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Is the Hermeneutic Interpretation of Art Erotic? A Reader of Gadamer Responds to Sontag's Challenge

Abstract

The object of the article is to assess whether the concepts of erotica and the erotic can be identified with the hermeneutic interpretation of art as understood by Hans-Georg Gadamer. The starting point of the discussion is Susan Sontag's essay 'Against interpretation', in which the concept of the erotic interpretation of art is outlined and which culminates with the author setting up a deliberate opposition between the erotics of art and hermeneutics. The present article is an attempt to present the issue of the eroticism of hermeneutic interpretation on the basis of Sontag's essay, and thus a response to the provocation contained in this essay. In the final part of the text, another possible approach to the issue of the postulated eroticism of hermeneutics is presented.

The first part of the present article is devoted to explaining what Sontag means when she writes about the erotics of art and hermeneutics. The next part will demonstrate the connections and similarities between the concept of erotic art presented by Sontag and Gadamer's concept of the hermeneutic interpretation of art. In the third part of the article I present Gadamer's proposition and answer the question of whether the hermeneutic interpretation of art can be erotic. The final part of the article is devoted to invoking additional arguments for linking erotics and hermeneutics, followed by a summary.

Key words

Hans-Georg Gadamer, Susan Sontag, hermeneutics, erotics of art, interpretation

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'In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art'¹ – this is the unexpected conclusion of Susan Sontag's famous 1964 essay 'Against interpretation'². The article provoked me to pose a few basic questions and to undertake an attempt to find answers to them. In the present article I ask: what, in Sontag's approach, is the meaning of an erotic approach to art? Is the distinction between hermeneutics and eroticism justified? And can hermeneutics be erotic? In the present article I consider the following issues:

- how the phrase 'erotics of art' should be understood in the context of Sontag's essay, and
- whether the erotics of art must indeed replace the hermeneutics of art, that is, whether the hermeneutics of art is opposed to and has little or nothing in common with the erotics of art (as understood by Sontag, and with reference to the broader philosophical tradition).
- If, however, the hermeneutics of art could also be erotic, what would that mean? In other words, what is the hermeneutic interpretation of art and on what might its eroticism depend?

At the same time I emphasise that, based on the cited essay (the question of the interpretation of art) as well as the specific nature of hermeneutic reflection, by *the hermeneutics of art* I understand *the hermeneutic interpretation of art*, and by *the erotics of art* something that might be called *the erotic interpretation of art*. In addition, I explain that in writing about the hermeneutics of art, I refer to the position of Gadamer, which I regard as the most current and complete example of contemporary hermeneutic theory concerning artistic activity. In this article I intend to show that the opposition proposed by Sontag is extremely dubious overall, and completely unjustified with respect to the hermeneutic philosopher from Heidelberg. I also wish to show that the hermeneutic interpretation of art in Gadamer's terms is an activity which can be defined by the word *erotic* – of course, only after I have established the scope of meaning of that concept. I will list and briefly discuss the arguments for my own position.

¹ See: S. Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, [online] <http://shifter-magazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Sontag-Against-Interpretation.pdf> [accessed: 10.06.2016].

² Sontag's essay was written in 1964 but appeared in 1966.

The Erotics of Art According to Susan Sontag

Sontag presented her views on the phenomenon of interpretation (and, indirectly, the erotics of art) in the form of an essay in a manner attractive to readers, light and free, rich in metaphor and figurative comparison (e.g. 'Like the fumes of the automobile and of heavy industry which befoul the urban atmosphere, the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities'.³). This is the language of theoretical expression, appealing to the feelings and emotions of readers through the language employed, as well as directly, through indicating the presumed feelings associated with the viewing of art, e.g. 'interpretation of this type indicates a dissatisfaction (conscious or unconscious) with the work, a wish to replace it by something else'.⁴ At the same time it is also imprecise language, devoid of academic exactitude and confusing. The formulation 'erotics of art' appears for the first time at the end of the text, where it resonates strongly, even though the meaning of this term is explicitly explained neither before nor afterwards. The reader can only guess that what Sontag is opposing to the interpretation of art comprises what she understands as its erotics. The essay is dominated by a formulation designating the approach to art, dominant in contemporary culture, which Sontag is criticising; she calls it, simply, 'interpretation'. This 'interpretation' is very narrowly understood; that is, as Sontag herself explains, '[b]y interpretation, I mean here a conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code, certain "rules" of interpretation'.⁵ The interpretation about which Sontag writes, then, is in principle nothing more than translation.⁶ Sontag seems to subsequently identify interpretation, thus understood, with the hermeneutics of art and to set up erotics as its opposition. Unfortunately, as in the case of erotics, Sontag does not explain why this interpretation is identified with hermeneutics. Nor does she indicate which form of hermeneutics she has in mind here, nor to what hermeneutic tradition she is referring to. Sontag therefore carries out a series of simplifications and generalisations.

