Enduring Death: Hauntings of Literature and Art


The subtitle of Robert Rowland Smith’s *Death-Drive* announces a ghostly Freudian haunting of literature and art. This visitation by Freud, coming without full authoritative presence, drives Smith to posit a compelling and creative—albeit strange and spectral—reading of aesthetics and its relations to death and the deathly. But Freud is not the only ghostly presence in this book, absent presences abound: death and the death-drive itself, as the text’s central themes, refuse to appear as such; the aesthetic moment both arrives and withdraws as the argument circles its thesis; psychoanalysis, subjectivity, pleasure, philosophy and politics shimmer in and out of focus, and Jacques Derrida, in whose memory the book is dedicated, provides more than a hint of his own spectrality. While this abundance of indistinct figures risks overflowing to produce an opacity and a density that threatens the task of this book reviewer—it also, perhaps, gestures appropriately towards the form and the content of Smith’s argument in *Death-Drive.*

Despite this clamour of indistinct ghosts, Smith skilfully manages to produce a rich, rigorous and inquiring introduction to the death-drive in Freud—one that would be useful both for those unfamiliar with Freud’s work and for seasoned readers of psychoanalytic theory. This is a densely theorized text and, as such, it would be impossible to do justice in the space of a review to all the complexities and subtleties of Smith’s arguments. I will thus limit myself to providing a broad overview of the characteristics of the death-drive that pertain to the originality of Smith’s foray into this subject matter before speaking directly to this thesis as it pertains to the aesthetic.

According to Smith, the death-drive retains a critical imperative in contemporary philosophies of death, but despite the term entering common parlance—or perhaps because of this—it’s edge has blunted. Smith sharpens up the edginess of the death-drive in a series of chapters that question and recall the strange logic of a drive to death in order to provoke an incisive interruption and revision of this logic. One central question asked is: why is a drive to death necessary at all? In Freudian psychoanalysis the human psyche’s fundamental logic consists of wish fulfilment, that is, the pursuit of pleasure. Why then, Smith asks, would Freud propose a drive towards death? Is death not unpleasurable? With his essay ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, Freud appears to be breaking his own rule. Yet these terms, it turns out, are not so secure. Pleasure is defined by Freud as a lessening of tension, as an absence of unpleasure, that is, as a quenching relief that ‘begins to look like death’ (p.4). Both securing and undoing the position of pleasure as the principle of life, Freud ultimately sets the sights of this pleasurable death-drive on a withheld trace of an earlier state that had yet to come alive, a minimal state of the inanimate that precedes all life and to which it seeks to return. What Freud’s ‘beyond’ of the pleasure principle effects then is a tautology where ‘life, that is pleasure, seeks death, that is pleasure, that is life’ (p.69). This total levelling of terms is held at bay, for Smith, only via the recursive production and separation of the id, ego, and superego, perceived as united in the figure of the subject and that allows for *mythos,* drama and rhetoric that narrate pleasure and death as polarized.

I will return in a moment to the importance Smith attributes to this dramatics of the death-drive but first, in order to continue to locate the terms of his thesis, I will address the status of death ‘itself’ as Smith defines it. In Chapter 2 the status of death is considered in relation to thought, rationality and the Enlightenment via Adorno and Pocock; but in general the book suggests that death as death, is a *necessity* that must come inevitably to end life, and such necessity, according to Smith, paralyses
thought, rendering death unthinkable. The fact that we can have no conceptual access to the experience of this radical alterity does not, however, render death as the reverse of life for Smith: death is in life both insofar as it must end life (the two sides of one coin metaphor), or it is in life the guise perhaps of a perpetual mourning that confuses life and death in a more Derridean sense. Death is always both absent and present. In Chapter 1, Smith turns to the philosophical basics of death through the figures of Pascal and Heidegger to argue, following Heidegger, that death is more imaginary than real, and, as such, once again finds itself in the space of rhetoric or the artistic. This death then is barely there, a death without presence bears the remnant of a force that one could equate to a certain driven-ness. It is barely there both in the Freudian sense of a death kept in reserve, never appearing as symptom but referring in its pleasurable repetition to the absent state of inertia to which life is driven to return; and in a more Derridean sense pursued by Smith in Chapters 4 and 5, where death drives life via its spectral presence as infinite deferral. It is in the play between these two ghostly deaths that haunts this text that I would locate Smith’s drive to consider the life and the death of aesthetic artworks themselves.

