The Locus of Looking - Dissecting Visuality in the Theatre

Bleeker, M.A.

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In contrast to performance, theatre cannot keep from setting up, stating, constructing, and giving points of view: the director's point of view, the author's towards the action, the actor's towards the stage, the spectator's towards the actor. There is a multiplicity of viewpoints and gazes, a 'density of signs' (to quote Barthes) setting up a theoretic multiplicity absent from performance — (Feral 1982: 178).

On the post-dramatic stage, dramatic perspective is broken, deconstructed or absent altogether. Often, this deconstruction is associated with an 'opening up.' The disappearance of the dramatic perspective seems to open more direct contact with what is on stage. No longer restricted by the framing of the drama, we can finally begin to see what is actually there. Needless to say, I will be arguing against such interpretations. And here again, perspective will be my key.

To make the model of perspective operative for an analysis of how vision 'takes place' in this type of theatre, what is needed is an explanation for both drama and its deconstruction in terms of an address to a seer. What is needed is a means of accounting for both drama and its deconstruction in terms of the setting up of positions for seers to 'take up' and to see as if from there. In this chapter, I will present such an explanation, beginning with a suggestion posed in Artifact.

In Artifact, a man and a woman try to understand what is happening on stage. Both characters are determined to show the audience 'how it is.' But what does this mean? Is showing it 'as it is' done by means of the theatricality of the woman, showing us the act of showing it 'as it is'? Or is showing it 'as it is' achieved by the man who, with his deconstructive interventions, casual clothes, and downplayed acting sets out to undermine her self-confident and highly theatrical gestures? The man who sets out to look for forgotten stories and asks questions like "where?" and "what?" and "why?" and "when?" and draws attention to the forgotten 'other face' or 'under side' of the theatre by opening a trapdoor in the stage floor and inspecting the wings?

What will count as a convincing manifestation of 'how it is' for the man will most probably not be recognized as such by the woman, and vice versa. Each character frames what is 'there to be seen' in a different way and according to a different logic. Nevertheless, the successive positions represented by them are kept together by a similar goal that drives their quest. Both the explicit theatricality of the woman and the undermining gestures of the man 'showing the under side' are shown to be driven by a similar longing. Artifact shows both drama and its deconstruction to be driven by a similar longing to get in touch with what is really there. Unlike the case of conventional drama, the goal of this quest is not represented by something within the fictional world. There is no riddle to be solved, or princess to be won. Teleology here is brought to bear on how the theatre shows 'how it is.'
The relationship between theatre and its deconstruction as represented by *Artifact* is at odds with accounts of deconstruction in the theatre in which deconstruction is understood to be opposed to presenting points of view. But it is not at all at odds with Derrida's own account of the way telos is inseparable from the way we are involved with the world that surrounds us. In *Limited Inc* (1993), he writes:

This telos or 'fulfillment' is constitutive of intentionality: it is part of its concept. Intentional movement tends towards this fulfillment. This is the origin or the fatality of that 'longing for metaphysical plenitude' which, however, can also presupposed, described, or lived without the romantic, even mystical pathos sometimes associated with these words (Derrida 1993: 121).

Longing is the movement of intentionality and therefore a structural and ineradicable aspect of intentionality itself. It is a structural part of the way we relate to what we are confronted with. As such, it is integral part of the project of deconstruction. But this longing should never be confused with its cultural expressions, which are so often, as Derrida writes, tingled with romantic and even mystical pathos. How this longing manifests itself in cultural articulations and what may appear as telos and give direction to this longing is culturally determined and, therefore, non-universal. Furthermore, what we are yearning for can never be adequately represented. Herein lies the fatality of longing, as well as one of deconstruction's most important lessons.  

**The Paradox that is Perspective, Again** — In showing the man and the woman as rivals, as antagonist and protagonist, *Artifact* presents theatre and its deconstruction as two different manifestations of the same quest. Both the man and the woman present the audience with positions from where to see it 'as it really is.' Both of them show it 'as it is' seen from a subjective point of view. This way, *Artifact* draws attention to the relation between these visions as represented on stage, showing it 'as it is,' and a position of the subject of vision presented to the audience to 'take up.'

Apart from the positions presented by the man and the woman acting as internal focalizers, the performance as a whole also presents the seer with a position to take up in relation to what is seen. *Artifact* demonstrates that for the seer to take up this position and thus 'step inside,' this position needs to be marked by absence. The vision presented on stage can only appear as simply 'there to be seen' as long as the seer remains unaware of the way his or her seeing gets mediated. When the safety curtain comes down in *Artifact*, we are suddenly made aware of our position in relation to what is seen and how this position mediates in how we see what we see.

This ambiguity is precisely the paradox at the heart of perspective. The curious thing about the way perspective works is that it has to remain invisible in order to work best. As soon as perspective becomes too obvious,
the vision produced by it is no longer convincing as an image of 'how it is.' Instead, this vision appears as constructed and artificial. All of this makes perspective as a definition of the relation between seer and point of view from where it is seen a highly ambiguous one.