Despite these reservations, I will now attempt, for the purpose of analysis of the concept of hermeneutic interpretation, to reconstruct the meaning of the term 'erotics of art' in Sontag's terms. Taking her negative state-

³ S. Sontag, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

ments on the subject of how not to regard art as a point of departure, I will identify an intrusive, hypothetically contradictory element associated with the postulated 'erotic' approach. The final paragraphs of the essay, moreover, contain some of Sontag's positive statements regarding the desired theme, that is, the erotic method of viewing art, to which I will also refer.

The erotics of art takes as its subject the work as a whole rather than the separate elements of content and form. This means that the form of art, in this approach, is decidedly appreciated, which does not mean, however, that the content ceases to have any significance. Sontag clearly states that development and more accurate descriptions of the form and appearance of works are necessary, as well as descriptive rather than normative terminology for these procedures. But she adds that considerations of content should meld with those of form.⁷ Erotic procedures, in her opinion, appreciate and disclose 'the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it'.⁸ The erotics of art should thus indicate proceedings outside the rules, free, spontaneous and individual, not contained within the boundaries of any universal code. It is reasonable to ask at this point what procedures are to be discussed here: for example, a purely intellectual recording and analysis of what has been viewed, or a creative translation of what has been perceived from pictorial into descriptive language, or perhaps a game of associations, in which the work is only the point of departure? Unfortunately, we find no answers to these questions in Sontag's essay. We read instead that the erotics of art is intended to serve the work exclusively, rather than goals external to it. Nor should the activity of the viewer lead in any way to the destruction of the work – and here also we are condemned to speculate what, according to Sontag, 'destruction of works of art' is and what it is not.⁹ Perhaps this refers to forgetting or degrading the works, to belittling their value through ignoring their form and content or through lax and effortless viewing and consideration. It is certain, however, that in order not to destroy art, the erotic approach is necessary – that is, one distinguished by the delicacy and mindfulness manifested towards the viewed and appreciated object. Erotic interpretation of a work is associated with expression of respect for what is available to the senses. Thus characterised, the reception of art must simultaneously be associated with a specific con-

⁷ Ibidem, pp. 8–9.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 9.

⁹ Ibidem, pp. 4–5.

ception of the processes of understanding artworks. As we know, this cannot be understanding in the sense of interpretation within Sontag's narrow perspective, that is, exclusively a translation. Must it therefore be understanding beyond the conceptual, beyond language? This answer suggests itself here, but it seems excessively radical, and therefore unjustified. Sontag excludes translation from the area of erotic activities (described thus: 'The interpreter says, Look, don't you see that X is really – or, really means – A? That Y is really B? That Z is really C?'¹⁰); however, she says nothing about other forms of expression. The translation referred to here is a simple, basic form of viewing-understanding, devoid of inventiveness. Human cognitive abilities are greater and more complex, something which has long been expressed in art. Is it difficult, then, to imagine erotic writing or speaking? Less than a decade after Sontag's essay, Roland Barthes presented the answer to this question in his famous work *The Pleasure of the Text*, in which he convincingly presented an 'erotic' method of reading, writing, and speaking about art.¹¹

The erotics of art, in the analysed approach, is undoubtedly associated with feelings, with the sphere of human sensitivity (Sontag writes: 'We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more'¹²). Does this statement conflict with the postulate cited above of an approach to a work which distinguishes and emphasises its formal aspects? It may seem that the emotional perception of a work is primarily related to the content of art, that is, a more or less, for better or worse, specific message included in the work. If this were true of popular intuitions, it would be all the more worth following Sontag's postulates, which are linked to a way of understanding human perception that deviates from tradition. To get closer to Sontag's intentions, one must discard thinking about 'thinking' in exclusively intellectual and visual terms, as a controlled activity associated with distance from the subject and intended to achieve specific, quantifiable, and so-called objective results.

The erotics of art means, in Sontag's view, direct experience of the work as what it simply is, as what exists independently in front of the viewer. Sontag states clearly that our culture's problem is 'hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability'¹³ and that the interpretation associated with this culture poisons human sen-

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 3.

¹¹ See: R. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. R. Miller, New York 1975, pp. 3–67.

