

Deep Relationality and the Hinge-like Structure of History: Michael Fried's Photographs

Although I have written once before about Michael Fried's *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008)¹, in a short essay published as a 'Critical Commentary' in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*², I didn't there articulate (let alone attempt to answer) the question that his book raised for me more insistently than any other – the question of what conception of the nature of photography underlay its overlapping accounts of the various bodies and series of photographic works of art that it discusses.

After all, those accounts continuously declared Fried's conviction that some contemporary art photography could be understood only in relation to topics that determined the nature of pictorial modernism; and his influential account of modernist painting, and in particular of the value of the works of high modernism in American painting of the 1950s and 1960s, located it in the way such works acknowledged the essential features of their medium, and so its distinctness as one artistic medium amongst others. And even if that idea of the essence of a medium was, as it were, historicist – adverting not to the irreducible, ahistorical essence of all painting, but rather that which, at a given moment, is capable of generating (in both artist and audience) the conviction that the relevant work is a great painting, despite eg its refusal to provide representational content or traces of brushwork on the painted surface – it still involves the disclosure of some features as essential to its being a contemporary exemplar of that long artistic tradition, as opposed to any other. It would seem to follow that any photographs produced by artists understood to be grappling with the conditions of modernism would necessarily constitute acknowledgements of the essential nature of photography, and so must amount to disclosures of what essentially distinguishes photography from, say, painting (or video or cinema).

An immediate difficulty with this conclusion is that Fried's own account aims to disclose a deep continuity between modernist, and in particular high modernist, painting and the relevant strands of contemporary art photography; hence it appears to require that he apply a range of concepts (beholding, absorption, worldhood, objecthood, theatricality) whose sense had been worked out as part of working out how modernist painting acknowledged the conditions of its own medium to works of art that appeared to belong to a very different medium. A further difficulty is that the relevant photographic works were largely produced under a very different technological regime than that of analogue photography (involving the registration of light on film): both their scale and their content were a function of (sometime quite radical) advances in a variety of primarily digital photographic techniques (relating to the capture, manipulation and printing of the relevant images), and so they inevitably raised the question of whether the concept of a photograph, and so that of a distinctively photographic medium, still retained a univocal sense. Might not those differences of

¹ New Haven: Yale University Press – hereafter 'WPM'.

² Vol 51, No. 1: January 2011.

technology and technique even be sufficient to license the judgement that a photograph by Jeff Wall and one by Cartier-Bresson were essentially different kinds of object – even that what Wall calls a photograph is closer to a painting than it is to a photograph produced by analogue means?³

This might address the immediate difficulty I raised, although only at the cost of jettisoning Fried's patent conviction throughout his book that he is disclosing the nature of a new photographic regime rather than a new phase in a long (related series of) regimes of painting; but it would only heighten the bewilderment induced by Fried's apparent lack of interest in explicitly confronting this issue in his book. That is to say, although his discussion of a given photographer's body of work (or portion of a larger such body) always brings out the way in which it acknowledges some determining condition or conditions of its own possibility, he offers no general account of how each such condition relates to those acknowledged in other such bodies of work (that is, no account of what kind of work these contemporary works actually are, if indeed they are a single kind, as opposed to being each a kind unto themselves), or of how they stand – aesthetically and ontologically speaking - in relation to photographic works produced under analogue conditions.

It's worth emphasizing that this sense of something missing from Fried's account will persist even if one takes fully on board Wittgensteinian qualms about the universal pertinence of the *Merkmal* model of definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. For one might still reasonably expect the composer of this group portrait to say at least as much about the overlapping family resemblances making up the kind(s) of photographic artwork his book aspires to disclose as he did (and assigned great importance to being able to do) with respect to the evolving collective ontological self-understanding embodied in the kinds of modernist and high modernist paintings that formed the subject of so many of his previous writings. In this essay, I will attempt not so much to fill in this apparent lacuna in Fried's account as to explain why it might be thought to be merely apparent. In so doing, I will take my bearings from both my critical commentary and the longer essay on Fried's larger body of work that preceded it, although in ways that will also reveal certain limitations and unidentified possibilities latent in both⁴; and I will also try to take into account work that Fried has produced since WPM's publication.

1. *Portraits and Typologies*

Looking again at Fried's book, it now seems to me that he does in fact confront the frustrated expectation I have just articulated, or rather provides a justification for frustrating it, in the final chapter of the book itself – where he gives an account of the work of the Bechers,

³ This last suggestion is a possibility emphasized and exploited in Diarmuid Costello's fine essay 'On the Very Idea of a "Specific" Medium: Michael Fried and Stanley Cavell on Painting and Photography as Arts,' (*Critical Inquiry*, 34:2, Winter 2008, pp. 274-312), although in ways that differ significantly from (as well as overlapping with) the response canvassed in this paper.

