Hermeneutics and Consumer Research

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This article reviews the nature of hermeneutic philosophy and the assumptions and features of a textual interpretation consistent with this perspective. The relationship of hermeneutic philosophy to the interpretive and critical theory traditions in consumer research is also discussed.

The term “hermeneutics” and related derivations have appeared with increasing frequency in consumer research (App. A). Although these terms have most often appeared in studies taking an “interpretive approach” (Hudson and Ozanne 1988), the relationship of hermeneutics to this approach remains obscure. Moreover, the questions, What is hermeneutics? and Does hermeneutics have a unique contribution to make to consumer research? remain unanswered. This article attempts to answer these questions and, in the process, follows Hudson and Ozanne by identifying differences among interpretive approaches.

Hermeneutic philosophy is concerned with the interpretation of understanding (Bernstein 1983; Bleicher 1980; Gadamer 1989). This philosophy holds that understanding has an ontological status. It emphasizes that all understanding is linguistic. Furthermore, hermeneutic philosophy explores how the subject-object dichotomy may be bridged by an interpreter engaging the “other” through a reading that is grounded in, but not determined solely by, the interpreter’s [pre-understanding.

The relevance of hermeneutics to consumer research is threefold. First, in purporting to understand understanding itself, philosophical hermeneutics is basic to any scientific or scholarly endeavor. The concept of [pre-understanding accounts not only for existing theory and research findings but also for the knowledge that researchers as subjects share with the human objects of their inquiry.


Finally, hermeneutic philosophy can be shown to have distinct implications for approaches to consumer research, although hermeneutic philosophy is not strictly associated with one particular method. Of particular relevance are the concepts of [pre-understanding, the hermeneutic circle, the fusion of horizons, self-understanding, and the ideal of the dialogic community.

In support of the preceding claims, we provide an account of major themes in hermeneutic philosophy. We include a brief historical sketch and a summary of the tenets characterizing hermeneutics. We discuss the similarities between hermeneutic philosophy on the one hand and certain interpretive approaches and critical theory on the other. Finally, we outline a research approach consistent with hermeneutic philosophy, compare it to other emergent approaches, and illustrate it with two interpretations.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW
OF HERMENEUTICS

The meaning of hermeneutics has evolved over time as understandings of understanding have grown and changed. This section briefly highlights this evolution, although the meaning of some of the developments may not be apparent until the discussion is expanded in later sections. Furthermore, while the various meanings are presented sequentially, it is emphasized that no version ceases to exist. Proponents of each might be found today, and later views incorporate elements of their predecessors. “There does not exist a general hermeneutics, that is, a general theory of interpretation, . . . there are only various separate and contrasting hermeneutic theories” (Thompson 1981, p. 46).

The term “hermeneutics” derives from Hermes, messenger of the Greek gods, who announced messages

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verbatim to mortals and made them understandable. The implication is that hermeneutics has two tasks: to determine what a text has to say and to provide instruction about what to do (Bleicher 1980, p. 12).

An important influence in the development of hermeneutics was the practice of exegesis, the determination of divine meaning in sacred texts through close reading. As a consequence, a "hermeneutical method" developed in the context of religious studies. This method is summarized in a Reformation account of biblical hermeneutics in which the interpreter is instructed to analyze a passage's grammar and to consider the passage in the broader contexts of the complete text and the felt experience of Christian life (Bleicher 1980, p. 12). The significant development here is the recognition that individual textual components have to be dealt with as part of a larger whole.

Hermeneutics was, in time, generalized to a theory of textual interpretation not restricted to religious works. The nearly unanimous opinion of pre- and early-twentieth-century hermeneutic thinking was that, if an interpreter followed prescribed procedures, it was possible in principle to determine an "objective," immutable meaning either as intended by the author or as contained in the text. This form of hermeneutics is known as "hermeneutic theory."

A contemporary proponent of hermeneutic theory is Emilio Betti. Influenced by, among others, the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, the linguist Wilhelm Dilthey, and the linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt, Betti (1980) identified "meaning-full forms" (p. 53) in which the mind of the other has objectified itself. The task of the reader or listener is to re-experience, re-recognize, and re-think (Verstehen) what the other originally felt or thought (Bleicher 1980, pp. 110–112). Betti formulated a set of "hermeneutical canons" to facilitate this process of interpretation and argued that, when the meaning-complex or "objective" knowledge is acquired through interpretation, understanding occurs at intellectual, emotional, and moral levels. Misunderstanding occurs, he suggested, with increases in space and time between the author and reader.

"Philosophical hermeneutics" developed through the middle to late twentieth century and was very much a consequence of Martin Heidegger's Sein und Zeit (published in English as Being and Time) and Hans-Georg Gadamer's Wahrheit und Methode (published in English as Truth and Method). In contrast to hermeneutical theory, philosophical hermeneutics took the position that interpretations are not decidable (Connolly and Keutner 1988). In other words, understanding is not the objective re-cognition of an author's intended meaning. Instead, understanding is a practical task in which the interpreter is changed by becoming aware of new possibilities of what it is to be a human being.

Another aspect of philosophical hermeneutics that is different from hermeneutical theory is a movement away from an epistemology of subject-interpreting-ob-ject—a legacy of Cartesian subject-object dualism. Instead, attention shifts to an ontology of the interpreter in the continuous act of coming-into-understanding.

"Critical hermeneutics" emerged in response to philosophical hermeneutics. It is closely related to critical theory (see Murray and Oznan 1991) and diverges from philosophical hermeneutics most notably in its recognition of systemic distortion of pre-understanding (i.e., false consciousness) and in its use of analytic procedures (e.g., psychoanalysis, neo-Marxian analysis) to remove this distortion. Jürgen Habermas (1980) and Karl-Otto Apel (1984) argued that uncritical acceptance of pre-understanding could perpetuate the exclusion of past suppressed interests. Furthermore, the recognition of the linguisticity of understanding by philosophical hermeneutics does not acknowledge that language is also a medium of domination. Thus, the critical thinkers developed theory and techniques that address power interests and systemic distortions of understanding.

The most recent version of hermeneutics to emerge is "phenomenological hermeneutics." It is claimed by its proponents to bridge hermeneutical theory, philosophical hermeneutics, and critical hermeneutics (Bleicher 1980; Valdés 1987). Based primarily on the work of Paul Ricoeur, phenomenological hermeneutics mediates between a recapture of an objective sense of the text and an existential appropriation of its meaning into understanding. Semiotically structured analyses that show how the text works and what it says before this sense of it is used to give insights into the interpreter's own situation.

In our account of hermeneutic philosophy, we emphasize philosophical hermeneutics informed by certain insights from critical and phenomenological hermeneutics. We describe the tenets of hermeneutic philosophy and show how these relate to implicit or explicit assumptions of critical theory and various interpretive approaches.

**TENETS OF HERMENEUTIC PHILOSOPHY**

[Pre]-understanding and Prejudice

A concept emphasized in hermeneutic philosophy is [pre]-understanding. It has also been described as prejudice or pre-judgment. [Pre]-understanding follows from the recognition that prior to any interpretation, we and the object of our interpretation exist. In advance of any reflection, we belong to a cultural world. Heidegger designated this relationship "being-in-the-world" (Bleicher 1980, p. 118, citing Heidegger 1949).

