

Johann Michel's Hermeneutic-pragmatist Approach to Interpreting Visual Works of Art: The "Problem of Meaning" as a Condition for Going Beyond "Texts"

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Abstract

This paper examines some of Johann Michel's contributions to hermeneutics, with an emphasis on interpretation as a resolution for "problems of meaning", utilizing specific techniques in both erudite activity and everyday life. Based on Michel's goal of transforming hermeneutics along pragmatist lines, this paper focuses on discussing the limits of the textual model of hermeneutics and Michel's proposal to broaden hermeneutics through a pragmatic approach to interpretation, which aims to move beyond texts and towards visual works of art. The assumption is made here that hermeneutics is not limited to the "text". Although we can reject this limitation, part of hermeneutics emphasizes this notion and the dominance of language over image. This failure to recognize the visual image would make it difficult for hermeneutics to participate in the debate on images and works of art.

Keywords: hermeneutics, pragmatic, image, art, text

1. Introduction

In¹ this article, I will begin by discussing some of Johann Michel's general contributions to hermeneutics and then delve deeper into his contribution to the notion of interpretation as applied to works of art. By general contributions, I refer to his proposal of considering interpretative techniques (*interpretatio*) appropriate for problems of meaning. I am referring, therefore, to the broadening of the effectiveness of interpretation as a result of its narrowing. Interpretation becomes necessary when there is a problem of meaning; it takes place based on the techniques needed to address these problems. Michel defines hermeneutics as a search for meaning, without neglecting the social aspect of interpretation, which is central to its practical dimension. This pragmatic orientation considers the concrete condition of the interpreter. He posits understanding and interpretation as activities of everyday life. This practice is broad and concerns both specialists and laypeople. If those who interpret also act in the world, common practice on the anthropological level will not be sacrificed in favor of interpretative activity on the epistemological level².

The notion of "problematicity" is central to Michel's proposal for transforming hermeneutics through a pragmatist approach. He seeks to extend the principle of "grasping meaning" [*saisir le sens*] to situations where interpretation must intervene, such as when our pre-

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² *Homo Interpretans* signaled the defense of the act of interpreting as a constitutive task of human practice. This book investigated the anthropological nature of interpretation and a pre-understanding that remains stable until it is shaken by the problem of meaning. To interpret is to exercise the ability to create schemata of meaning. Michel argues for the fundamental importance of interpretation in both everyday life and philosophy. See: "Not every inquiry reduces to an interpretive activity, but there cannot be an investigation or evaluation apart from a suspending of meaning and some corresponding interpretive activity once familiar situations, routine evaluations get called into question" (Michel 2019: 24–25).

understanding is unsettled by a problem of meaning³. The restriction of “problematicity” as a condition for interpretative demands is fundamental for distinguishing it from other key notions in hermeneutics, such as immediate understanding. In this sense, interpretation will be defined as “[...] a suspensive, mediated, and reflective understanding that utilizes techniques to overcome misunderstanding or miscomprehension” (Michel 2023a: 360). I emphasize the recognition that “the experience of misunderstanding is the driving force of hermeneutics”. Additionally, Michel insists that a hermeneutics strengthened by critical reflection must encompass the social character of the act of interpreting.

Based on Michel’s proposals, we can think of the delimitation of hermeneutic problems as a horizon for its expansion, making hermeneutics still relevant today ⁴ . Michel aims to broaden hermeneutics through pragmatics and to overcome the text paradigm. Let’s examine his guidelines for the pragmatist transformation of hermeneutics. The first guideline is anthropological and considers interpretation to be a fundamental human activity; the second, pragmatist, reserves interpretation for reflective understanding directed at the problem of meaning; the third, epistemological, extends the domain of investigation beyond texts. According to this final guideline, hermeneutics is not limited to spoken or written discourse.