For Derrida and for Smith, Freud’s levelling of terms results in a death-drive devoid of destruction. According to Freud, the ego cannot wish for its own death, it can wish only for pleasure, and therefore all seeming self-destructive tendencies such as suicide must be accounted for. As Smith argues in Chapter 3 via an analysis of Durkheim and Foucault, Freud accounts for suicide as a misdirected sadism, where the super-ego as the representative of the social, destroys a self that has taken on a unpleasurable character. Suicide is then in fact murder: social pressures cause sadistic pleasures that would properly orientate the destructiveness of death outwards to the world, to be directed inwards towards the social representation of the self taken on by the super-ego. The ego itself must always seek to fill up its wishes (for this is its defining characteristic) and then redeem this pleasure through its own quieting to seek its own path towards death. Freud’s death-drive conserves still the psyche’s own minimal death as inertia.

In order to position his aesthetic death-drive Smith undertakes in Chapter 4 a reading and a revision of Derrida’s own reframing of Freud’s speculations. Derrida’s ‘archivialithic death drive’ explored in Archive Fever institutes a destructiveness to Freud’s theory by configuring the death-drive as ‘evil for evil’s sake’ (mal pour mal). For Derrida, death, in remaining radically other, introduces a force without force – a death-drive – which operates in silence, leaving no traces of its own, only ‘lovely impressions’ as an ‘erotic simulacrum’ – a death that is in fact ‘life’. In being also ‘cruelty for cruelty’s sake’, this death-drive, Smith explains, remains without the need of justification, justice or principle – it is without alibi. Thus it is ‘essential’ for it cannot be justified away or placed in any higher category (p.99). As Smith elaborates, the English term ‘sake’ signals both self-protection, of one’s own immortality (and which as such cannot be presented), and a justification in public for my sake: ‘its authenticity harbours in this inexpressible living singularity forced to defend itself by an exposure that ruins – by definition – that sakeful innerness’ (p.101). Death is reconfigured here then as productive of a drive that institutes error for no reason, for its own sake, that frees the death-drive from its psychic bonds and institutes a deviation not from the right path (as in Freud) but from pathness itself, from the teleology of a return to death – allowing, Smith affirms, all other paths to be laid. In destroying all necessities for the sake of its own necessity (which can never be rendered present as such), death’s drive destroys all structures, principles, categories, and clears a path for the absolutely unexpected event.

In following Derrida’s aporetic path Smith offers a version of the death drive as a ‘self destroying thing without a cause that leaves both “lovely impressions” and, in its form as irreducible cruelty, also animates beings psyches and souls’ (p.101), that is, providing both the living being and the ‘dead’ artistic object. It is when Smith shifts this argument to pursue his increasingly urgent concern for the aesthetic, for a certain ‘art for art’s sake’, that he begins to forge a path of his own. For Smith suggests that the self-positing of the artwork itself might present the singularity of an absolute event. He provides the example of Mark Rothko’s painting White over Red to reflect the status of this aesthetic moment, a moment in which the artwork destroys itself in its generality, its category, classification and genealogy, as it appears as a ‘unique error’. Here, pleasure is protected for its own sake, and thus does not reside in any given psyche as Freud would have it: in order to appear the painting must break with everything not itself. Any relation to the world of classification, of schools, names and histories the artwork partakes of would be a relation from within, relating to all that is excluded in an inclusive-exclusion that neither retains nor incor-
The status that Smith is conferring on the aesthetic moment is particularly difficult to fathom in this chapter, which, for me, rushes too quickly through its dismissal of Derrida’s originary self-destructive trace. A deferred clarification arrives, however, when we come to the Postscript, where the aesthetic is defined as requiring the formal, discreet, bounded or framed to affirm its specificity. This aesthetic singularity abides with a stillness and intactness that looks like death: ‘once made’ Smith affirms, ‘the artwork cannot change and grow even though its looks like death: ‘once made’ Smith affirms, ‘the artwork cannot change and grow even though its meaning will undergo endless manipulation by and adaptation to the needs of successive interpreters’ (pp.200–201). Smith is thus conserving the originary moment of aesthetic appearance for ‘[i]f beauty sails under the star of the death-drive, the light of the latter is made up of two near-indistinguishable elements: (1) the error of contingency, the destruction of all genera; (2) beauty’s ‘moment’ of exclusion or annihilation that cuts of everything else for its own sake. Neither amounts to an archiviolithic death-drive in the Derridean sense’ (p.104).

While for Derrida the ‘light’ of the death-drive is a ‘dark light’ that infects all with an absence that defers full presence (death itself) and difference renders all artwork as dramatic phenomenal form, Smith appears to make a special case for the presentation of aesthetic timelessness. In Chapters 5 and 6, however, Smith goes on to affirm and employ this Derridean strategy of differential dramatics to indicate how artworks not only abide in their singularity but are also disseminated via the technical repetitions of narrative, suggestion, transference, rhetorics and ideology; he employs examples, or instances, from Shakespeare (Macbeth and Hamlet), fiction (Ian McEwen’s Enduring Love) and art (John Minihan and Katharina Fritsch), to usefully elucidate his arguments.

