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Modernism, Teatricality, and Scepticism: Michael Fried and Cavell's Conception of the Ordinary Language Philosophy

Abstract: The paper treats the relationship between the art historian Michael Fried and the philosopher Stanley Cavell, as well as their readings of Wittgenstein's late philosophy. It argues that Fried's entire historic-artistic method rests on Wittgensteinian grounds; there is special emphasis on theses concerning the grammatical criteria of language and scepticism. Namely, Fried, like Cavell, interprets modernism as a crisis of *a priori* criteria by which we come to think a given object as a successful work of art. Fried labels an artwork's failure to convince, to communicate with the recipient, with the term *theatre*. This text establishes an analogy between Fried's concept of theatre, Cavell's concept of scepticism, and Wittgenstein's thesis of the impossibility of a private language, situating those theses in the wider context of discussions of modernism.

Keywords: ordinary language philosophy, history of art, theatre, scepticism, private language, grammatical criteria, Michael Fried, Stanley Cavell, Ludwig Wittgenstein

Modernism as the Crisis of a priori Criteria

Michael Fried began his work in criticism and art history during the 1960s, strongly influenced by Clement Greenberg's formalist postulates concerning high modernism. However, although Greenberg was and remained one of his central references in terms of methodology, one could scarcely consider Fried's art historical method formalist in the Greenbergian, neo-Kantian sense: already in his 1960s essays, Fried performed a deconstruction of Greenberg's universalist and a-historical conception of art-historical development *qua* a productive evolution of style and introduced the historic-contextualist approach into formal analysis. One of his references

of paramount importance is certainly Ludwig Wittgenstein – one among many examples is the reference to Wittgenstein’s late philosophy in the introductory part of one of Fried’s central works – the 1960s essay collection that was published in the 1980s under the title of *Art and Objecthood* (titled after the eponymous essay in that book, which is today regarded as one of the most influential as well as widely disputed critiques of minimalism in 1960s art).¹ Invoking Wittgenstein’s conception of linguistic conventions, or criteria, Fried there pursues a deconstruction of Greenberg’s neo-Kantianism, which viewed the development of art in terms of a progressive uncovering of a universal ‘essence’ of painting by means of a modernist uncovering of two-dimensionality: in Greenberg’s view, art is the procedure of a gradual reduction of means of expression and the image to a two-dimensional non-representational surface.² Fried asserts that this kind of approach is basically a-historical and that one cannot speak of ‘universal’ features of painting, or of flatness as its essence: painting is a historical convention and therefore the ‘essence’ of its media, such as the flatness, is likewise a form of convention, or, in Wittgensteinian terms, a ‘language game’ prone to constant change and historically determined transformations. Fried’s approach thus bears the marks of a procedure that seeks to de-essentialise Greenberg’s essentialist formalism: in Fried’s view, the chief task of painters in a given epoch is to find those conventions that at a given juncture of historical development lend a non-trivial character to their work; as that question – what those conventions are – always remains open, the artwork turns into a form of a grammatical exploration of how to reconstitute the criteria whereby a given object is identified as a painterly painting.

Therefore, the concept of everyday language grammatical criteria is a constitutive place in Fried’s history of art. The basic feature of Wittgenstein’s late philosophy is the claim that language is not based on universals, that is, *a priori* rules: this claim is central to both Cavell and Fried’s conceptions of modernism. Modernity is a macro-cultural formation of the crisis of *a priori* criteria, where the threat of misunderstanding is constitutive of man as a linguistic being. In that sense, Fried’s history of art is a sort of theory of *long durée* in which he analyses in what way the modern age produces the ‘crisis of representation’ that culminated with the advent of minimalism during the 1960s. Fried labels this ‘crisis of representation’ as ‘theatre’, that is, ‘theatricality’, a term borrowed from the critical vocabulary of one of the founders of modern fine arts criticism, the French Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot. As we will try to show, Fried’s concept of theatre is inherently linked to Cavell’s conception of scepticism, that is, Wittgenstein’s private language. Theatre is a specific mode of being in the world of objects, which we perceive as works of art: some works of art we pronounce authentic, unique, unrepeatable, while others we deem inauthentic, lacking in integrity, contrived, that is, theatrical. Diderot used the term in his critique

¹ Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago–London, The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

² Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting”, in: John O’Brian (ed.), *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Volume 4, Chicago–London, The University of Chicago Press, 1995, 85–93.

of aristocratic, monarchist culture by rejecting the inauthentic ‘manner’ of rococo painting, whose roots he situated in the affected way of life of French court circles of the *ancien régime* period. For Fried, theatricality describes a painting that ‘falls short’, that fails to convince. In his view, a successful painting is one that transcends its own objecthood: an artwork, that is, an art object is no ordinary object; we do not perceive a work of art the same way we perceive everyday objects, like cars, tables, or chairs. Of course, that does not mean that *under certain conditions* and within certain disciplines and procedures of art, tables or chairs could not be works of art; rather, it points to the fact that works of art mean something to us, that we take an interest in them in a rather specific way and ascribe to them the kind of value that we only ascribe to other people. By contrast, a theatrical painting is one that fails to transcend its status of a mere object or thing.