³ *Qu’est-ce que l’herméneutique ?* maintains that interpretation necessarily involves “grasping meaning”. The foreword by Christian Berner highlights the intention to broaden the field by delineating the specific tasks of interpretation. This links the books closely: the problem of meaning requires interpretation, which is conducted using appropriate interpretative techniques; this applies to hermeneutics and the everyday world. Another clarification by Michel: as types of understanding, mediation is specific to interpretation, which distinguishes it from the immediate understanding of meaning. All interpretation is understanding, but understanding that takes place spontaneously is not interpretation.

⁴ Michel reaffirms the plurality of orientations by asking what hermeneutics is, but says that it must not be a prisoner of its own history. “It must expand to new objects and different spaces for reflection” (see Michel 2023a: 22). See also: “Everything concerning the meaning of the sign is its responsibility, especially when the meaning is not fully revealed” (see Michel 2023a: 27).

In the next section, I will focus on the implications of addressing objects of meaning that do not belong to the linguistic and verbal dimension. I will take seriously the assumption that hermeneutics is not restricted to a "science of the text".

2. Going beyond the "textual" model of hermeneutics

The first risk for a hermeneutics bound to the notion of text is its failure to recognize the practical aspect of common interpretative functions. Based on this practical orientation proposed by Michel, this article will focus on the critique of the textual model and on expanding hermeneutics to the interpretation of visual works of art. Hermeneutics has traditionally privileged the interpretation of texts as spoken or written discourse. This is an important part of human experience, without a doubt, but other philosophical traditions have gone beyond written discourse, as in the case of pragmatics. Michel's reflection on meaning and experience reinforces the contact between the two traditions⁵.

In this quest to expand hermeneutics beyond texts through pragmatism, Michel's goal is explicit: "to do justice to common experiences of interpretation"⁶. He criticizes the reduction of the hermeneutic experience to language:

⁵ The attention given to pre-linguistic experience deserves a separate analysis. Michel questions the centrality of language in shaping experience. See: "Recognizing preverbal or non-verbal experience does not mean that it is necessarily devoid of meaning and irreducible to any form of understanding. There can be meaning in experience without it being expressed in a discursive form. This is the reason why a pragmatic hermeneutics of non-verbal experience is possible and even necessary" (see Michel 2023a:140).

⁶ His diagnosis that Heidegger's radical ontologization of understanding moves away from the "text" at the cost of distancing itself from common modes of interpretation would deserve a separate analysis too. A departure from "texts" that do not allow for discussions of everyday ways of understanding, which sometimes occur in museums, adds to that cost. In this sense, Michel also questions, if everyday experiences of understanding (or lack thereof) are always considered derivative forms, what remains for the interpretation of our everyday "problems of meaning"?

If it is true that contemporary hermeneutics from Gadamer to Ricoeur undeniably privileges linguistic and textual experience (to the point of encompassing all hermeneutic experience), it is not true, however, that this presupposition is shared by all hermeneutic traditions. [...] Where are we headed with this? [...] To the fact that, indeed, despite what Gadamer says, there is a non-discursive, somatic hermeneutic experience that has nothing to envy in the discursive and linguistic [*langagière*] hermeneutic experience (Michel 2023a: 160–161).

Hermeneutic experience could learn something from pragmatics in this regard. Michel's "pragmatist hermeneutics" project includes a reflection on regimes of problematicity of meaning and modalities of experience.

Michel addresses the complementary relationship between meaning, privileged by hermeneutics, and experience, privileged by pragmatism. He analyzes the progression from immediate experience – in which there is a spontaneous understanding that is not mediated by language – to acquired experience – in which there is a pre-understanding of meaning; and finally from this to creative experience – in which we have interpretation. Our abilities progress between one experience and the next. What matters most is the progression from "having an experience", typical of acquired experience, to "making an experience", typical of "creative experience". This merits closer examination: Understanding "creative experience" in the regime of "making an experience" means recognizing it as a singular experience that presupposes a rupture in the intelligibility of the order of meaning. The subject has difficulty understanding what is happening, and interpretation is required to pass this test of incomprehension. In this process, Michel says, productive interpretation is crucial, involving the

task of reconstructing and grasping meaning. This distinguishes the creative experience from others. The interpreter conducts this activity using interpretative techniques, whose reflection is not the monopoly of hermeneutics.

