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## Projective art and the ‘staging’ of empathic projection

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### ABSTRACT

Michael Fried’s unexpected contribution to defining the ontological status of video art includes an intriguing claim that projective art is particularly suited to the ‘staging’ of empathic projection. Fried applies Stanley Cavell’s notion of empathic projection, developed in relation to scepticism of ‘other minds’, to moving image installations that not only exploit the beholder’s capacity for empathically projecting, but do so in such a way as to reveal the mechanism at play. In developing this claim, I compare Fried’s key example of Douglas Gordon’s *Play Dead; Real Time* (2003) with Bill Viola and Kira Perov’s *Martyrs* (2014), a work that likewise elicits an emotional response but without a compensatory (and hence critical) foregrounding of the underlying structuring mechanism. However, the comparison suggests that the staging of empathic projection should not be interpreted as an anti-theatrical strategy (as Fried contends), but rather as an exemplary manifestation of what I am calling the configurational encounter – a revealing of the artwork’s conditions of existence. I reference Paul Sharits’s *Epileptic Seizure Comparison* (1976), an important (and unacknowledged) precursor to Gordon’s staging of empathic projection. Finally, I consider Chris Welsby’s landscape films in the light of the capacity of technology to reveal psychological mechanisms of projection, tracing such processes of projection to early childhood experiences of differentiating the human from the non-human.

## KEYWORDS

reception aesthetics

video art

empathic projection

philosophical scepticism

filmic apparatus

Stanley Cavell

## I.

In this article, I want to develop Michael Fried's claim that in moving image art there is a connection between 'empathic projection' and the technological, where 'the two modes of projection meet and mingle on screen' (2008, 2011). By empathic projection, Fried is referring not to mere empathy, but an active process of identification with another sentient being from within our necessary confinement from them. This juxtaposition of the psychological and technical might be viewed with scepticism by some readers schooled in early structural and expanded film-making.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Fried's recent contribution to debates around beholding video art is arguably weakened by an underplaying of the role of technology, and by a corresponding failure to acknowledge earlier film-making traditions (2011).<sup>2</sup> However, it is important to register that Fried qualifies his contention. Crucially, he insists that a work such as Douglas Gordon's 2003 installation *Play Dead; Real Time*, which I consider at length in section III, does not so much invite projection, but rather entails a 'laying bare' of empathic projection that is 'structural' – that reveals the mechanism at play (Fried 2011: 210).<sup>3</sup> As I hope to demonstrate, Fried elaborates his argument by noting that in

a number of works by Gordon, a self-acknowledged ‘sadistic’ mechanism is also at play implicating the viewer, and hence problematizing her position. In *Play Dead; Real Time*, the scene of an elephant playing dead, then struggling to get to its feet, is ‘staged’ for the benefit of the beholder in what Fried refers to as ‘a powerful thematization of [the work’s] to-be-seenness’ (2011: 171-72). In other words, we are made complicit to the elephant’s ordeal. For Fried, this theatricalizing of a film’s reception (i.e., its engagement of the beholder within the ‘real’ space and time of the gallery) is not an end in itself, but a prerequisite for new sources of absorption, in which empathic projection is revealed as playing a central role. Here, absorption is founded upon the deep-rooted complexities of our relation to the filmed animal and its evident struggle. Fried’s argument thus constitutes an audacious attempt to draw Gordon’s work into his wider project of antitheatricality ([1967] 1998, 1988).

My own interest in developing this argument is somewhat different. Fried’s notion of ‘staging’ empathic projection is one manifestation (albeit a key one) of what I have called, elsewhere, the *configurational encounter*.<sup>4</sup> This is an encounter categorized by its explicit disclosing of the conditions of a work’s access and existence. Unlike narrative-based cinematic film, where narrative absorption entails a putting aside of our knowledge of how films are made, moving image installations frequently reveal their configurations, foregrounding the apparatus of production and/or reception. More pertinently for this article, this foregrounding has the potential to ally psychological processes to such structuring mechanisms, problematizing our orientation (ethically and spatially) towards the work. I seek to distinguish such examples from immersive video art that merely elicits empathy in a largely uncritical manner.

## II.

For the philosopher Stanley Cavell from whom Fried takes the term, ‘empathic projection’ is inexorably linked to overcoming human finitude: as Fried puts it, ‘the often painful fact of the necessary separateness of persons and their consequent opacity to one another’ (2010: 104). This sense of finitude lies at the heart of Cavell’s ‘ordinary language’ take on what is known in philosophy as the ‘sceptical problematic’, and particularly that aspect of scepticism associated not with the external world as such, but with our relation to ‘others’. In other words, and crucially for Fried’s project, Cavell engages the acute problem of whether it is truly possible to know ‘other minds’.<sup>5</sup>

Cavell notes that in any encounter,

my taking you for, seeing you as, human depends upon nothing more than my capacity for something like empathic projection, and that if this is true then I must settle on the validity of my projection from within my present condition, from within, so to speak, my confinement from you. For there would be no way for me to step outside my projections. ([1979] 1999: 123)

This often painful sense of confinement, of being enclosed within my own experience, not only places limits on my possible knowledge, but inflects human relations, leading to a withdrawal of acknowledgment and an unwillingness to respond empathically (Cavell [1979] 1999). As an active form of identification with the other, empathic projection attempts to bridge this intrinsic separation and is conceived as essential to comprehending what is distinctively human.