⁴ That essay is 'Crimes and Deeds of Glory: Michael Fried's Modernism' in *British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol 41, No 1 January 2001, pp 1-23 – hereafter 'CDG'.

photographers of the highest interest in their own right, and extremely influential figures for many of the German photographers discussed in other chapters (Gursky, Ruff and Struth were students of Bernd Becher). Beginning in the 1960s, Bernd and Hilla Becher travelled extensively across Europe and the United States to photograph various structures – water towers, cooling towers, gasometers, lime kilns and so on – on industrial sites; using analogue cameras with long exposures or fine-grained film to capture real detail and depth of field, the resultant black-and-white photographs were taken from raised, head-on vantage points, with each structure’s environment cropped to a minimum but in such a way as to capture its rootedness in the ground. As their first book’s title indicates, their concern was typological: from each category of structure, they selected a small number of photographs and arranged them in a grid structure, whose point – as Fried emphasizes – is ‘above all comparative: the viewer is thereby invited to intuit from the... individual instances the latent ‘presence’ or operation of a single type and at the same time to enjoy a heightened apprehension of the individuality or uniqueness of the particular instances relative both to one another and to the latent or implied type’ (WPM, 309).

Fried interprets this typological concern in the light of Hegel’s distinction between the genuine or true infinite and its spurious or bad counterpart, which is designed to help us grasp the finitude or determinateness – call it the genuine individuality - of objects. By virtue of their typological mode of presentation, the objects depicted in the Becher’s work are made internally contrastive with one another, so that our perceptual mode of address to their individual instances is strongly but non-coercively structured or directed, both within a given group and between different groups. This format prevents us from attempting to perceive any individual object of a given type ‘in itself’, as it were: for so encountered, ‘the category of water tower would implicitly be contrasted with every other category of object, man-made and natural, large and small, opaque, translucent and transparent, solid, liquid and gaseous, and so on, to be encountered in the universe; and... *all* the specific features of that particular water tower... would in principle be equally important and moreover would implicitly stand in contrast with everything that might be truly predicated of every other object in the universe... (the water tower, one might say, would be a bare particular and nothing more, and so would every discernible feature of its construction)’ (WPM, 326). For Hegel, such bare particularity is chimerical – a fantasy of objecthood rather than its underlying essence. What the Bechers’ typological tableaux supply that is missing from what Fried calls a mere world of real things encountered in the course of everyday life ‘is a showing of the grounds of its intelligibility, which is also to say of its capacity for individuation, *as* a world. Or, as a *world*, one bearing the stamp of a particular stage in history’ (WPM, 327-8). For Hegel (or at least for Pippin’s Hegel as interpreted by Fried), this field of relations, contrasts and oppositions is a collective, greatly mediated and deeply historical field maintained by human subjects; so it is subject to evolution and to contestation about its proper articulation and interpretation. Hence ‘[i]t goes without saying that the project of creating... typologies [that bring some aspect of that field to consciousness] can never be final, both on the typological level and on that of the individual instance... which is to say that the project is always... open to further discoveries and arrangements. [As Pippin puts it] “The infinity at play in such incompleteness is of the kind Hegel calls ‘true’ or genuine’ “ (WPM, 327).

In the first instance, this Hegelian interpretation of the Bechers' typological practice implies that the two dominant analogies in the literature deployed to grasp its significance (Linnean comparative morphology and Galtonian composite photography) miss something vital. However that may be, I want to suggest that this concluding chapter also has a reflexive significance; for it provides an illuminating model for understanding the internal structure of Fried's book and so the mode of address it tries to establish in relation to its readers. More specifically, just as the book as a whole might be thought of (as I suggested in my critical commentary, applying a thought I originally developed in my essay to characterize one formal feature of Fried's book *Manet's Modernism*⁵) as a group portrait of the various photographers whose work so often assigns prominence to the role and nature of portraiture, so its successive alignment of more than a dozen different kinds of (series of) photographs – Wall's near-documentaries and his street photographs, Struths's museum photographs and family portraits, Demand's allegories of intention – can be thought of as a typology of a certain kind (more precisely, of a certain kind of kinds) of photographic object. What Fried calls the genuine individuality of that which is produced by the members of this group is 'a kind of ultimate "deep" relationality... a "deep" contrastiveness or oppositionality' (WPM, 325-6); the necessarily linear typological mode of their textual re-presentation brings out both their generic similarities and their specific differences, and thereby discloses the historically specific grounds of their intelligibility as the kind of aesthetic object they are.