¹² S. Sontag, op. cit., p. 10.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 4.

sitivity. The erotic approach is to serve as the remedy: a kind of activity associated not with subordination, or, more properly, mastery of the experienced object, but with the recognition of its individuality and expression of this recognition. A work of art in this approach is to be exclusively an artwork, not a utilitarian object, not a something needed for a something-else, e.g. 'for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories'.¹⁴

Seemingly also important in grasping Sontag's position is the concept of transparency, which, she writes, 'is the highest, most liberating value in art – and in criticism – today'.¹⁵ And further on: 'Transparency means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are'.¹⁶ How is one to understand these metaphorical remarks? What might these transparent works and interpretations be? A few lines later, we read about the obviousness that accompanied ancient art and is now disappearing, as well as the clarity that once accompanied a sensory experience. Transparency, clarity, obviousness – it seems that, by invoking these concepts, Sontag is calling attention to the fundamental problem of modern art – the same problem hermeneutics is concerned with, i.e. the problem of universal lack of understanding of artworks on the part of the ordinary (i.e. non-qualified) viewer, and hence the problem of inaccessibility (and thus incomprehensibility) of art and its increasing elitism. The author calls for transparency, clarity and obviousness, which, for her, means fighting for works of art and our experience of them to be 'more, rather than less, real to us'.¹⁷ And moreover, a well-conceived interpretation of art (i.e. in an erotic interpretation) is, in her opinion, a question of showing and discerning that a work simply exists, and also, possibly, of understanding as well *how* it exists. It cannot be a question only of inquiring what the work means. The eroticism of art is a kind of theoretical proposition, intended to provide a remedy for the problems associated with the perception of contemporary art. According to this American intellectual, we need erotics 'to see more, to hear more, to feel more'.¹⁸ Understood thus, the aesthetic experience has little in common with disinterested viewing and pleasure according to Kant's model.

Sontag's article fails to present any exhaustive and rigorous theoretical propositions that might include a description of new tools to be

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 6.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 9.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 10.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

used to improve the reception of contemporary art. Rather, the article is a collection of free insights which, though interesting, are often general, vague, and no longer very original. Moreover, many of Sontag's formulations demand substantiations which are not to be found in the article. Surprising is the almost complete omission of the viewer of art, i.e. any accounting for and description of the potential influence of the viewer on the choice of a certain interpretation rather than another, a certain understanding of a given work rather than another. Sontag's considerations are worth recalling, however, as they indicate a specific problem connected with art and indicate quite clearly the direction in which a solution is to be sought. The erotics of art, according to Sontag, constitutes, first and foremost, the complexity of this approach, which is not merely conceptual, linguistic, or emotional, but takes into account and describes the multifaceted nature of the human method of cognition, and thus also of the human experience of art. A similar understanding of human perception characterises and distinguishes Gadamer's hermeneutics. As we know, the author of *Truth and Method* is critical of the forms of rationality established in European tradition. Even Gadamer's predecessors, such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Peter Yorck von Wartenburg, identify notions of reason, rationality, knowledge, science, and objects of cognition prevailing in European culture which are, in their opinion, inconsistent with human understanding. Hermeneutics proposes such a very different model of rationality that it is sometimes called a modern form of irrationalism. Arguments in favour of this statement are provided by basic hermeneutic assumptions. These include, among others, assertions about human finitude and historicity; the circular structure of understanding; the linguistic nature of human reason; the positive role of superstition and anteriority and the necessity of cultural, social, and historical contexts; a concept of practical reason and practical philosophy; and a concept of truth which is neither objective nor subjective.

This American intellectual's essay appeared in 1966, whereas Gadamer published his magnum opus *Truth and Method* in 1960 (though he continued to develop the reflections presented in this book into the 90s). Therefore these researchers presented their theoretical propositions at nearly the same time. Although Sontag concludes her considerations by presenting a decisive opposition between hermeneutics and erotics, I would like to identify and briefly describe the clear similarities be-

tween Sontag's remarks on a desired approach to art and Gadamer's remarks on the subject of hermeneutic interpretation.