The implication of being-in-the-world is that the interpreter and that which is interpreted are linked by a context of tradition—the accumulation of the beliefs, theories, codes, metaphors, myths, events, practices, institutions, and ideologies (as apprehended through
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language) that precede the interpretation. While taken for granted, ordinarily unnoticed, and never made fully explicit, tradition nonetheless weaves together the interpreter and that which is interpreted. Even prior to interpretation, the inherence of tacit knowledge becomes apparent because of the tradition that they mutually know and constitute.

Philosophical hermeneutics stresses that [pre]-understanding enables rather than constrains the interpreter. In anyone’s experience, things are either familiar or strange only because there is a starting or reference point, or what Gadamer (1989) termed “prejudice.” Prejudice is not necessarily unjustified or erroneous. In fact, prejudice is our window on the world, our base for recognition and comparison. Without prejudice, it would not be possible to make sense of the events and objects we observe or to find meaning in the words and actions of others.

[Pre]-understanding or prejudice is continually being realized and worked out. In the trial-and-error, dialectic nature of inquiry, [pre]-understanding’s adequacy to encompass the subject matter is continually tested. When things, events, objects, words, or actions seem alien, puzzling, or contradictory, [pre]-understanding is challenged to change.

The [pre]-understanding of consumer researchers is found in two interrelated traditions—experience as a consumer and experience as a researcher. If we, for instance, knew nothing about modern stores, complex arrays of merchandise, of the artistry and imagination that inform advertising, or of the complex emotions associated with gift giving, we could not begin to make sense of the many phenomena we study. Philosophical hermeneutics counsels us to capitalize more fully on [pre]-understanding rather than trying to put it aside when we take up research.

[Pre]-understanding also results from knowledge of accumulated theories and research findings concerning consumer behavior. Our theoretical knowledge of attitudes, learning, socialization, and other consumer behavior concepts gives us an additional basis for making sense of consumer behavior. We acknowledge that the enterprise of seeking such insight is shaped by our particular temporality, socially, and culturally conditioned [pre]-understanding of our subject and of science in general. We do not put this prejudice aside but instead use it to construct a coherent account.

Hermeneutics’ emphasis on [pre]-understanding is paralleled in the doctrine that informs Mick’s (1986) semiotics, some forms of structuralism (see, e.g., Hirschman 1988), and the more integrative forms of literary criticism (see Stern 1989). Semiotics “insists on an ongoing reflexivity where the researcher’s presuppositions—prior beliefs, theories, models, metaphors, etc.—are regarded as integral to the inquiry’s outcome” (Mick 1986, p. 208). Mick’s tutorial on semiotics stresses the importance of tacit knowledge, both as what shapes the researcher and as what the researcher seeks to learn about.

McCracken’s (1988) second step in the “qualitative research circle” (p. 29) of the long interview is the “review of cultural categories” (p. 32). This step involves a review of the researcher’s personal experience as it relates to the topic of investigation. Associations, incidents, and assumptions are identified and considered as the self is made an instrument of inquiry.

Other research approaches seem to regard [pre]-understanding largely as an obstacle to be overcome. In critical theory, [pre]-understanding is regarded with suspicion and is overcome if dogma is discerned. While naturalistic inquiry acknowledges that the research team is an instrument and that inquiry is not value free, some accounts advocate the use of external auditors and member checking. Prejudice is regarded as distorting the researchers’ apprehension of the informants’ reality; the researcher-as-instrument in this view is to function as a conduit for the meaning of the informants rather than as a co-constituent of that meaning. Similarly, in existential phenomenology, while it is acknowledged that multiple interpretations are possible, effort is made to bracket (hold in suspension) the researcher’s pre-interpretation.

Hermeneutic philosophers acknowledge the limitations in each person’s [pre]-understanding but place the emphasis on its enabling role and advocate drawing as consciously as possible on [pre]-understanding as a starting point for interpretation. Moreover, they do not believe it is possible to penetrate the subjectivity of the other and seek instead to move beyond the subject-object distinction in acknowledging that all understanding is a product, in part, of the interpreter’s [pre]-understanding.

Ideal of the Dialogic Community

An ideal to be striven for in hermeneutic philosophy is the dialogic community. A dialogic community shares [pre]-understanding mediated through language. The community is characterized by a sense of collective identity and by voluntary participation in purposive social action. This action is grounded in dialogue—conversation where participants listen as well as speak and accept other points of view as worthy of consideration (Bernstein 1983; Gadamer 1989, p. 385). They have the “good will” to try to understand one another.

The community plays both a constitutive and a regulative role. Through dialogue, the community collectively creates new understanding. As a part of this process, the community responds to emergent interpretations without subscribing to a correspondence view of truth. New interpretations are evaluated with
the goal of better taking up another’s perspective as opposed to deciding whether the statements are moving closer to or further from “Truth” (Valdés 1987, p. 55). The imperative in the term “regulative” is on being open to the other as opposed to performing a gatekeeper role.

Consumer research comes closest to the ideal of dialogic community in the “invisible college,” the give-and-take of an academic seminar, the exchanges in a conference special session, and the double-blind review process of a peer-refereed journal. In the case of a journal, the dialogic community is composed of the editor, members of the editorial board, occasional reviewers, and readers of the journal. Dialogue is represented in the submission of a manuscript and successive iterations of reviewer and author responses until consensus is achieved. Members of this community author new manuscripts and play a regulative role.

This tenet may be related to the assumptions underlying critical theory. In some versions of critical theory, the notions of “general symmetry” and the “ideal speech situation,” where all participants have an equal chance to engage in unrestrained discourse (see Murray and Ozanne 1991, pp. 132, 141–142), are directly related to the tenet of a dialogic community. These ideas are rooted in a common intellectual heritage—they share an emphasis on the linguistic nature of understanding and on the need for iteration in interpretation. The difference between the two traditions concerns the respective views of the dialogic community. Whereas hermeneutic philosophers focus on the constitutive creative potential of the dialogic community, the emphasis in critical theory is on the hazards of power differences in constraining dialogic interchange. Critical theorists regard general symmetry and the ideal speech situation as guides or standards that should be striven for but that cannot be sustainedly achieved. It is only when power differences are removed that critical theory acknowledges the reconstructive potential of the dialogic community. The idealism of hermeneutics is like that of liberal democracy; in the practice of both, the constitutive creative potential is not always realized, but this potential is realized with sufficient frequency to lend credibility to pursuit of the ideal.

The tenet of the dialogic community also bears some relationship to a methodological feature of existential phenomenology identified by Thompson et al. (1989): the “interpretive group.” They suggest that, among other benefits, a group effort at interpretation may be useful since a group may collectively see patterns not recognized by any single researcher. Although this is a methodological edict, it appears to point to an assumption of existential phenomenology (“people who share a common interest [may serve] . . . a recognition function” [Thompson et al. 1989, p. 141]) similar to an implication of hermeneutics (people who share [pre]-understanding are more likely to make similar interpretations of the same text. Conversely, people with different [pre]-understanding are more likely to create dissimilar interpretations).

The use of external auditors in naturalistic inquiry (Belk et al. 1988) or humanistic inquiry (Hirschman 1986), while apparently similar at the operational level to the idea of the dialogic community in philosophical hermeneutics, differs in a crucial way. External auditors are advocated in these approaches as a means of ensuring that “findings [flow] from the data rather than being imposed by the biases of the inquirers” (Belk et al. 1988, p. 456) or that an “interpretation is drawn in a logical and unprejudiced manner” (Hirschman 1986, p. 246). Philosophical hermeneutics does not regard [pre]-understanding as a constraint to be overcome; moreover, it would argue that “findings” should and must “flow from the interpreter” in the sense that the interpreter’s [pre]-understanding is a crucial element of interpretation.