Fried thereby forges a direct link between theatricality and private language: faced with a painting we perceive as theatrical, we remain indifferent. Cavell describes relating to another person in a similar way: I can react to another person in only one of two ways: by ignoring or not noticing them, with indifference (scepticism), or by accepting or *acknowledging* them; an ‘other’ may be only a body that does or does not matter, or a person to whom I reveal myself. My treatment of a work of art implies a similar relation: confronting a modernist painting does not concern my awareness that I am confronted with a work of art (what else could that two-dimensional object be anyway?); however, my awareness that that object is a work of art is not enough – what is necessary is my acknowledgement of that work as such and the artist’s capability of making it convincing (in this context, Cavell and Fried use the term ‘presentness’). Otherwise, I remain indifferent to that work, the work remains a mere object, no better or essentially worse than any other object or thing, that is, my experience of the work remains a private experience. For Fried, as well as for Cavell, this is a historically contingent situation: in traditional society, the problem of whether a given painting is ‘authentic’ or only an example of a mere ‘manner’ does not explicitly exist. The moment when the problem was articulated as such was the moment of the birth of Modernity. Therefore, Fried’s history of art is an analysis of the historical constitution and evolution of the modern age and art in the modern sense of that word.

Caravaggio and Wittgensteinian Scepticism

Fried provides a specific conception of the painting: unlike poststructuralist problematisations of painting that treat the painting as a form of language, that is, system of signification, for Fried, a painting is an object, which means – colour on canvas. Still, it is a completely specific kind of object. This ontological uniqueness of the painting is reflected in the fact that the painting, although not constituting language, still enters into a specific relation with language. One may problematise this relation between the painting and language by way of Cavell’s thesis, mentioned above,

of scepticism: the uncertainty of our mutual agreement within the modern aesthetic regime points to the fact that scepticism/private language poses a permanent threat to the painting, moreover, that scepticism is inherent to the painting.

Admittedly, Fried explicitly mentions the problematic of the relationship between the painting and scepticism only in one of his later books, his extensive study of Caravaggio's painting. In his analysis, Fried credits Caravaggio with the invention of one of the more significant procedures of European post-Renaissance painting – absorption. Fried developed the concept of absorption in his earlier books, especially his study of French 18th-century painting: absorption refers to the way Caravaggio (and later other painters as well, such as Jean-Baptist Greuze or Jean-Baptist-Siméon Chardin) depicted his characters in a condition of intense attention, absorption in their actions – reading, listening, sleeping, grieving, thinking. The figures in Caravaggio's and later Greuze's and Chardin's paintings are thus in a condition that approximates a sort of self-oblivion – *oubli de soi* or self-forgetting, or total immersion in their actions. A painting thereby becomes a fully rounded expressive system – its parts (the foci of the gazes that are visible in the painting, elements of landscape, architecture, and objects depicted in the painting) exist for each other and combined together, produce a unique, unifying effect. Typical examples include Caravaggio's *Saint Jerome Writing*, shown at a moment of profound intellectual immersion in his book, then also his *Death of the Virgin*, where the faces of the apostles are covered in shadow, as well as *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, where the absorptive effect is accomplished by synchronising the positions of the figures depicted in the painting and by continuity between their facial expressions. At the same time, Fried links the concept of absorption with Cavell's analysis of modern scepticism, offered in Cavell's interpretation of Shakespeare's drama.³ Namely, Fried pursues a detailed analysis of Caravaggio's formal procedures in his paintings: using mirrors to painting with living models, for example; at the same time, he advances the claim that in his paintings, by using the newly discovered procedures of absorption, Caravaggio performs a sort of annihilation of expression. For example, in *The Crowning with Thorns* of 1604 or 1607, Fried focuses on Christ's facial expression and asks: is that an expression of pain and physical suffering? Or is it, rather, one of total spiritual absence, spiritual void, as though Christ had no 'internal life' in him whatsoever, which could be manifested on his face? Fried also emphasises the gaze of the male figure in the upper left corner: we might expect his gaze to be fixed on the back of Christ's head, where he is attaching the crown of thorns with a bamboo stick; however, his gaze is lost in an undefined space between Christ's right shoulder and neck. In that way, that gaze becomes 'empty', suggesting a similar kind of spiritual annihilation like the gaze of Christ. The faces of the remaining men are completely hidden – therefore we can hardly determine any type of emotional relationship between the depicted figures. The actors in the scene are reduced to bodies in mutual isolation; those are not expressive bodies, but bodies