Gadamer, Sontag and the Concept of the Erotics of Art

The analysis of Sontag's essay presented above constitutes a contribution to the discussion on the theme of the eroticism of hermeneutic interpretation. This, in my opinion, is a reasonable undertaking, because recalling Sontag's article in the context of contemporary hermeneutic reflection leads to emphasising the latter's potential in terms of its relevance and universality. The alleged opposition, which Sontag expresses rather sharply, assumed to prevail between eroticism and hermeneutics (as if between modern and ossified thought) applies to hermeneutics only within a narrow range, i.e. within the meaning of the old, traditional hermeneutics. However, the strong similarities between the approaches to art presented by Sontag and Gadamer (the latter being one of the most important contemporary philosophers dealing with hermeneutics) show, in my opinion, hermeneutics in a more current and contemporary form. The problem associated with the viewing of modern art which Sontag points out in her essay has not yet been resolved. In this article I wish to emphasise, *inter alia*, that the author of *The Relevance of the Beautiful* also attempts to respond to the challenges posed by the latest art. In a wider context (exceeding the scope of this article) I am interested as to whether his answers are merely theoretical digressions, inapplicable to the field of actual artistic practice, or whether they possess practical value. Sontag and Gadamer are astonishingly similar in terms of the direction of the solutions being sought. But whereas Sontag presents only the draft, in the form of a free paraphilosophical essay, of a proposal for a new way of interpreting art, Gadamer, in a number of other works, develops and constructs a comprehensive philosophical theory. Therefore, I treat Sontag's essay exclusively as a kind of introduction to the discussion on the eroticism of hermeneutic interpretation, while the main subject of my discussion is Gadamer's reflections.

It is worth noting that Gadamer referred to Sontag's article in an article of his own, "The Artwork in Word and Image: "So True, So Full of Being!", first published in English in 2007. In the opinion of the Heidelberg philosopher, Sontag, in her work, accurately pointed out weaknesses of the contemporary and most widespread method of interpreting art. Gadamer also correctly stated that, in his opinion, the general approach

to artistic works was not properly linked with basic scientific methodology, and as such prevented a given work from being fully presented. Moreover, according to Gadamer, Sontag pointed out with equal accuracy that proper presentation of a work should mean that it should 'appear in its own light'.¹⁹ This is one of a number of her comments which correspond to the hermeneutic approach.

It should be noted here as well that Sontag's and Gadamer's methods of constructing theoretical statements are similar in certain respects. Gadamer uses metaphor and formulates judgments with a high degree of generality as readily as the American intellectual, and, like her, employs a light, colourful style eschewing scientific accuracy and precision. I am unable to settle here what might be meant by the phrases 'the luminousness of the thing in itself' or 'to appear in its own light'; I can only point out their metaphorical nature and ambiguity. I will return to the issue of the 'luminousness' of artworks in the section on Gadamer's views on interpretation.

The considerations presented by Sontag in the essay 'Against interpretation' concerning the contemporary way of viewing art – which renders proper presentation of works impossible and denies their viewers actual experience of them – are consistent with the views of Gadamer on the poor state of contemporarily formed aesthetic consciousness and the results of this approach.²⁰ Gadamer, like Sontag, deplores the relationship – devoid of respect, delicacy, and sensitivity – of the contemporary viewer to art. And, like Sontag, he points out that the consequences of this cannot be positive, because interpretation carried out in this manner impoverishes reality and the work itself, reducing it to specific finite content. Even more surprising, then, is the American scholar's declaration: 'In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art'.²¹

¹⁹ See: H.-G. Gadamer, "The Artwork in Word and Image: 'So True, So Full of Being'", trans. R.E. Palmer, [in:] idem, *The Gadamer Reader. A Bouquet of the Later Writing*, ed. R.E. Palmer, Illinois 2007, p. 219. For the German version of the article, see: H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Lesebuch*, ed. J. Grondin, Tübingen 1997. Along with his insights on brightness, the luminousness of art, and interpretation, Gadamer rightly invokes the figure of Martin Heidegger, who had stated much earlier that 'every interpretation must overlucidate' [in:] H.-G. Gadamer, "The Artwork in Word and Image...", op. cit., p. 219.

²⁰ See: "Kant, Immanuel (1724–1804)", [in:] C. Lawn, N. Keane, *The Gadamer Dictionary*, New York 2011, pp. 85–86.

²¹ See: S. Sontag, op. cit., p. 10.

It is difficult, of course, to explicitly determine why Sontag sets up such an opposition, which could be justified only if we were to combine the hermeneutic approach with the principles of biblical exegesis and legal hermeneutics, or with traditional models of interaction – psychological, historical, immanent – with text. In these cited approaches, interpretative efforts aim at the establishment of a single correct explanation. Sontag seems to adopt this rather narrow, colloquial, and simply mistaken conception of hermeneutics. While it is fully understandable, and probable, that Sontag simply did not manage to read *Truth and Method* before writing her essay, she certainly should have been familiar with the writings of Heidegger. The way in which she used the term *hermeneutics* demonstrates, unfortunately, either ignorance regarding hermeneutic reflection or conscious use of the most basic meaning of the term to strengthen her own message. Regardless of the reasons for her approach to the issue, Sontag's statement is provocative, because Gadamer's proposition (like those of other hermeneutists) are far from the conclusions cited above, which are not accepted today. What is more, at certain points Gadamer's hermeneutic proposition is close to what the American scholar writes about interpretation – which may mean that the hermeneutics of art is simultaneously its erotics.