In addition to developing a critique of the textual model of hermeneutics, he applies it to other situations. Although we can reject this limitation, part of hermeneutics embraces the emphasis on the notion of "text" and also embraces the dominance of language over image. This failure to recognize the visual image would make it difficult for hermeneutics to participate in the debate on images. Emmanuel Alloa criticized the subordination of the image to text by advocating for a necessary reconstruction of the relationship between the verbal and the visual. He says that iconology considers the image in terms of its legibility, i.e., it must be read in light of a supposed textual reference hidden within it. These textual assumptions of iconology, he argues, renew the subordination of the iconic to the discursive. Although his critique targets iconology, it would apply to theories of interpretation in general⁷.

Alloa warns against thinking that the heuristic power of the image depends on its discursive character. This suggests a "textualism" whose problem is seeing the image as an object extracted from discourse. If the text is the object privileged by hermeneutics, then the pictorial work of art, as Michel says, becomes the neglected object. His intention

⁷ Paul Ricoeur's theory of metaphor, for example, remains at the level of the conflict between the paradigm of language and that of the image. His theory of metaphor does not alter the dominance of language over images. In addressing the tension between the verbal and visual elements of the metaphorical statement, Ricoeur does not consider the "image" autonomously. See Ricoeur 2000: 323–326. This view, however, must be revised in the light of the publication of *Lectures on Imagination*, a posthumous book in which he discusses works of art as examples of the productivity of imagination. His theory of fiction offers the means to expand his hermeneutics to the visual. I compared Ricoeur's theory of metaphor and Gottfried Boehm's hermeneutics, which is more open to visual images "outside" language, in Sanfelice (2025).

to go beyond the text is just as important as considering interpretation from a holistic approach. He criticizes the hermeneutics that uses the image merely as a pretext for discourse, seeking instead a hermeneutics that does justice to images. A fundamental question in this search is, "Does hermeneutics, originally derived from texts, have the resources to interpret an image that is not *textualized*?" (Michel 2023b: 16). He directs his response and his critique of the subordination of the image to text towards the work of art.

The integration of images and visual works of art into the realm of a pragmatist hermeneutics depends on this question, as does the reflection on the similarity between hermeneutic techniques for deciphering texts and the method of iconology. Michel points out the historical limits of this method, which is mainly valid for Renaissance art⁸, and argues that an iconological version of hermeneutics seeks to decipher literary themes in paintings and inherits techniques from textual hermeneutics. He warns that hermeneutics cannot be limited to iconographic interpretation, nor can it reduce pictorial images to a "historical document" that reveals these themes. Hermeneutics is also concerned with the interpretation of the literal or pre-iconographic meaning.

Michel shows why iconology, hermeneutics, and pragmatism benefit from the articulation between the description and interpretation of works of art. He proposes a dialogue between the analytical philosophy of art and iconography to defend gradual forms of comprehensive description that allow for better interpretation⁹. He also

⁸ See: "However, it must be acknowledged that other periods and other artistic movements [beyond the Renaissance and Classicism] clearly resist the pre-iconographic, iconographic, and iconological method, when there is no longer any history, no more characters, no more hidden meanings, even before abstract or conceptual art, starting with certain Dutch landscape paintings. Does the sidelining of iconology for entire sections of art history necessarily lead to the failure of hermeneutics?" (Michel 2023b: 16).

