

Exalting Points of View

A Discussion of Michael Fried's Interpretation of Wittgenstein's Contribution to Aesthetic Thought

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ABSTRACT This paper discusses how Wittgenstein's thinking informs recent conversations about art and aesthetic practice by examining his influence on the work of the noted modernist art critic, Michael Fried. Fried considers an excerpt from Wittgenstein's *Culture and Value*, with a puzzling thought experiment, to help us see more clearly the Canadian artist Jeff Wall's photographic vision and aesthetic. I consider Fried's account of the photographic practice of Jeff Wall, especially his photograph *Morning Cleaning*, Mies van der Rohe Foundation (1999).

KEYWORDS Wittgenstein, Michael Fried, Jeff Wall, André Bazin, Photography, Neorealism

This paper discusses how Wittgenstein's thinking informs recent conversations about art and aesthetic practice by examining his influence on the work of the noted modernist art critic, Michael Fried. Based on an excerpt from Wittgenstein's *Culture and Value*, I consider Fried's account of the photographic practice of the Canadian artist Jeff Wall. Fried's interpretation appears in his recent book, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008), in which he writes about many of the most prominent photographers in contemporary art from the 1970s onward. In Chapter 3, "Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday," Michael Fried pays careful attention to a long excerpt from Wittgenstein's *Culture and Value*, dated August 22, 1930, suggesting that it is one of Wittgenstein's most interesting contributions to aesthetic thought.¹ Fried considers Wittgenstein's text, with its puzzling thought experiment, to help us see more clearly Jeff Wall's photographic vision and aesthetic. Through the so-called "near documentary" approach, in which the photographs are supposed to reconstruct actual events, Wall attempts to represent the everyday in a way that is both conspicuous and beautiful.

With regard to Wall's artistic output, Fried asserts that Wall pursues "antitheatrical" ideals in many of his pictures, which suggests that they ought to be considered in light of a particular tradition of painting in France that started in 1750 and persisted through the 1860s.² Fried is also interested in Diderot's thoughts about the problematic issue of the beholder and her or his relationship to painting and drama.³ Fried notes that according to Diderot, in order for the beholder to become absorbed

in a picture, the beholder's presence has to be ignored; the only means of accomplishing this is by representing the person being absorbed. The artist therefore should attempt to create the ontological illusion that the beholder is not present, with the aim of neutralizing or denying the beholder's presence. If this is not accomplished, then the painting is considered theatrical. As I understand Fried, *absorption* is an important category in relation to what the picture depicts (and how this affects the beholder) and, more generally, to the way autonomous (and non-soliciting) artworks allow the beholder to become absorbed in the work.

An important backdrop of Fried's discussion in his new book on photography is his "Art and Objecthood" (1966/67), which constitutes Fried's central and most discussed work with respect to his critique of the minimalist development within art. Fried was uneasy with how the experience of minimalist works differs from the experience of high-modernist works. The problem, we could say, was related to Fried's concern that minimalist or literal objects threatened to erase the distinction between art and mere objects. One important consequence of the minimalist program is that these works erase the distinction between our experience of artworks and of ordinary objects. A central contention in Fried's critical essay is that literalist art creates a theatrical effect on the beholder and that we therefore are faced with a new form of theater. Fried's idea seems to be that these works include the beholder and his surroundings in a radical new way. Consequently, within this practice, art loses autonomy.⁴

One of the key issues in Fried's book is that the Diderotean problematic was revitalized, first in connection with the conflict between high-modernism and minimalism in the 1960s, which was extensively delineated in Fried's "Art and Objecthood," and then within the development of photography as a medium of artistic expression during the 1970s and 1980s. For Fried, an important aspect of the abstractions within high-modernism – in contrast to minimalist objects – was that the beholder was not addressed; that is, the work was not *for* her or him, and therefore was not theatrical. A modernist artwork is considered a meaningful unit in and of itself, set apart from its beholder or surroundings. What distinguishes many of the photographers Fried discusses (Jeff Wall included) is "the explicitness of their engagement with a particular constellation of artistic and theoretical issues all of which relate, in one way or another, to the core opposition between theatricality and antitheatricality as that opposition was formulated in 'Art and Objecthood'["]."⁵

The connection between Diderot's reflections and Wall's aesthetic practice is instructive, which is also true of Fried's thoughts on the de-

velopment of the beholder problematic within the French tradition of painting. Also interesting is that this Diderotean beholder problematic is taken up much later, first in connection with the conflict between high-modernism and minimalists in the 1960s, and then within the development of photography as a medium of artistic expression. Although I find Fried's turn to photography worthwhile and appreciate many of his insightful readings of famous photographs in his recent work, my sense is that the connection he urges between Wittgenstein and Wall is problematic in several ways. One important issue is whether (and how) Wittgenstein's excerpt addresses any of the key issues related to the theatrical versus the antitheatrical problematic. Whereas Fried attempts to read the excerpt in terms of his own antitheatrical aesthetic, and takes it further to anticipate Wall's artistic practice, I argue that the excerpt draws attention to the way a person's experiences might be affected by a personal perspective. Furthermore, Wittgenstein's brief remarks about how the artwork compels us could indeed be taken to support a modernist and antitheatrical aesthetic in line with Fried. On the other hand, Wittgenstein's thought experiment and his view on how a personal perspective might exalt the object of our attention can be taken as gesturing toward theories and practices emphasizing an active contribution on part of the spectator, and therefore challenging the modernist notion of the autonomy of the artwork. With my point of departure as Wall's *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation* (1999),⁶ a photograph that Fried relates to Wittgenstein's excerpt, I discuss some of these thoughts in the concluding part of this paper.

