claims, we value it not for its aesthetic effects but for what it has to ‘say’ to us. A novel configuration of hidden or overlooked elements in a symbol’s horizon of speculative meaning can impose an unaccustomed penumbra of significance, forcing us to rethink and revalue its customary expressive deployment. Art shocks and illuminates because it draws from a word’s or an image’s speculative excess, provocative realignments of meaning which disrupt the conventional status of a sign or symbol. Gadamer’s aesthetics establishes that his doubled hermeneutics is not a logic of assertion and counter-assertion. The power of art does not reside in its ability to displace one field of meaning with another but in its capacity to effect a transformative engagement, that is, enabling us to grasp a familiar field of meaning in unfamiliar ways. This is not to be grasped as an artwork translating commonplace fields of meaning into its terms but rather as its language transfiguring the ordinary so that we come to see it as extraordinary. Gadamer’s aesthetics provides a hermeneutical economy whereby the effective relations that achieve what Danto calls the transfiguration of the commonplace can be understood.18

Gadamer’s doubled hermeneutics indicates that the key to the effective relationality that constitutes the ‘event’ of an artwork speaking to us lies in the placeholder status accorded to words and symbols by virtue of their operating in several speculative horizons. This means that the field of meaning in which a placeholder term appears can affect other fields of meaning in which it operates. Clever associations of meaning, amusing juxtaposition of terms, visual puns, literary double entendres or surreal alignments of images require that an artwork make a spectator conscious of being positioned between different fields (horizons) of meaning in such a way as to facilitate the doubled reading of one framework in the language of its other. The emergence of such a doubled reading within experience indicates, as we have argued, the return of the speculative dimensions of meaning to the foreground of a spectator’s awareness. How is the hermeneutical exchange which drives such doubling to be articulated?

This exchange is not a matter of replacing one’s customary way of seeing with another. Such abandonment jettisons the initial motivation, as Nietzsche once put it, to see around one’s own corner.19 Nor does it involve the ubiquity of ‘cultural exchanges’ which claim to show how other art traditions render common subject-matters in their distinct ways. The English Lake District as depicted by a Chinese watercolourist presents a curio to the European eye and as such it is, hermeneutically speaking, ineffective. Hermeneutic doubling is not a logic of
substitution. To the contrary, in the experience of art, the mode of relations that constitute an alien artwork come to permeate those that form a customary way of seeing in such a way as not to displace it but rather to achieve a new and significant permutation of it, permanently altering its initial configuration. This exchange or doubling should be understood as the deep inflection of one framework with the terms of another. This study suggests that hermeneutic doubling is a productive engagement, the success of which is marked by the generation of the permutation as a third element. This entails an obversion of form in which, because of its engagement with a set of foreign relations, the home framework becomes a qualitatively different world. The emergence of this third term reveals itself as the transfiguration of what the exchange has left behind (the original framework). Hermeneutic doubling opens a space between ‘the once understood’ and ‘the now understood’. The difference is articulated by what the emergence itself achieves: a distinction between the transformed framework and the prior untransformed framework, from which the transformed framework emerges as a permutation. The emergence of a traversable, conceptually differentiated space between a transfigured and an untransfigured framework of meaning provides the spectator with a means to gauge the extent of a change in understanding.

Gadamer’s aesthetics are, indeed, speculative. The discussion of art and aesthetics in Part One of *Truth and Method* points to so much more than is initially stated. Aesthetic experience is presented as a counterfoil to the cognitive claims of science and, yet, though Gadamer carefully identifies in tradition the formal preconditions of aesthetic experience, he does little to articulate how the spectator’s horizon is permeated transformatively by the artwork. Thinking with Gadamer rather than against him, this study develops what his hermeneutical aesthetics suggests but does not state. The justification for this lies in the application of his own claim that to understand a thinker or artist is to think with him or her, even when entering unknown territory.

Gadamer’s approach to art is known primarily for its rehabilitation of tradition but it merits philosophical attention for so much more. His aesthetics reveals that philosophical hermeneutics offers not only a study of the philosophical preconditions of aesthetic experience but also an acute insight into the educative processes operating within hermeneutic transmission and reception. The transformative nature of these processes relies on what we have described as Gadamer’s doubled hermeneutics, which merits serious attention by all in the theory communities of aesthetics, art and hermeneutics. This doubled hermeneutics expands into an account of the following.
1. It suggests that the cognitive value of art depends upon a conception of a work as a body of significant relations which interact with and affect other sets of significant relations in its cultural environment.

2. The role of words and images as placeholders within such frameworks promises a ‘poetics’ able to address how artworks ‘work’.

3. Such a ‘poetics’ suggests a non-metaphorical account of Gadamer’s key claim that art ‘speaks’ and an explanation of what the ‘effectiveness’ of art’s historical reception resides in. We shall argue that the address of art is its ‘effect’: it is the experience of one framework being transformatively inflected by another.