³ Stanley Cavell, *Discowning Knowledge: in Six Plays of Shakespeare*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

that are ‘closed off’ in absorption: “[...] the figures in those canvases, mere representations, manifestly ‘have’ no interiority of the sort actual persons do. It is as if the zero for ‘Expression’ that de Piles brilliantly awarded Caravaggio simultaneously suggests doubts about whether expressions ever actually do reveal anything about the feelings or states of mind they are supposedly expressing and also suggests something about the inevitability of our taking even the lack of expression as revelatory. Another, only slightly different way of framing the problem would be to say that the invention of absorption in Caravaggio’s religious paintings of the late 1590s and early 1600s can be seen as in dialogue with the skeptical doubt that we can ever know with certainty the contents of another person’s mind.”⁴

With this effect, Caravaggio achieves the impression of a special psychological and spiritual ‘depth’ in his painted figures, generating a sort of gap between the ‘hidden,’ ‘internal’ psychic life (the private) and its reserved or entirely annihilated external manifestation (the public); thereby the problem of Caravaggio’s painting starts being a specifically Cavellian problematic of knowing another person’s mind. In analogy to Cavell’s thesis of scepticism as a constitutive element in Shakespeare’s dramatic writing, for Fried, absorption is a reaction to the process of the de-legitimation of the Christian-theological view of the world. In the system of the modern age, there is no ‘external’ guarantor of meaning and inter-social understanding – in Cavell’s words, linguistic understanding, ‘my taking you for, seeing you as, human depends upon nothing more than my capacity for something like empathic projection.’ Further down in his book *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell replaces the concept of empathic projection with that of acknowledgement: my ability to recognise another human being rests on my capacity to project – to project upon another my experience of a human being and at the same time quite naturally to expect that the other have an ‘interiority’ similar to mine.⁵ Empathic projection provides no certainty to our relationship with an other, but without this kind of projection, we could not distinguish people from things; that is the essence of the claim that mastering language does not entail blindly following the rules but an always open projection of words from one context into another. The fact that in front of a work of art we use a similar projective mechanism supports the view that for us, a painting is not an ordinary thing, that we spontaneously and non-reflectively ‘read’ it as a human gesture. In Fried’s words, “might it not be legitimate, at least heuristically, to think of the invention of absorption in painting as calling for something like a new, more concentrated (more focused, more motivated) form of empathic projection on the part of the viewer, who is of course – who inevitably knows himself or herself to be – ‘confined from’ the merely painted figures in obvious respects? Moreover, precisely because, however realistic they may be, the figures in a painting are understood to be mere depictions, not actual human beings, the viewer’s or indeed the skeptic’s sense of *their* ‘confinement’ within

⁴ Michael Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio*, Princeton–Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2010, 103.

⁵ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Scepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, New York–Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

themselves will inevitably be qualified in important ways [...] Nevertheless, a notion like empathic projection seems to me to capture something of the *feat* of viewing, in all its spontaneity and nonreflectivness, that the invention of absorption called into being.”⁶

Caravaggio’s art reflects the beginning of the long process of the de-legitimisation of the theological view of the world, whereby relations between people cease to be fixed, stable, and defined *a priori*. Unlike classical, Renaissance painting, Caravaggio’s art reflects a social constellation wherein the concept of community ceases to be an uncertain category and wherein interpersonal relations rest on nothing but a mutual ‘social contract’. Precisely for that reason, although in his day the problem of theatre (or, for that matter, that of the social contract) had not yet been explicitly stated, Caravaggio produces a new kind of painting – instead of the symmetry, harmony, and perspectival space of the Renaissance, Caravaggio needs new expressive and painterly means to make his paintings ‘convincing’ – his juxtapositions of light and dark, his use of action, highlighting a moment instead of a protracted period of time, unusual compositions, and extreme *chiaroscuro* are all hints of procedures that were to be definitively articulated only during the time of the French bourgeois revolution; at that time, critics described those procedures as drama.

The Dialectics of Theatre and Absorption

In Diderot’s time, the theory of painting was marked by a dialectic between two opposed concepts: the theatre, on the one hand, which carried a basically negative connotation of value, and, on the other hand, drama, as a positive term. For Diderot, the theatre is an artificial construction, synonymous with something inauthentic and contrived; as Fried asserts in his *Absorption and Theatricality*, “in that event the painting would no longer be ‘une rue, une place publique, un temple’ (a street, a public square, a temple); it would become ‘un théâtre’ (a theater), that is, an artificial construction in which persuasiveness was sacrificed and dramatic illusion vitiated in the attempt to impress the beholder and solicit his applause. [...] he continued to express his distaste for the theater as he knew it and in his writings on paintings used the term *le théâtral*, the theatrical, implying consciousness of being beheld, as synonymous with falseness.”⁷

In Diderot’s view, overcoming the theatre is painting’s primary task, which a painting may achieve only by negating the fact that there is a beholder standing before it, by negating the primary convention of painting – that paintings are meant to be looked at. In fact, this negation constitutes a development of the procedure hinted at

⁶ Michael Fried, *The Moment of Caravaggio*, op. cit., 106.

