Toward a Cognitive Theory of Narrative Acts

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Theory of Mind and Michael Fried's
Absorption and Theatricality:
Notes toward Cognitive Historicism

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It is warm outside. Spring blossoms brush against the house. Leaning over the windowsill, propping his right hand with his left, a young man is blowing bubbles. Just now a particularly large bubble is trembling at the tip of his blowpipe.[1] The man is holding his breath. The world is standing still.

The Soap Bubble is one of Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin's "paintings of games and amusements" done in the 1730s (Fried 51). His subjects build card castles, sketch, and play knucklebones. They are so completely absorbed in what they do that they are unaware of being watched, and they draw us in precisely with their peculiar obliviousness to our presence, their utter lack of theatricality.

Absorptive paintings are anti-theatrical and as such both irresistible and difficult to create. This is the argument advanced by Michael Fried in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Following the development of French genre painting from the 1750s to the early 1780s, Fried shows how artists tried to minimize the self-awareness of art—grounded in the "primordial convention that [art is] made to be beheld" (157)—by depicting persons not aware of the presence of the beholder. He also shows how quickly the established methods of representing absorption would become stale and how desperately the artists would cast about for new ways to convince their audiences that the people in paintings did not care about their gaze.

Published in 1980, *Absorption and Theatricality* won academic prizes and stirred up controversies. Today it continues to reach beyond the disciplinary boundaries of art history, influencing debates in literary criticism, cultural studies, and performance theory. My goal in this chapter is to expand its reach yet further—into cognitive science. I suggest that

Figure 8.1. *Soap Bubbles*, Jean-Baptiste-Simeon Chardin, National Gallery of Art

to grasp fully the brilliance of Fried's argument and the significance of his insights for contemporary cultural criticism, we need to consider what he says in the context of recent cognitive-evolutionary research on Theory of Mind.

As I will demonstrate shortly, studies in Theory of Mind confirm our intuitions about the performative nature of all human communication. As such they provide a broader theoretical framework for Fried's

articulation of the difficulties faced by artists who wished to minimize the theatricality of their pieces. Fried's discussion of these difficulties is particularly illuminating for literary critics interested in bringing together cognitive science and cultural historicism because he is deeply invested in historicizing, yet he also wants to understand the psychological dynamics behind the historically specific concerns of artists and critics. Today we can use insights from cognitive science to mediate the relationship between psychology and history in our cultural and literary analyses, which is why I consider Fried's approach cognitive, ahead of its time, and want to explore the implications of his argument for cognitive literary theory.

From Bubbles to Blindness: Struggling to Ensure Absorption

And so Chardin's canvases of the 1730s as well as Chardin's, Greuze's, Van Loo's, and Vien's works of the 1750s depicted people so caught up in praying, playing, sketching, learning difficult lessons, blowing bubbles, grieving, rejoicing, listening raptly to charismatic speakers, or simply sleeping, as not to be aware of being watched. By "negating the beholder's presence" these paintings resisted the pervasive theatricality of representational art. And by resisting theatricality, they became more spectacular. As Fried puts it, "Only by establishing the fiction of [the beholder's] absence or nonexistence could his actual placement before and his enthrallment by the painting be secured" (103). The sight of people so absorbed in what they are doing that they are unable to put on any special body postures or facial expressions—the absence of performance—seemed mesmerizing.

By the early 1760s, however, the subject matter wore itself thin. It became increasingly difficult for artists to use the established contexts of absorption (such as reading, praying, sleeping) to convincingly exclude the beholder from the picture. And so "deliberate and extraordinary measures came to be required in order to persuade contemporary audiences of the absorption of a figure or group of figures in the world of the painting" (Fried 67). One such measure involved ratcheting up the drama: Greuze's *Le Fils ingrat* (1777) and *Le Fils puni* (1778) depict a family so distraught over the rebellion of the ungrateful son and the resulting early death of his father that it is obvious that none of them would be able to gather their wits enough to look about themselves and realize that they are being observed.

Another measure involved opening a painting "to a number of points of view other than that of the beholder standing before the canvas" (159): In David's *Belisaire* (1781), the "off-center perspective [places] the beholder to one side of the painting, away from [the central] figure of Belisarius" (156), thus implying that the perspective and viewing convenience of the beholder are simply not part of the characters' worldview.

Yet another way to create the illusion of absorption was to make the titular character blind, as in Vincent's *Belisaire* (1777), David's *Belisaire* (1781, 1785), Peyron's *Belisaire* (1779), and David's *Homere endormi* and *Homere recitant* (both 1794): The blind protagonist is by default unaware of the beholder.

Fried calls these measures "extreme." The intensification of drama, the experimentation with different perspectives, and the introduction of blind historical and mythical figures all seem to testify that by the 1770s, "the everyday as such was in an important sense lost to pictorial representation" (61). The absorptive charm of mundane activities of listening, watching, and daydreaming was broken. In fact, Fried argues that if we follow "the evolution of David's art between 1780 and 1814," we can trace in it "a drastic loss of conviction in [both] action and expression as resources for ambitious painting, that is, in the very possibility that either could be represented other than as theatrical" (176). In other words, "the persuasive representation of absorption" may have remained a "positive desideratum" (13) for artists, but, at least within the context of that specific period in French art history, the means of achieving that absorption and thus escaping the theatricality of representational art seemed to have been exhausted.

Moreover, for some critics, such as Rousseau, those means had always been futile. Unlike Diderot, who actively considered the ways of transcending theatricality both in drama and painting, Rousseau "not only [argued] that the theater is beyond redemption" but also strongly implied "that there is no aspect of social life that is not comprised within the dangerous, because readily theatricalized and theatricalizing, realm of the spectacular" (168). In other words, one cannot reduce the self-conscious quality of the whole painting by reducing the self-consciousness of its subjects.