In this chapter, I propose the conceptual pair of theatricality and absorption to further explore this ambiguity in perspective. This conceptual pair will aid me in describing the effect of the paradox that is perspective, and to do so in terms of an interaction between an address presented by a performance and the response of the seer as a culturally and historically conditioned subject.

Theatricality is a very complex term that can be used in many different ways. It can have a very positive meaning, as for example in Artaud, who uses it to describe a quality of theatre performance that has been lost in the dramatic, text dominated theatre. Theatricality can also be used as a pejorative term to describe a particular phenomenon as artificial, fake, or unbelievable. This use of the term theatricality knows a long tradition described by Jonas Barish in his *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* (1981). It is also possible to use theatricality in a more neutral way to refer to a quality of the theatre. It can mean that which is specifically theatrical, in performance or in the dramatic text, or be used to construct an opposition of what is theatrical versus the dramatic text. This is the way it is used by Barthes, who describes theatricality as theatre-minus-text, a density of signs and sensations, gesture, tone, distance, substance, and light.²

The concept of theatricality that I want to propose differs from the above and is based on Michael Fried's theorizing of the concept in "Art and Objecthood" (1968) and also his later *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980). In "Art and Objecthood," Fried characterizes the theatrical as the effect of a particular address presented by the work to a beholder. The theatrical work of art explicitly addresses the beholder thus making her or him aware of beholding as a process of interaction taking place in time, as well as of the self as an embodied presence engaged in an interaction with the object seen.

Fried uses this concept of the theatrical to criticize minimalism (or as he calls it literalist art) and to oppose the experience of minimalist works to that of modern art characterized by instantaneity and what he calls 'presentness.' "Presentness is grace," reads the final line of his text, for presentness lifts us above the perverted theatrical mode of being we are confined to most of our lives (Fried 1968: 147).

Fried's anti-theatrical prejudice is not directed against the theater per se. In Fried's usage, the term 'theatricality' does not denote the essence, or even a quality of the theatre as an art form. Indeed, Fried even mentions some theatre makers as being engaged in the same battle against theatricality as the modernist arts, citing Artaud and Brecht as examples.³ Instead, Fried uses theatricality to describe "the wrong sort of consciousness of an audience," as he put it in 1987, in reviewing his 1967 essay (Fried 1987:...
57). This “wrong sort of consciousness” is not limited to minimalism but belongs to a larger historical field the roots of which he locates in 18th-century French painting. The central impulse of this development in French painting is the attempt to defeat the theatrical. This is done by means of strategies of absorption. In *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980) Fried describes a series of such strategies and explains how they evoke absorption by presenting the seer with a position marked by absence. One of these strategies is Diderot’s version of Aristotelian drama. Interestingly here, drama as theorized by Diderot appears as a means to achieve effects similar to the presentness Fried values so much in modern art.

**Art and Objecthood** — In “Art and Objecthood,” Fried characterizes the theatrical in terms of a particular relationship between the beholder as subject and the work as object, a relationship that takes place in time, that has duration. This relationship is implied within the structure of a work as a result of which this work includes the beholder as part of a situation. This subject-object relation is not given beforehand, but is constituted within a movement of distancing. “It is, one might say, precisely this distancing that *makes* the beholder a subject and the piece in question ... an object” (Fried 1968: 126, italics in the text).

The explicitness with which the work addresses the beholder makes the beholder a subject and establishes the experience itself as something like that of an object, or as Fried wants to call it, of objecthood. In confrontation with a theatrical work of art:

> the beholder knows himself in an indeterminate, open ended – and unexacting – relation as *subject* to the impassive object on the wall or floor. In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced by the silent presence of another *person*; the experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly [...] can be strongly, if momentarily, disquieting in just this way (Fried 1968: 128, italics in the text).

Theatricality produces the beholder as subject, in a way comparable to the way deixis functions to set up relationships in language; the address produces the addressee as subject. Theatricality describes a situation in which the address makes the addressee explicitly aware of him or her being addressed. In doing so, it undermines the position of seer as unseen and (the illusion of) vision as unmediated access to what is there to be seen.

Fried opposes theatricality as rooted in time and space to the timeless essences of modern art, and explains the presentness of modern art in terms that are remarkably similar to Norman Bryson’s account of the address presented by perspectival painting, where suppression of deixis results in the effect of timeless and disembodied vision.4

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It is as though one's experience of the latter [modern art] has no duration – not because one in fact experiences a picture by Noland or Olitski or a sculpture by David Smith or Caro in no time at all, but because at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest. [...] It is this continuous and entire presentness, amounting as it were, to the perpetual creation of itself, that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness: as though if only one were infinitely more acute, a single brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be for ever convinced by it (Fried 1968: 145–146, italics in the text).