⁷ Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988, 100.

by Caravaggio already in the 17th century – absorption. It concerns a specific dialectical procedure: the mid-18th-century artist strives to win over the beholder by negating her presence. It means treating the painting as an autonomous and fully rounded whole, by transcending the contrived expressivity, allegory, and exaggeration of late rococo painting (such as that of François Boucher, whom Diderot accused of painting his figures as though they were puppets). Diderot identifies this persuasive quality of anti-rococo painting in its emphasis of only a single moment of action, unlike the scattered theatricality of rococo; what Diderot and his contemporaries pursued was action, more compelling than action in theatre; the kind of action Diderot positively labelled as ‘drama’. Although Fried there does not explicitly mention either Cavell’s or Wittgenstein’s arguments, the concepts of theatre and absorption are inherent to his theses on scepticism and linguistic criteria.

Namely, like scepticism, theatricality is also a consequence of the collapse of the epistemic, moral, and political absolutes of traditional, that is, pre-modern European society, where there are no longer *a priori* solutions to human contradictions. It was the epoch of a historical ‘catastrophe’ that saw an epochal crisis of the system of legitimacy, that is, system that implied removing God, abandoning divine right, and generating a notion of political legitimisation based exclusively on individual consent (that is, ‘contract’). ‘In all these transformations a premodern vision of an objective, hierarchical order gets abandoned in favor of an anxious attempt at grounding knowledge, values, and norms with reference to human arrangements and consent alone.’⁸ The underlying values of society grow uncertain, loosened, based on rather fragile foundations: aesthetic values (similarly to moral and political values) are precisely of this sort – within the modern aesthetic regime of art there is always the danger of disagreement. The beholder, or viewer, is no longer taken for granted, as something that goes without saying – she must be won over, convinced, by means inherent to painting as a medium. The artist may no longer simply take for granted his capability of creating a truly valuable work; the theatre is a constant threat, whereas its overcoming is the central problem of artistic work, because when the ‘ordinary becomes disconnected, as it were, from an objectivist vision of a hierarchical order, it may be seen for what it is: a structure dependent on a fragile agreement in judgment which can easily be repudiated.’⁹ For that reason precisely, from Diderot’s time on, the central question will be whether a work of art is good or not, that is, whether it is a mere object, thing, a form of theatre, or a unique and unrepeatable human gesture in the shape of a painting or a statue.

At this point we may even say that the theatre is a specific form of scepticism: scepticism is a violation of our natural being in language, that is, violation of the grammatical criteria of that language; by negating those criteria, the sceptic drives a wedge between language and the world and enters into a specific kind of ‘metaphysical isolation’, that is, into a private language. By negating the grammatical criteria of

⁸ Espen Hammer, *Stanley Cavell: Scepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary*, Cambridge, Polity, 2002, 77.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

language, the sceptic annuls all difference between objects and thereby annihilates the world made of those objects, which in fact means this: seeking to speak outside of language games, the sceptic withdraws in terms of her interest in the world, negates that the world's phenomena mean anything to her, and deprives the world's objects of their specificity and worth. That is why scepticism is a form of 'disenchantment' in the world, boredom facing the world, that is, alienation, privacy, and isolation brought on by the modern, post-Cartesian, and post-Enlightenment age, in other words, the feeling 'that much of what is said [...] is empty, say bankrupt, the result of speaking not meaningfully, as the positivists used to like to say, as if words themselves had insufficient sense, but rather speaking pointlessly, as if we had nothing in mind, or nothing at heart to say'.¹⁰ That is why paintings embody a special mode of being in the world. In other words, with his concept of theatricality, Fried asserts "that paintings cannot but embody some mode of being in the world, reflect some attempt to do justice to visual, motor, laboring, social and sexual intelligibility. When paintings exhibit an understanding of such intelligibility in terms of spectatorship, representationalism (the world as an object in the theatre of the mind), a Cartesian gulf between bodiless mind and world, or when social, intersubjective relations are conveyed as caught in an unavoidable duality of either active subjects or passive subject-objects, we might expect *something* in our experience of such paintings *to fail*, to work against itself, to manifest the flatness, narrowness, or, in general, phoniness of the sort of world-engagement depicted."¹¹

However, although resting on rather porous foundations, from the 18th century on, the regime of art at the same time also starts being a place of a utopian transcendence of modern baselessness and alienation. Namely, Fried emphasises Diderot's link between the momentary and integral character of paintings (which Diderot called *tableaux*), on the one hand, and the integral character of the human soul on the other hand, that is, the modern self's quest for integrity. One's presence to oneself is a specific psycho-physical condition whereby thinkers such as Diderot highlight the feeling of the self as integral. Namely, Diderot "found in the fully realized *tableau* an external, 'objective' equivalent for his own sense of himself as an integral yet continuously changing being and that his insistence that the art of painting satisfy the most exigent requirements of unity and instantaneousness may in part be understood as an insistence that it generate objects capable of measuring up to that equivalence – of confronting him on equal terms – and thereby of confirming precisely that sense of self that the passage as a whole expresses so vividly. It goes without saying that any object possessing those capabilities was no ordinary object."¹²

The aesthetic regime of art gains a hitherto non-existent quality – the creation of new types of objects (*tableaux*) becomes equivalent to the creation of a new subject,

¹⁰ Stanley Cavell, *Themes out of School: Effects and Causes*, Chicago–Londo, University of Chicago Press, 1988, 191.