Jeff Wall and Wittgenstein's Excerpt

Fried discusses Wittgenstein's excerpt from *Culture and Value* in the chapter, "Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday."⁷ Here Fried focuses on Wall's artistic output, with a particular eye to Wall's central position within contemporary art and the development of photography as a widely recognized art form. According to Fried, Wall is one of the most prominent forerunners of several important developments within art photography:

In my opinion and by common consensus, Wall is one of the most ambitious and accomplished photographers working today but, of course, to say that is to say something quite different from what a comparable claim would have entailed even twenty years ago. One of the most important developments in the so-called visual arts of the past twenty-plus years has been the emergence

of large-scale, tableau-sized photographs that by virtue of their size demand to be hung on gallery walls in the manner of easel paintings, and in other respects as well aspire to what might loosely be called the rhetorical, or beholder-addressing, significance of paintings while at the same time declaring their artifactual identity as photographs.⁸

The photographic works on which Fried focuses break with photographic modernism and the so-called straight photography tradition precisely through their format (modernist photographs were usually small) and manner of exhibition. The photographs are as big as history paintings and often relate to that tradition. Moreover, Wall and many of the other photographers in Fried's book manipulate their pictures digitally, which is at odds with the tradition of "straight photography," in which one tries to avoid every form of manipulation in post-production.

For Fried, Wall's photograph *Morning Cleaning* materializes aspects of the philosophical text and thus helps us better understand its profundity. Wall's photograph is "cinematographic," which means that both motive and *mis-en-scène* are staged.⁹ The window cleaner in Wall's photograph seems to be in his own world, ignorant of the beholder's (photograph's) presence. He does not even notice the sunlight entering the room. However, we realize that it is impossible for this photograph to have been taken by a candid camera; it is too composed and too technically accomplished.¹⁰ Although the picture cannot be taken as spontaneous "straight photography," since it was carefully planned and digitally reworked, the picture nevertheless has a very realistic feeling.

Let us now take a closer look at the excerpt:

Engelmann told me that when he rummages round at home in a drawer full of his own manuscripts, they strike him as so glorious that he thinks they would be worth presenting to other people. (He said it's the same when he is reading through letters from his dead relations.) But when he imagines a selection of them published he said the whole business loses its charm & value & becomes impossible. I said this case was like the following one: Nothing could be more remarkable than seeing someone who thinks himself unobserved engaged in some quite simple everyday activity. Let's imagine a theatre, the curtain goes up & we see someone alone in his room walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, seating himself etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; as if we were watching a chapter from a biography with our own eyes, – surely this would be at once uncanny and wonderful. More wonderful than anything a playwright could cause to be acted or spoken on the stage. We should be see-

ing life itself. – But then we do see this every day & it makes not the slightest impression on us! True enough, but we do not see it from *that* point of view. – Similarly when E. looks at his writings and finds them splendid (even though he would not care to publish any of the pieces individually), he is seeing his life as God’s work of art, & as such it is certainly worth contemplating, as is every life & everything whatever. But only the artist can represent the individual thing so that it appears to us as a work of art; those manuscripts *rightly* lose their value if we contemplate them singly & in any case without *prejudice*, i.e. without being enthusiastic about them in advance. The work of art compels us – as one might say – to see it in the right perspective, but without art the object is a piece of nature like any other, & the fact that *we* may exalt it through our enthusiasm does not give anyone the right to display it to us. (I am always reminded of one of those insipid photographs of a piece of scenery which is interesting to the person who took it because he was there himself, experienced something, but which a third party looks at with justifiable coldness; in so far as it is ever justifiable to look at something with coldness.)

But now it seems to me too that besides the work of the artist there is another through which the world may be captured sub specie aeterni. It is – as I believe – the way of thought which, as it were, flies above the world and leaves it the way it is, contemplating it from above in its flight.¹¹

Fried’s interpretation of the excerpt is organized into eight points. If I have understood Fried correctly, he asserts the following points: (1) that the thought experiment belongs to an antitheatrical frame of mind; (2) the everyday is only available in an antitheatrical/absorptive form; (3) the point of view introduced in the thought experiment is associated with seeing the scene in question as a work of art; (4) important distinctions between “the individual thing” and “the object”; (5) and looking at something “without prejudice” and “with coldness” are established; (6) the excerpt invites us to imagine a new medium; (7) only a work of art can make life itself (in the form of absorption) available for aesthetic contemplation; and (8) there is an affinity between “contemplating the world from above” and Wittgenstein’s conception of perspicuous representation in the *Investigations*.