To clarify this latter point, consider a hypothetical question, which Rousseau and Diderot would answer somewhat differently. Let's say that the work of art itself cannot be cleansed of intentionality and, hence, theatricality, for it was *made with the intention to be looked at*. Perhaps, then, its intention-less subjects—that is, the persons caught at the moment when they are not aware of being looked at—can diminish the

overall theatricality of the piece to some extent. Rousseau would say no: the allegedly beholder-free subjects make the whole piece even more insidiously theatrical. Diderot might say yes, if only to reflect his fascination with the process of hiding, ignoring, or diminishing the beholder.

And what would Fried himself say? On the one hand, he would agree with Rousseau that theatricality pervades our art and social life. In his earlier essay, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), Fried called his readers' "attention to the utter pervasiveness—the virtual universality—of the sensibility or mode of being . . . corrupted or perverted by theater" (168). On the other hand, "Art and Objecthood" focuses on works of modernist art that "defeat theater" by their quality of "presentness," that is, by their apparent ability to just *be* there independently from the perspective of the beholder. If, as Fried puts it in the famous last sentence of that essay, "presentness is grace" (168), then this grace is attainable or at least imaginable—a position that aligns Fried somewhat more with Diderot than with Rousseau.

For a cognitive cultural critic, the issue of escape from theatricality, as formulated by Fried, captures an important cognitive paradox underlying much of our culture. To get at the root of this paradox, we need to turn to the concept of Theory of Mind. For it seems that both the impulse to transcend the theatricality of representations (and indeed of our whole social life) and the nagging suspicion that no such transcendence is possible might be grounded in the workings of our evolved cognitive adaptations for mind-reading.

What are these adaptations?

Theory of Mind and Two Underlying Assumptions

Theory of Mind, also known as mind-reading, is a term used by cognitive psychologists and philosophers of mind to describe our ability to explain behavior in terms of underlying thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions (e.g., we see somebody reaching for a cup of water, and we assume that she is thirsty).[2] We attribute states of mind to ourselves and others all the time. Our attributions are frequently incorrect (the person who reached for the cup of water might have done it for reasons other than being thirsty). Still, making them is the default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment. When Theory of Mind is impaired, as it is in varying degrees in the case of autism and schizophrenia, communication breaks down.

Note that the words *theory* in Theory of Mind and *reading* in mind-

reading are potentially misleading because they seem to imply that we attribute states of mind intentionally and consciously. In fact, it might be difficult for us to appreciate at this point just how much mind-reading takes place on a level inaccessible to our consciousness. For it seems that while our perceptual systems "eagerly" register the information about people's bodies and their facial expressions, they do not necessarily make all that information available to us for our conscious interpretation. Think of the intriguing functioning of the so-called "mirror neurons." Studies of imitation in monkeys and humans have discovered a "neural mirror system that demonstrates an internal correlation between the representations of perceptual and motor functionalities" (Borenstein and Ruppin 229). What this means is that "an action is understood when its observation causes the motor system of the observer to 'resonate.'" So when you observe someone else grasping a cup, the "same population of neurons that control[s] the execution of grasping movements becomes active in [your own] motor areas" (Rizzolatti et al. 2001, 662). At least on some level, your brain does not seem to distinguish between you doing something and a person that you observe doing it.

In other words, our neural circuits are powerfully attuned to the presence, behavior, and emotional display of others. This attunement begins early (since some form of it is already present in newborn infants) and takes numerous nuanced forms as we grow into our environment. We are intensely aware of the body language and facial expressions of other people, even if the full extent and significance of such awareness escape us.[3]

Let me now spell out two assumptions underlying the present argument. First, I think of our cognitive adaptations for mind-reading as promiscuous, voracious, and proactive, their very condition of being a constant stimulation delivered either by direct interactions with other people or by imaginary approximations of such interactions. To amplify this point, it is useful to compare our adaptations for mind-reading with our adaptations for seeing. Because our species evolved to take in so much information about our environment visually, we simply cannot help seeing once we open our eyes in the morning,[4] and the range of cultural practices grounded in the particularities of our system of visual adaptations is truly staggering. Similarly, as cognitive evolutionary psychologist Jesse M. Bering observes, after a certain age, people "cannot turn off their mind-reading skills even if they want to. All human actions are forevermore perceived to be the products of unobservable mental states, and every behavior, therefore, is subject to intense socio-

cognitive scrutiny" (12). This means that although we are a far way off from grasping the full extent to which our lives are structured by our adaptations for mind-reading, we should be prepared to find that the cultural effect of those adaptations may prove just as profound and far-ranging as that of being able to see.[5]

The second assumption is a paradox. We perceive people's observable behavior as both a highly informative and at the same time an unreliable source of information about their minds. This double perspective is fundamental and inescapable, and it informs all of our social life and cultural representations.

To begin to appreciate the power of this double perspective, consider the reason we remain suspicious of each other's body language. When I am speaking to you, you count on my registering information conveyed by your face, movements, and appearance. That is, you can't know what particular grin or shrug or tattoo I will notice and consider significant at a given moment (indeed, I don't know either). Our evolutionary past ensures, however, that you will intuitively expect me to "read" your body as indicative of your thoughts, desires, and intentions. Moreover, the same evolutionary past ensures that I intuitively know that you expect me to read your body in this fashion. This means that I have to constantly negotiate between trusting this or that bodily sign of yours more than another. Were I to put this negotiation in words—which will sound funny because we do *not* consciously articulate it to ourselves in such a fashion—it might go like this: "Did she smile because she liked what I said or because she wanted me to think that she liked what I said, or because she was thinking of how well she handled an argument yesterday, or was she thinking of something altogether unrelated?"

In other words, paradoxical as it may seem, we treat with caution the information about the person's state of mind inferred from our observation of her behavior and body language precisely because we can't help treating them as a highly valuable source of information about her mind—*and we both know it*. Because the body is *the* text that we read throughout our evolution as a social species, we are now stuck, for better or for worse, with cognitive adaptations that forcefully focus our attention on that particular text. (Nor would we want to completely distrust the body—our quick and far-from-perfect reading of each other is what gets us through the day.)