⁹ The central distinction here is between "thin" description and "thick" description. The former is a minimal account that does not question the meaning; the latter adds

analyzes a critique of iconology's tendency to explain works based on their textual sources. According to this critique, iconology has "[...] quickly abandoned the terrain of iconography, of the interpretative description of the image itself, in favor of its literary explanation. [...] In short, iconology is 'made for the blind'" (Michel 2023c: 39). Michel then presents the stages of analysis of the iconological method: starting with the pre-iconographic description of the primary or factual meanings of an image, followed by the iconographic analysis of secondary meanings, where knowledge of classical texts is essential to discover the literary sources of the images¹⁰. However, the pre-iconographic description would already be "[...] an interpretative description if we consider that this reflexive operation is far from being carried out spontaneously" (Ib.).

details about what is being described. According to Michel, thick description can be interpretative and enriches thin description, which supports it and allows for minimal objectivity. Between them, "there are gradual forms of comprehensive description". Michel advocates progressions toward the best interpretation, but the more detailed the description, he argues, the greater the risk of contradictory interpretations. How do we know which is epistemologically better? He thus enters the debate on the criteria for deciding between conflicting interpretations. "Interpretative pluralism" stands out: a plausible interpretation must be supported by a true description. However, "[...] this position alone cannot define the epistemic status of description, much less of interpretation or thick description." Michel 2023c: 34. How can relativism be reconciled with the theory of "restricted interpretation"? How can a pragmatist perspectivism be sustained without abandoning the epistemic question? Michel acknowledges the virtue of "interpretative pluralism", but he states that description relies on the logic of bivalence, meaning it is either true or false: "[...] for an *interpretation to be plausible*, it must be compatible with a *true description*." Michel 2023c: 33. The support of interpretation in description is close to Ryle's distinction, where thick description relies on thin description. However, argues Michel, "a description can be incomplete or partial without being false." Michel 2023c: 34. Pächt's unrestricted interpretationism, from which he analyzes iconology, confronts Michel's theory of restricted interpretation as suspensive, mediated, and reflexive understanding.

¹⁰ Finally, there is the iconological interpretation itself, which "[...] analyzes the worldviews and the symbolic, cultural, and historical forms in which images were produced. [...] the pre-iconographic level is already more than a thin description, as it requires the historian to relate motifs to a history of styles, that is, to the way objects and events were historically expressed in particular forms." Michel 2023c: 39. See also: "[...] the great interest of Panofsky's typology is that it allows for the demonstration of increasing layers of interpretation, with the most detailed description at the level of iconological analysis" (Michel 2023c: 39–40).

Iconology, says Michel, shows the increasing degrees of interpretative layers. Finally, he denies that Panofsky is “blind to images” and that he interprets a work solely through its textual sources. This would apply to the iconographic layer, not the pre-iconographic layer. Hermeneutics and iconology may converge when analyzing pre-iconographic or literal elements of an image, and perhaps they could complement each other when they go beyond that. By suggesting an “*icono-hermeneutics*”, Michel reinforces the openness of hermeneutics to the realms of aesthetics and the image. This is yet another way to direct it towards the interpretation of works of art and engage in the debate about its place among art and image theories.

3. Interpreting works of art: when problems arise

If Michel previously clarified the definition of inhabited space in terms of what is “familiar” to us, in his study of works of art, he addresses works as objects that have the power to “defamiliarize”. Works of art disrupt our references and habitual modes of understanding. They are defined as the category of things and beings that, as Michel puts it, “[...] demand more than any other an interpretative effort due to their potential for plurivocity” (Michel 2023a: 26). He addresses the plurivocality that would be the *raison d’être* of the work of art, i.e., its ability to evoke multiple interpretations.

The interpretation of works of art is considered based on the distinction between two scales: the ontological scale, whose problem is defining what constitutes a work, and the denotative or representational scale, whose problem is the apprehension of the work’s meaning and the interpretation required for that apprehension. For the first scale, the primary author of reference, especially in contemporary art, is Arthur C. Danto. He proposed a type of interpretation, called “surface interpretation”, as a condition for defining an object as a work. His theory, Michel notes, is primarily

concerned with the categorization and classification of works; it is therefore a descriptive ontology of the work of art. The work differs from an ordinary object that is visually identical to it by an act of "naming", a form of interpretation akin to baptism, in Danto's analogy. In his terms, it is the "transfiguration" of an ordinary object into a work of art.