4. The deployment of hermeneutical excess within speculative reasoning establishes a principle of incommensurability which explains why the movement of understanding is both never ending and self-perpetuating. Within the constraints of appropriacy, any work or interpretation can legitimately deploy a symbol but neither may claim to exhaust its meaning. There is always incommensurability between what a symbol says and what it is capable of saying (its excess). This differential offers a twofold procedural guarantee of both creative optimism (no matter the power of a given meaning, there is always more to be said) and interpretive modesty (whatever the confidence placed in an interpretation, it is formally subject to being adjusted by alternative readings deriving from the hermeneutical excess of its subject-matter). Either way, the principle of hermeneutic incommensurability upholds the movement of understanding. The more an interpretation seeks to diminish the differential between an image and its speculative horizon, the more it drives other possibilities for understanding into the open.

5. The presence of a speculative totality of meaning attached to a word or image is invoked through the particular expression or utterance. This places artistic and hermeneutic practice at the interstices between what is in play in a speculative horizon and what that horizon facilitates in the way of particular readings or expressions. The originality of Gadamer’s position lies in the suggestion that the creation of new artworks is not an end in itself but a means of soliciting from the unspoken horizons that enable and inform them, other as yet unrealised possibilities for meaning. Artistic practice becomes a means of keeping the transformative movement between horizons of meaning in play.

The significant merit of Gadamer’s doubled hermeneutics for philosopher and practitioner alike is that by placing the subjective experience
of art within the objective horizons and mechanisms of dialogical exchange, it promises an objective, ontologically based account of what takes place within subjectivity, that is, the transmission, reception and transformation of aesthetic meaning. If the vitality of a tradition can be judged by the degree to which its ‘continuities of conflict’ assert themselves, Gadamer’s principles of hermeneutical excess and incommensurability offer a perceptive account of how such continuities of conflict maintain themselves and productively so. It is these principles that justify what this study offers: a rethinking of aesthetic experience in hermeneutic terms.

Much has been made of the enigmatic quality of art, that it always seems to promise more than it discloses. Gadamer, following Heidegger, is acutely aware of what a work ‘withholds’ from a spectator and how it makes the presence of that absence felt. This gives to a work, in the words of Joanna McGregor, a ‘quality of mystery and melancholy, of shadows, pauses and memory’. In formal terms, her statement reiterates the axiom of hermeneutic incommensurability: \( x = x^+ \). That is, how a work is interpreted or self-interprets itself can never be rendered commensurate with what the work might yet mean (the withheld). The statement presages an important ontological claim. On the assumption that the artwork has no predefined essence or meaning but is a specific set of part–whole relationships, what that work can be understood as yet meaning depends upon the spectator achieving or witnessing new and significant movement in the relations that embody the work. We argue that it is the principle of incommensurability that draws a spectator further into a work in search of its ‘yet to be disclosed’ elements, even if they are hidden in the visible, and that it is this involvement which sets in motion, once again, the part–whole relations upon which the possibility of transformed understanding rests. Developing such reasoning requires thinking well beyond Gadamer’s arguments but to them go the credit for opening the way to a hermeneutical aesthetics capable of altering our understanding of the workings not just of art but of the humanities generally. This book seeks to extend the conversation about art that Gadamer started.

Chapter 1 considers the intellectual context informing Gadamer’s hermeneutical reformation of aesthetics. It introduces the concepts appearance, presentation and language. We claim that rather than avoiding aesthetic subjectivism, Gadamer needs a reconstructed account of subjectivity as an interactive agency in the event of aesthetic experience, in order to secure the effectiveness of his doubled hermeneutics.
in particular. The broad debate of these early chapters sets the context for what follows: a detailed examination of the philosophical specifics of Gadamer’s stated and implied arguments with regard to the experience of art.

Chapter 3 addresses the defining paradox of Gadamer’s aesthetics: how to reconcile the alleged disinterestedness of aesthetics with the cognitive interests of a phenomenological analysis of experience. We shall argue that Gadamer’s implied approach to aesthetic attentiveness offers a persuasive reconciliation of the interested and the disinterested. The reconciliation is one of Gadamer’s greatest unremarked contributions to contemporary aesthetics. Aesthetic attentiveness is no unthinking receptiveness but a complex reflective practice capable of transforming understanding.

Chapter 4 concerns itself with the notions of theoros, aesthetic spectatorship and participation. Gadamer’s reconstruction of aesthetic experience as a participatory act adds a new valence to the part–whole relationship within hermeneutics. Hermeneutical part–whole structures cannot be understood from the ‘outside’, as it were, but only by being participated in. This implies that an understanding of a given element within an artwork requires a sense of its whole. A grasp of the latter is conditional upon where in a field of relationships an observing subject stands. To understand more of both part and whole requires a shift of spectorial position within its nexus. This insight contributes to one of the greatest achievements of philosophical hermeneutics within aesthetic education: the deconstruction of the theory/practice divide. The consequences of this realignment of theory and practice we shall discuss in detail. Once again, the argument depends upon abandoning the notion of a detached aesthetic observer. To understand the dynamics of aesthetic experience, phenomenalist indifference must be replaced with phenomenological involvement.