All these claims are interesting and need further comments. I now address Fried’s points in order:

(1) Fried launches his interpretation of the passage in *Culture and Value* by noticing that the person in the thought experiment is absorbed in what he is doing. As already mentioned, absorption and the ordinary are two prominent dimensions in Wall’s photography. Wittgenstein himself

does not make use of the expression “absorbed” in this context. He only suggests that he is engaged in some everyday activities and that he is not aware of being observed. For Fried, however, a connection exists between the thought experiment and Diderot’s thoughts about the connection between absorption and not being observed. Actually, the extract’s significance for aesthetic thought can only be gauged against the background of the issue of antitheatricality.

(2) Fried then goes on to argue that the excerpt claims that the everyday is *only* available through an antitheatrical and absorptive form; the thought experiment shows us how artworks may open our eyes to various aspects of the everyday. For Fried, the everyday constitutes an important aesthetic category for both Wall and Wittgenstein. The antitheatrical (absorptive) form suggested in Wittgenstein’s extract involves an extreme form of realism (“a *ne plus ultra* of realism”) in which we would see life itself.¹² However, are we actually faced with a representation in this case? If so, what is the person on the stage representing? The point of view alluded to in the thought experiment does not involve an aesthetic representation, so in my view it is not obvious that, “the everyday is here imagined by him as available only in an antitheatrical (and implicitly absorptive) form.”¹³

(3) In response to the objection, “But then, we do see this every day, & it makes not the slightest impression on us!” Fried says that it is critical that we correctly understand the perspective the experiment invites us to occupy. The perspective is associated with seeing the scene in question as an artwork. (“The question, then, is how to characterize the latter perspective, which he associates with seeing the scene in question as a work of art.”¹⁴) Moreover, Fried stresses that we are faced with a fundamental distinction between the world of the beholder and the person being beheld. For Fried, this suggests a connection between the scene in the thought experiment and the absorptive scenes in the French tradition of painting and recent art photography.

My sense is that it is important to perceive that we are faced with a thought experiment (and not an example of an artwork): “– surely this would be at once uncanny and wonderful. More wonderful than anything a playwright could cause to be acted or spoken on the stage.” Perhaps it is more accurate to say that we are faced with a comparison. In my view, Wittgenstein is interested in how our prejudices, that is, our enthusiastic *thoughts* about what we are observing, contribute to what we actually *see*. Engelmann, for example, sees the letters for a short time in a particular perspective. He manages for a brief moment (at home) to

see his life as a work of art created by God. His enthusiasm and personal experiences cause him to see the manuscripts in a particular way.

(4) Fried takes Wittgenstein's distinction between the "individual thing" and the "object" that he has explored in his art criticism to pertain to his central conception of objecthood that he developed in the 1960s: "the extract deploys an unexpected distinction between (the representation) of the 'individual thing,' *das Einzelne*, and, in the absence of art, 'the object,' *der Gegenstand* – a 'mere' object[.]"¹⁵ A closer look at the extract reveals that all that Wittgenstein is saying is that only the artist is able to *represent* the individual thing so it appears as a work of art. There is a comment on Engelmann's view that his manuscripts will appear inert if they are contemplated individually. He also says that without artistic representation, the object ("Gegenstand") will appear as a piece of nature, like any other thing. With regard to the last comment, Wittgenstein appears to have naturalistic paintings in mind (that is, paintings in which some kind of scenery is depicted in a realistic fashion).

Furthermore, in this context the individual thing and the object are synonymous. The artist can represent the individual thing or an object. An artistic representation may compel the beholder towards the individual thing or an object in a particular way. Without the representation, the individual thing/object is like any other piece of nature. The artistic representation seems to transform reality, forcing a new perception of the represented individual thing or object. Interestingly, Wittgenstein refers to photography as providing an example of a nonartistic representation of scenery. It seems as if photography is considered transparent and without any capacity to transform what it depicts.

In a critical commentary on Fried's new book, Stephen Mulhall argues that Fried should see the contrast between the individual thing and the object in relation to the contrast between the individual thing and the larger group of things to which it initially belonged:

For, reacting to Engelmann's sense that, whilst his writings taken as a whole appear splendid or glorious, they lose their charm the moment he contemplates the idea of publishing a selection of them, Wittgenstein claims that they suffer this loss not simply insofar we contemplate them without prejudice, but also insofar we contemplate them singly.¹⁶

Mullhall assumes that Wittgenstein is interested in the possibility that the value of the manuscripts as described is recoverable. This could happen "either by an artistic representation of them in their singularity, or by their being viewed in the context of the larger body of related

things from which they have extracted.”¹⁷ However, as Mullhall continues, “Wittgenstein also says that Engelmann can succeed in viewing his whole body of writing, and so his life, as God’s work of art without needing the work of the artist in order to do so (whereas artistic work is required if an individual object is to be so viewed). So is artistic work needed or not?”¹⁸

At this point, I agree with Fried that Wittgenstein is not discussing any “alternative strategy for attributing value to ordinary things.”¹⁹ What I find interesting is the suggested contrast between the compelling perspective of art and the (non-compelling) perspective provided by personal experiences and prejudices. The excerpt suggests a connection between the strange situation described by the thought experiment and the example involving insipid photographs that are only of interest to those who were there when the photograph was made. The person who was there looks at the pictures from a different point of view than does the person who was not present. Although the photograph and the things photographed might be exalted through the enthusiasm of the person who was present, this person could not expect others to see the photograph in the same way.