What all this adds up to is that we are in a bind. We have the hungry Theory of Mind that needs constant input in the form of observable behavior indicative of unobservable mental states. And we have the

body that our Theory of Mind evolved to focus on in order to get that input. And that body—the object of our Theory of Mind's obsessive attention—is a privileged and, as such, potentially misleading source of information about the person's mental state.

Note how at this point the research on Theory of Mind complements our own discipline's insight about the body as a site of performance. Because we are drawn to each other's bodies in our quest to figure out each other's thoughts and intentions, we end up *performing* our bodies (not always consciously or successfully) to shape other people's perceptions of our mental states. A particular body thus can be viewed only as a time-and-place-specific cultural construction—that is, as an attempt to influence others into perceiving it in a certain way. As Ellen Spolsky (Chapter Two, this volume) puts it,

> The clues to which we sensibly learn to be attentive cannot be relied on absolutely because bodies themselves, the bodies that are evolved to give external expression to internal states, learn to produce these clues within contexts differentiated by cultural categories such as gender, age, social class, and occupation. Not only our interpretations of them but the evolved physical expressions themselves are enriched and/or distorted by social overlays, making both misinterpretation and deliberate deception possible.

Cognitive evolutionary research thus lends strong support to theorists in cultural studies who seek to expand the meaning of performativity, such as Joseph Roach, who argues that performance, "though it frequently makes references to theatricality as the most fecund metaphor for the social dimensions of social production, embraces a much wider range of human behaviors. Such behaviors may include what Michel de Certeau calls 'the practice of everyday life,' in which the role of spectator expands into that of participant" (46). Indeed, work on Theory of Mind indicates that our everyday mind-reading turns each of us into a performer and a spectator, whether we are aware of it or not.

Let us consider another, closely related, implication of the studies on Theory of Mind. They encourage us to think of a broad variety of cultural institutions and social practices as both reflecting our overarching need to attribute minds *and* remaining subject to the instabilities inherent to our mind-reading processes. For example, our social infrastructure seems to be chock-full of devices designed to bypass our fakeable, performable, constructable body in reading the person's mind. We use

various tokens, legal documents, credit and medical histories, recommendation letters, gossip, blood and hair samples, and polygraph tests to avoid the situation when we have to make an important decision based on the information provided solely by the person's immediate observable behavior.

Some of these devices succeed better than others, and none is perfect. We may not yet be living in the future depicted in *Gattaca* (1997), whose protagonist (played by Ethan Hawke) fakes his blood and hair samples to deceive others about his intentions, but that sci-fi moment does capture an important sociocognitive feature of our world: There is a constant arms race going on between cultural institutions trying to claim some aspects of the body as essential, unfakeable, and intentionality-free, and individuals finding ways to perform even those seemingly unperformable aspects of the body.

Fictions of Embodied Transparency

As one example of such an arms race, consider a peculiar representational tradition—I call it a tradition of embodied transparency—of putting protagonists in situations in which their bodies spontaneously reveal their true feelings, often against their wills. Manifesting itself differently in different genres and individual works, moments of embodied transparency are carefully foregrounded within larger narratives. In each case an author builds up a specific context in which brief access to a character's mental state via her body language stands out sharply against the relative opacity of other characters, or of the same character a moment ago.

Every moment of transparency is thus entirely relative and context-dependent, but the wish to create and behold such moments seems to be perennial, grounded in our evolutionary history as a social species. Representations of embodied transparency must be immensely flattering to our Theory of Mind adaptations, which evolved to read minds through bodies but have to constantly contend with the possibility of misreading and the resulting social failure. The pleasure derived from moments of embodied transparency is thus largely a social pleasure—a titillating illusion of superior social discernment and power.

Elsewhere I consider examples of embodied transparency in novels (such as Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*), in nineteenth-century genre paintings (such as "proposal compositions" discussed by Stephen Kern

in *Eyes of Love*), and in twentieth-century mock-documentaries (such as *The Office*).[6] In each case, I demonstrate that to be effective, moments of embodied transparency have to be spontaneous, unexpected, and short. They also have to look unconventional in the larger context of their genre. That is (returning to my earlier argument about the arms race), writers, artists, and movie directors have to keep inventing *new* ways of forcing the body into a state of transparency because as soon as one way of doing it emerges as an established convention, it loses credibility. The mind retreats further, leaving the body as a front going through the expected motions of "revealing" the "true" states of mind. The double perspective of the body comes back with a vengeance.

The issue of unconventionality will bear directly upon our discussion of eighteenth-century paintings of absorption later in this chapter. But before returning to Fried, let us consider two other case studies of eighteenth-century embodied transparency: narrativized, but not exactly fictional. As segues to *Absorption and Theatricality*, these case studies will illustrate my point about the centrality of brevity and spontaneity in constructing convincing representations of direct access to people's mental states.

The first case study comes from poet and playwright Johanna Baillie's *Plays on the Passions*, published in 1798; specifically the "Introductory Discourse" to *Plays on the Passions*, as discussed recently by cognitive literary critic Alan Richardson. For Baillie, as Richardson points out,

> reading human emotions and intentions through their embodied manifestations is an innately driven, experientially developed, species-wide human practice. [Thus] Baillie argues that public executions drew large crowds precisely because of this universal fascination with emotional expression. Few spectators "can get near enough to distinguish the expression of a face, or the minuter parts of a criminal's behavior" under such unusually intense emotional pressure, yet even "from a considerable distance will they remark whether he steps firmly; whether the motions of his body denote agitation or calmness." ("Facial Expression Theory," in press)

Baillie's focus, of course, is not executions but theater: that "grand and favorite amusement of every nation into which it has been introduced." She believes (to quote Richardson again) that "in the right hands and under the right circumstances" theater can "provide a more intimate look" at a variety of "nonverbal emotional behaviors" ("Facial Expres-

sion Theory"). What interests me, however, is precisely the fleeting description of the greed with which onlookers take in the impromptu spectacle of the condemned man's body language. I agree with Richardson that Baillie sees public executions as feeding the "universal fascination with emotional expression"—feeding our Theory of Mind, we can say now.[7] At the same time, I think that there is something unique about this particular crowd-drawing occasion. For a public execution does more than merely provide spectators with a show of strong emotions on the part of the criminal: it also promises a privileged access to his feelings. As a real-life social event and as a secondhand description of this event, a public execution represents a striking instance of embodied transparency.