This relationality is not the result of conscious reflection by the human subjects who make them, but they are nevertheless responsible for them; their collective efforts have established the field within which their photographic objects are themselves established and grasped as inseparable from each other, hence as part of a larger whole, one which is itself open to further articulation and reflective re-arrangement as it makes possible the making of further, new, similar but different such objects. Here, it becomes important to recall that the Bechers are the earliest of the practitioners Fried discusses: their typological practice is thoroughly analogue, and it is the generation of students they influenced (both directly and indirectly) who followed their example into territory opened up by new photographic technology and techniques of presentation. This suggests that what Fried is bringing to our consciousness in his book is the emergence of a new kind of photographic entity; it is one made possible by more traditional photographic entities, or more precisely by an aesthetic possibility disclosed by a creative practice of analogue photography, without which the new aesthetic possibilities established by the work of contemporary philosophers employing new photographic technologies would not have been graspable, but which outreaches them and both extends and reconfigures the photographic field those analogue practices helped to establish and maintain.

In that sense, Fried's characterization of the Bechers' photographs is (just like those photographs themselves) an attempt to document the inhabitants of a rapidly vanishing, historically and technologically specific realm. But precisely by presenting them in such a way as to emphasize that they belong to a particular spatio-temporal location, he also brings

⁵ Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996 – hereafter 'MM'.

to consciousness that which replaced them, as well as the fact that the originality of those replacements is ultimately dependent on that which they replaced. But it is vital to appreciate that their photographic successors are emerging rather than, as it were, fully realized – that Fried’s sense of the contemporary arrangement of the photographic field is that something is, as it were, struggling to be born within it. It is not that he is struggling clearly to perceive what has already been solidly established and needs only to be brought to critically reflective consciousness. It is rather that the Bechers have helped him more clearly to perceive that their successors are struggling to establish an aesthetically satisfying successor to their kind of analogue photographic work of art, which accordingly means a kind of photographic entity that possesses genuine individuality - a concretely specified, deeply relational and internally articulated mode of photographic objecthood (and that it is only his dim, initial and provisional perception of that struggle that enables his perception of the Bechers’ typological practice as one of its enabling conditions).

2. *Media, Genres and Projectivity*

So understood, Fried’s avoidance of any explicit general or generic account of the new kind of photographic object that is his concern in WPM is multiply determined. To begin with, that object is still subject to determination – not only because all typological modes of presentation show rather than say, and so leave the work of articulating the understanding they embody importantly in the hands of the viewer, but also because these photographic objects are still in the process of being brought into existence by the subjects of his group portrait. In that sense, the question of what this new kind of object might be is itself a matter of debate between those involved in making it, part of the work in which they are involved in creating their works.

An analogy here might be Cavell’s conception of the internal relatedness manifest by films that belong to his conception of a genre of film (such as comedies of re-marriage)⁶. According to him, each candidate member offers an interpretation of the genre’s founding myth, and in so doing can contest any other candidate’s assumption that a given clause or element of that myth is essential to it by making an aesthetically rewarding film which dispenses with that element but finds a satisfying way of retelling the myth that compensates for its absence. What unites the members of the genre is thus itself a matter of discussion between them; and that shared willingness to converse about what relates them to one another is not only the mode of their generic unity, but entails that the unity or individuality of each film is itself deeply relational – impossible to grasp except as internally articulated, hence as a specifically different inhabitant of a shared cinematic world whose own individuality is grounded and manifest in that of its inhabitants.

We can put this point another way if we recall that Fried’s understanding of a medium and its essential properties is not just thorough-goingly historical but also essentially opposed to the assumption that the aesthetic possibilities of an artistic medium are determined by independently given features of its material basis. Again, there is here a helpful analogy with

⁶ cf the Introduction to his *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976).

Cavell⁷: he takes the concept of a medium to be indispensable in differentiating kinds of art work, and in understanding specific instances of those kinds; but it must be seen as referring not simply to a physical material but to a material-in-certain-characteristic-applications, and hence as having a necessarily dual sense. Sound, for example, is not the medium of music in the absence of the art of composing and playing music. Musical works of art are not the result of applications of a medium that is defined by its independently given possibilities; for it is only through the artist's successful production of something we are prepared to call a musical work of art that the artistic possibilities of that physical material are discovered, maintained and explored. Such possibilities of sound, without which it would not count as an artistic medium, are themselves media of music - ways in which various sources of sound have been applied to create specific artistic achievements eg in plainsong, the fugue, the aria, sonata form. They are the strains of convention through which composers have been able to create, performers to practice, and audiences to acknowledge, specific works of art.