Like perspectival painting described by Bryson, modern art (in Fried's account) presents the viewer with an eternal moment of disclosed presence where the seer can instantaneously see everything 'as it is.' This analogy with perspective in painting is all the more surprising since modern painting, in Clement Greenberg's influential account of it, is characterized by precisely a resistance to the illusionary effect of which perspective presents an image.

From Giotto to Courbet, the painter's first task had been to hollow out an illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface. One looked through this surface as through a proscenium into a stage. Modernism has rendered this stage shallower and shallower until now its backdrop has become the same as its curtain which has now become all that the painter has left to work on (Greenberg 1961: 136).

Greenberg compares perspective in painting with the theatre to reject both as illusory. He opposes them to modern painting that shows painting 'as it is,' that is, as a two dimensional colored surface. Just as in Lehmann's account of drama in the theatre, perspective is presented as an out-moded ideology that has to be undone in order to make way for the pure opticality to which painting must, according to Greenberg, confine itself.

**After Effects** — Ever since its appearance in *Artforum* in 1967, Fried's "Art and Objecthood" has been subject to severe criticism. One might wonder to what extent the article itself is to blame for the vehemence of the attacks. In a 1997 review celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of Fried's article, Philip Auslander observes that "Fried's strident and intemperate tone, as well as his apparently virulent, under explained anti-theatricalism, have made his essay an easy target, especially for critics championing post-abstract art and post-modernist performance" (Auslander 1997: 49).

"Art and Objecthood" marks a turning point in the understanding of art and of the aesthetic experience. It is located on the threshold between an object-immanent approach to art and a relational approach which addresses the interaction between work and beholder. Its appearance marks the moment that the emergence of minimalism and performance art gave rise to intense debates and polarizations within the art world. In the visual arts, experiments with performance and theatricality inspired a rethinking of the presuppositions underlying modernist conceptions of art and the aesthetic experience.
Here, theatricality and performance functioned as what Rosalind Krauss (1981: 240) has called an 'operational divide,' alerting the seer to the relational character of the art experience. The binary opposition of theatricality and presentness as introduced by Fried in his essay reflects precisely this opposition of modernist and postmodernist positions that were at stake in the art world at that very moment.

Fried's terminology was picked up in an altogether different way by Josette Féral (1982) and Chantal Pontbriand (1982), who willingly adopted Fried's anti-theatrical prejudice and used his concept of presentness to theorize performance as an anti-theatrical practice. Foreshadowing Lehmann's concept of the post-dramatic theatre as a non-teleological architecture, Josette Féral defines performance as a "primary process lacking teleology" (Féral 1982: 171). She understands this non-teleological event in terms of a deconstruction of the mediation of the symbolic order and a resistance to positioning as it takes place in the theatre. Performance, according to Féral, involves a process of undoing pre-given points of view rather than constructing them. Performance exposes what remains hidden in the theatre. It gives the audience "a glimpse of its in-side, its reverse side, its hidden face" (Féral 1982: 176). Since it tells of nothing and imitates no one, performance escapes all illusion and representation to reveal what remains hidden behind the symbolic mediation that takes place in the theatre. "Performance rejects all illusion," writes Féral (1982: 171). It "presents, it does not represent" writes her colleague Pontbriand (1982: 155).5

Fried's definition of theatricality gives rise to rather different interpretations and uses, and is opposed to various 'others.' Theatricality can serve as a figure for an emerging postmodernism, threatening to an established modernism (Fried), but also as a figure for desiccated modernism against which an emergent postmodernism defines itself (Féral and Pontbriand). Theatricality became a polemical term, a term of condemnation exemplified by Fried's essay, and of praise when used by supporters of postmodernism in the visual arts. For Fried, theatricality was the enemy of art, were art is understood from a Greenbergian modernism. Féral and Pontbriand argue, on very similar grounds, that theatricality is the enemy of art understood from the point of view of Derridean poststructuralism.

However, Auslander, from the perspective of 1997, observes that Féral and Pontbriand's Derridean deconstruction in fact serves to take a next step in the modernist reduction to essences in search of timeless and immediate presence (Auslander 1997: 56). Féral and Pontbriand's discourse is firmly inscribed within the Greenbergian mythic narrative of a medium's struggle to discover and specify what is specific to itself and this drama is played out against a backdrop of historical necessity. Their essays do not so much deconstruct Fried, as dress up Greenbergian aesthetics in poststructuralist clothing. In their texts, the Derridean deferral and displacement, rather than questioning the immediate presence of performance, serves to safeguard it against the illusion of theatre.
The Theatrical and the Nontheatrical — Discussing the amazing flexibility of the concept of theatricality, Auslander reminds his readers of Rosalind Krauss who observes that ‘theatre,’ in Fried’s essay is an empty term whose role it is to set up a system founded upon the opposition between itself and another term (Auslander 1997: 52). Krauss calls this other term the ‘nontheatrical’ (Krauss 1987: 62). Auslander adds to this that in Fried’s historical account the nontheatrical is clearly modernism.