As a condemned criminal walks to his death, his mind is pried open against his will. Whatever behavior he may display as he approaches the gallows—"agitation or calmness"—spectators *know*, or think that they can largely guess, what lies beneath: terror, despair, fear, and perhaps an improbable hope for a miraculous reprieve. The extremity of the occasion narrows down drastically the possible range of the man's mental states, while the transience of this moment of transparency—the fateful walk will end very, very soon—amplifies its value. Hence the onlookers gaze and gaze[8] even when the great distance precludes them from discerning the exact facial expression of the criminal: the awareness of the inimitable value of this soon-to-be-over spectacle of emotional access keeps them riveted to the spot. Some of that raw value trickles down as they comment on what they see (or think they see), and as they retell the event or re-imagine it in service of a very different cultural project, such as, for example, Baillie's discourse on passions and theater.

My second case study also originates in the late-eighteenth-century theatrical discourse.[9] In 1807, Henry Siddons (son of Sarah Siddons and himself an actor) published *Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture and Action*, a translation from German of Johann Jacob Engel's *Ideen zu einer Mimik* (1785), revised to reflect the conventions of the English stage. At one point, to illustrate what he calls "the communicative power of gesture" (36), Siddons treats the reader to the following tableau:

> When a person sits at the theater, after having seen a play acted three or four times, his mind naturally becomes vacant and inactive. If among the spectators he chances to recognize a youth, to whom the same is new, this object affords him, and many others, a more entertaining fund of observation than all that is going forward on the stage.

This novice of an auditor, carried away by the illusion, imitates all he sees, even to the actions of the players, though in a mode less decisive. Without knowing what is going to be said, he is serious, or contented, according to the tone which the performers happen to take. His eyes become a mirror, faithfully reflecting the varying gestures of the several personages concerned.

Ill humour, irony, anger, curiosity, contempt, in a word, all the passions of the author are repeated in the lines of his countenance. This imitative picture is only interrupted whilst his proper sentiments, crossing exterior objects, seek for modes of expressing themselves. (35–36)

What interests me in this scene is the implicit contrast between the "reality" of emotions as they are portrayed onstage and as they are mirrored by the unsophisticated observer. For note that nobody in this tableau apparently experiences the real feelings of "ill humour, irony, anger, curiosity [or] contempt." The actors put on a show of those emotions, but who knows what they really feel? The "youth" unselfconsciously mimics their body language, but does it mean that he is *really* angry or contemptuous at this point? I doubt it. However much I may fear and hate a psychopathic murderer from a movie, those feelings are *nothing* compared to what I would experience were I to encounter such a person in real life. In this respect, the body of Siddons's impressionable "youth" is as unreliable an index to his true feelings as the acting bodies on stage are to theirs.

However, this weak version of ill humor, irony, or anger is not *all* that animates our young man. He feels something else—and very deeply, too—and that something else is plainly written all over his body. *It is his engagement with what he sees onstage.* The smile of contempt that momentarily curls his lips as he watches the actress stare down the double-dealing villain thus expresses not so much any actual contempt on his part but rather his deep involvement with the performance: his complete surrender to the power of the actors.

If we focus on this particular aspect of the young man's feelings, it means that, at least for the duration of this episode, his body language reflects his state of mind more accurately than the body language of the performers reflects their state of mind. He is completely taken by what happens onstage, and because he is not faking that state of deep emotional engagement for the benefit of the observer (for he does not know that he is being observed), his unpremeditated show of feelings becomes

more engrossing for the theatergoer than the official show of feelings put on by the actors.

Siddons's voyeuristic tableau thus plays with our double view of the body as the best and the worst source of information about the person's mind by teasing us with a vision of a highly readable body in the setting (theater) that thrives on cultivating the gap between the body and the mind. Moreover, this specific setting also ensures that the moment will not last: the "youth" is in thrall now, but this spell will be broken at any second. As with the context of public execution, which renders both plausible and short-lived the moment of the man's embodied transparency, the context of theatrical spectatorship renders transparency both possible and transient.

I don't think that either Baillie or Siddons consciously set out to construct what I now call contexts of embodied transparency. Instead, they wanted to make specific points about the power of theater, and the representations of bodies rendered briefly and radically readable allowed them to advance these points. One may thus speculate that a moment of embodied transparency can make a rhetorical point more compelling and vivid. Writers may intuitively cultivate such moments to increase the imaginative charge of their arguments, their immediacy and spontaneity.

Using Theory of Mind to Negotiate between Psychology and History

Let us now turn to *Absorption and Theatricality*. What happens if we approach Fried's arguments from the point of view of cognitive theory of mind-reading? First, we notice that the attempts to eschew theatricality in eighteenth-century French genre painting are on a par with other representational endeavors (such as Baillie's execution scene and Siddons's voyeuristic tableau) to render the body transparent. For what is the state of "absorption" if not the carefully constructed moment when the observable body language provides the direct access to the person's state of mind? Chardin's young man balancing a soap bubble on the end of his pipe is completely absorbed by what he does. As a result, his mental state is as transparent as that of an enthralled youth from Siddons's imagined theater and that of a criminal approaching the gallows. Absorption signifies transparency.