If I stopped projecting, I would no longer take anything to be human, or rather I would see no radical difference between humans and other things. I am, after all, very selective about this already. Only a small proportion of the things I see, or sense, do I regard as human (or animated, or embodied). Projection already puts a seam in human experience; some things are on one side of the seam, some on the other. (Cavell [1979] 1999: 425)

Cavell goes on to contrast two forms of scepticism: one, about the existence of other minds, involves a recognition that I, myself, am an instance of that which I struggle to know; the other, a scepticism with respect to the existence of an external world, involves a difficulty in imagining what the object of knowledge is, in that it is a thing that lies beyond my subjective experience. This, in turn, implies a duality of perspective in relation to our scepticism about the existence of others, in that we are necessarily both an outsider to someone else, *and* an insider to ourselves. This is the intractable problem of knowing and being known. As the Cavell scholar Richard Moran puts it, ‘as both knowers and things sometimes known, there is the fact that the object of understanding (a person, or a practice) is already an intentional phenomenon, something already constituted by certain forms of description and explanation’ (2011: 252). Of particular relevance to this article is that Cavell applies this scepticism of other minds to the issue of pain: ‘What I feel, when I feel pain, is pain. So I am putting a restriction on what the Outsider can know. He can know something about another’s pain that I cannot know, but not something about mine’ ([1979] 1999: 418).

This raises philosophical issues beyond the remit of this article. What is relevant here, however, is Cavell’s conviction (reciprocated by Fried) that the sceptical problematic lies at the heart of certain works of art. More specifically, he claims that it is fundamental to the

development of Shakespearian tragedy, which, prefiguring Descartes's *Meditations* ([1641] 1955), directly engages with the sceptical problem of how to live in a groundless, non-theistic world – a world without the reassuring belief in God. Cavell argues that his extensive writing on Shakespeare is not merely an application of a preconceived philosophical position to the realm of theatre, because scepticism is itself drawn towards the tragic. As Cavell writes:

If Shakespeare's plays interpret and reinterpret the sceptical problematic – the question whether I know with certainty of the existence of the external world and myself and others in it – it follows that the plays find no stable solution to scepticism, in particular no rest in what we know of God. (2003: 3-4)

For Cavell, Shakespeare therefore makes available to us the recognition of a necessary human condition of separateness, intrinsic to our relation to others, such that the limits of our knowledge of others and their motives, underpins the very notion of tragedy. Again and again, Shakespeare's characters are forced to live out the consequence of their words and actions. Theatre offers not only the possibility of acknowledgment of others and willingness to respond empathically, but also the staging of its avoidance and tragic withdrawal by certain characters within the plays. Commenting upon Cavell's argument, Espen Hammer notes that in this case, not only is the 'other lost but the world itself recedes from the sceptic, or he from it' (2002: 75).

What, however, is the importance of a play's staging, as opposed to merely being read on the page? This brings us back to a vital distinction between Cavell's analysis of the staging of Shakespeare's plays, which explicitly draws upon Fried's wider antitheatrical project (1988),<sup>6</sup> and Fried's more recent claim with regard to the staging of empathic projection in moving

image installations. The notion of ‘performed’ character not only adds a further complexity to the way empathic projection operates in the theatre, but, as we shall see, it is also directly relevant to the film and video art I consider in this article. Unlike the actor, whose presence we might acknowledge at the curtain call, the character s/he plays occupies a fictional realm removed from our reality. Cavell notes that this extraneousness to the closed world of the characters might initially seem to jeopardize any attempt at acknowledgment. Cavell’s response is to insist upon the asymmetry of this relation; while we are excluded from their presence within the performed scenario, we are at the same time given privileged access to the characters’ world and motives (information not necessarily available to the characters themselves). The characters, absorbed within their world, are ‘present’ to us, through a *shared* intimacy afforded the audience despite, and because of our very helplessness in the face of the characters’ suffering. In other words, ‘the conditions of theatre literalize the conditions we exact for existence outside – hiddenness, silence, isolation – hence make that existence plain’ (Cavell 2003: 104). However, in an act of redemption, Shakespearian theatre makes plain this separateness through our communal shared experience as audience members.

As we shall see in the next section, moving image installation, with its employment of film/video projections that engage both the beholder’s movement and the space of the gallery, offers a previously derided ‘theatrical’ mode of engagement, in the sense Fried employs of emphasizing our real space and time experience. This theatricality is now conceived by Fried as affording new absorptive possibilities through its extended temporality, but in a reflexive way. Importantly, if both Cavell and Fried associate the ‘modernist’ laying bare of the conditions of an artwork’s own existence with the development of a medium, the hybrid transmedia video installation potentially offers new means to lay



bare the psychic mechanism of empathic projection through an acknowledgment of its own staging. It is a theatrical mode of engagement that Fried has had to ‘learn to appreciate’ (2011: 64).