**Linguisticity of Understanding**

Hermeneutic philosophy stresses that “language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs” (Gadamer 1989, p. 389). Through language, experience is filtered, encoded, and communicated in dialogue. It bridges past and present, interpreter and text; it conveys and propels tradition.

There is no perspective outside language from which to view language as an object (Bernstein 1983; Gadamer 1989, p. 452; Rorty 1989). Gadamer’s (1989) statement “Being that can be understood is language” (p. 474) implies that language always shapes and constrains our experience of the world. There is no world outside of language to be discovered with language as a tool; language is the world we know. This universality of understanding is always partial, and our language determines that partiality or horizon of prejudice.

Taking into account this linguisticity of understanding, Heidegger (1949) stresses that it is not possible to appropriate a text’s meaning by an attempt at neutrality. In advance of any interpretation, the interpreter belongs to the world and, as a consequence, has inherited [pre]-understanding mediated by language.

The assumption that understanding is linguistic is largely shared by the various language- or sign-based approaches to studying consumer behavior that include structuralism (Levy 1981), semiotics (Mick 1986), and some of the integrative approaches to literary criticism (Stern 1989). The linguisticity of understanding is not discussed in consumer research representations of existential phenomenology (Thompson et al. 1989), naturalistic-humanistic inquiry (Belk et al. 1988; Hirsch-
man 1986), or critical theory (Murray and Ozanne 1991).

Nonobjectivist

We share tradition, but we do not all share all elements of tradition. The world we know is the language we use. As a consequence, our pre-understanding sensitizes us to certain issues and not to others. The lens through which we view texts both highlights and obscures particular components. There is never any one, or objective, understanding of a text. Rather, there are many; no one understanding can embody all the elements of tradition.

This does not, however, mean that all interpretations are equally persuasive. The emergent consensus of the dialogic community confers greater authority on some interpretations than on others. The impossibility of an objective interpretation implies that, while some interpretations will be judged superior to others, multiple interpretations are possible, and no interpretation can ever claim to be final or correct (Madison 1989). Note that this means hermeneutic philosophy is not consistent with extreme relativism; rather, as Madison argues, it is consistent with our everyday understanding that "there is more than one side to every story" and that all understanding is perspectival.

To a greater or lesser extent, most of the research approaches being compared here to hermeneutics share this underlying tenet. In existential phenomenology, for instance, Thompson, Locander, and Pollio (1990) argue that "texts are always open to multiple interpretations" (p. 347); however, they stress that not all interpretations are equally adequate in describing respondent perspectives (the goal of existential phenomenology). Likewise, humanistic and naturalistic inquiry are based on non-objectivist assumptions. Hirschman (1986) observes that "research inquiry is inherently value-laden because researcher values inevitably influence the choice of phenomenon, choice of method, choice of data, and choice of findings" (p. 238). She states that "the humanist approach denies the possibility of discovering objective truth" (1986, p. 242). Similarly, Mick, in explicating semiotics, states that "objectivity is impossible; theories precede facts and interpretation precedes perception," and that "the cybernetic matrix of the symbol-human environment will not permit us to arrive at the truth" (1986, pp. 207, 209). And, while the literary criticism approaches outlined by Stern (1989) vary considerably, in few of them is there "one right reading" of a text. According to critical theorists, "facts cannot be separated from values" (Murray and Ozanne 1991, p. 131). Although reality is thereby socially constructed, it can then be objectified in constraining social structures.

Understanding

According to hermeneutic philosophy, understanding is not what we believe we learn about the other from the text. As we derive a sense of the text, our own self-knowledge is changed. As Ricoeur says: "To understand is to understand oneself in front of the text" (Ricoeur 1981, p. 143; emphasis in the original). Hermeneutic understanding is in part self-understanding, self-reflection, and self-development.

Interpretation of a text involves the explication, the clarification, and the working out of the possibilities of our existence as humans. We appropriate for ourselves new alternatives and project into our own lives their potential. "Thus it is true in every case that a person who understands, understands himself [or herself] (sich versteht), projecting himself [or herself] upon his [or her] possibilities" (Gadamer 1989, p. 260).

Hermeneutical understanding has an ontological status (Gadamer 1989, p. 293). The ontological status of understanding in hermeneutic philosophy refers to the nature of human beings, which is one of all trying to understand. We are in a continuous state of coming into understanding: "understanding is always in the process of being concretized" (Gadamer 1989, p. 476). Understanding is reflected in interpretation(s).

This insight is opposed to the position of hermeneutical theory that interpretation leads to understanding. Instead, "interpretation is the explicit form of understanding" (Gadamer 1989, p. 307).

In the continuous process of understanding, the boundary between subject and object is transcended. As researchers who are humans (and consumers), we are simultaneously trying to understand the other as well as be an other who is being understood. The stranger becomes familiar and is constituted into our comprehension of humanity (and consumption). Thus, hermeneutical philosophy moves beyond the dichotomies that surfaced in Enlightenment thinking between objectivism and relativism, mind and body, and subject and object (see Bernstein 1983).

This transcendence of the subject-object dichotomy has an important implication for what is meant by "self" in "self-understanding." The self is neither the object, for example, the informant, nor the subject, for example, the researcher. Following Apel (1984, p. 239), the self is the "ideal communication community." We can equate this meaning narrowly to the dialogic community and broadly to the human community to which we all belong.

Hermeneutic self-understanding is not a detached, pre-given theory, principle, or universal to be applied without change again and again to various issues (Gadamer 1989, p. 341). Instead, hermeneutical understanding is an action-oriented, practical-moral knowledge brought to, and derived from, a specific situation or problem. An example adopted from Gadamer (1989, pp. 310, 325) illustrates this aspect of hermeneutical understanding: a judge is required to render a judgment regarding an alleged violation of the law. The judge approaches the text of the law with [pre-understanding in the form of accumulated precedent, related judg-
ments, and past experience. In deciding the outcome of the case, the law is interpreted. [pre-J]understanding is modified, and understanding of the law is advanced. The meaning of the law and the meaning of the specific case are codetermined. This understanding provides the basis for [pre-]understanding for the next case. "We consider application to be just as integral a part of the hermeneutical process as are understanding and interpretation" (Gadamer 1989, p. 308).

Hermeneutic understanding is different from explanation (Apel 1984). Explanation abstracts from experience. Theoretical constructs are distilled from lived experience and linked together in a reductionist, Hem- pelian nomological net. Underlying causal laws and principles are assumed in the search for "Nature's Own Vocabulary" (Rorty 1982, p. 192). A hermeneutic perspective on understanding, by contrast, assumes many vocabularies, which include the vocabulary of explanation. Vocabularies are revised as new words and metaphors are formed and old ones die away. Explanation's vocabulary is seen to be just one more vocabulary for creating narratives by which humans tell stories about themselves.

This relationship between explanation and understanding is similar to the relationship between a map of a city and an inhabitant's description of the city (Packer 1985). A map abstracts city elements at a point in time and presents them as a related system of objects. An account of city life by an inhabitant is a reflection on the accumulations of discovery and experience. It is "a system of possibilities and resources, frustrations and obstacles, and two people will find both commonalities and differences in their accounts of it" (Packer 1985, p. 1092). Understanding brings to consciousness those possibilities of being that explanation, by reason of its abstraction, conceals and closes off.