Hence the important point that I revisit several times in my chapter.

Research on Theory of Mind begins to explain some of the intrinsic pull of the absorptive paintings. Fried notes that "absorption emerges as good in and of itself, without regard to its occasion" (51). A cognitive literary critic such as myself will agree with this and speculate that representations of absorption may feel "good in and of [themselves]" because they flatter our mind-reading adaptations. Such representations regale us with something that we hold at premium in our everyday life and never get much of (i.e., moments of perfect access to other people's minds), and they intensify our pleasure by constructing plausible social contexts for these fleeting mind-reading feasts.

Here and elsewhere in his argument, Fried demonstrates his interest in the interplay between psychology and history. Let us see how the cognitive perspective may anchor his—and our—intuitions about the relationship between the two.

Fried begins with a strong assertion of the historical limits of his argument. "This study is exclusively concerned with developments in France," he tells us on the first page. Then again on page two: "I am convinced that there took place in French painting starting around the middle of the century a unique and very largely autonomous evolution; and it is the task of comprehending that evolution as nearly as possible in its own terms—of laying bare the issues crucially at stake in it—that is undertaken in the pages that follow."

By insisting that the French absorptive paintings should be considered on their "own terms," Fried distances himself from two interpretive traditions. First, he disagrees with those art historians who think that by focusing on the human body in action, Chardin and others were taking an ideological stand against Rococo's indifference to historical figures and heroic endeavors. As Fried puts it, authors of absorptive paintings were not really interested in upholding "the doctrines of the hierarchy of genres and the supremacy of history painting as they were held by anti-Rococo critics and theorists." In his view, the artists' interest in representation of absorption was not ideological or primarily concerned with the subject matter but was rather "determined by other, ontologically prior concerns and imperatives." And these had to do, among other things, with the relationship, "at once literal and fictive, between painting and the beholder" (75–76).

I suggest that such "ontologically prior concerns"—particularly when framed in terms of the relationship "between painting and the beholder"—are ultimately bound up with the cognition of mind-reading. The absorptive painting titillates us with the illusion of embodied

transparency. Our responses to this powerful illusion certainly draw on an idiosyncratic mix of personal ideologies and aesthetics, but the socio-cognitive—the drive to read minds and the anxiety about misreading minds—is inextricably there, heightening and structuring our interest in the painting.

Here is the second interpretive tradition that Fried wants to keep at arm's length. He is wary of our tendency to assume that if two works deal with the same subject one must have influenced the other. Thus, when he looks at the 1770s–1780s paintings by Vincent, David, and Peyron, featuring the blind general Belisarius receiving alms, Fried has to address the role of the much earlier canvas on the same theme: Luciana Borzone's *Belisarius Receiving Alms* (1620). It may seem obvious that the 1620 painting had a lasting influence on the late eighteenth-century *Belisarius*es, yet, as Fried puts it, "the notion of influence is what I wish to see beyond" (145). In his view, the *Belisarius*es of the 1770s–1780s were informed by the increasingly desperate attempts of the artists to eradicate the beholder (and hence create the illusion of complete absorption), and it would be anachronistic to project this desperation back onto the 1620 canvas.

Consider one important detail shared by the seventeenth-century *Belisarius* and its eighteenth-century counterparts. Both feature a younger officer who is looking at the general while remaining invisible to him. Fried's careful analysis demonstrates, however, that in Vincent's and David's *Belisarius*es, the posture of this observer implies a more aggressive endeavor to ensure the subjects' engrossment in the world of the painting. For example, in stark contrast to the merely pensive officer of Borzone's painting, the officer of Vincent's painting "gazes anxiously, almost mistrustfully, at the sightless eyes of the great general" (152). For Fried, this intense gaze is strongly indicative of the artist's near-desperate attempt to render both men completely absorbed in the present moment and thus oblivious to the presence of the beholder. The general cannot perform for the beholder because he is blind, and the officer cannot perform for the beholder because he is too preoccupied by figuring out what the blind man is up to.

The officer's mistrust is actually somewhat ill warranted. Does he think that Belisarius is faking blindness? Why should he doubt the old general? It is precisely because the officer's attitude is not entirely psychologically convincing that we infer that it must serve other representational needs. Specifically, it increases his absorption in what is going on. And it is this forced absorption, as Fried argues, that renders the

whole painting a pointedly 1770s project, whose goals and mood are strikingly different from those of its alleged 1620 predecessor.

To see why Fried's insistence on seeing beyond the "notion of influence" is crucial from the cognitive perspective, let us broaden the context of his discussion and think of how we generally construct our narratives of influence. For example, imagine a cultural historian who has just read Siddons's description of the enthralled youth in *Practical Illustrations* and is now looking at the young man of Chardin's *The Soap Bubble*. The suggestive parallels between the representations of absorbed bodies may prompt this historian to look for evidence of influence of one on the other, inferring, perhaps, that the French tradition of absorptive painting informed Siddons's sensibility by the way of Engel's earlier *Ideen zu einer Mimik*. Such an argument would sound quite plausible; in fact, it would be typical of claims we routinely make in our cultural analyses. Looking at the two representational traditions side by side seems to call for some sort of narrative of influence.

But, let us say, we do not want to insist that one directly influenced the other. What alternative do we have? We may have to come up with an argument that would demonstrate that the idea of emotional transparency as a representational desideratum was "in the air"—that is, present in a variety of cultural discourses at the time—and as such got picked by Chardin, Engel, Siddons, and Baillie.

And it is not that this historicized account will be wrong. It could be quite insightful. However, it will always remain a "just so" story—a result of our earnest wish to explain what it was about this or that historical moment that made artists and writers feel that representations of embodied transparency would be particularly desirable and valuable right then.