¹¹ Robert Pippin, "Authenticity in Painting: Remarks on Michael Fried's Art History", *Critical Inquiry*, No. 31, Spring 2005, 575–598.

¹² Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, op. cit., 91.

that is, the aesthetic sphere becomes a place where one may transcend modern alienation, a sort of solution to the baselessness of modern existence. In Diderot's time, drama, unlike theatre, had a positive connotation – whereas theatre implied unfocused attention, mannerism and affectation, drama connoted synthesis, compactness, focus, and unity. In fact, drama signified the embodiment of an aesthetically successful artistic idea based on the unities of action and time: the artist was to focus on representing a single moment of action and should not combine contradictory elements or stages of one and the same act. The artist thereby achieves dramatic and expressive unity in her work, while her painting becomes a dramatically complete system of causes and consequences; for Diderot, pictorial unity is a sort of 'microcosm' that reiterates the causal system of nature. Pictorial unity should be instantly cognisable: "[composition] has only one moment for its object, to which everything must be related and in terms of which everything must be organized, but so perfectly that nothing can excuse any departure from that relationship [...] from the very moment when the eye perceives the painting, it must embrace everything."¹³ In their texts, Fried and Cavell label this instantaneousness, this 'totality' of the aesthetic experience as its 'presentness'.

The Crisis of Representation from Courbet to Manet

Fried thus describes the historical process of the crisis in the system of legitimisation in the worlds of art, that is, the crisis of conventions, in Wittgenstein's terms, of criteria within those worlds. Fried locates the onset of that crisis in French culture on the eve of the Revolution (in his study of Diderot, mentioned above), whereas in his books on Courbet and Manet he advances the thesis of a 'crisis of representation' brought forth by modernism, whose outlines may be gleaned already in the opening decades of the 19th century, and which obviously culminated with the advent of minimalism during the 1960s. In Fried's view, the problem of theatricality is one of the dominant themes in 19th-century French visual culture; however, what distinguishes its art from mid-18th-century art is the fact that in that new historical context, an approach such as absorption may no longer be as convincing. Already for several decades, Greuze's work had been perceived as exaggerated, banal, moralist, while 19th-century artists had no universal or unifying answer to the threat of theatre. Jean-François Millet, for instance, painted his peasants and members of the rural proletariat according to Diderotian 'rules' – completely absorbed in the materiality of their work, locked in their thoughts, and with 'dull' looks suggesting spiritual absence, seeking to highlight thereby the alienation and harm of waged labour. However, for many contemporary critics, such as, for instance, Charles Baudelaire, his approach was basically theatrical – in Baudelaire's view, it is as though Millet's characters were asking to suffer and Millet himself were soliciting applause from the beholder on account of his own moral rectitude.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid, 88.

¹⁴ Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism*, Chicago–London, The University of Chicago Press, 1990, 40–44.

All of the foregoing points to the conclusion that absorption as a ‘method’ of transcending theatre became unconvincing already in the 19th century and that contemporary artists could no longer constitute a comprehensive, unifying paradigm of art. Courbet, for instance, had to find a different way of transcending theatre – with his project of a quasi-corporeal incorporation of the painter into the space of the painting, entailing a range of strategies of literal and metaphorical self-representation, which Fried calls ‘narcissistic’. Courbet was thereby in continuity with Diderot’s anti-theatrical tradition, but in this new historical context, Courbet solved the problem of theatre in an essentially new and different way. Moreover, although producing an entirely new concept of the painting, Courbet did not definitively solve the problem of theatricality – in his case, too, theatre remains a constant threat; in other words, Courbet strove for a Diderotian completeness, integrity, *totality* of the painting, but did not ever attain it. Fried demonstrates this in one of the central chapters in his monograph, where he analyses Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans*: there is no need here for a detailed reconstruction of Fried’s challenging and complex interpretation of that painting; suffice it point that for Fried, Courbet’s canvas is an example of the modern rift in the system of representation that produces a gap between the painter’s position as a beholder and that of the real beholder, that is, a distinction between different positions of beholding. Fried’s interpretation reaches its climax in the following passage: “[the painting] may be taken as positing a distinction between the two acts of mutual facing that together constitute the conventional relationship between painting and beholder, or, more pointedly, as effecting a separation between what might be described as the *painting’s gaze out at the beholder-‘in’-the-painter-beholder* and the *painter-‘in’-the-painter-beholder’s gaze into the painting*, a feat tantamount to driving a wedge between the two components of the painter-beholder’s compound identity.”¹⁵