### III.

How does this issue of empathic projection bear upon the reception of moving image installations? Fried develops his position primarily in relation to Douglas Gordon’s 2003 installation *Play Dead; Real Time*. This installation comprises two free-standing screens and a floor-placed monitor. On the large rear-projection screens, images are presented of an elephant that continually falls, and then struggles to get up again; by contrast, the footage on the monitor focuses on close-ups of the elephant’s head, and in particular the animal’s seemingly mournful eye. In a reflexive gesture, the staging of the elephant’s ordeal was shot in the very space in which the work was first installed, that is, the Gagosian Gallery in New York. The two large projections approximate the life-sized presence of the animal within the space, a figural presence that reinforces the continuity between the implied filmic space and the space of reception/production. However, the double-sidedness of the screens, and the insistent rotation of the camera encircling the animal, complicates this connection between the filmic images and gallery space; moreover, the extremely low viewpoint of the camera dolly likewise serves to disconnect the floor edge, as it appears in the film footage, from that of the installation space – a distancing enhanced by subsequent reiterations of the installation in various venues where there was even less of a ‘fit’ between the two spaces.

Fried suggests that such a work ‘lays bare – all but forces on one’s attention – the empathic-projective mechanism’ (2011: 198). As already noted, this is entirely consistent with Cavell’s

description of certain modernist works as revealing their own conditions of existence. Here, the elephant is ‘absorbed’ in the considerable exertions necessitated by her role of ‘playing dead’ – exertions that not only make the spectator feel decidedly uncomfortable as ‘Minnie’ rocks backwards and forwards, struggling onto her knees, but engender a powerful (and unexpected) emotional response. This comprises both revulsion and fascination at the cruelty of the act, but also an engrossment with the spectacle and its staging). Fried insists that *Play Dead; Real Time* is not merely an appeal to the viewer’s experience, in the sense of his critique of minimalism in which he claims the experience of the spectator ‘stands in’ for the work, but a laying bare that is ‘structural’ – that reveals the psychic mechanism (rather than the emotions engendered) at play. Not only is the scene clearly staged for the benefit of the beholder, but ‘the viewer is led to intuit the presence in the depicted space of others whom he or she never is shown’ (Fried 2011: 171-172). There must, at the very least, be a trainer, camera operator and crew, all encircling the animal, following the camera dolly in order to remain out of shot.<sup>7</sup> That this ‘staging’ is, without doubt, for our benefit confirms our complicity in the elephant’s ordeal.

Fried observes that, ‘Minnie was aware of her trainer and the others sharing the gallery space with her’, but the nature of this awareness is problematic in that this does not (and cannot) amount to an awareness of being filmed (2011: 173). Indeed, for Fried this very lack of awareness makes Minnie an ideal candidate for that of absorbed ‘protagonist’. While the elephant cannot be said to be ‘acting’ as such, Fried states that she is required to play a role, that is, to ‘play’ dead. Of course, Fried is not implying she has any conception of what it is to play a role. Oblivious to the significance of the camera (with no awareness of what it is to be filmed), she is fully absorbed in the exertions necessitated by the task required of her by her

trainer. At the same time, in Gordon's work we are encouraged to anthropomorphize such an action and feel empathy and revulsion at her treatment.

This returns us to Cavell, and the role of empathic projection in seaming the human from the non-human; moreover, it raises precisely the kind of *mis*-categorization that follows from our attempt to empathically project onto an animal through the kind of explicit anthropomorphism *Play Dead* exploits. The body of Minnie is ever-present as she dutifully obeys her trainer's commands, a struggle reinforced by the insistent focus on that single, apparently mournful eye, framed by the monitor. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein states: 'Only of what behaves like a human being can one say it *has* pains. For one has to say it of a body, or, if you like, of a soul which some body *has*' (Wittgenstein [1953] 2001: §283, 83<sup>e</sup>, original emphasis). Gordon thus might be said to stage a categorical error (between human and animal) that not only reveals the very conditions of the work's existence, but 'makes us palpably, disturbingly aware of our own empathically projective role in the process by which something like pain gets a foothold' (Fried 2011: 199).<sup>8</sup>

#### IV.

Let me contrast Gordon's *Play Dead; Real Time* with a work that I believe likewise elicits empathic projection, but without a compensatory (and hence critical or reflexive) drawing attention to the mechanism/situation at play. *Martyrs* (2014), Bill Viola and Kira Perov's *in situ* video installation in London's St. Paul's Cathedral presents four 'martyrs', three men and one woman undergoing various ordeals. The 'altarpiece' comprises four vertically mounted plasma screens, housed in a cast carbon steel frame designed by the architect Norman Foster. In a typical Viola trope, we are first presented with a static tableau, which gradually starts to

reveal movement. Each scene relates to an element, from left to right: earth, air, fire and water. Primed by the religious context (a key factor of the work's conditions of access), one is unambiguously invited to empathize with the ordeals of the four protagonists, who, in turn, undergo a kind of reversed burial, a suspension, an immolation, and an inverted drowning. Critics have claimed that the work brings to mind not only historic Christian martyrdom, but contemporary images of torture. Yet the images refer to no particular conflict, no single political context; Viola and Perov are drawn to the universal and to universalizing motifs. Utilizing intrinsically enveloping elements (earth, air, fire and water), they encourage empathic concern with the 'human condition', informed by Viola's eclectic mix of Zen Buddhism, Sufism, and the mysticism of Saint John of the Cross.