Chapter 5 develops the consequences of Gadamer’s critique of aesthetic subjectivity. If, phenomenologically speaking, an involvement with art’s subject-matters demonstrates that the experience of meaning has primacy over the experience of aesthetic properties, the communication of meaning emanates from the conveyance of significance within bodies of semantic relations: meaning’s mode of being, whether visual or literary, is presentational. With characteristic restraint, this simple move in Gadamer’s aesthetics prompts a major ontological shift in thinking about the ancient but nonetheless ever contentious question of art’s relation to reality. Establishing ‘appearance’ as the ontological mode of a subject-matter grounds Gadamer’s argument that temporal appearances add to rather than detract from the reality of their subject
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concerns. This argument prompts a revaluation of the ontological status of both ‘likeness’ and image as potentially transforming the part–whole relationships from which they spring. Likenesses become visualisations of future possibilities held within a part–whole relationship, whilst images in art assume a cognitive significance by allowing their objects ‘to become more what they are’ (Werden zum Sein). Such arguments rework the classical distinctions between mimesis and imitation. They culminate in a novel reappraisal of the part–whole relationship in hermeneutics which suggests that what art discloses is not the actual per se but analogous patterns of reasoning which intimate different readings of how the actual might be understood.

Chapter 6 attends to the signature claim of Gadamer’s aesthetics: art addresses us. What does Gadamer mean by this argument? An answer requires expanding the conventional meaning of language as tied to just the spoken and written. Gadamer’s conception of linguisticality extends provocatively the notion of language so as to include any set of communicative relations, whether visual or musical. Our argument develops a hermeneutic conception of the artwork as a body or ‘measure’ of relations. This broader conception of linguisticality allows art to be considered as language: like all sets of communicative relations, those that constitute art have a speculative capacity to refer beyond themselves. This capacity is central to what Gadamer means by art ‘addressing’ us. The speculative dimensions central to the experience of art’s address clarify how the ‘truth’ of art’s cognitive content can be grasped. The relationship between art and language allows Gadamer’s aesthetics to revitalise a hermeneutical conception of truth, based upon plausibility rather than formal demonstration.

Chapter 7 offers a summary of the principal arguments of this study. It suggests that Gadamer’s deconstruction of traditional aesthetics culminates in a threefold redemptive revaluation of the discipline. First, the endeavour to redeem aesthetics by absorbing it within hermeneutics depends upon prioritising the question of meaning within the experience of art. This shifts aesthetic experience into a participatory mode and in consequence revitalises the importance of the part–whole relationship in aesthetic reasoning. Second, aesthetic attentiveness returns us not to an original way of seeing but to a way of seeing which facilitates origination within and amongst the aesthetic ideas and subject-matters which shape any experience of art. Third, we suggest that the aesthetic image has a twofold redemptive function in relation to the complexities of human experience. Like the doubled hermeneutics operating within Gadamer’s thinking, the image has both summative and projective aspects. The poignant image brings to summative resolution strands
of meaning already at play within our environment and suggests, controversially, how our unfinished and incomplete understanding of actuality might be transformed by projective visions of the impossible, that is, meaning made whole. The fiction of completed meaning in art is redeemed not by its vision of a different actuality but because it offers a different way of envisioning this actuality. The principal claim of a hermeneutically orientated aesthetics is that we are vulnerable to art’s address precisely because our experience of both ourselves and our world is unfinished.

NOTES

6. This theme is discussed at length in Chapter 6.
9. Gombrich speaks of the subjectivity which vitiates the possibility of a plausible aesthetics – see his *The Sense of Order* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1984), p. 117 – whilst Eagleton refers to the political importance of aesthetics in that ‘the work of art can gather the unruly materials of everyday life into a shapely whole without losing anything of their vitality. If it is a riposte to political absolutism, it is also an argument against anarchy’ – see his *Holy Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 87.
11. Anthony Giddens coined the phrase ‘double hermeneutic’ to refer to the process where categories which are part of a life-world are appealed to in a description of that life-world. See his *New Rules of Sociological Method* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), p. 162. Gadamer’s position implies that a
doubled hermeneutics has a speculative or mirroring element: a subject comes to think of its initial self-understanding differently when it meets that understanding doubling back in the language of an opposing party.

14. Friedrich Schleiermacher argues: ‘The understanding of the whole is not only conditioned by that of the particular, but also, vice versa, that of the particular by the whole. For if the particular is to be understood as a member of the sequence, the exponent, the tendency, the manner of the whole must be known; and if (it is to be known as) a product of language, then it must already be known what linguistic usage one is actually dealing with.’ See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher: Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, ed. A. Bowie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 231–2. Wilhelm Dilthey contends that ‘the whole must be understood in terms of its individual parts, individual parts in terms of the whole... So understanding of the whole and of the individual parts are interdependent.’ See Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Writings*, ed. H. P. Rickman (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 262.
20. Anyone who knows the British national anthem will have their perception of it quite altered after listening to Charles Ives’s variations on the hymn tune ‘America’.
21. This is not to be thought of as reconstructing an agent’s thoughts so as to understand the motivations of his or her actions, *pace* Collingwood, but of following that agent’s thoughts and developing them into forms that surpass the achievement of the original thinker. See R. J. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 170–6.
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