In Gadamer's hermeneutics, there are repeated references to the necessary sensitivity of viewers, as well as the harmfulness of the methodological (in the sense of the scientific method) approach applied to the interpretation of artistic creations. Moreover, one can state that Gadamer's proposition is close to Sontag's approach in two more important respects, as demonstrated and described by Arthur Danto in one of his essays, namely in his specific view of anti-intellectualism and literariness. About Sontag and the work 'Against Interpretation', Danto wrote that she

[...] is here an anti-intellectual, stating that the work gives us everything we need to know about it, on the condition, however, that what we seek is a literary experience: we just have to pay attention to the work. According to this understanding of interpretation, the artist is definitely not in a privileged position.²²

²² A.C. Danto, "Ocena i interpretacja dzieła sztuki", [in:] *Świat sztuki. Pisma z filozofii sztuki* [*The world of art: writings from art philosophy*], ed. and trans. L. Sosnowski, Cracow 2006, p. 172. [Originally: A.C. Danto, "The Appreciation and Interpretation of Works of Art", [in:] idem, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, New York 1986].

I identify the anti-intellectualism cited by Danto with the manner in which Sontag conducts her theoretical reflections, the literariness with the nature of aesthetic experience – and we find, in my opinion, both in Gadamer as well. There is no space in the present article for a precise analysis of this issue; I note only that what I have in mind here is the expanded concept of rationality which occurs in Gadamer's hermeneutics as well as the nature of hermeneutic interpretation in his approach, i.e. an activity just as creative as literature itself and one which, in addition, often makes use of the same means and figures as literature does.

When contact with art is described in terms of eroticism, it is impossible not to link it to the sphere of feelings and emotions, and consequently impossible not to see it as a dynamic, variable, but also individual experience. The erotics of art must therefore be a potent and poignant experience. And in this context it must be emphasised that when Gadamer differentiates art from all unscientific, so-called humanistic, experiences, he indicates precisely the intensity of the experience of viewing a work of art. He writes that art has an exceptionally strong impact on its viewers, because it moves and stimulates them, addressing, as it were, each of them individually. In *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics* we read that a work 'says something to each person as if it were said especially to him, as something present and contemporaneous'.²³ Later, we read that, moreover, that when we view art 'as an encounter with the authentic, as a familiarity that includes surprise, the experience of art is experience in a real sense'.²⁴ I think, taking this perspective into account – when speaking of 'experience in a real sense', about an 'encounter', about the idea that a piece of art 'says something [...] as if it were said especially to him' – that the identification of hermeneutic interpretation as erotic should not surprise us.

Of course, aesthetic experience in the hermeneutic approach is connected, as we know, with understanding, with grasping the sense or the truth of a work, and, as such, it is an intellectual activity. However, one must bear in mind the expanded concept of rationality employed by Gadamer, as mentioned above. When we read in the writings of the Heidelberg thinker about experiences of authenticity and the obviousness associated with aesthetic experience, as well as the contemporaneity and

²³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*, p. 3, [online] <http://thinkingtogether.org/rcream/archive/old/S2005/127/gadamer.pdf> [accessed: 10.06.2016].

²⁴ Ibidem.

timeliness of every such experience or the inexhaustibility of artworks, I think it is reasonable to suppose that the word *erotic* may help us to correctly grasp his thought. In seeking the causes of the exceptionally strong influence of art on its viewers, we find ourselves as well on the trail of the 'eroticism' of art and aesthetic experience. This is not without reason, since Gadamer proclaims in his works the currency and relevance of beauty, as well as the relevance of questions about art.²⁵ Art is able to influence its viewers so powerfully because it is beautiful, and beauty, as we know from Plato, attracts the eye, creates love and desire, begetting the desire to know (which is also acknowledged as a form of possession) what appears to us as beautiful.²⁶ I will return to this issue in the final part of the text.

Hermeneutic Interpretation of Art

According to the hermeneutic approach, a work of art achieves real or legitimate existence only in the private experience of the individual, i.e. when, as a result of an encounter with a work of art, the viewer begins a special game: the game of understanding what has been viewed, heard, or felt. It is precisely this game between the viewer and the work that is identified in hermeneutics as interpretation. In none of his works does Gadamer state directly how to conduct this game; he offers no precise guidance on how to interpret artworks, how to describe, analyse, or understand them, or how to experience them.²⁷ Nonetheless, the philosopher maintains that he is trying to lead viewers of artworks to another, fuller experience of art. In his 'Introduction' and 'Foreword to the Second Edition' in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer explains that his goal is not to con-

²⁵ See: H.-G. Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful", [in:] idem, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. N. Walker, ed. R. Bernasconi, Cambridge 1986, pp. 3–53.