Cavell's account of cinema involves a parallel dual deployment of the concept of a medium in relation to that of its material basis. He begins by analysing the material basis of film (in terms of photography in its relation to reality); he then characterizes the medium of film as a succession of automatic world projections, and identifies specific film media – that is, the character types and genres whose particular applications in good movies disclose the artistic potential of these media in this medium. But the terms of Cavell's specification of the medium of film are not read off from merely material properties of photography, but accrue their highly idiosyncratic sense from his critical interpretations of specific films and specific achievements of film. And the same is true of his characterizations of the various media of film: as we saw, he does not analyze the genre of remarriage comedy by first specifying the features necessary and sufficient for membership, and then testing individual candidate films against that specification. Rather, each member is seen as mounting a critical study of the conventions hitherto seen as definitive of that genre; by establishing, for example, that the absence of one such feature can be compensated for in certain ways, it thereby discovers new possibilities of that generic medium, and hence of the medium of film. Crucially, however, nothing can count as a discovery of either kind unless we are prepared to count the specific object before us as a work of art; everything comes down to specific acts of critical judgement.

Although Cavell was writing in an era in which photography and cinema were exclusively analogue in nature, a parallel point holds of Fried's serial discussions of contemporary photographic work. He does not approach them with an independently-established conception of the material basis of this new photographic medium (understood in terms of new technologies and techniques of capturing, manipulating and enlarging images), and then argue that the work of certain individuals constitutes great art because it exploits precisely those features of this new photographic medium. Rather, he takes the striking success of a given work to disclose (that is, to determine) an aesthetic possibility of its new medium, and thereby to acknowledge something about that medium as being of essential aesthetic

⁷ Cf Chs 5, 11 and 14 of *The World Viewed* Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

significance, there and then. It amounts, in effect, to a currently convincing but inherently contestable partial specification of the essence of the new photographic medium. For this reason, aesthetic appraisal of each new work in the terms best able to make sense of its claim on our experience and judgement is necessarily prior to any more general characterization of the ontological field each individual entity inhabits; hence a second reason for Fried's apparent failure to provide such a general account is that his reflective critical appraisal of the relevant works was still at the stage of (as it were) compiling authoritative individual depictions of the relevant works and asserting their inter-relatedness, rather than being confidently able to step back, assemble and present a stable and perspicuous typology of the field (something that the Bechers after all achieved only with respect to types of object always already receding into history). In this sense, Fried is still touring his sites, taking his pictures, and selecting his candidates; the presentational grid is to-be-realized.

A third factor determining Fried's refusal of generality becomes visible once we acknowledge that no individual critic experiences such photographic objects in a vacuum. If the objects must be understood in relation to their socio-historical location, so must the subjects they address; and Fried's subjectivity has a very specific genealogy whose pertinence to his critical appraisals is explicitly acknowledged throughout the book. For the terms he reaches for in understanding the work of these photographers are essentially those through which he has previously attempted to grasp the high modernist paintings of the 1960s, and the pre-history of modernist painting from Chardin to Manet and the Impressionists.

For Fried, the moment that these photographers disclosed the possibility (inherent in various technical developments) of making photographs primarily and essentially intended to be framed and hung on a wall - in other words to be looked at like paintings rather than merely to be examined up close by single viewers - they were bound to confront a new question, or rather a question long-familiar to painters newly transposed into a photographic context, concerning the relation between the photograph and its beholders. This led them to engage with a range of concerns familiar from the context of modernist painting - absorption, corporeal merger, facingness, the relationship between beholder, artist and subject - in ways that acknowledge, and so are inflected by the specific characteristics of (this kind of) photography (a photographic subject's awareness of the camera, the photographer's distinctive ways of declaring his or her hand in the staging of the presented scene, the distinctive ways in which photographs present a world, and so on). Most fundamentally, it led them to confront the problem of theatricality and its avoidance - the issue that Fried associates with the Diderotian origins of the pre-history of modernism and that pressed so deeply on his own art-critical writings of the 1960s, in which he identified a battle between modernists and literalists over the value of a theatricalized relation between artwork and audience in which the continuation of art as an enterprise was at stake.

Given the pervasiveness with which Fried's readings of these photographs reach for this familiar conceptual regime, readers could be forgiven for thinking that Fried had fallen upon this new artistic territory because he understood it to provide a surprising but straightforward continuation of the historical-critical narrative of modernism that most (including himself) had judged to have come to a decisive end when Minimalism prevailed over high modernism

in the art world of the 1970s and after. But then he would surely confront a devastating dilemma: either these photographers are engaging with the very same issues as those faced by modernist painters, in which case those issues float free of medium-specific constraints in exactly the way that Fried's own narrative denies; or the distinctive character of the photographic medium does have the significance Fried's approach would presuppose, in which case these photographers can't really be confronting the very same problems that modernist painters and Minimalists faced.