(5) Fried also drives at the distinction between looking at something without prejudice and with coldness. Engelmann’s fear is that other people would look at his manuscripts with coldness. The photo example is meant to illuminate this point. A person who was not there himself would look at the photograph with justifiable coldness. That is, such a person would contemplate it without prejudice (there would be nothing that mobilized in him an interest in the scenery). He would not be enthusiastic in advance, as it were. Of course, being prejudiced can mean many things. In this context, however, I think we are supposed to see that a connection exists between looking at something “without prejudice” and “with coldness.”

(6) With his thought experiment, Fried’s Wittgenstein invites us to imagine a completely new artistic medium, one that was not available at the time that Wittgenstein wrote the passage. In Fried’s words:

I take Wittgenstein to be inviting one to imagine an artistic medium significantly different from anything available to him (or others) at that time. Obviously the theater could not supply what was wanted, even though he begins by asking us to imagine a curtain going up on a stage such as had never – he seems to think – actually existed. I have suggested, however, that the dramaturgy of his thought experiment is extremely close to that of Diderot’s writings on drama and painting of the 1750s and ’60s.²⁰

Fried contends that Jeff Wall is exploring a medium that the experiment invites us to imagine in his photographic practice. Fried even says that Wall, with his *Morning Cleaning*, responds to the artistic challenge described in Wittgenstein's passage, which is the most important reason for relating Wittgenstein's passage to Wall's project. However, I cannot agree that the passage encourages the reading that Fried proposes.²¹

(7) Fried understands Wittgenstein's claim that "But only the artist can represent the individual thing so that it appears as a work of art" means that "only a work of art, precisely because it 'compels us to see it in the right perspective,' can make 'life itself,' in the form of absorption, available for aesthetic contemplation."²² For Fried, the recognition of artifice that he ascribes to Wittgenstein must be viewed with an eye to Wall's aesthetic practice: "I want to associate this acknowledgement of artifice (for that is what it is: think of the theater and its curtain) with the frank acknowledgement – the foregrounding – of photographic and dramaturgical artifice in Wall's pictures[.]"²³ Through his near-documentary aesthetic involving artifice (for example, staging, sets, and so forth), Wall produced such a picture in *Morning Cleaning*. However, one might ask whether viewing life itself (as described in the thought experiment) and viewing something as a work of art is the same thing. Fried takes Wittgenstein's supposed recognition of artifice (displayed by the fact that the thought experiment involves a scene) to applaud Wall's near-documentary style (aesthetic strategy), which involves making pictures to demonstrate what an event looked like when it occurred without the impact of observation being apparent. However, we should remember that when Wittgenstein says, "We should be seeing life itself," he is talking about the thought experiment (and what this situation would involve). Moreover, Wittgenstein says that the artist compels us to occupy the correct perspective. He does not say that the artist makes life itself available for aesthetic contemplation in the manner that Fried suggests.

I think it is important that we consider the experiment as a response to Engelmann's puzzlement, that is, a response to the reason for the change in perception of the manuscript from precious to worthless. In Wittgenstein's company, Engelmann seemed to have voiced his fear that something will lose its value and attractiveness (for example, his own manuscripts and letters from dead relatives) when put in a new context. For example, when Engelmann imagines a selection of them published or he contemplates them singly, he doubts whether others would appreciate their value. Therefore, presenting them to other people seems impossible. Two important questions can be posited: Can you always expect

other people to see something in the same way? When is this likely to be a problem? Wittgenstein reminds us in his response to this problem how important the perspective, that is, our particular prejudgments or enthusiasm for something, may be. Personal involvement may make something appear attractive and wonderful.

When Wittgenstein says, "I said this case is like the following one," we should ask why the example pertains to Engelmann's frustration. Wittgenstein urges us to imagine everyday activities, such as a person walking back and forth on a stage, lighting a cigarette, seating himself, and so forth from a peculiar point of view. We are supposed to imagine a person engaging in these activities while not being aware of our presence. From this *point of view*, the person's behavior would make a deep impression on us. What we would see would be "just life itself," and not an artist's interpretation and representation of something.

Engelmann's case is similar. When he finds his manuscripts glorious, he sees his life as God's work of art, and not just an ordinary life among other lives. From this point of view, his manuscripts and letters are clearly worth contemplating. However, there is, as Wittgenstein notes, an important difference between seeing something as a work of art (as God's work of art) and actually *representing* something so that it appears as a work of art. Engelmann is not representing anything; he is only very enthusiastic about something. His enthusiasm might be passed on to others, but in contrast to a work of art, as Wittgenstein suggests, there is nothing compelling about his way of seeing the manuscripts. Because of his enthusiasm, which in this context is considered a *prejudice*, the manuscripts *appear* glorious. The enthusiasm about the manuscripts is endangered when Engelmann imagines the manuscripts separated from their usual and homely context. Not only is he uncertain about the enthusiasm of others out of context but he is also uncertain about his own enthusiasm under such circumstances. The work of art, on the other hand, compels us to see the thing in the correct perspective. This could be construed to mean that the artwork's meaning is not dependent on the spectator; instead, the artwork compels the spectator to see the thing represented in the right perspective.²⁴

A wonderful scene in Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) has some bearing on the problem Engelmann poses. In the last part of the film, there is a concert in which the guitarist in the performing band (The Yardbirds) smashes his guitar and lets the crowd in front of him fight over the ruined instrument. The main character (the photographer) gets hold of this desired object and narrowly escapes a bunch of crazed audience mem-

bers. Out on the street, he looks at the piece of junk and throws it away. An accidental walker takes it up and examines the thing before letting it fall back down on the street. The scene could be considered a funny reminder about how our enthusiasm affects the way we look at things.