That is, unless we posit a cognitive foundation for our enduring interest in visual and verbal representations of embodied transparency, a "notion of influence" or a historicized "just so" story (or some combination of the two) is what we will have to fall back onto again and again. By contrast, see what happens if we establish, once and for all, that we remain perennially fascinated by socially rich representational contexts that construct bodies as transparent and thus flatter and titillate our Theory of Mind. If we do so, we free ourselves from the obligation to endlessly explain one such construction through another, or to make historical contexts carry more weight than they can bear.

This is to say that usually we make them carry *all* the weight, and they don't have to. For if we factor in the cognitive aspect, we can attend

to specific historical contexts of cultural representations and speak of influences only when we have compelling evidence for such influences and contexts, and not because we simply have no other ways of explaining their powerful appeal. The cognitive perspective thus makes possible a more balanced and responsible historicizing than we are currently pressed into.

This is why I suggest that Fried's study was "cognitive" before its time and that now, with the advent of research on Theory of Mind, it can be properly appreciated as such. By resisting the "notion of influence" and the primacy of the considerations of "hierarchy of genres" and "subject matter," Fried articulated the need for alternative conceptual frameworks, which would address the "ontologically prior" relationship between painting and the beholder. With their double view of the body, studies in Theory of Mind go right to the heart of this relationship. They suggest that absorptive paintings are riveting because they present us with an illusion of direct unmediated access to the subjects' mental states. Sociocognitive satisfaction thus underlies aesthetic pleasure. It does not *define* this pleasure: too many culture-specific and personally idiosyncratic factors are at play in each case. In fact, as Fried demonstrates, a number of eighteenth-century critics found various faults with absorptive pieces, which means that a rich visual illusion of privileged mind-access does not directly translate into aesthetic pleasure for everybody. Still, at least to some important degree, it makes this pleasure possible.

How to Construct Brevity, Spontaneity, and Unconventionality

I suggested earlier that, to be convincing, contexts of embodied transparency have to strike observers and readers as transient and unexpected. Let me restate this. By presenting the body as faithfully reflecting the mind, such contexts attempt to transcend the double position of the body as a highly privileged yet unreliable source of information about the person's mental state. However, this transcendence—this moment of truth—is always suspect for our mind-reading and hence body-performing species. This is why contexts of embodied transparency require painstaking planning and foregrounding on the part of the author, yet have to strike beholders as brief, spontaneous, and unconventional.

Now consider Fried's observation that the scenes of absorption demanded both intricate plotting on the part of the artist *and* a very pecu-

liar handling of time. It seems to me that Fried addresses here the same cognitive dynamics as I do above, only that he articulates them through the idiom of a specific genre at a specific historical moment. Here, for example, is the elaborate background narrative that had to precede the "chance" occurrence captured by Greuze's *La Piete filiale* (1763). This painting features a paralyzed old man surrounded by his family at the precise moment when they all respond emotionally to his interaction with his benevolent son-in-law. Here is Diderot's description of that painting:

> The moment . . . chosen by the artist is special. By chance it happened that, on that particular day, it was his son-in-law who brought the old man some food, and the latter, moved, showed his gratitude in such an animated and earnest way that it interrupted the occupations and attracted the attention of the whole family. (Quoted in Fried, 55)

As Fried observes,

> Diderot's statement is the most forthright assertion of the primacy of considerations of absorption that we have so far encountered. He seems almost to be saying that Greuze was compelled first to paralyze the old man and then to orchestrate an entire sequence of ostensibly chance events in order to arrive in the end at the sort of emotionally charged, highly moralized, and dramatically unified situation that alone was capable of embodying with sufficient perspicuousness the absorptive states of suspension of activity and fixing of attention that painter and critic alike regarded as paramount. (56)

The cognitive perspective strongly supports both Diderot's and Fried's intuition that the painters had to go to great lengths to build their scenes of *Absorption*. A successful representation of embodied transparency requires a convincing background narrative and something akin to a "mania for plotting" (55) in an artist (a charge sometimes leveled against Greuze).

If you disagree and think it is easy to come up with a context in which a character is forced to embody her true feelings, try it. Chances are that you will settle on either of these two scenarios: a violent surprise—a subject is shocked by some news and his body immediately shows it—or physical torture; as Walter Benn Michaels puts it in his discussion of *American Psycho*, "You can be confident that the girl screaming when

you shoot her with a nail gun is not performing (in the sense of faking) her pain" (70). But these two scenarios, surprise and torture, don't begin to cover the variety of contexts that authors invented over the years to render bodies transparent.[10] A plausible instance of embodied transparency and, moreover, one that does not strike your audience as tedious (you can rely on surprises and tortures only for so long) requires a careful combination of generic conventions, familiar cultural realities, and specific plot turns. It's a lot of work all around.

And we have already seen how quickly the established methods of creating absorptive contexts start feeling stale. As Fried argues, by the early 1800s, David felt that none of those methods were effective anymore and that neither expressive body language nor carefully thought-through narrative could salvage the represented body from the grasp of theatricality.[11]

What David and other artists perceived as a specific representational crisis is actually an expression of a broader cognitive challenge involved in constructing contexts of embodied transparency. We can call it a long-term challenge because it indicates the impossibility of relying on the same type of narrative construction for long. This is to say that there is a relatively short historical window of opportunity within which the audiences would buy the idea of the complete unselfconscious absorption of the sleeping, card-castle-building, and bubble-blowing subjects. We can see why after a short while what used to be a fresh and convincing visual narrative of absorption would ossify into a convention. That is, we can imagine a hypothetical portrait of a woman not merely blowing bubbles but *blowing bubbles*—engaging in an activity that is *supposed* to be absorptive—*performing* unselfconsciousness for the beholder and thus completely defeating the original purpose of the endeavor.