But certain aspects of WPM suggest that Fried would not accept the terms of this dilemma. Take his concluding chapter on the Bechers: to be sure, the immediate significance of the contrast that their typological practice discloses between mere particularity and genuine individuality – or as Fried puts it, deploying a contrast he previously invoked to grasp a photograph by James Welling, between bad and good objecthood – is that it gives him a way of reformulating his 'Art and Objecthood' critique of Minimalism⁸. More specifically, whereas in that essay he talked of literalists as aiming to project and hypostasize objecthood as such (whereas modernists struggled to undo or neutralize it), he now finds it more apt to characterize this as a conflict between bad and good modes of objecthood. But the crucial point here is that this is a reformulation of his original claim. As Fried puts it, '[t]his is a distinction that was not there to be made by me in 1967, in advance of any knowledge of the photographic practises that were already bringing it into being' (WPM, 328). In other words, the notion of objecthood as it was deployed in his art-critical writings, and genealogized in his subsequent art-historical work, is subjected to potentially radical, even if enabling, revision when projected into this new aesthetic and ontological context – to the point at which its reconfiguration feeds back in genuinely new ways to Fried's current best understanding of his earlier critical stance.

Two more general issues thereby become salient. First, the dilemma that Fried is supposed to confront by virtue of his venture into photographic territory depends upon assuming that the key terms of the conceptual regime he deploys in so doing must either mean exactly what they mean in the context of painting, or else they must mean something essentially different (and hence stand in need of disambiguation). Otherwise put, these terms must either be univocal or equivocal; but to anyone as immersed in Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinian authors (such as Cavell) as is Fried, this will appear to be a deeply misleading picture of the nature of linguistic meaning.

Cavell encapsulates the relevant alternative in his perception of our words and concepts as essentially projective⁹. Take the word 'feed': we learn to 'feed the cat' and to 'feed the lions', and then, when someone talks of feeding the meter or feeding our pride, we understand them; we accept this projection of it. At the same time, however, such projections are also deeply controlled. We can, for example, feed a lion, but not by placing a bushel of carrots in its cage; and its failure to eat them would not count as a refusal to do so. Such projections of 'feed'

⁸ Collected in *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp 148-72 – hereafter 'AO'.

⁹ Cf 'Excursus on Wittgenstein's Vision of Language' in *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) – hereafter 'CR'.

and ‘refusal’ fail because their connection with other words in their normal contexts do not transfer to the new one: one can only refuse something that one might also accept, hence something that one can be offered or invited to accept; and what might count as an offer and an acceptance in the context of a meal is both different from and related to what counts as an offer and acceptance in the context of mating or being guided. These limits are neither arbitrary nor optional; they show how what Cavell calls a word’s grammatical schematism determines the respects in which a new context for a word must invite or allow its projection:

[A]ny form of life and every concept integral to it has an indefinite number of instances and directions of projection; and this variation is not arbitrary. *Both* the ‘outer’ variance and the ‘inner’ constancy are necessary if a concept is to accomplish its tasks – of meaning, understanding, communicating etc., and in general, guiding us through the world, and relating thought and action and feeling to the world. (CR, 185).

This flexible constancy, or essentially non-arbitrary variation, is what Cavell means by the projectibility of language; and it is itself a manifestation of (what Cavell understands as) Wittgenstein’s vision of words as governed by criteria:

[Wittgensteinian] criteria do not relate a name to an object, but, we might say, various concepts to the concept of that object. Here the test of your possession of a concept... would be your ability to use the concept in conjunction with other concepts, your knowledge of which concepts are relevant to the one in question and which are not; your knowledge of how various relevant concepts, used in conjunction with the concepts of different kinds of objects, require different kinds of contexts for their competent employment. (CR, 73)

A word’s grammatical schematism is its power to combine with other words – ‘the word’s potency to assume just those valences, and a sense that in each case there will be a point of application of the word, and that the point will be the same from context to context, or that the point will shift in a recognizable pattern or direction’ (CR, 77-8). Hence when the acceptability or naturalness of a new projection of a given word is in question, our final judgement will turn upon the speaker’s capacity to show that and how the new context into which she has projected it either invites or can be seen to allow that projection by inviting or allowing (at least some modified form of) the projection of those other words to which its criteria relate it, and which are accommodated in familiar contexts of the word’s use.

This approach - we might call it a conception of the deep relationality of words - plainly avoids picturing the grammar of a word as a matter of either reiterating its current ranges of employment or of establishing entirely new (and so essentially unrelated) applications. For that would precisely occlude the essential openness of words to engagement with new contexts, in relation to which further reaches of their significance (further possibilities and impossibilities of our making sense of and with them) disclose themselves. In short, on Cavell’s reading of Wittgenstein, to say that words possess a grammatical schematism is to say with full dialectical rigour that the meanings of words are essentially, always already to-be-unfolded; hence, they live and move and have their being in history, with all its complex conditions and vicissitudes.