Hermeneutic understanding is not the same as Verstehen. Verstehen is seeing "the world from an insider's perspective" (Hudson and Ozoanee 1985, p. 511). It assumes the ability to appropriate the life experience of the other: to relive it, reproduce it, coincide with it, and empathize with it. It has an "objective-idealist form" (Bleichner 1980, p. 271).

In contrast to Verstehen, hermeneutical understanding does not assume that a "true" meaning exists or, even if it did, that it could be apprehended. It is inappropriate to think of "somebody's own account of his [or her] behavior or culture as epistemically privileged" (Rorty 1982, p. 202). This account is just as much an interpretation as will be our account of his or her account.

Other "fallacious views" of hermeneutical understanding described by Ricoeur (1981, pp. 191–193) include trying to describe the original audience's understanding of the text such as would be done if we tried to describe how consumers of another era responded to an advertisement of that time. Another nonherme-

eutic view is that the meaning of the text is subsumed into the [pre-]understanding of the reader without changing that understanding. In hermeneutic understand-
ing, there must be observed some shift, change, or expansion of the horizon or frame of reference of the interpreter.

Hermeneutic understanding is partially consistent with that implicit in semiotics and structuralism, one of the integrative forms of literary criticism (see Stern 1989), and naturalistic-humanistic inquiry. For in-

stance, in Levy's (1981) use of structuralism, "a protocol in which a consumer tells the story of how the product is consumed can be examined for how the consumer interprets the consumption experience, what it tells about people related to consumption . . . and what the instance explains about the general nature of consum-
ing" (p. 50).

In this description, hermeneutic understanding could occur in either the experience of the consumer in a specific consumption-related instance ("how the consumer interprets the consumption experience") or when the researcher realizes an insight in working with the protocol ("what the instance explains about the possible nature of consuming"). The difficulty in being able to explicate the first kind of understanding, consumer self-understanding, is that we are removed from it by levels of interpretation. There is a first level of interpretation that occurs in the consumer's original experience. There is a second level of interpretation when the consumer recalls the experience for the researcher and creates the protocol. There is a third level of interpretation when the researcher interprets the protocol. Rather than claiming to have penetrated these dense layers of inter-

pretations to describe consumer self-understanding, it seems easier to describe what I (the researcher) or we (the research team) believe we (the dialogic or human community) have learned about the nature of consumer behavior. The researcher could say either "I think what we have learned here is that . . ." or "As compared to what our literature said about this phenomenon, our understanding has been revised as follows."

Naturalistic-humanistic inquiry likewise appears to be underpinned by different views of understanding, some of which are consistent with that of hermeneutics. For instance, Belk et al. (1988) note that the research team seeks to understand an activity from the perspec-
tive of the participants, and eventually moves from this to "themes that organize the way in which analysts and informants perceive" the activity (p. 458). Analytically organized themes would appear to be understanding of ourselves as consumers through the realization of other modes of consuming.

Hermeneutic philosophy's view of understanding is more at odds with that implicit in existential phenomenology. In this approach, the understanding that is sought is simply that of the "lived experience" of the individual (Thompson et al. 1989, p. 139) or Verstehen. Self-understanding seems neither explicitly nor implicit-

ly a part of the understanding that is to be achieved.
Similarly, in critical theory, it is regarded as possible to understand the perspective of the multiple "others" who are stakeholders in a concrete problem. Critical researchers "are successful to the extent that they come to see and talk about the world as the social actors do. . . . By grasping the social actors' view of the world . . . the researcher hopes to understand social action" (Murray and Ozanne 1991, p. 137).

IMPlications of Hermeneutic PHILOsoPhy for Consumer RESEARCH

Some researchers have referred to hermeneutics as a method that might be compared to phenomenology (see, e.g., Murray and Ozanne 1991, Fig. 1, p. 130). An important difference, however, is that, in comparison to those for phenomenology (see, e.g., Thompson et al. 1989), there exist no detailed and explicit guidelines for the hermeneutic method. Gadamer (1989, p. xxviii) emphasizes that his intent was not to elaborate a methodological procedure for the human sciences. Hermeneutic philosophy might be consistent with many alternative methodological approaches. For instance, Schouten's (1991) investigation of "selves in transition" and Belk's (1988) study of the "extended self" differ dramatically in methodological details. Yet both are highly consistent with hermeneutic philosophy. Both draw on pre-understanding to interpret a range of materials and both end up with new [self-]understanding. For instance, Belk suggests, "Our accumulation of possessions provides a sense of past and tells us who we are, where we have come from, and perhaps where we are going" (1988, p. 160; emphasis added).

Although there is no specific hermeneutic methodology, it is possible to identify and illustrate features of an approach to consumer research that are consistent with hermeneutic philosophy. These features concern the nature and autonomy of the text, semiotic-structural analysis, hermeneutic circle, fusion of horizons, and critical response. In the remainder of this section, we will describe each of these features and compare them, where possible, to the assumptions and features of interpretive and critical research. Table 1 adapts Murray and Ozanne's (1991) comparative framework to summarize and contrast these features.

Reference to McCracken's (1991) interpretation of the original version of Michael Jackson's Black and White music video (App. B) provides a convenient way of illustrating our exposition.5

5It should be noted that this interpretation was intended for a general audience rather than a scholarly one; it was published as a "think piece" in a daily newspaper, not as an academic analysis. Nonetheless, it serves to illustrate several aspects of a hermeneutic approach to a text.

Nature of the "Text"

The existential orientation of hermeneutic philosophy suggests that the texts to be studied will represent the contextualized personal expressions of an individual consumer. While early versions of hermeneutics would suggest that these texts be written, philosophical hermeneutics' emphasis on ontological understanding may lead to the study of a broader variety of textual forms. Forms originating with the consumer include interview transcripts, verbal protocols, and audiovisual recordings. Photographs and artifacts may also form the basis for an interpretation. McCracken's text is a music video. The common characteristic of these "texts" is the opportunity to be able to return to them again and again. Texts are "enduringly fixed expressions of life" (Gadamer 1989, p. 387, citing Droysen [1937, p. 63]).

In published consumer research, the texts most readily recognizable as candidates for hermeneutic assessment are those studied by linguistically based research approaches, such as semiotics, structuralism, and most types of literary criticism. A hermeneutic approach, however, could also be applied to the texts of interviews used as data in naturalistic-humanistic inquiry, existential phenomenology, and critical theory. The field notes collected in naturalistic-humanistic inquiry are, in effect, the first iteration of interpretation.

Autonomy of the Text

It is consistent with hermeneutic philosophy to believe that, once authored or recorded, a text assumes a life of its own. That is, it can lead to understanding that does not coincide with what the author or actor meant. It can generate insight that the author did not realize. This potential makes the interpretation much different than some "objective" re-cognition of the author's intended meaning. McCracken (App. B) acknowledges he cannot recover Michael Jackson's intended meaning in the violent smashing of car and shop windows, saying: "The significance of this? We can't know."

Methodological emphasis on the autonomy of the text is common to semiotic and structural approaches, and to text- and reader-focused and integrative forms of literary criticism (but not author-focused literary criticism). In naturalistic inquiry, texts are regarded as autonomous in that "there is no attempt to corroborate a respondent's description" (Thompson et al. 1989, p. 140); however, the text is not autonomous from its "author" in that it is precisely the author's unique perspective (their lived experience) that the analysis attempts to uncover. Similarly, in humanistic-naturalistic inquiry, the "texts" created are treated as representative of, not autonomous from, informants.