²⁶ On the nature of Eros as presented by Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, see: D.L. Roochnik, "The erotics of philosophical discourse", *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, April 1987, 4, 2, pp. 117–120.

²⁷ The word *experience* is not used here casually, but belongs, as we know, among the basic concepts of Gadamer's hermeneutics and also pertains to the phenomenon of interpretation; the experience of art, which relies on a specifically conceived interpretation, is in fact an exemplary hermeneutical experience. See: "Experience", [in:] C. Lawn, N. Keane, op. cit., pp. 47–48.

struct a research method for the humanities on the model of the scientific method.²⁸ Such an attempt would indeed, in his opinion, be doomed to failure. Hermeneutic interpretation is too complex, subtle, individual, and hence also changeable, to be determined and exhausted by means of one specific set of rules. This does not mean, however, that we cannot speak of such things as hermeneutic method or hermeneutic interpretation. In his work, Gadamer formulates a series of hints and guidelines which, taken together, constitute a picture of specific methods and interpretation.

Interpretation in the hermeneutic approach is, therefore, neither an additional procedure supporting or developing cognition, nor a kind of purely intellectual exercise, but is rather the right – because it is the only possible – way of being a cognising human being. In other words, it is the human way of experiencing the world, natural, inherent, perhaps even instinctive. It is thus impossible, in this kind of interpretation, to distinguish between understanding and application.²⁹ Understanding, interpretation, and application constitute a uniform hermeneutical process, the aim of which is experience of the truth.³⁰ Understood thus, interpretation itself becomes one of the most important concepts in philosophy; what is more, it takes on an ontological character, since, like hermeneutic understanding, it is itself a way of being human. Interpretation therefore defines both a human being, as one who interprets, and the entire reality of his or her life, which can be known only through the process of interpretation.

Interpretation, understood in this way, cannot lead to finite and final results. Thus hermeneutics states that there is neither a first nor last,

²⁸ See: H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, eds. and trans. J. Weinsheimer, D.G. Marshall, New York 2004, pp. XX-XXXIV. [Original: H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen 1960].

²⁹ See: “Understanding and Interpretation”, [in:] C. Lawn, N. Keane, op. cit., pp. 148–153.

³⁰ The notion of hermeneutic truth is a topic for a separate, extensive discussion for which there is unfortunately no place in the present article. For selected articles on this topic, see: B. Wachterhauser, “Getting it right: relativism, realism and truth”, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. R.J. Dostal, Cambridge 2002, pp. 52–78; J. Grondin, “Gadamer’s Aesthetics. The Overcoming of Aesthetic Consciousness and the Hermeneutical Truth of Art”, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. M. Kelly, New York–Oxford 1998, vol. 2, pp. 267–271; F.J. Ambrosio, “Dawn and Dusk: Gadamer and Heidegger on Truth”, *Man and World*, 1986, 19, pp. 21–53; A. Ergüden, “Truth and Method in Gadamer’s Hermeneutic Philosophy”, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, Spring 1988, 8, ‘Interpretation and Hermeneutics’, pp. 6–19.

a most important, most accurate, or most appropriate interpretation of a given item, issue, or artistic product. Subsequent interpretations constitute an element of a larger system, and interpretation itself signifies process or movement; it is an experience that takes time. Worthy of note is Gadamer's emphasis on the idea that, while artworks do not lend themselves to an arbitrary approach, it is possible and desirable to evaluate the accuracy of their interpretations. However, how such an assessment is to be carried out, and what criteria it is to be based on, is already a separate (and quite problematic in light of Gadamer's writings) matter.

The purpose of the interpretation of art is to reach the truth of a given artwork. This truth does not equate, however, as we know, to the achievement of a finite and objective result. In principle, we know very little more about this truth and are able to say or write even less. It must be like this, because interpretation in Gadamer's approach is itself a way to experience the world, and as such is historical and finite – and hence on a human scale – and can be neither objective nor subjective. As we read in *Truth and Method*:

The experience of art acknowledges that it cannot present the full truth of what it experiences in terms of definitive knowledge. There is no absolute progress and no final exhaustion of what lies in a work of art. The experience of art knows this of itself.³¹

A well-conceived interpretation in hermeneutics is linked with the actual experience of art. Therefore such an interpretation cannot rely first and foremost – or exclusively – on explanations of the meaning of a work of art for oneself or for others. It is, rather, a personal experience linked to cognitive effort and emotional reception of the work. The alienation and distance characterising the consciousness of modern man shaped in the spirit of modern science are replaced here by the experience of belonging and participation.³² Gadamer also speaks in this context about the disappearance of the noticeable and usually impassable gap existing between one human being and another, between a human being and a work of art, between a human being and the truth. And this means, in his view, that thanks to the ef-

³¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 86.