I agree with Krauss (and Auslander) that in Fried’s essay theatricality is used to set up a binary opposition. In this opposition theatricality is clearly the negative pole. Though it occurs to me that what is empty is not theatricality but the opposite term. Actually, Fried uses almost all of the thirty-one pages of his essay to explain what he means by theatricality. Indeed, this explanation is not always consistent – it raises many questions and is open to different interpretations. It is not always clear whether theatricality is a quality of a work, an effect produced in the interaction between a work and a beholder, or a sensibility, either as something expressed in a work or of a beholder. Nevertheless, if something has to be called empty, it is the opposite term – that to which Fried opposes his conception of theatricality – and this emptiness contributes to its status as the absolute.

This opposite term he defines time and again as what is not theatrical. For example, he writes: “The crucial distinction that I am proposing so far is between work that is fundamentally theatrical and work that is not” (Fried 1968: 130, italics in the text). Only in his later work does this term get a name and this name is absorption. In Fried’s later work, the opposition theatricality and absorption functions as an act of discernment between two modes of relationship between painting and beholder, instead of theatricality as a relationship versus presentness as the absence of such a relationship. This is a possibility already indicated in his “Art and Objecthood,” a possibility however, that is literally pushed to the margin, in a footnote.

In footnote number four, Fried takes issue with Greenberg’s conception of modernism in painting as progressive development, fuelled by an empirical search for what he calls the “irreducible working essence of art and the separate arts.” This progression consists of the rejection of the “dispensable, unessential” conventions of its own tradition as well as elements of the other arts, to seek its own formal essence. Although Fried adopts Greenberg’s idea of modernism, he also undertakes an attempt to embed the successive moments of the development in painting within the historical moment they appear. He writes:

[T]he crucial question is not what these minimal and, so to speak, timeless conditions are, but rather what, at a given moment, is capable of compelling conviction, of succeeding as painting. This is not to say that painting has no essence; it is to claim that essence – i.e. that which compels conviction – is largely determined by, and therefore changes continually in response to, the vital work of the recent past” (Fried 1968: 123–124, italics in the text).
In this footnote, Fried rewrites Greenberg's timeless essences into effects on a beholder at a particular time and place, and turns the development of modern art into a continuous search for new strategies to compel conviction. Fried's account of the instantaneousness of modern art, puts the modernism he inherited from Greenberg into a temporal perspective, which he nevertheless does not seem to feel completely comfortable with. Whereas he wants to make Greenberg's account of modernism more historical by building into it the idea that the essence of painting is historically contingent, he appears to be repulsed by art that he perceives as providing the viewer with an experience of such temporal contingency. This becomes the theme of his later work on the beginnings of the modern tradition in French painting.

Fried's theoretical elaboration on absorption in Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot (1980) allows me to expand on the Derridean move made by Féral and Pontbriand, by means of a deconstructivist reversal of Féral's definition of performance as the underside of theatre. If performance is understood to be the under side of theatre, is it then also possible to understand theatre as the hidden under side of performance? Would it be possible to understand the immediateness evoked by performance in terms of a particular relation between the beholder as subject and the work as object, a relation that takes place in time, that has duration, and produces a specific effect, to be more precise, a particular strong and compelling illusion of immediate access to what is there to be seen on stage?

Absorption — The central theme of Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot is the relation between painting and beholder in some of the most significant French paintings of the middle and late 18th century. In this period, according to Fried, the relationship between painting and beholder becomes increasingly problematic. A certain tension made itself felt between, on the one hand a painting as a representation, an object produced to represent something for someone (the beholder), and on the other, an uneasiness with the condition of representation. Fried refers to the moment that this paradox appears as "a momentous event, one of the first in the series of losses that together constitute the ontological basis of modern art" (Fried 1980: 61). This loss inaugurated a continuous search for representational strategies that suggest the absence of a beholder. These are representational strategies that repress the status of the painting as something constructed to be beheld.

According to Fried, the seminal figure for understanding the beginnings of this tradition is Denis Diderot (1713–84) whose writings on drama and painting have at their core the demand for the achievement of a new and paradoxical relationship between the work of art and its audience. His texts on theatre, his Salons, and his related texts on painting concern the conditions that have to be fulfilled in order for the work of art (be it a painting or
a play) successfully to persuade its audience of what he calls the truthfulness of its representations.6

In order to appear as a truthful representation it is crucial that the beholder be treated as if he or she were not there. This will counteract the self-awareness of the seer as seer in relation to what is seen. Absorption thus appears as a strategy of persuasion. It is a strategy with a paradoxical character comparable to that of perspective. Absorption functions as long as it remains invisible as a strategy. As soon as it becomes recognizable as such, it turns into its opposite, it becomes theatrical.