A consequence of this is the readily visible fragmentary character of Courbet’s work: in an epoch when modernity had already reached its maturity, paintings could no longer attain their pictorial unity. One gets the impression from Courbet’s canvases as though they had been cropped out from a larger work. That much was noted already by critics in his own day, who likened *A Burial at Ornans*, a painting over ten metres long, to a fragment, cut out from a larger work, ‘fifty metres long’.¹⁶ Courbet’s art emerges within a dialectic of unity, integrity (or at least an idea of that integrity), which Diderot already labelled as *tableaux* and the modern fragment, that is, what contemporary critics labelled as *morceaux*. Therefore, the modern artist works in a condition of constant failure in his attempts to attain a rounded whole, which nonetheless functions as a utopian normative, to which one strives.

This crisis of criteria culminates in the work of Édouard Manet: for him, working in the 1860s, absorption is useless as a means of presentation; therefore, Manet posits a new conception of the painting – one wherein it is no longer possible to negate the beholder’s presence in front of the painting and one that fully counts on

¹⁵ Ibid, 139.

¹⁶ Ibid, 235.

the beholder's presence. Therefore, Manet's characters are no longer absorbed in their own activities, but openly and directly gaze at the beholder in front of the painting. That way Manet develops a specific dialectic – transcending theatre by using its own means; in other words, Manet seeks to dramatise as much as he can, rather than negate, the primordial convention of painting whereby paintings are meant to be looked at. However, in the midst of a radical 'crisis of representation', this is possible only by invoking an 'external' instance – the tradition of painting as a discipline. The *tableau*, that is, completeness and integrity of the painting is not something that may be guaranteed in advance; that is why Manet attempts to incorporate into his painterly medium the most significant accomplishments of past art. This points to the specific modern situation of Manet's work: he invokes the history of art and tradition precisely because that same tradition is no longer present in current 'forms of life' – the criteria for thinking art can no longer be taken for granted, but must be *reconstituted*. One of the most significant aspects of Fried's monograph on Manet is his discussion of the relevance of the tradition of painting for French artists and critics of the 1860s – one of the preoccupations of this 'the generation of 1863', as Fried calls this group of authors, was to constitute an authentic canon of French art; still, at the time, this insistence on an 'authentically' national was linked to ideas of the universality of then emerging modern art. Manet refers to Chardin, Watteau, and Le Nain as 'authentic' French authors and incorporates their language into his own work and then, via this French canon, also further refers to the 'old masters' such as Velázquez, Rubens, and Raphael. This shows that under the conditions of modernity, the only way to valorise painting as universal, which means worthy, successful, relevant, was by way of comparison to the 'old masters', that is, to the great art of the past: "I think of this aspect of Manet's art as a deliberate attempt to establish the universality of *his own painting* [...] It is, however, to assert that Manet's evident determination to secure access to the major schools of painting must be seen, not simply as motivated by his intense interest in each school in its own right, but also – fundamentally – as direct toward the accomplishment of access to the art of painting *in its entirety*, so to speak [...] so Manet's explicit involvement with the Frenchness of French painting was an expression of his complete dedication to the art of painting *altogether*."¹⁷

This is something that makes Manet a truly modernist author: a modernist author may no longer appeal to any external criteria in the valorisation or affirmation of his work; in the age of modernity, even the existence of an audience is uncertain – the artist does not know whether his work constitutes any kind of contribution to the history of painting or sculpture as a discipline, whether it will ever reach its recipients, or, quite to the contrary, will remain confined in the privacy of his own artistic language. The only place that provides any sort of criteria is the history of art, the history of his artistic discipline and its conventions, within which the artist pursues his work. For the modernist artist, the past thereby becomes a problem that one cannot circumvent

¹⁷ Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s*, Chicago–London, The University of Chicago Press, 1996, 126.

– history sets the terms of his own creative exploration of media; to reject those terms, that is, to negate art history altogether would mean to reject the criteria whereby we think a given object as artistic, in other words, it would mean ‘entirely losing interest in whether one’s work matters in the ways (or in ways intelligibly related to the ways) the great work of the past matters to us.’¹⁸ In other words, it is precisely because his work is radically different from all art history, precisely because it is unique in its un-repeatability that the modernist author is in constant dialogue with that same history of art; tradition is indispensable to the modernist author, if he is to have any parameters for thinking his own work.