Laura Cumming, writing in *The Observer*, claims that *Martyrs* 'speaks to the religious art around it' in such a way that it 'does not insist upon a feeling so much as appeal to what is there (or not) within the viewer's imagination through silent images' (2014). Jonathan Jones, writing in *The Guardian*, states:

[Viola's] martyrs do not scream or bleed or even pray. They silently endure their strange fates. The stress is not on numbing details of torture – the man engulfed by fire is not singed. It is on the mystery of human courage that can endure the impossible [...] [by which] Viola gets to the core of what martyrdom means. (2014)

For both critics, *Martyrs* represents a triumphal return to form for Viola. The relatively restrained scale and abstracted imagery jettisons some of the more overtly illustrative aspects of Renaissance-inspired works such as *Emergence* (2002), which explicitly enacts Masolino

da Panicale's fresco, *Pietà* (1424), from the Museo della Collegiata (Empoli).

Acknowledging such earlier criticism, Rachel Spence, writing in the *Financial Times*, states:

By staking his vision on the real, Viola has suffered accusations of grandiosity. But when he shows physical bodies placed under intolerable pressure, he denies us the possibility of responding with the knowing distance of an art lover: we identify on a visceral human level with his protagonists' trauma. Both their suffering and their epiphany is ours. (2014)

Spence's claim is questionable. Indeed, the tableau framing of the scene affords precisely the kind of aesthetic separation demanded by the art lover. However, my interest is in contrasting the Cavellian notion of empathic projection, tied to the sceptical problematic, with the kind of empathic identification discussed here. In all of these accounts, a form of imaginative identification is singled out as being fundamental to the work's affective response. Writing of Viola's wider *oeuvre*, Mark B. N. Hansen has even suggested that the repeated use of slow motion digital imagery, beyond the bounds of normal perception, offers us a 'liberated' encounter with affectivity facilitated by its technological manipulation of time (2004: 260). For Hansen, this stretching of time has the capacity to 'trigger material alterations of human affective states' (Hansen 2004: 158), which amounts to nothing less than an emotional intensification that 'supersaturates the image with ordinarily imperceptible affective content' (2004: 261).

We might contrast the essentially cinematic identification with Viola and Perov's highly aestheticized figures, undergoing their emblematic ordeals, with the kind of problematizing of the beholder-position we observed with Gordon, where empathic projection is (as Fried

suggests) implicitly associated with the sceptical problematic of other minds. Gordon introduces a deliberately dubious ethical dimension, a doubling up where the viewer not only identifies with the animal's pain and suffering, but also with the position of the tormentor who is, like the viewer, a human being.<sup>9</sup>

Compare this complexity to Viola and Perov's work. The term martyr, derived from the Greek word μάρτυς (*mártys*), means to witness, and in its original usage, the martyr stands as a surrogate for our suffering; yet the beholder of Viola's *Martyrs* does not so much bear witness as observe a spectacle offered as a self-enclosed tableau vivant. Not only is our orientation not brought into play, but bathed in its Caravaggesque studio lighting, Viola's dehistoricized aestheticization of martyrdom denies a political reading, or any sense of complicity in the spectatorial position. Although Viola uses a static camera throughout, fixing the viewpoint and viewing distance, empathy is founded upon a distinctly cinematic putting aside of our knowledge that the whole scene is staged; there is no direct acknowledgment of the infrastructure that the films clearly required to stage; the mechanisms for generating earth, wind, fire or water remain resolutely hidden, kept out of shot.<sup>10</sup> The technologies of earth container, wind machine, pyrotechnics, rain machine and hoist are not only concealed, but conceptually form no part of the experienced work: we are not asked to reflect upon them as configurational properties of the films' production. Moreover, we are in no doubt that we are watching professional performers on a specially-engineered set with no relation to the space we occupy as beholders. This is not an ordeal suffered by the artist(s), in the tradition of early performance and conceptual art, such as Stelarc's various suspension pieces in which he is hung from hooks piercing his flesh. Neither is the audience made complicit as they were in Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964), first performed at the Yamaichi Concert Hall, Kyoto, Japan.

Here the audience was disturbingly invited to snip away at Ono's clothing in a potentially aggressive act of revealing the artist's vulnerable body.<sup>11</sup>

Is Viola really showing us bodies placed under intolerable pressure as was clearly evident in both Ono and Stelarc's performances? Here we must briefly return to the notion of performed character. Exactly whose body is placed under duress here? Viola and Perov's concealment of the staging of *Martyrs* – its lack of disclosure, and muted acknowledgment of the beholder – is entirely consistent with the cinematic production values of its high-definition, slow-motion imagery. While Viola may borrow strategies from performance art, it is the *represented* martyrs who undergo duress, not the actors. In order to identify with their ordeal we must temporarily put aside our knowledge of the work's configurational properties. There is thus no acknowledgment of the work's staging, or (crucially here) of the complexities of our empathically projecting role. While the work is undoubtedly designed to make us consider the pain of others, far from revealing an embodied affectivity, as Hansen suggests, we are insulated from any consideration of real pain.