Fried conceives of absorption not as an a-historical or absolute quality of a work but, instead, as the result of the interaction between a painting produced at particular time and place and a beholder as a historical and culturally determined subject. The 18th-century paintings discussed by Fried may have rather different effects on 21st-century beholders or on beholders from a cultural background that differs in important respects from that of the French upper class audience, for whom they were originally intended. Fried, therefore, refers to the accounts of 18th-century art critics to point out how and why these paintings, at the moment of their production, were conceived of as absorptive. He also uses their critical responses to demonstrate how strategies aiming at absorption eventually lost their power to achieve absorptive effects, at which time they were denounced as theatrical and had to be replaced by new strategies that were not yet visible as such. In Absorption and Theatricality, Fried distinguishes between three successive strategies aimed at achieving the desired effect.

For French painters of the early and mid 1750s, the persuasive representation of absorption entailed evoking the perfect obliviousness of a figure or group of figures to everything but the objects of their attention (Fried 1980: 66). This was achieved for example by depicting people sleeping, dreaming, reading or involved in other activities demanding their complete and undivided attention.7 These could be individuals but also compositions of more than one person all absorbed in the same activity. Absorption here results from the spectator's ability and willingness to imagine him or herself in the situation of the character depicted, to take up his or her position in the situation represented and to experience this situation from his or her point of view. To demonstrate the effect of these (collective) states of absorption, Fried refers to descriptions like the one quoted below, describing the impact made by Un Dessinateur d'après le Mercure de M. Pigalle by Chardin (1753):
How can one not be strongly moved by the truth, by the naivete of Mr. Chardin’s paintings? His figures are said not to be clever people – fine. They are not graceful – fine. But on the other hand, do they not all have their own action? Are they not completely caught up in it? Take for example the replica of his draughtsman that he has exhibited: people maintain that the heads are vague and lack precision. And yet, through this lack of precision, the attention of both figures is apparent; one must, it seems to me, become attentive with them” (Abbé Garrigues de Froment, quoted in Fried 1980: 13, my italics).

This description by Abbé Garrigues de Froment testifies as to how the characters depicted in this painting function as internal focalizors presenting the spectator with positions to take up. Absorption is the effect achieved when the spectator readily takes up the position of the characters, in a way similar to ‘taking up’ or empathizing with the position of a character represented on stage.

In this first stage, in order to invoke the process by which the audience will be absorbed, what was needed was to depict characters themselves absorbed. It was necessary to show characters so absorbed that they are unconscious of everything but the object of their absorption, including the beholder. By the first half of the 1760s, however, the presence of the beholder could no longer be dealt with in this way. The recognition that paintings are made to be beheld and, therefore, presuppose the existence of a beholder, led to the demand for the actualization of his or her presence in a way comparable to the manner in which perspective actualizes the presence of the beholder through presenting the beholder with a position that signifies his or her absence.

Simply disregarding the beholder was not enough anymore. It was now necessary to obviate the beholder, to deny his or her presence, in order to positively establish (insofar as this could be accomplished) that he had not been taken into account (Fried 1980: 103). At this point, Fried brings in Diderot to show how Aristotelian drama theory (in its classicist version) served to develop a second absorptive strategy based on the construction of pictorial unity.

**Drama as Strategy to De-Theatricalize Beholding** — In Diderot, Fried finds a historical predecessor to his notion of theatricality as the explicit address to a beholder, and also for his anti-theatrical prejudice. According to Diderot, nothing is more abortive of that act of persuasion than when a painter’s *dramatis personae*, or *dramatis personae* on stage, seem by virtue of the character of their actions and expressions to evince even a partial consciousness of being beheld. When this happens, the figures depicted will appear mannered and false, their actions and expressions will be seen, not as natural signs of intention or emotion, but merely as grimaces – feignings or impostures addressed to the beholder. And the work, far from projecting a
convincing image of the world, becomes what Diderot deprecating called a _un théâtre_: "an artificial construction whose too obvious designs on its audience made it repugnant to persons of taste" (Fried 1990: 7).^8^ Like Lehmann, Diderot distinguishes between drama and theatre. This distinction is of crucial importance in understanding how, for Diderot, drama can be a means to produce the desired effect of absorption. While, in Diderot's writings 'le théâtral' refers to the consciousness of being beheld and is synonymous with falseness, drama on the other hand, appears as a means to direct attention in a way that prevents theatricality (Fried 1980: 100). To be more precise, drama for Diderot is a means of de-theatricalizing beholding and as such, to guarantee the absoluteness of the picture or representation on stage relative to the beholder. Drama directs attention away from the seer, as well as from the relation between seers and seen, and towards, or better, _into_ the subject represented (Fried 1980: 103–104).