In critical methodology, texts may be regarded as partially autonomous. That is, as the critical researcher searches for "contradictions between intersubjective understanding and objective social conditions" (Murray
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<td>Initial stage</td>
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<td>Identification of a concrete practical problem</td>
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<td>Phenomenon’s boundaries are left open and</td>
<td>Identification of all groups involved with this problem</td>
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<td>Data collection stage</td>
<td>&quot;Bracketing&quot; of prior conceptions</td>
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<td>between the intersubjective understanding and the</td>
<td>determination of the horizon of the text—what it</td>
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<td>The awareness step: discuss alternative ways</td>
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<td>&quot;thick description&quot;</td>
<td>of seeing their situation with the repressed</td>
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<td>Content or textual analysis to yield an interpretation</td>
<td>The praxis step: participate in a theoretically</td>
<td>Fusion of horizons: recast [pre-]understanding to</td>
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<td>grounded program of action to change social</td>
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<td>Consensus of dialogic community</td>
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Source.—This table was adapted from Murray and Ozanne (1991, p. 136).

and Ozanne 1991, p. 136), the text (of an interview, for instance) may be regarded as a reflection of something more or different from that which the informant intended.

Semiotic-Structural Analysis

To account for the linguisticity of understanding, it is necessary to give close reading to the language (or other signifiers, such as pictures or gestures) of the text. Nonobjectivist semiotic and structural analyses serve this end (see n. 1). Semiotic analysis focuses on meaning-producing events (Eco 1976; Innes 1985; Sebeok 1976). A fundamental concept in semiotics is the sign—a symbol, icon, or index. The text is regarded as a system of signs and the analysis focuses on the relationships between the signs (syntactics), as well as the relationships between the signs and the objects to which they refer (semantics).

Structural analysis (Kurzweil 1980) is closely related to semiotics, especially in its identification of relationships between signs. Of particular interest are oppositional relationships, such as masculinity versus femininity, which rely for their meaning on their opposition to one another and which represent ways in which thinking is organized. Structuralists recognize that signs have many meanings; they limit the range of possibilities by seeking an inner logic on the basis of the distinctions drawn and relationships recognized between symbols used in human expressions.

In McCracken’s (1991) interpretation of Black and White, he analyzes both lyrics ("I don’t care if you’re black or white") and visual images ("We see a mesmerizing succession of men and women, perhaps 10 in all. By a trick of the camera, one face literally becomes another. A white woman becomes a black man, who becomes a white man, who becomes an Asian woman").
He parses the symbolism of these words and images in context of one another, stating “This is Ovid made contemporay. This is the new Metamorphosis. ... In a few seconds of video, all the distinctions of culture, race and gender disappear. Every difference is negotiable. We are all merely versions of one another.”

McCraekn also pays keen attention to opposites. He plays with the notion that, in this video, Jackson represents himself as having moved beyond the oppositional categories by which we traditionally define ourselves and others: “He is no longer black. He is not really white. He is no longer male. He is not quite female.”

The semiotic-structural aspect of the hermeneutic approach has, obviously, much in common with semiotics as described by Mick (1986), structuralism as outlined by Levy (1981), as well as by Hirschman (1988), and the structuralist form of literary criticism as summarized by Stern (1989). It is probably fair to say that a more detailed and technical semiotic-structural analysis would often be found in applications of these latter methodologies than would a hermeneutic analysis, since an explanation of the way specific sets of signs make certain meanings may be their endpoint. Semiotic-structural analyses as such are not a core element of existential phenomenology or naturalistic-humanistic inquiry.

Hermeneutic Circle

The idea of a hermeneutic circle, or iterative spiral of understanding, is central to hermeneutic philosophy. This idea has been widely seized upon by various interpretive researchers seeking to describe the back and forth, specific-general-specific movement of interpretation. The term “hermeneutic circle” represents the idea that the meaning of a whole text is determined from the individual elements of a text, while, at the same time, an individual element is understood by referring to the whole of which it is a part (Bernstein 1983). Specific elements are examined again and again, each time with a slightly different conception of the global whole. Gradually, an ever more integrated and comprehensive account of the specific elements, as well as of the text as a whole, emerges.

An individual element in the whole is not unlike a word in a sentence. By itself, the word may communicate little, especially since words have multiple meanings. In the context of a sentence, however, the sense of the word becomes apparent. In addition, the word contributes to the meaning of the sentence.

The objective of hermeneutic circling is to achieve an understanding free of contradictions. This is an important goal to achieve because contradictions are often overlooked as being minor errors or aberrations. The interpreter must persist until, eventually, an account is derived in which all passages in the text are woven into a coherent interpretation. At this point, it is often found that certain portions of the text, originally thought to be understood, have changed their meaning (Bernstein 1983).

In McCracken’s interpretation (see App. B), his first pass at interpreting the lyrics “I don’t care if you’re black or white” and the images of Jackson surrounded by Africans, Thais, North Americans, South Asians, and Russians is as follows: “At first glance, this looks like another cliche: rock musician calls for international understanding (yawn), Michael Jackson doing his version of ‘I’d like to buy the world a Coke.’” The notion that the video’s multiracial theme is a cliche reflects how McCracken’s [pre-Junderstanding shapes the way he approaches the text.

In the process of hermeneutic circling, however, McCracken comes to interpret the passage in a different way. In his revised interpretation, he realizes that Jackson “isn’t using these cultures as exotic. No, he skips from culture to culture because he now belongs in all of them.” He also appears to draw on this reinterpretation of the specific lyrics and images noted above when he summarizes his interpretation of the boundary-breaking message of the entire video by saying that Jackson “is experimenting in cultural definitions we may some day embrace.”

The dialectical tacking of the hermeneutic circle does not necessarily have to appear in the written interpretation. It appears in McCracken’s account as a useful rhetorical device. It is usually not so transparent.

The hermeneutic circle is also explicitly claimed to be a tool of existential phenomenology (Thompson et al. 1989, 1990). Semiotic-structural, literary criticism, and naturalistic-humanistic approaches may also incorporate iterative movements back and forth between elements of data and the entire body of data in creating an interpretation that is ever more complete. Critical researchers would be less likely to draw on circling techniques to resolve apparent inconsistencies or contradictions in data; they would tend more to regard these as evidence of the tensions between subjective understanding and objective social conditions (Murray and O’zanne 1991).

Fusion of Horizons

Both literally and figuratively, everything that is “visible” from a particular vantage point is the horizon (Gadamer 1989, p. 302). Both the interpreter and the text (representative of the other) have a horizon. It is in the fusion of horizons that the subject-object dichotomy is transcended.

The horizon of the interpreter is his or her [pre-Junderstanding. The horizon of the text is its sense discerned through semiotic-structural analysis and progressive iterations of the hermeneutical circle. The interpreter’s horizon is finite but neither limiting nor closed. When the interpreter moves or changes position through developing understanding, his or her horizon...
moves as well. Fusion of horizons implies that the horizon of the interpreter comes to encompass or integrate the discerned horizon of the text. In the process, [pre-junderstanding is changed until it is able to account for the sense of the text. [Pre-junderstanding becomes understanding.

This fusion of horizons is evident in McCracken's response to his interpretation of the video. He states (App. B): "Plainly this [loosening conventional definitions of culture] is a personal project for Michael Jackson. Something in his own biography made him wish to evade traditional gender and racial categories. But, just as plainly, something in us responds to this. The cultural categories of race and gender are constantly being written and rewritten in our society, and we marvel at his definitional versatility. In a changing society, he is a metamorph and, to this extent, an exemplar."