³² For more on the experience of alienation of aesthetic and historical consciousness, see H.-G. Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem" (1966), [in:] idem, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. D.E. Linge, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1977, pp. 3–17. [Original: H.-G. Gadamer, "Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems" (1966), [in:] idem, *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 2, 1986, pp. 219–231].

forts undertaken in interpretation, 'you and I are no longer trapped in our differences'.³³ It is worth emphasising that hermeneutical interpretation, if expressed in writing or speech, must necessarily bear the hallmarks of the 'private' world of the interpreter-viewer, yet simultaneously transcend his or her subjective horizon. Therefore creative involvement, inventiveness, and the interpreter's own contribution should, in my opinion, be regarded as indispensable elements of hermeneutic interpretation.

Let us reiterate that hermeneutic interpretation understood in the spirit of Gadamer must differ from interpretations and descriptions of works defined as expert, academic, or aspiring to objectivity, precision, or full compliance with the material accumulated on a given theme. As cited by Paul Ricoeur, an individually understood belief or will is required for, and enables, all understanding. Accordingly, the French philosopher also stated (and, in my opinion, this can also be applied to Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics) that what is rather barbarously called the epistemology of interpretation 'seeks a return to naivety [since, as he added] we may have lost the original naivety of those who proclaimed the great myths, but in interpreting we seek critical naivety, which uses a whole arsenal of means and methods of exegesis so that what the original, fundamental language preached might speak and exist'.³⁴ Gadamer wrote in this context about good will, as being necessary and making an appearance wherever understanding is sought, and thus wherever an attempt is made at interpretation.³⁵ When speaking about the will, is it reasonable to enquire about the source of its stimulation, the reason for its appearance? Eros, love, desire – these certainly constitute one possible answer.

In referring specific statements on the topic of interpretation to the problem, basic in terms of aesthetics, concerning the mode of existence of works of art, we come to the conclusion that they gain their own existence precisely in interpretation – or through interpretation, in the

³³ H.-G. Gadamer, P. Ricoeur, "Konflikt interpretacji" [The conflict of interpretations], trans. L. Sosnowski, [in:] *Estetyka w świecie* [World aesthetics], Vol. IV, ed. M. Gołaszewska, Cracow 1994, p. 61.

³⁴ P. Ricoeur, "Konflikt hermeneutyk: epistemologia interpretacji" [Hermeneutic conflict: an epistemological interpretation] [in:] idem, *Egzystencja i hermeneutyka* [Existence and hermeneutics], Warsaw 1975, p. 83.

³⁵ See: H.-G. Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation", trans. R. E. Palmer [in:] idem, *The Gadamer Reader. A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. R. E. Palmer, Evanston, Illinois 2007, p. 172. [Original: "Text und Interpretation", [in:] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 2, Tübingen 1986, pp. 330–360].

course of interpretation. R. E. Palmer, too, writes in this way about the hermeneutic understanding of art in his introduction to Gadamer's article 'The Artwork in Word and Image: "So True, So Full of Being!"'. In it, we read: 'Here we see the hermeneutical character of Gadamer's thinking about art. It is in the interpretation that the work has its being'.³⁶ How these statements should be understood (i.e. whether we are talking about the existence of a work of art in general or about its existence or non-existence in the minds of viewers) and what consequences may arise from this approach are extremely interesting issues, well worth considering. However, because they exceed the scope of the present article, I leave them unresolved here.³⁷

Summing up the above characterisation, I will mention the following features of hermeneutic interpretation which, in my opinion, serve to define the word *erotic*. Comparing Gadamer's reflections with the views of Sontag, it can be said that: (1) hermeneutic interpretation cannot be reduced to a set of rules or to a certain pattern; (2) it is, moreover, as in Sontag, a free, dynamic, and variable process; (3) it is equally an individual, private, and complex experience; (4) furthermore, it is an experience involving the intellect and emotions of the recipient; (5) moreover, hermeneutic interpretation, like erotic interpretation in Sontag's terms, equally serves the full presentation, and even the existence, of the work; (6) as in the work of the American intellectual, remarks on light and illumination in the context of the presentation of works of art appear as well in Gadamer's work.

The last point that I mentioned, concerning how to characterise the issue of eroticism of the experience of art, leads the present considerations beyond the context of 'Against Interpretation' towards a broader philosophical tradition. In the final and concluding part of the article, I would like to briefly introduce the issue of the erotics of art in connection with the concept of beauty and the Platonic concept of Eros, with

³⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, "The Artwork in Word and Image...", op. cit., p. 193.