Cavell and Wittgenstein thereby give us a useful analogical model for understanding the grammatical schematism of Fried's explanatory conceptual regime for painterly modernism; coming to appreciate the projectibility of its constituent terms into a photographic context amounts to a way of disclosing further reaches of their significance, and that in turn requires that we view them as neither univocal nor equivocal but as analogically related to their mode of deployment and signification in their original context. Fried's aesthetic responses to these new photographic objects accordingly disclose an essentially analogical relation between these photographs and the high modernist paintings of the 1960s (as well as the Minimalist works of the same era, and of course their modernist predecessors); insofar as we are compelled to characterize them by the same terms, we declare a conviction of the similarity of their objects, but insofar as those terms are necessarily modified by the distinctive character of their new context of application, we also declare a sense of the specific differences of their objects. And the discovery of such a new context for their application retrospectively alters our understanding of the significance of those terms (and so of their objects) in their original context; for it reveals dimensions of sense-making and significance in both that we would otherwise never have come to appreciate.

And this brings us to the second general issue bearing on the inherent situatedness of Fried's modes of critical response to contemporary photography; it is not just that his present discoveries reconfigure and deepen his understanding of the conceptual regime he had previously brought to bear on painterly modernism, but that this reconfigurative disclosure of past and present opened up a particular trajectory into the future.

3. *The Undecidability of Origins: Medium-specificity, Decapitation and Religion*

The essentially enabling and productive nature of his encounter with the photographers captured in WPM's group portrait is the work Fried has published since that book's appearance. On the one hand, there has been another book on contemporary artists – two video artists, one of whom did make a brief appearance in WPM (Sala and Gordon), together with a sculptor (Ray) and a painter (Marioni)¹⁰; and on the other, he has published two substantial art-historical works on Caravaggio and a body of work produced in the decades after Caravaggio's death¹¹.

Further exploratory work in the same vein as that embodied in WPM is essentially unsurprising; but *FHO* is surprising in that it doesn't examine any further specifically photographic work, but does address new work in the more familiar media of painting and sculpture. This leads Fried to more explicit specifications of the ways in which WPM had reshaped his sense of both the contemporary art scene and of the modernist context with which his earlier work had been so concerned. He describes the former as one in which his early commitment to a particular canon of high modernist painting and sculpture had 'left me stranded in a corner, one that I saw no way of escaping short of relinquishing a set of core

¹⁰ *Four Honest Outlaws* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011) – hereafter 'FHO'.

¹¹ *The Moment of Caravaggio* (Princeton N.J.; Princeton University Press, 2010) – hereafter 'MO'; and *After Caravaggio* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

values and beliefs that remained, for me, inviolable' (FHO, 22-3); but his experience of the new photography opened up work in other media, so that his current sense is 'not so much that I have finally found a way out of the corner... as that over the past three decades photography and certain other developments have reconfigured the room' (FHO, 23). In other words, both the basic circumstances of the world of art and Fried's basic orientation or mode of address towards it have altered; on the one hand, genuinely valuable work in a variety of media has begun to repudiate the facile post-Minimalist rejection of modernism, and on the other, Fried himself has thereby been enabled and compelled to discriminate more finely between those aspects of his conceptual regime that only appeared to be essential to the continuation of modernist anti-theatricality from those that really (here and now) are essential. Most interestingly, he cites the three famous theses proposed towards the end of 'Art and Objecthood', and specifically distances himself from the third – the one which declares: 'The concepts of quality and value – and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself – are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within the individual arts. What lies *between* the arts is theatre' (AO, 164).

Initially, this thesis' insistence on medium-specificity is only reconfigured typographically: Fried says that 'I wish I had put 'between' in scare quotes instead of italics' (FHO, 10). This is hardly a perspicuous qualification, but it at least suggests that what he had then regarded as a term whose meaning was so uncontroversial he could simply emphasize its importance he now regards as one whose meaning can and should itself be held up for interrogation. And later, he goes further: in the book's conclusion, he declares:

Although this book singles out artists whose work seems to me to prove the current vitality of high modernist themes and issues, it also demonstrates that that vitality is not tied to a specific medium, or to put this more strongly, that the question of medium-specificity, while not exactly irrelevant to the artists I discuss – Ray's commitment to sculpture and Marioni's to painting are definitive for both of them, while Sala's pursuit of presentness finds a perfect home in video - no longer plays the kind of role that it did at an earlier moment in the history of modernism. That is, I would no longer wish to argue that for a work of contemporary art to matter deeply it has in all cases to be understood as doing so as an instance of a particular art or medium. My conviction as to Sala's accomplishment is in no way dependent on an appreciation of a standing canon of previous video art; and in the case of Gordon, it is not at all clear how the concept of a medium bears on my analyses of *Play Dead; Real Time* or *Déjà vu*. (FHO, 204)