## V.

I have argued elsewhere (Wilder 2012) that, in his account of recent video art, Fried effectively removes Gordon and Anri Sala's work from its historical precedents, particularly a range of experimental/expanded film practices that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, it is disingenuous of Fried to maintain that Gordon, as some 'sort of genius' (2011: 27), works independently of this earlier moving image tradition. I will limit the discussion here to just one example that regardless of Gordon's knowledge, or not, of the work in question, paves the way for his own concerns. My claim here is that not only is technology

crucial to the Cavellian notion of laying bare the mechanisms at play, but that there is a potential allying of psychological processes of projection to such technologically structured mechanisms.

Consider, for example, Paul Sharits's extraordinary 1976 film installation *Epileptic Seizure Comparison*.<sup>12</sup> The work comprises two 16mm film projections, one placed immediately above the other, filling the short wall of an open trapezoid arrangement where the projections are partly mirrored by the two reflective angled walls that abut the image. The content consists of altered educational medical film footage of patients having epileptic convulsions. This is temporally and tonally transformed using an optical printer, and rapidly intercut with blocks of pure colour, producing a stroboscopic pulse accompanied by a soundtrack of the patients' moans and simulations of brain wave frequencies.<sup>13</sup> Sharits describes the experience thus:

Viewers entering the trapezoidal-shaped space with its reflective, aluminum-painted walls, exaggerating the frenetic pulsing of the screen images, become part of the projected image beam. This is enhanced by the stereo sound which creates an inferred 'wall' (closed door) behind them [...] seized as it were. In a convulsive space, becoming one with the two images of paroxysm. (2008: 330)

What distinguishes this piece from his earlier work is that Sharits successfully matches paroxysmal content to his own characteristic flicker form. Should we really be watching this? Not only does our viewing feel invasive, but we are very aware that such optical stimulation might potentially trigger just the kind of seizure we are witnessing. We are made to experience something of the turbulent condition of the epileptic. As Sharits states,



‘everything was done to allow the viewer to move beyond mere voyeurism and actually enter into the convulsive state, to allow a deeper empathy for the condition and to also, hopefully, experience the ecstatic aspect of such paroxysm’ (1989: 436).<sup>14</sup>

While empathy is thus explicitly referred to, this quote needs some unpicking. If we are to take Sharits literally, by becoming immersed in the projected image, we experience something of the convulsive/ecstatic state through an extreme form of empathic identification: one made possible by the technology of the flicker film acting upon our perceptual system. However, the situation the installation presents is more complex in its staging than might initially be gleaned from Sharits’s account. Despite his description of becoming part of the image, the work is not just about the experience – the experience does not simply ‘stand-in’ for the work. It problematizes the spectator position through its staging of the event in a way that illicit the spectator’s disconcerting fascination. Of course, Sharits’s epileptic patients, in the throes of their convulsions, might be seen as prime examples of absorption and (unlike Minnie) oblivious to any external presence. However, the educational footage itself, while genuine, is also ‘staged’, in that the convulsions are deliberately induced by directing flashing lights at the patients, producing paroxysms staged for the attendant camera. By removing the films from their educational context, Sharits compromises our position as viewers, in that we are not medical students learning from the footage how to help those similarly afflicted but beholders of an artwork, fashioned for our aesthetic, or even voyeuristic pleasure.

Sharits thus not only prefigures Gordon’s use of found footage as ‘ontological object’, but also his ambiguous play on culpability. If there is any doubt about this, consider Gordon’s *10 ms-1* (1994), a work that loops not only found footage but also medical footage. In painful

and jerky slow motion, a figure struggles and continually fails to get to his feet. This is supposedly a physically and psychologically damaged World War I casualty, though, significantly, there is a strong possibility that the whole event has also been staged. As Tate Modern's website reveals:

The man's outwardly healthy appearance makes the forces responsible for his collapse ambiguous. He may be suffering from a spinal injury or from shell shock, but it is equally possible that he is an actor involved in a clinical reconstruction for teaching purposes. In another work made around the same time, Gordon used a medical demonstration film in which a case of hysteria was staged, and he has acknowledged an interest in the way that such ambiguous documentation opens up questions about truth, perception and representation. (Tate Modern 2000)

Fried states that with *10 ms-1* the 'empathic projection is in this case at once solicited and challenged by the oddness of the damaged man's behavior and the slow motion jerkiness of the image-flow' (2011: 210). Does this complicate the viewer's empathic response?

Certainly, as Gordon acknowledges, there is a 'sadistic mechanism' at work here – even more so than in *Play Dead; Real Time*. As with Sharits's *Epileptic Seizure Comparison*, we are both fascinated and repelled by the imagery. This effect is enhanced by the technical manipulation of the slowed down and looped fragment, and by the explicitness of the way in which 'consciousness of that "mechanism" is thrust on the viewer' (Fried 2011: 210), bringing both her physical and ethical orientation into play.