Interpreting Fried, Jonathan Harris draws parallels between Fried’s interpretation and Arnold Hauser’s interpretation of the beginnings of modern art in his *Social History of Art*. What links their respective interpretations is that both of them situate the birth of modernism at the moment of the radical disintegration or death of that which Harris calls the ‘collective style’ of art: from the time of Manet and the impressionists to Picasso and the 1920s avant-garde, an entirely new profile of the artist takes shape, an author who acts as an isolated individual working in the conditions of a constant threat of alienation and privacy. Harris uses there a typically Wittgensteinian vocabulary: modernist works of art are ‘language games’, but of a kind that cannot fit into any common language or collective semantic system. Avant-garde artists therefore work in almost complete social isolation, ‘in exile’ or at least in bohemian groups of social outcasts; in such conditions (where artworks are no longer made on commission, nor do artists have, whilst creating their works, an idea who their consumers might be), the audience of art, the aesthetic community, the *other* becomes a fragile and uncertain category. Modern artists produce their works for their own sake, practically for themselves, while creating art becomes a value in its own right. In fact, this is a basic definition of aestheticism: art is no longer a social activity but an activity of self-expression that produces and takes shape according to its own standards; in other words, in the conditions of modernity, artistic work is a medium through which an individual addresses another individual, without anything guaranteeing their agreement *a priori*. The doctrine of ‘art for art’s sake’ is a consequence of art’s radical social dislocation in modern capitalist society. In that sense Fried describes the process of the erosion in ‘style as social indicator’ that occurs in the development of art after Manet: “[modernism] *does* demonstrate the erosion in ‘style as social indicator’ that disturbed Hauser so much. And it *is* the case, Fried remarks, that style, understood in the Hauser-Schapiro sense, becomes grossly inappropriate when considering Manet’s and his successors’ paintings: style understood as generalized type is inadequate in terms of ‘legitimacy or validity’, and this is partly because of what Fried calls ‘modernist painting’s drive to transform and renew itself through radical *criticism* of its own achievements.’¹⁹

¹⁸ Stephen Mulhall, “Stanley Cavell”, in: Diarmuid Costello and Jonathan Vickery (eds.) *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers*, Oxford–New York, Berg, 2007, 113.

¹⁹ Jonathan Harris, *Writing Back to Modern Art: After Greenberg, Fried, and Clark*, London–New York, Routledge, 2005, 18.

Therefore, self-criticism is a basic feature of modernist art: in the conditions of a radical de-legitimisation of the category of social art, that is, of the disintegration of the category of 'community' addressed by artists and works of art, the relating of current art to that of the past is the only way that same art may constitute itself (thus we may also speak even of a specific 'modernist tradition'). This relating to the past is necessary because modern art is a product of quite specific social circumstances and is, as such, a specific form of visual social behaviour: in a situation where the great art schools of the past have disappeared and ceased to play an integrating role in our current 'forms of life', the modern artist is left to his own devices, his own 'resources' and extreme forms of individualism. Therefore, lapsing into a private language of one's own is an inherent threat to art under the conditions of modernism.

An Artwork Is Not a Thing: Fried's Critique of Minimalism

Fried's 'crisis of representation' culminates after the experience of the avant-garde, that is, during the 1960s, with the emergence of artistic practices such as minimalism: before minimalism, the problem artists faced was the risk that their work might be unconvincing, banal, that their paintings might fail to be 'authentic' or 'fail' altogether. However, only after the experience of minimalism (or that of the Duchampian readymade) does art confront the systemic problem of non-differentiating between artistic and ordinary, everyday objects, that is, the reduction of the artwork to an object, literally a *thing* (it is hardly surprising that Fried describes minimalist art as *literalist art*; in this context, *literal* may be understood as referring to creating objects that are deprived of the 'auratic' quality of modernist works). Modernism is a practice that seeks to overcome scepticism by taking the overcoming of theatricality as its central problem; minimalism, on the other hand, abandons that problem and yields, from anti-utopian grounds, to the spectacularisation/theatre of late consumer society.

In that context, Fried's main thesis in 'Art and Objecthood', his essay mentioned above, is roughly this: minimalism is an artistic movement that attempts, in a radical way, to deconstruct and reject as outdated the medium of modernist painting and sculpture, that is, the modernist conception of the work of art as unique and unrepeatable. The minimalists pursue that goal by rejecting the painting or statue, replacing them with tri-dimensional, minimalist objects – in lieu of a painting or statue as a unique work, they situate the repetitiveness of a 'specific' minimalist object that rests on a series of identical, uniform units. The goal of minimalist authors is to eliminate modernism's 'anthropomorphism', which means treating the work as a human gesture or expression, introducing instead the model of the a-personal, industrialised Gestalt. Looked at in this way, modernism and minimalism are radically opposed: modernist painting or sculpture insist on a thorough distinction between works of art and everyday objects or things; the imperative of modernist painting is to