This is, of course, a highly qualified concession, given that it really excludes only Gordon from the conceptual matrix in which the aesthetic significance of a modernist work hangs together with its acknowledgement of the possibilities of its medium. One might also wonder why Fried thinks that his analysis of *Déjà vu* doesn't involve the concept of a medium, given its argument that Gordon's treatment of *D.O.A* in that installation foregrounds the exemplary absorption of its actors in their roles, and so acknowledges the relation between actor and character that is a condition of the possibility of movies, and so of *Déjà vu*. But it certainly amounts to a reconfiguration of what Fried holds to be essential to the modernist project; and other reconfigurations hang together with it – for examples, on Fried's account of what he

still thinks of as modernist contemporary work, what makes it modernist is increasingly seen as its investment in the struggle to avoid or overcome bad objecthood and theatricality whilst acknowledging its relation to its beholder, rather than the more specific strategies it deploys to do this. Indeed, Fried even suggests that his present conception of the essence of modernism is even more general: that it lies in its pursuit of what he calls ‘the ultimate stakes of serious art – to attach us to reality. Modernism from Manet onward aimed at nothing less, under conditions it knew to be unpromising. Presentness, theatricality and... embedment concern nothing else.’ (FHO, 24)

Once one ascends or descends to such a general or basic characterization of artistic modernism, it certainly becomes easier to acknowledge a greater variety of more specifically differentiated realizations of it in different works in different media; but such reformulations of earlier attempts to characterize the essential nature of modernism in the light of later artistic developments give us no reason to reject those earlier characterizations *tout court*. On the contrary, a willingness to engage in such retrospective revisions of an initial understanding is positively demanded of anyone who sees such characterizations as ultimately grounded in his experience of individual works, who sees the projection of the relevant terms into new contexts which require their adaptation and thereby elicit further reaches of their significance as exemplary of how words function, and who thinks of modernism not only as determining what the essential nature of a given medium is in a given historical context, but as itself possessed of an essence that is equally bound to evolve, adapt and unfold new reaches of significance as it encounters new historical circumstances.

The other focus of Fried’s post-WPM work is Caravaggio – or more precisely, the work that eventually culminated in WPM interrupted and was interrupted by work on Caravaggio, although the two book-length versions of the latter only appeared in print well after WPM. However that may be, what is striking about the account of Caravaggio’s work that Fried provides is the extent to which it employs versions of themes and terms drawn from the conceptual regime long-familiar from his account of modernism. So, for example, Fried argues that Caravaggio’s persistent use of the self-portrait is an attempt to acknowledge his own generative role in the production of his paintings, exemplifying an immersive drive (cf Courbet); he uncovers a persistent interest in absorption – the depiction of figures engrossed in their own activities and hence oblivious to the viewer; and he finds that Caravaggio returns repeatedly to the question ‘which way does a painting face (towards the viewer or into the depicted scene)?’.

However, Fried is quick to point out that these outcroppings of familiar concepts do not have their familiar significance. In Caravaggio’s work, we see the *invention* of absorption: absorptive themes and effects emerged as central to the enterprise of painting as never before. But the concept of theatricality has no direct purchase, because, unlike the situation in eighteenth century France, ‘whatever intimation of unawareness [of the viewer] there may appear to be goes hand in hand with a new... thematization of pictorial address’ (MC, 2), the repeated deployment of figures openly looking at their viewers without any hint of suspicion attaching to that stance. Likewise, the immersive thrust of Caravaggio’s work is – unlike Courbet’s work - balanced by a specular counter-thrust, whereby the picture is given up to visuality or spectatordom. And Caravaggio’s attempts to establish the independence and

autonomy of his paintings do not, as analogous struggles in Diderot's era did, generate a pursuit of ideals of dramatic unity, as manifest in the tableau format.

On the one hand, then, Fried is no more prone to think that disclosing pre-Diderotian contexts in which versions of his modernist conceptual regime can find fruitful application entails univocity of sense than he did when finding an equally fruitful context for their application in post-1960s photography. On the other hand, the successful projection of that regime back onto 1590s Rome does indicate a significant continuity: as he puts it, Caravaggio is revealed as the inventor of absorption, and so as a profoundly fateful historical source for the pre-modern phase of European painting outlined in Fried's mighty trilogy on the roots of Manet's modernism. And what enables this perception – call it a further extension of the pre-modern roots of modernism – is Fried's work on contemporary photography.