Michel's interest, however, extends beyond the ontological scale, where we need to determine if we are dealing with a work of art, to include how interpretation is demanded. He highlights difficulties in Danto's theory, particularly regarding the actual demand for interpretation. Michel presents a pragmatist objection to it: when a visitor is in a museum, for example, the question "Is *this* a work of art?" does not generally arise. In these cases, an interpretation that would constitute the work is unnecessary; it is not a case of "transfiguration"¹¹. He emphasizes the presupposition that a problem of meaning must exist for this need to arise. In short, works that require mediation through a theory would be the exception rather than the rule.

Another criticism of Danto's theory of art concerns the interpreter who performs the "transfiguration" of the ordinary object into a work of art. In this theory, it is the artist who validates and confirms the work. The artist grants the status of a work of art based on their intention, and they also assume the role of fixing "[...] the correct interpretation of what is represented in their work. The artist's interpretation intervenes on both the ontological and denotative levels" (239). Receptive interpretation, that of the spectator, should therefore

¹¹ "Why do we understand it spontaneously, without needing to interpret it? Because these objects are inscribed in spaces and contexts of meaning specifically dedicated to art. [...] To take up Danto's example, in a museum, a black paint stain is immediately understood (without interpretation) as a painting. Strictly speaking, it is not interpreted in its ontological status as a work of art, even if it can be, as we shall see, in terms of its potential for denotation or suggestion" (Michel 2023a: 228).

be based on creative interpretation. To evaluate this notion of interpretation based on the artist's intentions, Michel presents Danto's analysis of the painting *The Fall of Icarus*¹². Michel argues that there is no ontological question here: Brueghel's painting is a work of art. On the denotative level, however, the analysis shows how the painting's title guides our interpretation to a detail without which the meaning of the painting would be lost. For Michel, this suggests the artist's intention to guide the viewer to the myth of Icarus. The pictorial detail of the upturned legs (Icarus drowning), almost hidden, is the central theme of the painting. Therefore, it is necessary to interpret based on this indication provided by the artist, an interpretation that transforms the bucolic scene into a tragic scene.

According to Michel, the problem is that Danto's theory confuses the ontological scale and the representational scale, which do not involve the same issues. The case of Brueghel's painting is not the same as that of Duchamp's *ready-made*, *Fontaine*, in which the ontological scale was involved from the start. This criticism, therefore, concerns the essential function of the artist on both scales. Without denying its relevance, the artist alone does not transform the common

¹² The two aspects of Danto's theory – interpretation constitutes the work of art; the interpretation that counts is that of the artist – are linked by a distinction between "deep interpretation" and "surface interpretation", which Danto used to attack hermeneutics. He rejected this "dread hermeneutic circle", which he saw as a source of interpretations that ignore the author as the "agent and authority" of the work. Instead, the "correct" or "surface" interpretation adheres to this principle. Michel enters the discussion on the dual role of the artist as both creator and interpreter, although he does not analyze the distinction proposed by Danto in "Deep Interpretation". This distinction would not work for Danto's own theory and practice, as Peg Brand and Myles Brand have shown. This analysis would reinforce Michel's proposal to distinguish between the ontological and representational scales. The assumption that the "incorrect" interpretation, in disagreement with the artist's intentions, "reverses" the transfiguration of the work of art would support his argument about the situation of determining whether we are dealing with a work and, therefore, whether there is a demand for constitutive interpretation. Danto criticized hermeneutics and Ricoeur's notion of the symbol, despite the similarity between Ricoeur's theory of fiction and Danto's statement that "to interpret means in effect an imaginative restoration" Danto 1981: 705. This is what I argued in Sanfelice (2023b).

urinal into a work of art. Danto was aware of this need for conditions of reception and a historical context for transfiguration to occur. Michel shows that certain contexts are more conducive to analyses like Danto's, for example, when we have to interpret objects that have been decontextualized and gained the status of a work of art by being presented as such. Other contexts would be less conducive: when interpreting works that have a dual status, both artistic and religious. In the period before the Renaissance, and in cases of contemporary art, this theory does not work as well¹³.