(8) Toward the end of the excerpt, we are told that the artist captures the world *sub specie aeterni*. Fried takes the last sentence about this way of thought as an early intuition of the notion of perspicuous representation in *Philosophical Investigations*, something that connects the excerpt to Wittgenstein's interest in the ordinary. According to Fried, "This suggests that between the enterprise of the *Philosophical Investigations* and the seemingly more narrowly esthetic concerns of the 1930 extract there exists an affinity as fruitful to think about as it is – at least at first – surprising."²⁵

It is instructive to compare Fried's interpretation with remarks from *Notebooks 1914–1916* (07 Oct 16), in which Wittgenstein says that the usual way of looking at things is to see them from their midst. On the other hand, through a work of art we see things from the outside. In such cases, the rest of the world constitutes a background. The artistic representation separates the thing from the rest of the world.²⁶ In the subsequent note (08 Oct 16), Wittgenstein says:

As a thing among things, each thing is equally insignificant; as world each one equally significant.

If I have been contemplating the stove, and then am told: but now all you know is the stove, my result does indeed seem trivial. For this represents the matter as if I have studied the stove as one among the many things in the world. But if I was contemplating the stove *it* was my world, and everything else colorless by contrast with it.²⁷

Referring to Engelmann, we might say that he sees his life not as a life among other lives, but as a life created by God. He contemplates the manuscripts as if they are his world.

The way of thought is not an alternative strategy. The point is that there are different ways to contemplate things that break with usual practices. In contrast to the way of art, the way of thought does not involve creating anything in the world. The world is left as it is. It is from this perspective that we should understand the last sentences of the excerpt:

But now it seems to me too that besides the work of the artist there is another through which the world may be captured *sub specie aeterni*. It is – as I believe – the way of thought which, as it were, flies above the world and leaves it the way it is, contemplating it from above in its flight.

For Wittgenstein, it is important that our experiences be informed by various perspectives. I take his excerpt to suggest that art can, through its representations, force the beholder to view an individual thing in a particular way. On the other hand, the way of thought may also force us to take a perspective that involves viewing things from the outside. This is very different from intervening in the world and producing a representation.

Jeff Wall, Neorealism, and the Experience of Ambiguity in Cinema and Photography

The suggestion about the compelling force of the art work notwithstanding, the excerpt's assertions about how our experiences are formed by various perspectives are nevertheless relevant for discussions about interpretation and meaning with regard to works of art.²⁸ Many artworks invite the beholder to participate in their meaning (or are experienced to do so). In this perspective, the way the excerpt draws attention to the subject's responses and how fundamental they might be for one's experience are relevant. In closing, I return to Wall's *Morning Cleaning*. I think this work of art urges the beholder to participate actively in its meaning, such that one's prejudgments and personal experiences are important.

According to Fried, *Morning Cleaning* could be considered an example of Wall's move towards antitheatrical art. An important element in Wall's endeavor is the artist's occupation with the everyday and a near-documentary style. I certainly agree that it is instructive to consider Wall's *Morning Cleaning* and many of his other photographs with an eye to the Diderotian tradition. Wall's occupation with absorbed personages and his allusions to historical images are important on this score.²⁹ Fried also connects Wall's picture to high modernist painting, which I consider related to his idea that Wall is moving toward an antitheatrical art. An important question is how we should understand Fried's claim. Later in his book, Fried suggests, among other things, that high modernist paintings and sculptures "were fundamentally antitheatrical in that (to speak only somewhat metaphorically) they took no notice of the beholder, who was left to come to terms with them – to make sense of the relationships they comprised – as best as he or she could."³⁰ Fried complains that within so-called literalism or theatrical art, meaning was essentially "indeterminate." If I have understood Fried correctly, the meaning of antitheatrical art, on the other hand, appears to be determined more by the work itself or by the intentions of the artist.³¹ Yet as far as Wall's *Morning Cleaning* is concerned, my sense is that this work actually leaves much room for the viewer. The viewer may, as it were, feel encouraged to participate in the meaning of the photograph.