## VI.

Earlier, I noted Cavell's claim that empathic projection 'seams' human experience, between on the one side the animated or embodied, and on the other the inanimate. What about processes of projection directed at the inanimate? Certainly, there seems little problem extending Cavell's notion of empathic projection to what Donald Winnicott terms 'transitional objects', the first 'not-me' possession in the development of an 'affectionate type of object-relation' typical of a child's attachment to something like a teddy bear or soft toy ([1951] 1971: 2). The transitional object is transitional in a double sense: in the sense of the inanimate object standing in for the mother in the child's affections, and also externalizing the child's inner fantasies. A transitional object gains meaning through the infant projecting onto it, so that it becomes part of her growing sense of a subjective self. Significantly, Winnicott describes these substitutes for the maternal presence as objects 'that are not part of the infant's body yet are not fully recognized as belonging to external reality' ([1951] 1971: 3).<sup>15</sup> Winnicott reminds us that Cavell's 'seaming' of human experience is integral to the early stages of child development, and makes a persuasive case for 'an intermediate state between a baby's inability and his growing ability to recognize and accept reality', an intermediate state between 'the subjective and that which is objectively perceived' ([1951] 1971: 4). That Cavell's and Winnicott's positions appear to be compatible is borne out when the former states that the origins of scepticism itself can be traced to this separation: 'what philosophy registers as uncertainty in our knowledge of the existence of the world is a function of, say intellectualization of, the child's sense of loss in separating from the mother's body' (Cavell 2003: 13).<sup>16</sup>

Are such early processes of projection extended further into our affective relation with the world as we mature? Consistent with Winnicott's position, Richard Wollheim certainly thinks so. Like Cavell, Wollheim is rare amongst analytic philosophers in the seriousness

with which he engages with object relations psychoanalytic theory, to the extent of founding his theory of expressive perception in painting on a process that he terms ‘complex projection’, i.e., projection ‘onto some natural part of the environment, or something which does not, and is not held to, possess a psychology’ (1991: 58). This is dependent upon correspondence, the mechanism by which Wollheim argues a work (or, indeed, a part of nature) might acquire expressive content. This is a relation between an artefact and an emotion, which the artwork is capable of invoking by virtue of how it looks. Wollheim identifies correspondence as the means by which an internal psychological state is transferred from the viewer to the work of art, a correspondence between a work and an internal condition dependent upon the expressive perception of ‘projective properties’ manifest in the art object. What is distinctive about such projective properties? Wollheim claims that ‘they are properties that we identify through experiences’, that have a ‘special complexity’ (1991: 56). While the experience is perceptual, it is not wholly so, in that it is in part an affective experience ‘directed towards older or more dominant objects’ that intimate a history (Wollheim 1991: 56). This is not a narrow intimation of an individual history, but a pattern that emerges over time. As Michael Podro notes, Wollheim thus founds his conception of expressiveness ‘upon the internal continuity of mental life’, whereby ‘early processes of projection affect our later capacity to form relationships with other people and even the way the inanimate world takes on qualities of mood and feeling’ (2004: 218). These processes, as part of a shared culture, evolve into a recognizable dispositional pattern. Wollheim claims that ‘as the psychology matures, projection becomes more orderly, and those parts of the environment upon which feelings are projected are now selected because of their affinity to those feelings’ (1993: 152).<sup>17</sup>

A number of factors emerge from Wollheim's account that directly impinge upon the staging of empathic projection. With its roots in earlier experiences, expressive perception, thus conceived, is a habitual form of seeing, one permeated or coloured by our affective experiences of the world. Complex projection thus describes 'a way of experiencing the external world' (1987: 82-83). With its origins in infancy, might this not intimately tie together the two strands of scepticism referred to earlier – uncertainty in relation to other minds and the external world? Certainly, as Moran notes, both forms of scepticism 'may begin with a sense of my enclosure within my own experience, separated from the object of knowledge, and the sense that my own position for knowledge here (which is not essentially different from anyone else's) is inherently disappointing, doomed to failure' (2011: 239).

If Cavell's notion of empathic projection as a seaming of the animate/inanimate is a process with its origins in the early separation from the maternal body, then processes of projection that metaphorize something 'without a psychology' are also inevitably tinged by the Cavellian notion of separation. Thus, if I am touched by melancholy on 'looking out over an estuary and the salt-marshes', or looking at John Constable's *Hadleigh Castle* (1829), 'which depicts a landscape with much this character', then 'I respond by judging the scene itself to be melancholy – that is, metaphorically melancholy' (Wollheim 1984: 215). Expressive perception of an artwork does not therefore require someone to be in the immediate throes or aftermath of an act of projection, but merely that the artwork be perceived as 'being of a piece with' an emotional state felt by the projector (Wollheim 1991: 61-62).

While Cavell holds that scepticism of the external world cannot be 'lived' without inducing psychosis ([1979] 1999), it might nonetheless colour our expressive perception of the world. In other words, it colours the kind of correspondences that Wollheim claims are 'grounded in

trains of association', such that 'it is these associations that function as the background against which correspondence is perceived' (1999: 79). These trains of association, with their roots in early childhood, might therefore be said to arise from the very 'problem' of the limits of our knowledge of the world that underlies external-world scepticism.