The implications of hermeneutics' emphasis on fusion of horizons and the breakdown of the subject-object dichotomy is that a hermeneutic interpretation makes statements about the collective "self." Geertz (1988) suggests research of this nature can "open (a bit) the consciousness of one group of people to (something of) the life-form of another, and in that way to (something of) their own" (p. 143). As Bernstein (1983) stresses, it is only through efforts to sharpen our understanding of the other that we gain deeper understanding of ourselves. The process of hermeneutic interpretation, then, does lead to generalizations of a sort. These generalizations will not be factlike statements or causal explanations of human behavior; rather, they will be reflexive insights not so much about the other as about a collective human community.

McCracken's conclusions (see App. B), on the basis of his interpretation, are that "We are all beginning to see that transformation will be the theme of the 21st century, which will force us out of the old pattern of stasis-change into continual change. The future will be a place of relentless transformation..." Michael Jackson is, in his way, an astonishing creator of culture. His Black and White gives us a glimpse of some of the remarkable things that await us in the next century."

Critical Response

The nonobjectivity of hermeneutics and the linguisticity of understanding mean there is no one single or correct interpretation (Gadamer 1989, p. 397). A hermeneutic interpretation, however, is similar to other products of human talent and will be subject to a range of accomplishment. How does the reviewer differentiate better from worse interpretations?

The reviewer's response to a hermeneutic interpretation is not unlike the critical review of an artistic performance (Bernstein 1983, pp. 124–125; Gadamer 1989, p. 191) and suggests several features. An artistic performance has both technical and artistic elements. Reviewing the conduct of the semiotic-structural analysis or the adequacy of the literature review would seem like judging technical ability. Responding to claims of understanding would be akin to judging artistic rendition.

This analogy suggests several points the critical reviewer might consider when responding to a hermeneutic interpretation:

- The interpretation must be coherent and free of contradiction. Themes must be documented. Observations should be supported with relevant examples.
- A command of the relevant literature will be evident. Tradition must be acknowledged.
- The interpretation should be comprehensible to the reading audience, given their pre-junderstanding. It should show "good will" by adapting to them and taking into account their world view.
- The interpretation should "enlighten." It is "fruitful" in revealing new dimensions of the problem at hand. "'What is evident is always something surprising as well, like a new light being turned on.' said Gadamer (1989, p.486). It yields insight that leads to revision of pre-junderstanding. This revision should be made quite explicit.
- The prose should be persuasive, engaging, interesting, stimulating, and appealing (McCloskey 1983). Allusions, metaphors, similes, and analogies serve hermeneutics well. The cultural literacy of the authors will be apparent.

The last points emphasize the rhetorical nature of a hermeneutic interpretation, and that the selection among alternative interpretations is a matter of argumentation and debate (Thompson 1981, p. 53). "And so we see that the rhetorical and hermeneutical aspects of human linguisticality completely interpenetrate each other" (Gadamer 1976, p. 25). Rhetoric is argumentation aimed at the dialogic community. It covers all modes of discourse that aim at persuasion and conviction (Madison 1989; Perelman 1989).

McCracken's (1991) interpretation of Michael Jackson's Black and White video is a good one on these counts. He draws explicitly on the words and images of the "text" to document specific themes. He creates an overall interpretation that is consistent and coherent. His prose is compelling as he leads the reader from an initial tendency toward jaded indifference through a grudging recognition of the nuances of the video's import to an enthusiastic appreciation. He addresses his intended general readership audience with both a terminology and a set of ideas to which they should easily relate, and builds on these ideas so as to draw his audience along with him to new insights. Whether, of course, these insights are "enlightening" to all members depends on their own pre-junderstanding.

Anyone attempting to evaluate a hermeneutic interpretation must accept that there may be a multiplicity of equally good or better readings. Different artists (or
even the same artist at different times) perform distinct, but equally compelling, renditions of the same score or script. In an analogous way, the same text can continue to lead to new sources of understanding (Gadamer 1989, p. 298). It is possible, for instance, that someone else’s reading of the Black and White video might attempt to make sense of those images that McCracken regards as “mystifying details of personal biography,” those where Jackson smashes the windows of cars and shops.

As a way of illustrating the possibility of multiple readings, we provide a second interpretation of Michael Jackson’s video (App. C). In contrast to McCracken’s idea of transformation, this interpretation reads the video as a vilification of the persistence of racism.

We believe the second interpretation provides a complementary illustration of the features of a hermeneutic interpretation. Following from the notion of the autonomy of the text, we do not claim Michael Jackson’s intention is to expose the threats of racism. In fact, with his wealth and power, it would be surprising if it were his aim. However, our structural analysis of the black-white opposition and our semiotic analysis of the black panther image and the physical actions in the latter part of the video lead us to see in the text a cry of outrage.

McCracken’s interpretation expresses more satisfaction with the status quo; our interpretation urges change. The understandings yielded by the two readings thus differ starkly, yet each is grounded in the same text and uses demonstrably similar interpretive techniques.

CHALLENGES TO HERMENEUTIC PHILOSOPHY

Any account of hermeneutics based on Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics faces opposition from critical theorists and others (see, e.g., Apel 1984, pp. xviii–xix). We provide an admittedly simplified account of these views and the responses of hermeneuticians.

One concern of critical theorists is that the hermeneutic interpreter is “subject to the false consciousness of pseudonormal understanding” (Habermas 1980, p. 191). Critical theorists believe false consciousness occurs because there exists a causal system of empirical contingencies (i.e., social structures) that lie outside of consciousness. Both text and [pre]-understanding may be imbued with classism, sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, and speciesism—that is, domination. This potential is recognized in “systematically generated mis-understanding recognized as such—without, at first, being able to ‘grasp’ it” (Habermas 1980, p. 191). On this view, the idealism of hermeneutics renders it “blind to the perception of material factors that assert themselves ‘behind the backs’ of social actors” (Bleicher 1980, p. 175). Instead of self-understanding, it generates self-misunderstanding.

The response of hermeneuticians to the criticism of vulnerability to systemic [mis]-understanding is based on the tenet of the linguisticality of understanding. Gadamer’s reply to Habermas would be that “in the mirror of language everything that exists is reflected” (Habermas [1980, p. 1987], citing Gadamer [1967, p. 118]). The idea that there is a truth outside the mirror of language is inconsistent with hermeneutic understanding. Truth is a property of sentences, and sentences are parts of a human language. Since human languages are human creations, so is truth (Rorty 1989).

“Who denies that our specific human possibilities do not subsist solely in language?” adds Gadamer. “One would want to admit, instead, that every linguistic experience of the world is experience of the world, not experience of language” (Gadamer 1989, p. 546). Even domination is experienced in language. Once encountered, it presents itself to ourselves to be appropriated into hermeneutic understanding and, in turn, to become the [pre]-understanding of a subsequent interpretation. An illustration of this point comes in the second interpretation of the Michael Jackson video (App. C). This hermeneutic interpretation is partially informed by insights that a critical perspective, such as that introduced to consumer research by Rogers (1987) and Murray and Ozanne (1991), might generate. As critical perspectives are introduced, they become part of our [pre]-understanding and are likely to influence subsequent interpretations. Critiques of ideology are now part of our tradition and may well inform subsequent research.

“We can no longer oppose hermeneutics and the critique of ideology. The critique of ideology is the necessary detour which self-understanding must take” (Ricoeur 1981, p. 144).