In my view, it is important that we look into some of the cinematic aspects of Wall's *Morning Cleaning*, which is classified as cinematographic photography. It is interesting to note that for a long time Wall has taken a strong interest in the cinematic medium. As Peter Galassi points out, "Wall's extended engagement with the art of filmmaking never produced a finished film, but his subsequent work in photography is inconceivable without it."³² For Wall, Galassi says (citing Wall), "collaboration and preparation" were very important. He elaborates, "If a set could be constructed and a scene rehearsed for a film, then those same techniques could radically broaden the scope of photography, at the same time drawing it closer to the other visual arts that Wall admired, notably painting and filmmaking."³³ The following quote from Wall seems to support this view: "It seemed to me that the approaches and techniques used by cinematographers were in fact authentic photographic techniques, and that they could be used well in static picture making."³⁴

Wall's fascination with the everyday, to which Fried correctly draws attention at various junctures, is noticeable in many of his photographs. *Morning Cleaning* depicts a window cleaner going about his daily work. The event itself might seem ordinary, but the location and the beautiful morning light constitute a captivating context for this "incident in the daily life of worker."³⁵ According to Fried, Wall's approach to the everyday must be seen in connection with the aesthetic ideal that he has dubbed "near documentary." Fried further suggests that Wall's interest in the everyday is related to his fascination with neorealism. For Wall, neorealism "refers to using non-professional performers in roles very close to their own lives, photographing events as if you were doing reportage, and recognizing good subjects in the everyday."³⁶ In my view, it is important that we also consider the form of cinematic experience that the neorealist films are presumed to evoke. Famously, André Bazin, the noted French film critic and theorist, wrote extensively on neorealism. He was a devoted supporter and theorist of aesthetic realism in cinema, an aesthetic he saw developed in the work of directors, such as Orson Welles and Jean Renoir, and in the neorealist films made in the aftermath of the Second World War. Bazin calls attention to how films within this aesthetic register are endowed "with a sense of the ambiguity of reality."³⁷ In several essays, Bazin suggests that the use of depth of focus in combination with long takes and deep staging attempts to avoid placing a priori significance upon particular elements in the story's universe. For Bazin, classical montage (editing) alleviates the responsibility of finding sense in the image. Although Bazin emphasizes the use of long takes,

depth of focus, and staging in depth as realist techniques, he argues that cinematic realism could be achieved in many ways and that technological inventions and artistic research would bring about new forms of realism. Bazin values aesthetic realism because the depicted reality is not analyzed and edited for us, which means that we, as spectators, have the burden of making sense out of an ambiguous, screened reality. Thus, the spectator is called upon to do his own "editing." In "The Evolution of Film Language," Bazin suggests that the use of depth of field "creates a relationship between the viewer and the image which is closer to the viewer's relationship to reality." The upshot of this, according to Bazin, is that

the viewer has a more active intellectual approach, and makes a real contribution, to the *mise en scène*. With analytical editing viewers need only follow their guide and focus their attention on that of the filmmaker, who chooses for them what they should see. Here a minimum of individual choice is required. The meaning of the image depends in part on the viewer's attention and will³⁸

With an eye to Bazin, it is clearly interesting to note that *Morning Cleaning* has a large depth of field and the picture is staged in depth.³⁹ As for the photograph's cinematic scope, it is worth mentioning that the aspect ratio of the photograph is 1.87:1, which is very close to the standard widescreen format in American cinema (1.85:1). This format has become common in Europe as well. Indeed, the photograph may make us think of an establishing or reestablishing shot in a movie. However, an important question at this point is whether we could say that the photograph evokes an ambiguity of reality that is comparable to the one Bazin attributes to the aesthetics of neorealism. Since we are faced with a still picture and not a motion picture, we are, as it were, invited to absorb the detailed texture of the photograph. Perhaps we could say that this makes the viewing condition similar to that of a sequence shot (which for Bazin is central to the realist aesthetic). Interestingly, Wall suggests that a photograph is less determined than a shot in a motion picture. For Wall, a still picture "invites the most free experience." According to Wall, "Since it shows only an isolated moment, it cannot and must not show other moments, it can only suggest them. We take the suggestion, and elaborate it ourselves, freely, or very freely, according to who each viewer is, or wishes to be."⁴⁰ In the same interview, in which Wall takes issue with the prevalent view that he is an artist who attempts to control every aspect of his artistic work, he says that he considers meaning in part to be left up to the viewer. This is so, partially "because you can never determine this phenomenon, or

chimera, people call ‘meaning’. But works are structured, and depictions can be recognized, the way a likeness is recognizable, and that structure creates some foundation for the viewer’s response.”⁴¹

In my view, Fried’s careful ekphrasis and interpretation of the photograph could in fact be taken to demonstrate the photograph’s fascinating pictorial richness and ambiguity. Fried draws attention to the photograph’s interesting compositional details. He also discusses its thematic complexity and provides us with valuable information about how the photograph was made. However, the fact that the person appears absorbed seems to be the focal point in Fried’s reading. For Fried, the window cleaner is the principal focus of the work. At the same time, however, Fried suggests that the window cleaner’s engrossment in his task actually liberates us to look at and take in the rest of the picture. This is perhaps due to the circumstance that our attention is normally drawn toward a character’s face and gestures. We might add that the face of the worker in Wall’s photograph is turned away from us. There is another interesting point of connection between Wall’s photograph and Bazin’s writing on neorealist aesthetics. Bazin suggests that neorealism “calls upon the actor to be before expressing himself,” which involves, among other things, using non-professionals. According to Bazin:

In the realm of means of expression, neorealism runs counter to the traditional categories of spectacle – above all, as regards acting. According to the classic understanding of this function, inherited from the theater, the actor expresses something: a feeling, a passion, a desire, an idea. From his attitude and his miming the spectator can read his face like an open book.⁴²