Central to Diderot's aesthetics is the tableau, and his dealings with Aristotelian theory have to be understood in relation to his concern with the tableau (Fried 1980: 91, 93). Diderot understands drama as a means of constituting internal unity among elements seen, as a result of which they appear as a cut out segment, separated from their surroundings. In this sense, his conception of drama is comparable to Lehmann's conception of drama as framing. But Diderot's account has something to add to Lehmann's as well. To the unities of action, time and place, Diderot adds a fourth unity, that of point of view. In a well-composed tableau, all elements are brought together with regard to one single, unitary point of view. Absorption, therefore, has to be understood in terms of a duality of unitary point of view and unitary composition of the tableau. This duality presents an address to a viewer who is compelled to take up the position as implied by the tableau, or not.

**A Triangular Model** — Fried's reading of Diderot leads me to the following triangular model for the analysis of the relation between seer and seen:

![Triangular Model Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

Subject seen
\[\text{on stage or in a picture}\]

Subject of vision

Seer as subject

implied within the address

presented by what is seen
In this triangular model, focalization describes the relation between what is seen and the position whence it is seen. Focalization is part of the address presented to the seer and presents this seer with a position as the subject of vision. The effect of this address can be described with the terms absorption and theatricality.

Absorption describes the context in which the position presented is taken up automatically, as a result of which there seems to be no relationship at all between seer and seen. What is seen seems to be merely there to be seen and mediation appears to be absent. Theatricality describes the context in which the seer does not automatically take up the position presented implied in the address. The address becomes visible in its quality of an address, and this makes the viewer aware of the relation between seer and seen and the viewing situation.

As pointed out in the previous chapter, focalization functions on different levels. Characters on stage can function as internal focalizors and invite the audience to take up their position. In this way, they can both present an implicit invitation to 'step inside,' and direct the attention of the seer through the painting, inviting the seer to look in the direction indicated. This was important in the first phase of absorptive painting as described by Fried. Focalization also clarifies the function of the two characters in Artifact, while generally encouraging us to consider how we, as members of the audience, are invited to take up positions represented by characters on stage and to become attentive with them. We are drawn into feeling what they feel and seeing what they see.

Apart from one or more internal focalizors there is always an external focalizer, that anonymous agent through whose eyes we see what is there to be seen. This external focalizer becomes more important in the second phase of absorptive painting. Absorption here does not result from taking up the position of one of the characters represented on stage or in the picture, but from identification with the point of view of the external focalizer through whose eyes all appears as unity.

What is called for, in other words, is at the one and the same time the creation of a new sort of object – the fully realized tableau – and the constitution of a new sort of beholder – a new 'subject' – whose innermost nature would consist precisely in the conviction of his absence from the scene of representation (Fried 1980: 104, italics in the text)

The point of view of this new 'subject' is not part of the vision represented. It is the point of view from where it is seen. Its invisible logic can however, be made visible. In Artifact, this happens as the safety curtain comes down.

With this powerful gesture, Artifact exposes the perspective at work in the vision presented on stage. It shows how conventional ways of staging support suggestions of visibility and accessibility of what is there to be seen on stage. It also shows how these conventions direct the attention of the audience in such a way that this seer is unaware of what he or she does not see, and unaware of her or himself as seer in relation to what is seen.
When, after only a few moments, the safety curtain goes up again, the scene on stage is radically altered. Just before the curtain comes down, a whole group of dancers performs simultaneously in a symmetrical composition. When the curtain goes up, the dancers are still moving as if nothing had happened. Their formation in space is however, completely different. As is the case with film montage, the transformation from one situation to the next remains invisible. This mechanism is repeated several times.

The new composition of dancers in space no longer respects the conventions of visibility and frontality typical of the academic ballet. Sometimes the dancers face the back wall or the wings. Sometimes compositions are partially or wholly invisible because they take place in the wings. At some point the dancers lie on their back and perform their movements directed towards the ceiling. The grouping of the dancers in space is still a unitary composition and in that sense comparable to Diderot's tableau. However, the point of view implied by this tableau no longer matches the desires, presuppositions, and expectations of the seer seated in the auditorium. As a result, a certain distance makes itself felt between what is presented on stage as object of vision and the seer as subject. The perspective presented by the performance becomes visible as sign and loses its power to evoke absorption. It becomes theatrical.

Taking a Walk with Diderot — As Fried observes, Diderot is not the only one, nor was he the first, to theorize the relationship between drama and pictorial unity in painting. However, one important difference between Diderot and his predecessors is that, in the case of Diderot, this relationship involves more than just the expression of a central dramatic idea. As Fried observes:

The question he seems always to have asked himself is not whether a particular painting could be shown to possess an internal rationale that justified and in that sense bound together the different actions, incidents, and facial expressions represented in it, but whether his actual experience of the painting, prior to any conscious act of reflection or analysis, persuaded him beyond all doubt of the work's dramatic and expressive unity (Fried 1980: 85).