Then there is also what we can call a short-term challenge. An ideal context of transparency must come with the blueprint for its self-destruction. In fact, we can say that such a context is convincing in direct proportion to its fragility. Think back to Siddons's theatrical vignette. It captures the moment of transparency that cannot last because the particular emotional state of the "transparent" subject cannot last. At any point now the young man will shift his attention or grow self-conscious and thus lose that focused single-mindedness which is now written all over his body. In other words, it is because we are aware of the impending and inevitable loss of transparency that we are more poignantly attuned to its presence. ("Presentness is grace"—Fried again.)

There seem to be two different routes for arriving at the realization

that transparency is convincing in proportion to its transience: by observing specific contexts of transparency, or by thinking through the implications of the work on Theory of Mind. I used the second route: taking as a starting point the view of the body as the best and the worst source of information about the mind, one can predict that all contexts in which the body seems to tell the truth have to be short-lived. This is to say that the inherent instability of moments of embodied transparency can be influenced by a broad variety of historically specific factors, but such subversive factors will *always* be available in one form or another: their perennial availability is determined by the nature of the phenomenon that such representations grapple with. Because they attempt to circumvent our double view of the body by imagining a context in which the body is completely readable—a barely sustainable state for our mind-reading species—they must remain unstable and vulnerable to subversion.

Hence I believe that Fried describes the same dynamic of transience, only that he arrives at it via the first route. Working closely with modernist as well as eighteenth-century art, he becomes aware of the peculiar handling of time in sculptures and paintings that sought to "defeat theater . . . by virtue of their presentness and instantaneousness" ("Art and Objecthood," 167). And so, as we are reading what he says about the construction of time by absorptive paintings (see the long quote below), we can see how well his insights mesh with those made possible by research in Theory of Mind.

Here is Fried on Chardin's bubble-blowing, card-castle-building, knucklebones-playing characters:

> Chardin's paintings of games and amusements, in fact, all his genre paintings, are also remarkable for their uncanny power to suggest the actual duration of the absorptive states and activities they represent. Some such power necessarily characterizes all persuasive depictions of absorption, none of which would *be* persuasive if it did not at least convey the idea that the state or activity in question was sustained for a certain length of time. But Chardin's genre paintings, like Vermeer's before him, go much further than that. By a technical feat that almost defies analysis—though one writer has remarked helpfully on Chardin's characteristic choice of "natural pause in the action which, we feel, will recommence a moment later"—they come close to translating literal duration, the actual passage of time as one stands before the canvas, into a purely pictorial effect: as if the very stability and unchangingness

> of the painted image are perceived by the beholder not as material properties that could not be otherwise but as manifestations of an absorptive state—the image of absorption in itself, so to speak—that only happens to subsist. The result, paradoxically, is that stability and unchangingness are endowed to an astonishing degree with the power to conjure an illusion of imminent or gradual or even fairly abrupt change. (*Absorption*, 50)

To put it in cognitive terms, such canvases make us believe that we have the direct access to these people's minds *now* by making us expect to lose this access at any second. They effectively reinforce our anxious suspicion that other people's minds are never transparent by presenting *this* moment of transparency as an exception, an accident, a fluke. By doing so, they make us value this fluke—they encourage us to seize the moment and to look and look and look at it while it lasts. Or as Fried puts it, amplifying the view of Diderot and his contemporaries: A painting has "first to attract . . . and then to arrest . . . and finally to enthrall . . . the beholder, that is, a painting [has] to call to someone, bring him to a halt in front of itself, and hold him there as if spellbound and unable to move" (92).

To clarify: research on Theory of Mind does more than simply support Fried's insight. Paintings featuring subjects deeply absorbed in what they do are certainly not the only ones that have the power to bring the beholder "to a halt . . . and hold him there as if spellbound"—other works of art have that power too (or at least aspire to it). In explaining how they do it, we need to draw on cognitive, historical, aesthetic, and other factors; both the content and the combination of those factors would be different in each case. The work on Theory of Mind thus brings to light some of the cognitive factors that go into capturing the attention of the beholder in the case of absorptive paintings. To put it differently, that work suggests that there is a specific cognitive pattern—that is, our dual view of the body—that such paintings actively seek to exploit by their careful background plotting and their peculiar handling of time.

Theory of Mind and Sentimentalism

No discussion of eighteenth-century cultural representations of people gripped by strong emotions (e.g., the distraught family in *Le Fils ingrat* and *Le Fils puni*; the profoundly moved patriarch in *La Piete filiale*) can

avoid the issue of the period's sentimentalism. Here, again, Fried's treatment of this issue renders his approach cognitive before its time, especially in the context of his larger view of the relationship between psychology and history. Looking at Greuze's *La Piete filiale*, Fried insists that correlating the effect that this painting must have had on its contemporaries with what we call eighteenth-century "sentimentalism, emotionalism, and moralism" does not really explain as much as we think it does when we evoke all these "isms." As he puts it,

> For a long time now it has been traditional, almost obligatory, to remark that we, the modern public, no longer find it in ourselves to be moved by the sentimentality, emotionalism, and moralism of much of Greuze's production. But the truth is that we take those qualities at face value, as if they and nothing more were at stake in his pictures; and that we therefore fail to grasp what his sentimentalism, emotionalism, and moralism, as well as his alleged mania for plotting, are in the service of, pictorially speaking—viz., a more urgent and extreme evocation of absorption than can be found in the work of Chardin, Van Loo, Vien, or any other French painter of that time. (*Absorption*, 55)

Translating what Fried says into the language of cognitive theory, we can say that perhaps when we talk about sentimentalism to describe effects of certain representational methods on the audience we confuse ways with means. Perhaps what we call sentimentalism is really a way— one of many—to smuggle transparency into the representation. That is, eighteenth-century writers and artists faced the same challenge that writers and artists always face: they needed to construct convincing representational contexts for forcing the body to reveal the mind. The fact that we now group some of their methods under the unflattering rubric "sentimentalism" shows again how quickly those methods become outmoded with frequent use and how vulnerable they are to parody and subversion.