A final response of hermeneuticians to the criticism of vulnerability to systemic [mis]-understanding relates to the consequences of the semiotic-structural analysis. This analysis acts to distance the interpreter from the text by focusing attention on how it works and what it says. It is another “detour” (Ricoeur 1981, p. 158) prior to engagement with [pre]-understanding and a subsequent fusion of horizons. The semiotic-structural analysis creates a kind of maneuvering space in which the interpreter is challenged to find a revision to his/her [pre]-understanding, such that it encompasses the sense of the text. In this way, prejudice, preconceptions, and illusions are critically reviewed (Bleicher 1980, p. 234).

A second concern of critical theorists is the dialogically constituted nature of hermeneutic interpretations. They regard as unacceptably context-dependent an argument that merely convinces a given dialogic community at a given time. They hold to the ideal that there exists independently a best argument or way—the ideal that has constantly propelled Enlightenment science and liberal social thought (Rorty 1985). Habermas rejected the claim that the Enlightenment project was dead and elaborated a universalistic philosophy of rationality he called communicative action or competence—“action oriented to mutual understanding” (Bernstein 1985, p. 3).
Michel Foucault (see Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982) and Jean-François Lyotard (see Lyotard 1984) argue against any form of global theorizing and reject Habermas’s project. They see it as just another narrative, a “metanarrative,” because of its claim to generalize in a more comprehensive theory what was accomplished by Marx and Freud. They doubt that Habermas’s theory can provide universalistic criteria and succeed where transcendental philosophy and all other similar attempts failed.

No metanarrative is needed, says Rorty (1985), “What is needed is a sort of intellectual analogue of civic virtue—tolerance, irony, and a willingness to let spheres of culture flourish without worrying too much about their ‘common ground,’ their unification, the ‘intrinsic ideas’ they suggest, or what picture of [humankind] they ‘presuppose’” (p. 172).

This democracy of approaches has been adopted by some of those who have challenged hermeneutics. Apel (1984), for instance, legitimated the deductive-nomological and the critical-reconstructive, as well as the historical-hermeneutic, approaches. This “transcendental-pragmatic” perspective converges remarkably with that of Bernstein (1983), who advocated movement beyond the objectivism-relativism dilemma with a merger of science (as it is practiced), hermeneutics, and praxis (moral practice). It is also consistent with Ricoeur (1981), who mediates between an objective sense of the text and hermeneutic understanding. Note that, in each of these schemas, dialogically constituted hermeneutic interpretations remain an essential element.

The implication of this convergence is the basis of an argument for pluralism in consumer research, whether labeled “epistemic pluralism” (Madison 1989, p. 277) or “paradigmatic pluralism” (Sherry 1991, p. 572). In consumer research, positivist, interpretive, critical, and hermeneutic narratives can be sustained simultaneously.

CONCLUSIONS

This exposition of hermeneutic philosophy has attempted to clarify what is both a ubiquitous and an illusive term. It has also permitted a comparison of the assumptions and features of hermeneutics, critical theory, and various interpretive research approaches. Finally, it has allowed us to emphasize the relatively unique features of hermeneutic interpretation: [pre]-understanding, the linguisticity of understanding, the autonomy of the text, the hermeneutic circle, the fusion of horizons, and self-understanding. Research that is not hermeneutic does not reflect these features or the tenets of nonobjectivism and the ideal of the dialogic community.

The incorporation of these ideas in consumer research would enable researchers to draw more consciously, critically, and powerfully on their own [pre]-understanding of the everyday phenomena that we study. We often treat commonplace behaviors like bargain hunting, brand choice, and coupon usage as though we were not ourselves consumers. To be more explicit, drawing on and challenging our [pre]-understanding with regard to these phenomena, and regarding what we learn as insights into not only consumer behavior but our own lives as consumers, should serve to sharpen our instincts, heighten our humility, and increase our sense of moral ownership of the research that we do.

These insights can also extend into our lives as humans. Although our texts are about consumption, the self-understanding that is realized may involve family, community, and even the world to which we all belong. The reflexive nature of hermeneutics encourages us to consider our situation and to engage the dialogic community, no matter how broadly defined, with our insights. Hermeneutics makes us actors in the broader stage of social democracy.

Hermeneutic philosophy underdetermines the choice of methodological technique, the context of application, and the form of expression. Hermeneutic philosophy seeks to understand understanding as an ontological state, not to prescribe a method for interpreting texts in a set fashion. As such, it leaves the way open for methodological innovation in pursuit of the fusion of horizons and for paradigmatic pluralism as to what constitutes a legitimate form of expression. The method of hermeneutics is deeply democratic.

APPENDIX A

Hermeneutics Terms in Consumer Research and Sources

Hermeneutics Mick 1986, p. 207; Murray and Ozanne 1991, p. 130; O'Shaughnessy and Holbrook 1988, p. 197; Ryan and Bristor 1987, p. 191

Hermeneutic circle Hudson and Ozanne 1988, p. 510

Hermeneutical circle Thompson et al. 1989, p. 141

Hermeneutical approach Hirschman 1990, p. 51

Hermeneutic approach Holbrook and Grayson 1986, p. 374

Hermeneutic logic Holbrook 1988, p. 55

Hermeneutic analysis O'Shaughnessy 1985, p. 305

Hermeneutical tradition Hirschman 1988, p. 352

Hermeneutic fashion Thompson et al. 1990, p. 346.
APPENDIX B

Seeing the Future in Black and White

Last Thursday, all the world (well, about 500 million of us) tuned in to watch the new Michael Jackson video. We had to. After all, Michael Jackson's a wonder. He has sold more than 100 million records. A man with these numbers is important even when he's wrong. Even bad Michael Jackson is prime viewing.

The video *Black and White* is a funny mixture of elements. It begins with the silliest notion of rock 'n' roll: rock as scourge of the parent. This is the dumbest cliché and cheapest hook in an industry that excels in dumb and cheap. With beginnings as inauspicious as this, things look pretty grim. You knew the video couldn't get any worse. What, you wondered, if it didn't get any better?

The video's second theme was more promising. As Mr. Jackson sings and dances, he is magically transported from one culture to another. He is shown surrounded by Africans, Thais, North American aboriginals, South Asians and Russians. The lyric is "I don't care if you're black or white," and the theme is something like "cultural differences mean nothing in the face of human sameness."

At first glance, this looks like another cliché: rock musician calls for international understanding (yawn), Michael Jackson doing his version of "I'd like to buy the world a Coke." But then you get it. He isn't using these cultures as exotica. No, he skips from culture to culture because he now belongs in all of them. He is a fully international presence; all cultures are his province. One hundred and ten million records in the global village have seen to that.

The third theme is quite breathtaking. This part of the video is reputed to have cost $10,000 a second. It's worth every penny. We see a mesmerizing succession of men and women, perhaps 10 in all. By a trick of the camera, one face literally becomes another. A white woman becomes a black man, who becomes a white man, who becomes an Asian woman. Faces form and reform before your eyes. This is Ovid made contemporary. This is the new Metamorphosis.

No longer is Mr. Jackson flitting between cultures. He is dissolving them. And not just cultures. Now race and gender are dissolved as well. In a few seconds of video, all the distinctions of culture, race and gender disappear. Every difference is negotiable. We are all merely versions of one another. In the perfect mix of the Jackson video and the computer-controlled image, all men and women, all races, all cultures, are one.