Michel shows how to achieve a more precise notion of the interpretation of works of art by considering the phenomenon of the "inverse transfiguration of works of art". This involves reflecting on works that have lost their status and become common objects. The analysis of the *Apocalypse* tapestry (from Angers) helps think about this ontological question. During the French Revolution, the tapestry was cut up, and parts of it were used as rugs and to cover trees. Some parts were lost, and it wasn't until the mid-19th century that the remaining fragments were gathered and restored. For Michel, this shows that the ontological status of a work is neither fixed nor immutable – it depends on use, context, and appropriations and is never guaranteed. Furthermore, this status is not granted by the artist alone but also depends on contributions from institutions and traditions, which go beyond this individual level.

In addition to his criticisms of Danto's theory, Michel revisits the

¹³ According to Michel, interpreting Paleolithic art, for which we have no access to the "artists", requires a "restricted interpretation". This case is analyzed in detail. "Our objective here is to show that it is *receptive interpretation*, and not *creative interpretation*, that will determine whether these objects are categorized as works of art. Each 'receptive theory' projects, according to its frameworks of evaluation and perception, its matrices of meaning (disciplinary, cultural, historical) onto things as works of art." Michel 2023a: 247. Other cases mentioned by Michel include periods in which the notion of the artist as a singular creator does not exist, as well as artistic movements, such as "art brut", where an institutional theory better explains the transfiguration of the object into a work of art.

proposal of “restricted interpretation.” To state today that *Fontaine* is a work of art would be tautological. The theory of “restricted interpretation” presupposes that these factors, such as usage, context, and acquired experience, help guide interpretation at the ontological level. This proposal already enriches hermeneutics by clarifying its relationship with essentialist theories of art. On the denotative scale, Michel reintroduces the idea of the work of art as an object whose vocation is to be interpreted. He states:

Every work of art tends to require interpretation in its representational, denotative, and suggestive dimensions. The main reason supporting this hypothesis is that a work of art, at least if it is ontologically pre-understood as such, carries a plurality of meanings, a play on meanings, and multiple references that demand interpretative work more than any other object (Michel 2023a: 258).

But if any work of art, even minimalist art, involves working on meaning, what kind of interpretative work is that? The answer will come from the distinction between the ontological and representational levels. The claim of a universal demand for interpreting works of art does not jeopardize the theory of “restricted interpretation”; it remains valid that works of art need specific interpretative techniques, but it is not always a matter of determining whether we are dealing with a work of art. Moreover, these techniques do not always involve the “unveiling” (*dévoilement*) of meaning or a hermeneutics of suspicion¹⁴. Even when

¹⁴ Michel criticizes the reduction made by Susan Sontag in her article “Against Interpretation”, specifically the identification of interpretation with a hermeneutics of suspicion. It is important to remember, Michel argues, that techniques such as contextualization, explanation, translation, etc. are also part of hermeneutics. However, before criticizing, he acknowledges the fairness of Sontag’s thesis when aimed at abusive, “archaeological” interpretation that destroys; “it digs ‘behind’ the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one”. Sontag 1966: 4. Both Sontag and Michel emphasize the importance of experiencing a work, making the experience real without “taming” it. Another factor influencing this emphasis on the experience of the work is Michel’s recognition of the role of emotions and a “logic of sensations” in interpretation. He emphasizes the importance of not reducing this to or opposing it with the “logic of intellect.” On the contrary, Michel argues for the need to dialectically

it is a matter of determining whether we are looking at a work of art, both creative and receptive interpretation participate in "transfiguration". The discussion of Danto's analysis of *The Fall of Icarus* serves as an example: we already know that we are dealing with a work of art, and the technique used does not "unveil" a hidden meaning; on the contrary, it highlights a detail that seemed insignificant at first glance. However, it would be necessary to advance and develop, as Michel quotes, "[...] creative interpretations that open up potential meanings and at the same time enhance the logic of feelings: *interpret more to feel more*" (264).