For at least two crucial features of Fried's account of Caravaggio patently have their counterparts in WPM. First, having appreciated that the new photography (and so a new kind of photographic object) emerges once it is made primarily for the wall, so Fried can see more clearly that the problematic of absorption and address emerges in Caravaggio because he is confronting the emergence of the gallery picture – a new cultural context, importantly comprising ambitious, highly cultivated collectors and the construction of personal galleries for the exhibition of their work, which encouraged the development of framed and portable, less large and not necessarily devotional, paintings capable of bearing up under a new level of unusually close scrutiny (the precursor of the 'homeless' easel painting with which Diderot was concerned). Second, having had to resort to a concept of 'severing' in order to grasp Gursky's response to photographic to-be-seeness (WPM, 158-65), Fried then finds that a central aspect of Caravaggio's response to the gallery mode of painterly scrutiny – his mode of acknowledgement of its framed, portable independence from its surroundings – is to deploy representations of severed heads (John the Baptist, Medusa, Holofernes) to thematise the viewer's relation to the painting itself as a conjunction of decapitation and presentation. How, then, should one understand the internal articulation of the new tripartite historical schema that results from this dual extension of the range of application of Fried's modernist conceptual regime – so that his familiar narrative of the problematic of theatricality from Greuze to Manet to 1960's high modernism is now flanked both by an account of pre-Diderotian European painting and by one concerning post high-modernist photography? More specifically, how are we to assign relative creative priority between these three phases of Fried's current story?

The crucial clue is to be found in an aspect of Fried's own account of Manet to which he gives prominence in his book of that title by devoting its final chapter to the topic. As I emphasize in CDG, that chapter discloses 'a complexly recursive three-part hingelike structure' (MM, 410) operative at various levels in Fried's narrative wherever questions of origins or sources are at stake – whether it be the origins of high modernism (which Fried attributes to the triad of Courbet, Manet and Impressionism), or of modernism more generally (where Fried invokes both Courbet and his post-Diderotian predecessors in accounting for Manet's achievement), or of the pre-modernist tradition of denying the beholder by dramatizing absorptive scenes (where Fried finds that Greuze's initiating achievement can be grasped only in relation to that of Chardin before him and David after him).

According to Fried, this hingelike structure involves ‘a relation in which, conceptually, the first and third ‘moments’ precede the second, and thus jointly determine its meaning’ (MM, 411-12). Although the second moment appears genuinely determinative, it only acquires that originary status retrospectively: it can appear as originary solely from a point of view constructed by the work of those whose labours it makes possible - indeed, until that work is done the supposedly originating moment hasn’t actually originated anything. But once the third moment confers originary status on the second, it inevitably reveals the second’s dependence on the first; for insofar as the second moment originates a tradition, it distinguishes itself from the preceding moment and thereby reveals a shared frame of reference (as Diderot’s anxious denial of the beholder is what makes it possible for Manet to break decisively with him by finding a way to acknowledge that relation without theatricalizing it).

Here we can see Fried’s general sense that the development of an artistic tradition involves a continuous process of revisionary reconstitution of the nature and achievements of its past through the contemporary work that that past enables. And I want to suggest in conclusion that this is one element of his modernist conceptual regime that persists in his post-WPM work, and so helps to account for its structure. For his discovery of contemporary photography as a continuation of the high modernist project not only reveals that 1960s body of work as originating or creative (rather than the final phase of a project whose origins lie far in the past, in the complex historical nexus that links Greuze, Courbet, Manet and Impressionism); it also reveals Caravaggio as an originary figure in relation to the prehistory and so the history of modernism, including that contemporary photographic work. In other words, by seeing Caravaggio and the new photography as the first and third moments which reconfigure the meaning of the second moment that is the unfolding of modernism from Diderot to Stella, we disclose a new register of significance – and a new dimension of creativity – in that second moment.

As we just saw, however, we cannot identify the origin of an artistic regime or tradition without invoking a further instance of the hingelike historical schema. So to characterize Caravaggio’s work as initiating the thematization of absorption may distinguish him from his predecessors, but it also directs our attention to them, and to the role they play in making it possible for him so to distinguish himself. And here it is hard to avoid being struck by the sheer violence implicit in the modes of severance to which Fried finds that Caravaggio is compelled to resort in asserting his own autonomy by asserting the autonomy of his works. For the emergence of the gallery picture – the ontological development that Caravaggio determines and is determined by – is primarily the displacement of painting from churches and devotional contexts; and Fried’s invocation of decapitation in characterizing that process presents it as an uncannily traumatic disembedding or dismemberment. A closer examination of how and why this fateful diremption of art from religion came to seem not only possible but necessary in the inauguration of modernity, and yet in the first instance not only made possible but definitively inflected a mode of thematising absorption that avoids any pre-modernist anxiety about theatricalization (call it scepticism), might – amongst many other things - give us a deeper understanding of the ease with which Fried’s narrative of modernism as in search of attachment to reality so often reaches for a religious register. If we

are ever fully to grasp the significance of his 'Art and Objecthood' citation of a Protestant preacher's declaration that 'presentness is grace', such an examination seems all-but-unavoidable.

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