This is not the first time Michael Jackson has warmed to the theme of metamorphosis. Indeed, you might say he has devoted his life to it. Growing up in the public eye, he was called upon to change continuously as music, clothing and a fickle public changed.

But then he left the Jackson Five, and the real changes began. As a result of plastic surgery and bleaching, he has undergone further, more extraordinary metamorphoses. The object of this seems clear enough. He has deliberately transcended traditional notions of race and gender. He is no longer black. He is not really white. He is no longer male. He is not quite female. He loosened the conventional definitions of culture and escaped.

Plainly this is a personal project for Michael Jackson. Something in his own biography made him wish to evade traditional gender and racial categories. But, just as plainly, something in us responds to this. The cultural categories of race and gender are constantly being written and rewritten in our society, and we marvel at its definitional versatility. In a changing society, he is a metamorph and, to this extent, an exemplar. Michael Jackson has made himself a laboratory. He is experimenting in cultural definitions we may some day embrace.

More than that, we are all beginning to see that transformation will be the theme of the 21st century, which will force us out of the old pattern of stasis-change into continual change. The future will be a place of relentless transformation. There is a creature in *Terminator II* that becomes whatever it touches, illustrating one effortless, metamorphic shape of things to come. Michael Jackson illustrates another.

The "metamorphic" part of the video takes his own preoccupation and turns it into something more public, into something like art. It's the only time the video addresses anything with larger proportions. But this brush with art is short-lived. No sooner have we glimpsed it than we are again driven into the mystifying details of personal biography.

Michael Jackson, transformed into and then out of the shape of a panther, enters a ghetto street. He begins to dance. The dance is, as it always is with him, a demonstration of virtuoso control of the body. He is marionette under its own flawless control. But then comes violence. Suddenly he begins to smash the widows of cars and shops. Perfect control of the body turned into an inability to control the social self. Suddenly, he becomes an agent of anarchy and destruction.

The significance of this? We can't know. The video has once again descended from the public into the private. Perhaps this virtuoso of control secretly hates control. Perhaps this master of order is an anarchist. In any case, the video contains private and cryptic sentiments, ones that have so offended the public that Mr. Jackson has promised to take them out.

All in all, *Black and White* is a puzzle. The parts that work are powerful. The parts that don't are dreadful. What we know is that Mr. Jackson is a key fabricator of the global village, that his music and personas will help construct the international culture of the 21st century.

Naturally, many of us are appalled at this. The idea that the new world order will be shaped by a man who has spent his life on the stage, lives as a recluse and
regards Elizabeth Taylor as a formative intellectual influence is not a happy one. But this is too harsh. Michael Jackson is, in his way, an astonishing creator of culture. His *Black and White* gives us a glimpse of some of the remarkable things that await us in the next century.


APPENDIX C

Black or White, Not Black and White

"It's not about races, it's about faces," sings Michael Jackson in his video *Black and White*. "I'm not going to spend my life being one color."

We watch with amazement as faces, male and female, black and white, Caucasian and Asian, blend into one another. These metamorphosing faces are a piece of cunning technological wizardry, which is typical of Jackson's sophisticated showmanship.

"It doesn't matter if you're black or white," he continues. We are persuaded that historical oppositions, such as those between races, are breaking down. Racial, gender, and ethnic boundaries can be transcended, not just between groups, but by individuals.

"Cut. That was perfect." says a voice on the video, signaling a conclusion to the music but not to the visual images.

The gender- and race-blending face sequence ends. Our gaze wanders, and we are startled to discover a black panther brooding in the corner of the studio. It appears tawt with silent rage. Discovered, the panther darts out the back door and down a flight of stairs. We follow it into a dark alley.

This new setting is definitely "off-stage." There is no music playing now. We are suddenly far from a clean and well-lit world of cheerful singing and dancing that celebrates the unimportance of racial boundaries. The only sound now is an occasional scream—or is that the panther's growl?—and the sound of the wind as it stirs up stray bits of newspaper. Steam rises from the sewer grate.

The panther metamorphoses into Michael Jackson. He begins to dance. At first the body movements are tightly controlled, almost as though Jackson were a puppet and some unseen hand controlled him. Jackson, despite his wealth and power, remains a black man. We see in his rigidity the shackles of social institutions constraining society's underprivileged groups. His "remote-controlled" dancing symbolizes the plight of those controlled by the strings of poverty, inadequate access to quality education and health care, and constrained job opportunities. Their fates are jerked about beyond their own control.

Jackson's movements are emblematic of one whose freedom is curtailed. He splashes up dirty water from a puddle—disturbing the smooth surface that belies a rank reality. He grabs his crotch, an aggressive taunt threatening physical harm. It says to us: "Hey! Fuck you!"

Jackson tap dances under a streetlight in a manner not unlike the famous "Singin' in the Rain" dance sequence. But there is an eerie difference. Instead of gentle music, we hear howling wind. And instead of hurling dexterously over and around objects, Jackson deliberately kicks things in his path.

Jackson smashes the windows of a car with his hands. He jumps on its hood and smashes the wind-shield. He hurls the steering wheel of the ravaged car through the window of a nearby building. We feel directly threatened by his actions.

The scene makes us think of what it is to be marginalized. Like malevolent marionettes, the oppressed respond to their constraints in ways that hurt others—and themselves. These behaviors are unacceptable, but what are the alternatives? How else is it possible to obtain a vestige of power and control in a consumer society where one can never fully partake?

The final sequence of images reinforces the pervasive feeling of anger and despair. The camera on Jackson's face shows him grimace, seemingly with pain. He rips his clothes, rubbing his hands over his body with eyes closed, an expression of anguish on his face. He falls to his knees in a puddle, his clothes in tatters, his face contorted. As the filthy water threatens to drown him, Jackson becomes the panther again. The lyrics "It doesn't matter if you're black or white" are repeated for the last time.

We attempt to make sense of the seeming inconsistency of this final portion of the video. Are we to conclude that the violation of social norms is a futile gesture? Hostile behaviors may express one's sense of oppression, but they offer no chance of moving beyond the indignities associated with the categories into which one is born. No matter what society wishes us to believe, it matters a great deal whether you are black or white. The choices are still more constrained, the access to the "good life" still restricted.

In this light, the initial portion of the video can be seen to be a wishful fantasy or a poignant satire. We are not moving toward an egalitarian utopia where the American dream is equally accessible to all. For those who are members of marginalized groups, equity is a laughable myth.

The video as a whole is threatening. We understand that, despite the optimistic rhetoric and images, oppression, particularly racial oppression, is pervasive; moreover, this oppression is breeding a violent backlash that threatens social order. It suggests to us that, unless racial and other forms of oppression are addressed, disruptive violence (like that which occurred in Los Angeles after the first Rodney King trial) will persist and grow. The image of the black panther, symbol of the militant black rights group, has connotations quite dif-
different from the pleasant message in the lyrics of the song. This may not be a message we all want to hear. The last segment of the video, which occurs after the music has ended and shows Jackson smashing cars and grabbing his crotch, was regarded as puzzling, inconsistent, and, above all, offensive by many of the millions who watched the video the evening it was first aired. In response to public outcry, Michael Jackson dropped the final portion of the video. All subsequent screenings have contained only the portion of the video that appears to support the message suggested by the lyrics.

Given the unpalatable nature of this message, it is not surprising so many of us rejected the warning by rejecting the portion of the video that delivered the disturbing news. Why do we find it so hard to face up to the truth?

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