Drama does not only serve to make what is seen readable in function of one single goal or telos. More than that, in Diderot, drama appears as a means of compelling conviction: the conviction that the beholder is 'just looking,' and in so doing, able to see it 'as it is.' To achieve this, painting must not only be organized according to strict logic, this logic must also be convincing as a 'law of nature,' rather than as human invention. For Diderot, drama is a means of de-theatricalizing beholding. But drama is not the only means by which to achieve this effect. As Fried observes, absorption can be evoked in different ways using different strategies. What works and what does not work has to be understood in
relation to a seeer responding to the address presented. In this respect, Diderot's account of a third strategy of absorption as used by painters of his time is telling. Fried terms this strategy the pastoral conception of absorption. This strategy is related to landscape painting and it seems that there may well be ways of relating it to the landscape stage as well.

According to Fried this strategy is radically different from the other two because it results from paintings in which the seeer is free to wander around in the landscape represented. This fiction, according to Fried, is "conspicuously at odds with the doctrine of radical exclusion of the beholder that I have argued his writings expound" (Fried 1980: 118). Fried speaks of an alternative conception of painting as well as of a vision of the relationship between painting and beholder that "goes against almost everything that I have claimed about that relationship until now" (Fried 1980: 118).

Diderot describes these absorptive paintings of the third kind as if he is walking around in a landscape. It is only after many pages of description that the reader realizes that Diderot is in fact talking about a painting. This is a critic truly absorbed in the work of art! Absorbed, yet in a different way. Diderot is not absent as it was the case with the other paintings. On the contrary, he seems to be very much present. However, it is exactly the character of his presence that, as I will argue, proves to be the key to the understanding of what absorption might mean here.

Diderot describes his experience as physically entering the painting and walking around in it. This (inter)action is the main subject of his description. For this reason, Fried concludes, the relationship between painting and beholder is not denied but very much present. But who is actually present here, and in what way? What is absent from Diderot's descriptions is precisely his interaction with the painting as painting, as well as his physical presence as seeer in relation to the painting as object seen. What is lacking from his description is the viewing situation. The 'I' in Diderot's text interacts with the landscape represented, not with the painting as representation. This 'I' is completely absorbed into the painting, in the sense that for this 'I,' the landscape does not appear as a representation but rather as a real landscape that he has entered by stepping into the painting. In this landscape the 'I,' liberated from the bodily locus that is Diderot, can wander around freely and see everything 'as it is.' The 'I' in Diderot's text seems to prove Descartes remark that "it is certain that I am truly distinct from my body, and I can exist without it" (Descartes 1977: 235).

This is not to say that Diderot did not know that he was looking at a painting. What I want to draw attention to is how, according to his own description, his experience of being absorbed in the painting involves the absence of awareness of the painting as representation. The seeming absence of a relationship between seeer and seen here manifests itself in the absence of awareness of representation as representation, so typical of the 'subjectless' representations of the world of modern science.
The address presented by the painting presents the viewer with a position like that of the Cartesian disembodied I/eye. This position is not marked in actual space. It is a position that belongs to the discourse through which Diderot makes sense of what he sees. The position of the Cartesian disembodied I/eye mediates between Diderot as historical subject and the painting of the landscape. The landscape appears as a promise of fulfillment of a longing to exceed the limitations of his temporal, spatial, physical being. Diderot writes:

I was motionless; my eyes wandered without fixing themselves on any object, my arms fell to my sides, my mouth opened. My guide respected my admiration and my silence; he was as happy, as vain as if he was the owner or even the creator of these marvels. I shall not tell you how long my enchantment lasted. The immobility of beings, the solitude of a place, its profound silence, all suspend time; time no longer exists, nothing measures it, man becomes as if eternal (Diderot quoted in Fried 1980: 125).

Diderot describes his experience of being absorbed in the painting in terms that bring to mind the metaphysical implications of perspectival painting. Here however, it is not the well-composed tableau that brings his desire to a halt. The effect of absorption is not achieved through fixing the viewer in a place like in perspectival painting or in the dramatic model of absorptive painting. On the contrary, Diderot’s description testifies to how it is a lack of focus that supports the illusion of unproblematic and direct access to what is there to be seen. It is precisely this lack of focus that turns the landscape seen in the painting into a spectacle ‘before his own vision.’

1 — This reading of Derrida corresponds to John Caputo’s reading of Derrida in his The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion without Religion (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1997). I want to thank Petra Halkes for bringing this reading to my attention in her dissertation Aspiring to the Landscape. Investigations into the Meaning of Nature in Works by Wanda Koop, Stephen Hutchings, Susan Feindel and Eleanor Bond (2000) as well as in the inspiring discussions we had about her dissertation.