So, can such processes of complex projection be 'staged' in moving image installations? Is there an equivalent to Gordon's structural staging of empathic projection, but extended to things without a psychology? We might note just how easily the perspectival viewpoint of the moving image can be anthropomorphized. The notion of camera as 'eye' has been exploited throughout cinema's history whereby an identification is made between the position of the spectator and the so-called point-of-view shot. However, film and video can also employ disembodied viewpoints, mediated by the technology, facilitating positions or movements that we could never experience in reality. Indeed, experimental film often constructs a tension between what we see through the mediation of the apparatus and our own intrinsically embodied (and haptic) mode of seeing within the space of the gallery. Technology not only performs a crucial role in structuring this friction, but it also lays bare its underlying tension.<sup>18</sup> I want to conclude by briefly discussing a group of works by Chris Welsby where technology might be thought to play a particular role in revealing the psychological mechanism of projection onto the non-human.<sup>19</sup>

In many of Chris Welsby's individual and collaborative films from the 1970s, nature is conceived as a 'participant', rather than something to be exploited and dominated (2005). Not only are natural rhythms instrumental in organizing a film's time structure,<sup>20</sup> but Welsby exploits the very forces of nature in order to both generate the footage and to reveal the work's configurational properties. While one might register here the conceptual art strategy

of employing rules or instructions to generate the work, the open-ended outcome is dependent upon natural forces outside of the control of the artist. In a number of Welsby's solo films, the filming device is literally weather-driven. This has prompted Laura Mulvey to call Welsby a 'weather artist' rather than a 'landscape artist'.<sup>21</sup> Reflecting upon Mulvey's claim, in a review of the DVD release *Chris Welsby*, Steven Ball enumerates a series of Welsby's works employing weather-driven devices:

for the two-screen *Wind Vane* (1972), each camera's panning movement is controlled by the strength and direction of the wind on Hampstead Heath; the view of the landscape in *Windmill 3* (1973) is determined by a windblown mirrored windmill in front of the lens; and *Seven Days* (1974) uses the course of the sun to orientate the camera position in filming a Welsh landscape over the course of a week. (2006: online)

In *Seven Days* (16mm, colour), a single frame is taken every ten seconds for a week, and various elements draw attention to the camera position: the staccato movements, the shadow of the camera and tripod and the rain lashing directly onto the lens. Mounted on a specialist tracking device called an equatorial stand, the camera rotates around the earth's axis so that the camera is always oriented towards its own shadow or the sun:

the camera flipped back and forth between two positions governed by the sun's visibility; when it was out, the camera turned 180 degrees from the sun (and the frame included the camera's shadow moving across the land), and when the sun was behind clouds, it pointed straight at the sun. (Welsby 2005: n.p.)

At times, when the sun is out for an extended period, or when it rains for most of the day, the time-lapse film slowly progresses through its prescribed arc – mapping the shadow of the camera (and, fleetingly, the artist) as it moves over the earth and running brook, or panning the clouds. At other times, when fast-moving clouds intermittently obscure the sun, there is a rapid flicker between the images, intensified by the switching between sound tracks taken with the microphone pointed downwards or upwards. Welsby thus constructs a tension between the mechanistic and the unpredictable, the prescribed and the indeterminate. In an instructive take on this theme, Peter Wollen writes:

The techniques developed by Welsby made it possible for there to be a direct ('indexical' in the semiotic terminology developed by Pierce) registration of natural phenomena on film. Natural processes were no longer simply recorded from the outside, as objects of observation; they could be made to participate in the scheme of observation itself. (Wollen [1980]) cited in Welsby 2005)

The idea of a radical indeterminacy operating within the structural constraints enacted by the work is played out in terms of the film's production, opening up a space that cannot be completely controlled by the artist. Nature intervenes to determine its own 'representation'. The indexicality of film is explicitly revealed in ways that conventional cinematic film would never countenance, such as the rain directly striking the camera lens, revealing its configurational properties. If the so-called transparency of the medium of film is ordinarily dependent upon a mechanical causality that is typically concealed, then Welsby's work discloses not only the configurational properties operative in the film's production (reflections or shadows of the camera and so forth), but, as Wollen states, aspects of the very indexical registration inherent to the mechanically produced photographic image.



This indexicality might also bear upon how we register the external world, the problem I have raised in relation to external world scepticism. Welsby's films allow us to experience insentient nature not in the distanced way of the landscape painter, the kind of expression that Wollheim describes above, but in a way that reveals processes of projection at play. Necessarily immersed in nature through its extended and exhausting filming process, a work such as *Seven Days* allies a conceptual art-influenced concern with process and structure to the rhythmical vagaries of the weather, revealing the way nature (and the artist's presence) registers on the film apparatus. There is a distinctive hapticity, redolent of early processes of projection, in the way nature pushes up against the camera lens, intercut with fleeting images of the artist's hands, and even his (or perhaps his assistant's) hair.<sup>22</sup> At certain points in the film, foreground and background merge into an undifferentiated viewing experience, only for a more distanced viewing to assert itself (something replicated by films such as *Windmill 3*). This is all entirely determined by the natural forces at play on the device, an indexical marking of space and time, where the structuring mechanism (technological *and* psychological) is openly revealed throughout. I would like to suggest that there is a direct correspondence between *Seven Days* and Gordon's staging of empathic projection, in that while the mechanism of projection that seams human experience is made explicit (whether consciously, or not), the works also evoke deep-rooted trains of associations on which early processes of projection are founded.<sup>23</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Within such a tradition, one might usefully distinguish Peter Gidal's theory of apparatus, for instance, from the more narrative-driven and psychological work of a film-maker like Michael Snow.

<sup>2</sup> For a response to Fried's position, see my article 'Michael Fried and Beholding Video Art' (2012). Like Fried, I here use the richer and more active term beholder, common to discussions of painting, to the more passive spectator or viewer.