The distinction between the ontological scale and the representational scale points toward how to interpret a visual work of art: recognizing the type of interpretation required, whether the transfiguration of an object into a work is necessary, and finding the appropriate technique for each situation. Therefore, there is a fundamental difference between Danto's theory of art and Michel's pragmatist hermeneutics. While the former proposes dividing interpretations between "deep" and "surface", where the correct interpretation is that of the artist, the latter theory suggests restricting interpretation based on the appropriate treatment for each situation.

4. Conclusion

Restricting interpretation to cases where it is required is only a beginning, the starting point of the pragmatist transformation of hermeneutics. Michel's approach advances through a dialectic between the description and interpretation of works of art, as well as a dialectic

integrate the sensible and the intelligible in interpretation. See: "To dialecticize here does not mean that the sensible would be preserved only to be better surpassed by the intelligible, but that the detour through interpretation allows, in return, an increase in the affective potential of an image. Mediated, the sensible has certainly lost its original immediacy, but it has gained in intensity." Michel 2023b: 24. I addressed some aspects of Sontag's critique of hermeneutics and Ricoeur's theory of metaphor in Sanfelice (2023b).

between the sensible and the intelligible in image interpretation. His article on the description of works of art is exemplary for indicating this transformation: it allows for the tolerance of incompatible interpretations, provided they are plausible, without abandoning the specific epistemic regime of this category of objects. Michel also acknowledges that this regime is one among others and that other modes of interpretation are necessary for the “creative refiguration of the work”.

In his most recent work, *Lire les images* (2025), Michel reaffirms his commitment to the hermeneutics of the “long path” through methodological detours that will enrich it. By focusing on the interpretation of art images, he demonstrates that “problems of meaning”, which require interpretation, apply not only to discourse but also to images and, more specifically, to works of art. A separate study would be needed to follow him through the challenges that a hermeneutics of art confronts, the greatest of which is the “silence” of this tradition concerning images¹⁵. By persisting in the “long path” of hermeneutics, Michel seeks to expand the articulations between methods of interpretation, that is, to “dialecticize” antagonisms without erasing the polarities that make the experience before images something unstable yet rewarding¹⁶.

What this long and distinctive path ultimately reveals is that the

¹⁵ This concerns the privilege that tradition accords to discourse and text. By transposing hermeneutical methods employed in iconology and art history – particularly philological work – Michel seeks to establish a resonance between images and texts. He aims to make images “readable” while acknowledging that they resist textualization and discursivity. Moreover, interpretation would characterize the experience of “being affected” by the image without ever confusing or subordinating the logic of sensation to the logic of interpretation. See Michel 2025: 311.

¹⁶ *Lire les images* demonstrates the importance of Gadamer’s hermeneutics for the interpretation of images, as the latter constitutes an exception within the hermeneutical tradition. However, this “ontological path” still seems to Michel too short, as it “goes directly to the being of the image.” He therefore opts for the long path – the methodological one – following “in the footsteps of Paul Ricoeur”. See Michel 2025: 312.

"recreation" of works of art through productive interpretation lies within reach of a hermeneutics that seeks to renew itself with each image. Expanding hermeneutics becomes a requirement that the work of art itself imposes on the interpreter by presenting them with a problem of meaning. This expansion should be viewed from a creative perspective, which means moving away from the idea that works of art and images are texts in which meanings are inscribed and easily readable. The creation of meaning demands interpretative techniques; thus, transforming hermeneutics through the pragmatist approach proposed by Michel contributes to renewing and updating this tradition. Before becoming part of a tradition, interpreting is a daily task. Michel's work on the notion of interpretation invites us to evaluate theories of art according to their ability to contextualize and decontextualize the work of art. His work reminds us that the interpreter's situation unfolds according to their horizon of meaning and includes the "world of art" that imagination projects in order to expand this horizon. The act of interpreting constitutes us as beings of this horizon, and we must not forget the pragmatic nature of interpretation. Preserving this dimension renders the transformation of hermeneutics imperative for contemporary hermeneutics.

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