³⁷ In the context of this topic, i.e. the link between interpretation and the existence of a work, it is worth analysing Gadamer's remarks concerning the hermeneutic identity of works of art. While the philosopher devoted only a few pages of 'The Relevance of the Beautiful' to this issue, yet he formulated a number of important statements. See: H.-G. Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful", op. cit., pp. 25-31.

reference to an interesting article by Daniel L. Tate, published in 2015 under the title 'Erotics or Hermeneutics'.³⁸

'I Say That I Understand Nothing Other Than *Ta Erotika*' (Plato, *Symposium*, 177D8)

Gadamer emphasised the uniqueness and primacy of beauty in relation to hermeneutic issues, including the concept of rationality and understanding contained therein and the manner of existence and influence of art. The final pages of *Truth and Method* concerning the universal aspect of hermeneutics are, in fact, devoted to beauty, as well as light and brightness.³⁹ Important in this context is Gadamer's 1974 essay, 'The Relevance of the Beautiful'. Writing about beauty, Gadamer points out that it attracts a human being directly and immediately by virtue of the light that is present within it. The nature of the human soul is such, therefore, that it yearns for and directs itself towards beauty. The philosopher also explains that beauty needs nothing beyond itself in order to present itself; beauty is directly visible. Beauty exists in the same way as light, which means as well that its radiance is intrinsic. Beauty that manifests itself in something sensual – e.g. in a work of art – makes that sensual thing better, meaning more clearly visible. What is more, beauty is not confined to the realm of the exclusively visible, because it is also a vehicle for the appearance of good and truth. In beauty, the sphere of the conceivable is articulated. This relationship between the illumination of beauty and the clarity of what is understandable guides hermeneutic concepts. The hermeneutic experience, a prime example of which is the experience of art, partakes, according to Gadamer, of the same nature as the experience of beauty. This means, among other things, that the truth revealed in interpretation demands to be acknowledged without scientific proof. Furthermore, what penetrates to the viewer during this experience is seen in some sense as obvious, i.e. as unquestionable. Thus, this approach to the experience of art transcends what is logically conceivable.

The linking of beauty with cognition and its identification as a source of cognitive curiosity make express reference to the Platonic tradition

³⁸ D.L. Tate, "Erotics or hermeneutics? Nehamas and Gadamer on beauty and art", *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology*, 2:1, pp. 7–29, DOI: 10.1080/20539320.2015.11428457.

³⁹ See: H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., pp. 469–484.

and to the appearance therein of love at beauty's side: erotics.⁴⁰ Issues regarding the significance of the Platonic interpretation of the concepts of beauty (*kalon*) and love (*eros*) in relation to Gadamer's hermeneutics have been exhaustively presented and developed by Daniel Tate in the article mentioned above. The author argues there in favour of developing or supplementing Gadamer's considerations in terms of the position of Alexander Nehamas, who 'revives the Platonic view of love as the "passionate longing" for the beautiful that, he claims, better characterises our engagement with art than the idea of "disinterested pleasure"'.⁴¹ Recalling and developing the position of Plato on the subject of Eros leads to a better understanding of the nature of both beauty itself and experience thereof, and may also help us to attain a fuller grasp of the hermeneutical experience of art. The latter task seems still valid and current today, for what Gadamer writes about the hermeneutic interpretation of art transcends simple and traditional approaches.

There is no space in the present article for a precise reiteration and analysis of the considerations of Tate, which would indeed constitute unjustified translation and repetition. My intention here was to raise the issue of the erotics of art in the context of hermeneutic reflection and to attempt to link erotics with hermeneutics based on an analysis of the concepts of hermeneutic interpretation. I have achieved these objectives in the previous sections. The modest task of the present article was also, among other things, to show that the issue of the hermeneutic interpretation of art has not yet been fully developed and discussed. I have attempted to indicate those elements of Gadamer's reflections which, in my opinion, demand explanation and development (given that, after all, according to the hermeneutic approach, the former always must of necessity involve the latter). Could it be, then, that it is erotics that stands in need of hermeneutics – since, precisely, 'love [...] elides any easy distinction between the sensual and spiritual, between the desire to possess and the passion to know – just as beauty cannot be captured in distinctions between what is and what appears'?⁴²

⁴⁰ On the meaning of the term 'erotic' in reference to the Platonic tradition see: D.L. Roochnik, op. cit., pp. 117-129.

⁴¹ D. L. Tate, op. cit., p. 7.

⁴² Ibidem.

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