Wall’s photograph denies us access to the person’s physiognomy. Moreover, elements such as framing, lighting, or other elements in the *mis en scène* offer us no help at this point. Thus, perhaps it is possible to take Fried’s remarks on how the absorbed personage liberates the viewer to gesture toward the ambiguity that she or he must negotiate in an attempt to come to terms with *Morning Cleaning*. His observations about the sunlight in the photograph could support this consideration of Wall’s photograph:

Only one thing more remains to be mentioned, and that is the warm sunlight that streams into the room at a descending angle from right to left, illuminating the carpet in all its blackness, the three couches, and most of the bottom half of the left-hand wall (the sunlight falls short of the floor beyond the carpet and therefore also of the cleaner), thereby confirming the subtle privileging of the left-hand half of the composition despite the presence of the cleaner on the right.⁴³

Interestingly, in his interpretation of *Morning Cleaning*, Fried shows us two details from the picture (the window cleaner and the sculpture of a female nude). In cinematic terms, Fried splits the photograph into various shots (details). In discussing the effect of depth of field, Bazin says the viewer's mind is forced to distinguish a dramatic spectrum specific to each scene. By presenting us with such details, Fried breaks down the photograph into shots, which could be considered an attempt to negotiate *Morning Cleaning's* ambiguous and fascinating texture.

Coda

The central contentions of this paper could be summed as follows: While Fried attempts to read the passage from *Culture and Value* purely in terms of an antitheatrical aesthetic, and further employs it in his adumbration of Wall's artistic practice, I believe that the so-called thought experiment first of all emphasizes paying attention to the point of view from which something is seen. For example, whether something is taken to be wonderful and uncanny is, in many situations, very much a question of point of view or prejudice. Wittgenstein ultimately seems to highlight the fundamental role that such *thoughts* (perspectives) play in regard to how we perceive the world. As for Wall's *Morning Cleaning*, I think it is important that we look into the implications of the connection that Wall suggests exist between his work and neorealism. In my view, this point of connection is not only about the use of nonprofessional actors, everyday subjects, and the documentary "look." The allusion to neorealism could also be interpreted as a gesture towards the ambiguity of many of his photographs and how it affects the way we try to come to terms with their meaning. Thus, Fried's notion that we should understand Wall's *Morning Cleaning* in an antitheatrical register is complicated by Wall's own remarks, the picture's richness of detail, and the lack of dramatic spectrum, all circumstances that Fried points out in his detailed reading.⁴⁴

Notes

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 6–7.
2. Fried discusses several examples illustrating this aspect. He takes special interest in *Adrian Walker, artist, drawing from a specimen in a laboratory in the Department of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver 1992* and *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona 1999*.
3. Fried has written on the anti-theatrical thinking and artistic practice in

France in the following volumes: *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), and *Manet's Modernism, or The Face of the Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

4. From a high-modernist perspective, the meaning of a particular work is construed as something immanent, as something that the beholder might grasp in dealing with the work. As Fried puts it: "It is this continuous and entire *presentness*, amounting, as it were, to the perceptual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of *instantaneousness*, as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work and in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it. [...] I want to claim that it is by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness that modernist painting and sculpture defeat theater." Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 167.

5. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 338.

6. *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation*, Barcelona, 1999. The picture is mounted on a light box (187 × 351 cm).

7. Jeff Wall's works are also discussed in the chapter "Jeff Wall and Absorption: Heidegger on Worldhood and Technology." I relate to this chapter, even though I am not discussing his reading Heidegger that forms an important part of this chapter. According to Fried, the texts of these philosophers might help us understand Wall's pictures better. Importantly, Fried's attempt to articulate Wall's artistic vision through philosophical texts also involves the use of Wittgenstein's ideas to support a particular aesthetic ideal.

Wittgenstein and Heidegger are not the only philosophers Fried discusses in his new book; Hegel is also discussed.

8. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 37.

9. In his cinematic photographs, the sets are often staged, and the depicted persons often wear costumes. In the documentary photographs, the photographer decides only time and place for the shooting. Many of Wall's pictures are based on digital montage, such as *Morning Cleaning*. Fried gives a detailed description of the photograph's formal qualities and content (for example, its political undertones).

10. Cf. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 74. Wall says that it took over one month to make the picture. Two weeks were spent on planning, and almost two weeks were spent on the shooting. In addition, there was a lot of after work involved. Here is Wall's own account: "I think I shot for about twelve days. The light was right only in the early morning, from about 7:00

to 7:35. I had only about seven minutes each day to photograph the space as a whole, because the patterns change so quickly in the morning. I had to be ready for those seven minutes each morning, and during them I made the ‘master’ views, without the figure. He was standing by, and as soon as the masters were done, I readjusted the camera and photographed him changing the end-piece of his mop-squeegee. Since he is in shadow, and since that shadow did not change shape and brightness as quickly as some of the other areas did, I had maybe twenty-five minutes to work with him each day. Once his shadow area changed, the shot was over” (Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 74–5).

11. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 6–7.

12. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 77.

13. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 77.

14. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 77.

15. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 78. According to Fried, while modernist paintings tried to defeat their own objecthood, the minimalists (literalists) embraced it. The meaning of the work was not contained in the work: “the experience of literalist art is of an object in a *situation* – one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*.”

16. Stephen Mullhall, “A Critical Commentary,” Symposium on Michael Fried: *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 51 (2011): 97.

17. Stephen Mullhall, “A Critical Commentary,” 98.

18. Stephen Mullhall, “A Critical Commentary,” 98.

19. See Fried’s response in his “Reply to Naef and Mulhall,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 51, no. 1 (2011): 97.

20. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 79.

21. Fried notices that Wittgenstein was a devoted moviegoer, yet he doubts that art films or movies from the neo-realistic movement would have met the challenge adumbrated in the excerpt. As he puts it: “Yet I seriously doubt that movies, even Italian neorealist films of the postwar period, or the masterpieces of Bresson or Ozu, would have fulfilled for him the terms of the thought experiment of 1930.” Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 79.

22. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 80.

23. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 80.

24. Although I think Wittgenstein’s talk about how the artwork contains a compelling perspective might be taken to suggest that Wittgenstein and Fried agree on how the meaning is mainly determined by the work itself (and the artist), I also believe that Wittgenstein’s reflections draw attention to the experiencing subject in a way that has been prevalent in conversations about art since the debate in which Fried engaged in the late 1960s.

25. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Never Before*, 80.

26. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, eds. G. H. von Wright, and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981). Fried also draws attention to this connection. See the discussion in chapter 10 in *Why Photography Matters as Never Before*.

27. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988), 83.

28. In 1965, the art historian and critic Barbara Rose wrote about Wittgenstein's influence on the minimalists in her article, "ABC Art." A central feature of this influence revolved around Wittgenstein's understanding of meaning as related to our social practices. See Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 492–95.

29. Wall's interest in Fried's work and this tradition is well documented in Fried's book. For this influence, see also Peter Galassi's essay "Unorthodox" in Peter Galassi, *Jeff Wall* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 50–51.

30. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Never Before*, 270.

31. Cf. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Never Before*, 271.

32. Peter Galassi, "Unorthodox" in *Jeff Wall*, 18.

33. Peter Galassi, "Unorthodox" in *Jeff Wall*, 18.

34. Jan Estep, "Picture Making Meaning: An Interview with Jeff Wall," *Bridge Online*, Vol 2, No. 1, Sept. 03. http://www.janestep.com/?page_id=1420. Fried makes several references to this interview too. I received the interview from Jan Estep. According to Galassi, Terrence Malick and his cinematographer Néstor Almendros are often mentioned by Wall (Peter Galassi, "Unorthodox" in *Jeff Wall*, 18.) In his *A Man With a Camera* (1986) Almendros explains how some of the scenes in *Days of Heaven* were done. In my view, there is clearly an affinity between Wall's struggle with the light in *Morning Cleaning* and some of the difficulties with which Almendros struggles in shooting *Days of Heaven*. Malick wanted his cinematographer to film during the magic hour: "From the point of view of luminosity, this period lasts about twenty minutes, so that calling it a 'magic hour' is an optimistic euphemism. The light really was very beautiful, but we had little time to film scenes of long duration. All day we would work to get the actors and the camera ready; as soon as the sun had set we had to shoot quickly, not losing a moment. For these few minutes the light is truly magical, because no one knows where it is coming from. [...] Even though we took advantage of this short space of time with a kind of frenzy, we often had to finish the scene the next day at the same time, because the night would fall inexorably." Néstor Almendros, *A Man With a Camera*, trans. Racel Phillips Belash (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1986), 182. The meticulous planning

is very similar in these two cases. See also Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Never Before*, 363, fn. 29.

35. I borrow this expression from André Bazin's essay, "Bicycle Thief" in André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, Vol. 2, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 49.

36. The father and son in the De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) and the village people in Visconti's *The Earth Trembles* (1948) are good examples of films that use amateurs "in roles very close to their own lives." However, in other films, such as Rossellini's *Rome Open City* (1945), we find professional actors in the leading roles.

37. André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, trans. Timothy Barnard (Montreal: Caboose, 2009), 103.

38. André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, trans. Timothy Barnard (Montreal: Caboose, 2009), 101.

39. Wall says that he had to make several pictures in order to get the exposure of the various parts right. He used different apertures. The photograph of the window cleaner, for example, was taken separately from the shot of the main set. The various pictures were later combined digitally. For Wall's interesting account on how *Morning Cleaning* was made, see Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Never Before*, 363, fn. 29.

40. Estep, "Picture Making Meaning: An Interview with Jeff Wall."

41. Estep, "Picture Making Meaning: An Interview with Jeff Wall."

42. André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* Vol. 2, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 65.

43. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Never Before*, 67.

44. An earlier draft of this paper was presented to the Wittgenstein Workshop at the University of Chicago. I would like to thank the participants of the workshop, and, in particular, James Conant, who hosted the event, for valuable comments and questions. I would also like to thank Juliet Floyd and her students for reading and commenting on a draft of my paper at a Wittgenstein seminar at Boston University last year. Thanks are also due to Christine Hansen, from whom I received valuable suggestions.