3 - Artaud too sought an art complete within itself in which both the passage of time and the split between seer and seen cease to exist. In Artaud however, theatricality is not negatively connotated as it is in Fried. Artaud refers to that what is repressed by the logocentric tradition of dramatic theatre as described by Lehmann. Seen in this way, theatricality appears as a means of overcoming precisely the distance between subject and object that in Fried is typical of the theatrical. Wilma Siccam (Het Waarnemend Lichaam, Zintuiglijkheid en Representatie bij Beckett en Artaud. Nijmegen: Uitgeverij Vantilt, 2000) presents an extensive discussion of the similarities and differences between the projects of Fried and Artaud. See also Erwin Jans. “Over Theatraliteit en Lichamelijkheid,” Tmtesis I, 1992: 32-55.

According to Fried, in Brechtian theatre explicit theatricality is used to evoke what he calls the “wholly here and now” treating this here and now not as a pretense made possible by the rules of the (logocentric) game but, rather, exposing it as it is. Here, according to Fried, explicit theatricality serves a state of instantaneousness comparable to that of modern art. Fried also remarks however, that these strategies of exposing easily turn into a convention, as a result of which “it is not clear whether the handling of time Brecht calls for is tantamount to authentic presentness, or merely to another kind of presence – i.e. to the presentment of time itself” (Fried 1968: 147, footnote 20, italics in the text). This would relate Brechtian strategies to those of minimalism and, therefore, of theatricality, rather than to modern art and presentness. The ambiguity observed here, namely how strategies invented to achieve presentness can turn into convention and then become productive of effects opposite to those originally intended, becomes an important motive in his later Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot.

4 - See Bryson (1983), discussed in chapter 1 of this study.

5 - Féral (1982) points out three characteristics that, in her opinion, constitute the essential foundations of all performance, the first of which concerns the body of the performer, the second manipulations of space, and the third the relationships the performance institutes between artist and spectators, between spectators and the work, and between the work of art and the artist. She uses these three to characterize performance as the rejection of all illusion, a non-narrative and non-representational theatre of the body, disruption and displacement, and a process lacking teleology.

In her essay, Pontbriand (1982) attempts to describe and explain the effect of performance on the audience. She refers to a certain frustration many witnesses of performance experience as they are bombarded by multiple viewpoints, the effect of which she understands in terms of a re-actualized presence, or presentness, breaking up, or deconstructing, as it were, representation and thus showing the real without mystification.

7 — As Fried points out, the connection between sleep and absorption is actually made by Diderot in the article 'Animal,' which appeared in the first volume of the *Encyclopédie* (1751). There Diderot remarks that the soul is subject to a sort of inertia:

> [I]n consequence of which it would remain perpetually applied to the same thought, perhaps to the same idea, if it were not drawn away by something outside itself that diverted it, without however doing away with its liberty. It is by virtue of the latter faculty that it stops or passes swiftly from one contemplation to another. When the exercise of this faculty ceases, the soul remains fixed on the same contemplation; and such is perhaps the state of someone falling asleep, even of someone who is sleeping, and of someone who meditates very profoundly. If the last of these happens to contemplate several different objects successively, this is brought about not by an act of his own will, but by the connections between the objects themselves. And I know of nothing so mechanical as a man absorbed in profound meditation unless it is perhaps a man plunged into deep sleep (Diderot quoted in Fried 1980: 189).

8 — See for example Salons I (64), II (197), IV (167, 359). As Fried points out, by Diderot's time the word *théâtral* had in addition to its meaning as pertaining to the theatre the pejorative one of a mode of action or expression which "is suitable only for the theatre." But it is only in Diderot’s writings on drama and painting that the *manner* and the *théâtral* are in effect defined in terms of a positing of a beholder (see Fried 1989: 218–219).

9 — As Fried points out, the concept of point of view is central not just to Diderot’s vision of painting and drama but to his epistemology. As he writes "[t]he universe, whether considered as real or as intelligible, has an infinity of points of view from which it can be represented, and the number of possible systems of human knowledge is as great as that of points of view" (Oeuvres Complètes, VIII, 211, quoted in Fried 1980: 216).

For Diderot, the concept of intelligibility seems to entail the concept of point of view: something could be said to be intelligible only from one or another of an infinity of points of view. This means that, for Diderot, the claim to understand a given phenomenon involved accepting the responsibility, not just for the explanation itself, but also for the point of view implicit in it from the first.

10 — For this reason, Barthes compares the tableau as it functions in Diderot to a *fetish-object* (Barthes 1977: 71). For Barthes, Diderot is the theorist of the dialectics of desire as it is at work in representation.

Representation, as Barthes points out, is not defined by imitation and therefore cannot be understood from the relation between the representation and the reality it is supposed to represent. Instead "[t]he 'Organon of Representation' [...] will have as its dual foundation the sovereignty of the act of cutting out [decoupage] and the unity of the subject of that action" (Barthes 1977: 69–70). This duality, and not mimesis, is what constitutes representation. Here the tableau functions as the fetish-object where displacement seems to come to a halt in an image that can be seized by the eye.