As a related example of such a subverted context of transparency, consider the eighteenth-century sentimental novel, with its loving attention to blushing, crying, panting, fainting bodies. In Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1739), such bodily displays still stand for real feelings (see Mulan, 1–61), but in his next novel, *Clarissa* (1747–1748), they are already consciously faked for the benefit of naïve observers.[12] The term *sentimental* itself undergoes a change between 1740 and 1820. Originally neutral, "characterized by sentiment," or positive, "characterized by or

exhibiting refined and elevated feeling," it acquires a pejorative meaning of "addicted to indulgence in superficial emotion."[13] In other words, keep looking at the emoting body in hopes that it will keep providing direct access to the person's mental states, and you will soon be treated to "superficial emotion," performed for your viewing pleasure.

But perhaps the negative connotations of the late-eighteenth-century term *sentimentalism* show something else, too. Think of how many novels, movies, and songs produced within any recent decade can be easily characterized as sentimental, not in the pejorative sense of the word, but in the earlier eighteenth-century sense: as "characterized by sentiment." That kind of sentimentalism is here to stay because what it does, again and again, is correlate body with mind in convincing social contexts— and we can never get enough of such correlation in our representations of the world.[14]

Now think of the effects of claiming that sentimentalism is an eighteenth-century phenomenon and that "we, the modern public, no longer find it in ourselves to be moved" by *La Piete filiale* the way Greuze's contemporaries did. On the one hand, common sense suggests that this claim is correct. Surely, in the 1760s, they must have indeed responded to *La Piete filiale* in some ways different from the ways we respond to it now, just as audiences in the 1960s must have responded to "Green, Green Grass of Home" differently than we respond to it now.

On the other hand, one practical effect of this claim is that sentimentalism begins to seem safely *contained*—sealed off as a relic of a long-gone epoch associated with a very specific list of texts and works of art. And, so contained, sentimentalism becomes usable again. That is, whatever writers and artists do now can be sentimental, but it cannot add up to "sentimentalism," for we have been done with that for more than two hundred years, haven't we?

And such containment and recycling are of course necessary given that authors are always in need of new ways to render the body convincingly transparent. The rubric *sentimentalism* covers a broad variety of representational methods, many of which can never really go out of use. In fact, we can say that when one method of forcing the body into transparency is declared passé and appended with a proper condescending "ism," it is an indication that this method is now on the way to being recycled in a different guise and reinvented by a new genre or group of artists.

And so when Fried suggests that sentimentalism and emotionalism and mania for plotting were but the ways to the means—that they were

"in the service of" bringing about convincing representations of absorption—a cognitive literary critic such as myself can't agree more. I agree because I see absorption in terms of transparency (that is, the absorbed person is transparent to the viewer), and because I see transparency in terms of the cognitive paradox underlying our everyday social functioning. Since we cannot help reading bodies for states of mind, and since we can never be sure that the states of mind that we are reading into the bodies are correct, we continue to be fascinated by representations that create illusions of privileged mind-access in complex social environments. Embodied transparency thus remains what Spolsky (Chapter Two, this volume) would call a "representationally hungry" problem: although "especially talented writers and artists" repeatedly turn their attention to this problem, the sociocognitive need that drives it can never be satisfied.

Notes

1. As Michael Fried describes it, "The transparent, slightly distended globe at the tip of his blowpipe seems almost to swell and tremble before our eyes" (*Absorption and Theatricality*, 51).

2. This section of the chapter first appeared in my essay "Theory of Mind and Fictions of Embodied Transparency" (*Narrative*, 2008), and I am grateful to Jim Phelan, the editor of *Narrative*, for letting me reproduce it here.

3. For an important related discussion of mirror neurons, see Spolsky, Chapter Two in this volume.

4. Unless, of course, our visual system is severely damaged.

5. A note on the imaginary approximations of real life mind-reading: So important is the mind-reading ability for our species, and so ready is our Theory of Mind to jump into action at each hint of intentionality, that at least on some level we do not distinguish between attributing states of mind to real people and attributing them to fictional characters. Figuring out what the fictional character is thinking as she is complimenting the protagonist on his reading choices feels *at least on some level* almost as important as figuring out what a real woman is thinking as she looks us in the eye and holds forth on how she enjoyed reading the same book that we currently have in our hands. Hence the pleasure afforded by following various minds in fictional narratives is to a significant degree a social pleasure—an illusive but satisfying confirmation that we remain competent players in the social game that is our life.

6. Zunshine, "Theory of Mind and Fictions of Embodied Transparency."

7. What Spolsky (Chapter Two, this volume) calls "the terminology of feeding" seems to be becoming crucial for discussion of the cognitive structures underlying human consumption and production of culture.

8. Also, this situation is quite peculiar in an ethical sense. On the one hand,

gaping at an individual who is known to be in such dire distress should be ethically questionable; see, for example, Spolsky's discussion in this volume (Chapter Two) for various cultural taboos on staring. On the other hand, we may speculate that by committing a heinous crime and by being presently known as having committing that heinous crime, the criminal has removed himself beyond the pale of such ethical considerations, and thus has become fair game for intrusive observation by strangers.

9. For a detailed discussion of this example, see Zunshine, "Lying Bodies."

10. As Diderot himself put it (he was speaking of theater, but what he said applies equally well to paintings and fiction), the scenes "of violent passion are not those that reveal superior talent in the declaiming actor nor exquisite taste in the applauding spectator" (quoted in Fried, 117).

11. Of course, new ways of rendering the body transparent arise all the time, but one needs a broader perspective, made possible by research on Theory of Mind, to recognize them, in their untold variety, as adding up to the enduring representational tradition.

12. See Zunshine, "Richardson's *Clarissa*."

13. *OED*; second online edition, 1989.

14. Incidentally, by "convincing" I do not mean "realistic"; for example, an otherworldly setup of a science fiction story can be completely socially convincing but not realistic in the conventional sense of the word.