<sup>3</sup> Fried first develops this notion of an empathic projection mechanism in relation to 'minimally demonstrative' works by Caravaggio (2010).

<sup>4</sup> For a longer exposition of the configurational encounter, and my differences with Fried's position, see Wilder (2012).

<sup>5</sup> This is an issue Cavell explores at length in the notoriously difficult 'Skepticism and the Problem of Others', part four of his seminal work *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* ([1979] 1999: 327-496).

<sup>6</sup> Fried's antitheatrical project draws upon the French seventeenth-century philosopher and critic Denis Diderot (1988). Diderot condemns actors who play to the audience, or whose exaggerated gestures and familiar acting traits transgress the fourth wall, a term invented by Diderot himself.

<sup>7</sup> Fried notes that the 'artist remained outside, monitoring the scene as a whole' (2011: 172). While it might be claimed that any such performance to camera of animal and humans requires such a presence, the scene is filmed in the space we occupy and so foregrounds this fact, confirming it as a spectacle of dubious ethics.

<sup>8</sup> Fried also refers here to Gordon's earlier *B-Movie* (1995), a small video of a struggling fly lying on its back.

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Catherine Elwes for forcing me to clarify this point.

<sup>10</sup> For an account of shooting Viola's works, see producer Genevieve Anderson's 2015 notes 'The Paradox of Perfection: Technology, Vision, and the Work of Bill Viola', *artcore journal*, 2. Available online: <http://artcorejournal.net/2015/01/14/the-paradox-of-perfection-technology-vision-and-the-work-of-bill-viola-by-genevieve-anderson/>. Accessed 2 June 2016. For a behind-the-scenes look at the making of *Martyrs*, revealing some of the complexities of the set, see TateShots, 21 August 2014. Available online: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYay\\_DDL3eA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kYay_DDL3eA). Accessed 15 December 2015.

<sup>11</sup> While this was originally a live performance, the work is now better known through its documentation.

<sup>12</sup> In the same year of 1976, Sharits made a 34 minute single-screen 16mm film version of the piece, which is also entitled *Epileptic Seizure Comparison*.

<sup>13</sup> The original film footage of volunteers undergoing seizures was taken from a 1963, 25 minute, 16mm colour film entitled *Epileptic Seizure Patterns*, made in the Indiana University Audio-Visual Centre (IUAVC), initiated by Dr. Philip T. White, of the Indiana University School of Medicine, Department of Neurology. The press release is available at: <https://collections.libraries.indiana.edu/IULMIA/files/original/54da6f785a99f002eb82714418b7dc4c.pdf>. Accessed 20 May 2016.

<sup>14</sup> According to Yann Beauvais, the possibility of epilepsy was something Sharits dreaded (2008: 28).

<sup>15</sup> Normal so-called ‘object-usage’ is dependent upon the child’s growing realisation of the object’s otherness.

<sup>16</sup> That Winnicott and Cavell’s positions are compatible has been noted by, among others, Janet Adelman in *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays Hamlet to The Tempest* (1992). Cavell was certainly familiar with Winnicott’s objects-relation approach to psychoanalysis, and he reviewed Adam Phillips’s book on Winnicott, entitled *Terrors and Experts* for the *London Review of Books* (Cavell 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Unlike Wollheim, it is not my intention here to insist that such processes of projection are the *only* means by which a work of art might gain expressive content. For the most penetrating critique of Wollheim’s position that addresses this point, see Malcolm Budd (2001), ‘Wollheim on Correspondence’, in Robert van Gerwen (ed.), *Richard Wollheim on the Art of Painting: Art as Representation and Expression*.

<sup>18</sup> One might think of VALIE EXPORT’s *Adjunct Dislocations* (1973), or Michael Snow’s 360° rotating mechanism used for his 1971 film *La Région Centrale*.

<sup>19</sup> This is not to claim that such an intention was explicitly part of Welsby’s original project. My own work, *Pondskater* (2015), makes this connection more explicit. It comprises a steel structure in a configuration of three 1:3 ratio rear-projection screens, set at 120° angles to each other. The video footage is a 360° panorama of an unexceptional but beautiful pond in Lithuania, filmed using an improvised floating device with three waterproof cameras fixed at water level. Launched like a child’s toy, the length and direction of the takes are entirely dependent on the device’s own propulsion, powered by an impromptu sail.

<sup>20</sup> William Raban and Welsby's *River Yar* (1972), for instance, is a two-screen 16mm film, shot from a single fixed viewpoint through an upstairs window in a water mill in Yarmouth, Isle of Wight. The resulting time-lapse film of the tidal estuary utilizes single frames, shot one every minute over the course three weeks. The tidal movements allude to the passage of the moon and the films were made in the twenty-one days preceding the Spring Equinox, and the twenty-one days following the Autumn Equinox (Welsby 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Mulvey's comment appears in the DVD sleeve notes to the British Film Institute's DVD release, *Chris Welsby* (2005), n.p.

<sup>22</sup> Welsby's assistant was the film-maker Jenny Okun.

<sup>23</sup> An early version of this article constituted the introduction to the 'Projection/Expulsion' symposium and exhibition at Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London, in March 2015. I co-organized this event with Aura Satz. I am grateful for the comments by two anonymous reviewers and, as noted earlier, Catherine Elwes.