overcome objecthood and create a work that will be basically different from all other things and objects in the world. By contrast, minimalism equals the artwork with everyday objects; minimalism does not seek to overcome or suspend objecthood, but to reveal and project its own objective character; in other words, minimalist authors erase the border between art and non-art. Their insistence on objecthood takes art into a new form of theatricality/scepticism: instead of making the work be a place for producing value, or that which might be determined as the 'authenticity' of a work of art and the human gesture we read into and in it, minimalists are satisfied if, as Donald Judd put it, the work is 'interesting'. Therefore, any and every object may be art – from a minimalist Gestalt to everyday consumer-culture items; art is thereby transformed into constructing artificial settings, situations, or – theatre. Theatre is an essential negation of art, whereas modernism and minimalism are two diametrically opposed answers to that threat. Modernism strives to overcome the danger (a typical example is the work of one of the central authors in Fried's work in criticism and art history – the British sculptor Anthony Caro, whose sculptures transcend theatricality by virtue of being radically different from all familiar objects and things in the world), while minimalism abandons overcoming theatre as the fundamental problem in artistic work. Through theatricality, art becomes degenerate, that is, yielding to theatre, minimalists' artistic work fails to articulate the concept of artistic worth, value. The reception, 'consumption' of modernist art, on the one hand, and that of minimalism on the other hand are radically different: we observe a minimalist *object* from different angles, whereby this object, by virtue of integrating the beholder into the space organised by it, looks different from different viewing angles. Therefore, a minimalist work is always discovered anew, it implies a reception that is potentially *ad infinitum*; that is possible because a minimalist work is actually 'empty' – its consumption entails the dimension of time, while this obsession with time, with duration, is basically theatrical. By contrast, a modernist *work* is entirely visible, present, and its reception entails instantaneous looking, that is, what Fried and Cavell label as *presentness*.

In that essay, Fried does not provide an answer as to why theatre is a negative category, or why theatricality is harmful to art and why the instantaneousness and total visibility of a modern work of art automatically guarantee its worth. Answers to those questions are only hinted at, but as we have seen in arguments offered thus far, they are inherently related to the Wittgensteinian problematic of private language. Namely, Fried quotes from a text by a minimalist author, Tony Smith, in which he describes his experience of driving along a New Jersey highway, drawing parallels between its empty, entirely artificial landscape filled with neon lights, traffic signs, and commercial billboards, and the experience of confronting a similarly artificial work, object, or situation in a minimalist installation. Smith lives through his 'aesthetic' experience in silence, isolation, in an environment separated from every form of inter-social communication; in fact, what Smith describes is the transformation and replacement of the aesthetic and contemplative by the spectacular and entirely artificial. In Fried's words, "in each of the above cases the object is, so to speak,

replaced by something: for example, on the turnpike by the constant onrush of the road, the simultaneous recession of the new reaches of dark pavement illuminated by the onrushing headlights, the sense of the turnpike itself as something enormous, abandoned, derelict, existing for Smith alone and for those in the car with him... This last point is important. On the one hand, the turnpike, airstrips, and drill ground belong to no one; on the other, the situation established by Smith's presence is in each case felt by him to be *his*.²⁰

In other words, Smith is practically alone in his car and needs no one else in his experience of the spectacle unfolding before his eyes, while there is nothing behind that spectacle that we might identify as 'specifically human': the images before his eyes are not gestures but an artificial setting. Minimalist installations are similar in that regard: a minimalist construction ostensibly absorbs the viewer into its space, but results in exactly the opposite effect – the viewer's distancing, 'not only in physical, but also in psychological terms.' The viewer is thereby transformed from a viewing subject into a mere object – the experience of a minimalist work is analogous to that of driving down the highway: it is an experience or perception that remains closed off in privacy, failing to attain a public character.

Precisely for that reason, by way of presentness, modernist art overcomes theatre (that is, scepticism), because we perceive a modernist work, thanks to presentness, not as an ordinary object, but as a human gesture, unique and unrepeatable, the way other people are unique and unrepeatable but ordinary objects and things never are. That is why we perceive artworks, unlike everyday objects, in ways that are analogous to the way we perceive other people, persons – we speak of them in the context of love and emotions, contempt, or disgust, and simultaneously feel that someone, another person made of flesh and blood, like us, created them; that is why in our descriptions of works we use categories pertaining to personal style, feelings, insincerity, authority, invention, depth, or worthlessness.²¹ By emphasising the purely objective character of artistic objects, minimalism sets all of that aside. By analogy, Cavell labels the inability to view the other as a person made of flesh and blood, a person like ourselves, that is, the inability to see human gestures in paintings, as the inability to reconstitute the criteria within the process of inter-social communication, i.e. as alienation from ordinary language in use, as scepticism. It is therefore little surprising that Fried opens his essay with the claim that the procedures of art labelled in the 1960s as minimal art, ABC art, primary structures and specific object art are basically ideological, and concludes with that famous statement: 'We are literalists most or all of our times. Presentness is grace.'

²⁰ Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, op. cit., 159.

²¹ Stephen Mulhall, "Stanley Cavell", op. cit.