Smith, is, therefore, presenting us with an aesthetic death-drive that comes in two guises: firstly, a deathliness of art that conserves a minimal inert and formal element persisting through time. This is a death that speaks to Freud’s conservation of a pleasurable deathliness preceding all life – though here removed from its theodological basis in the human psyche to become ‘art for art’s sake’ as a ‘striving-in-sameness’ (p.202). And secondly, a deathliness that subsequently throws the artwork open to interpretation, suggestion and ideology, politically, rhetorically and pleausurably, by repeating, as Smith argues in Chapter 5, the constitutive absence of its deathly referent. This is an absence that renders formal boundaries insecure and thus opens them to the possibility of both creativity and destruction at all levels (Chapter 6).

Smith appears to argue that the aesthetic and the death-drive occupy the same position and status: they are both there without being there, both are without any transcendental or essential presence, and both are given the capacity to ‘think’ not in the sense of rational thought, but through an observant and respectful relation to death itself. Both then are deathly in their ability to still the viewer and the psyche, lessening their tension, and ‘lively’ in that this is experienced as pleasure; deathly in their technical reproducibility that destroys them, and lively in the creativity this must also permit. Smith’s thesis can be seen as an attempt to employ the Freudian death-drive as a means to secure a value for the aesthetic in the pleasures of inertia and deathly quietude, and the Derridean death-drive to also account for the real destructiveness and creativity that such aesthetics can produce ideologically, psychoanalytically and rhetorically.

Yet, because this logic necessitates that everything that is not death (death itself being a pure remainderless destruction) is nothing but rhetorical and fictive, then Smith’s argument itself is rendered rhetorical. He undertakes to persuade the reader of the privileged status of the artwork as – or functioning alongside – the death-drive. The suggestion of an immutability and immunity of the aesthetic in its ‘abiding formal moment’, timelessly declaring ‘this is it’ (p.200), does not always move or persuade me. However, I did redeem some pleasure in the play of Smith’s rhetorical, artistic forms; and though this pleasure is often infected by a certain obscurity of language and argument rendering the logic of his thought difficult, perhaps Smith’s point is that the immutability of the aesthetic cannot be thought in these rational terms remaining only in the experience of a deathly silencing that continues to destroy as it creates. Yet, the argument that the aesthetic is privileged in its production of an abiding singularity that effects a death-drive remains, for this reader, unpersuasive: being but one ‘fiction’ among many, I continue to find my own path to death.

Notes

The Personal is the Art Historical


More than any other of his six monographs, Michael Fried’s most recent book Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before is of particular personal significance to its author. One need only turn to the book’s index where the uncommonly long list of entries under the author’s own name suggests a high degree of self-scrutiny. In fact, aside from the two contemporary photographers Jeff Wall and Andreas Gursky, the single largest entry in the book’s index is ‘Fried, Michael’. If Why Photography Matters sometimes reads like a self-generated festschrift, this is because it purports to reconcile the two poles of the author’s career as a published writer. The modernist art critic from the 1960s, remembered in particular for his high-minded denunciation of minimalism (or ‘literalism’ as he continues to refer to it), is for the first time reconciled in Why Photography Matters with the art historian researching eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painting. Indeed, this particular reconciliation has been a long time coming, since echoes of Fried’s negative evaluation of the ‘theatricality’ of minimalism in his essay ‘Art and Objecthood’ (1967) have appeared throughout his art historical studies, with Absorption and Theatricality as the landmark volume. Together with his books on Manet, Courbet and Caravaggio, Absorption and Theatricality seems to have been driven by the need to find an external art historical source for this early art critical opposition to minimalism. Thus having elaborated his own antitheatrical account of the history of European painting from the eighteenth century until the birth of modernism in the mid-nineteenth century, Why Photography Matters claims to close the loop with a comparable antitheatricality in contemporary large-scale photography.

The central argument of the book rests on three interlinked issues. First, the subject is determined by the shift to large-scale, wall-oriented, high quality art photography that, for Fried, inherits the ‘entire problematic of beholding’, of ‘theatricality and antitheatricality’ (p.2). Second, this new pictorial art form, Fried goes on to assert, decisively answers the evaluative opposition between high modernism and minimalism that Fried made in his most famous essay of art criticism ‘Art and Objecthood’. Third, the ‘tableau form’ of photography – a term coined by the French critic and curator Jean-François Chevrier – for the first time since the emergence of postmodernism, offers an aesthetic equivalent to what Fried saw in the late modernist painting of Morris Louis, Jules Olitski and Frank Stella in the 1960s. This is not an unbroken line of continuity, but one that is mediated by the impact of minimalism’s new positioning of the beholder; so that viewers experience the ‘tableau form’ of photography, like minimalist sculpture, as an object in relation to their own body. But this literal ‘presence’ before the work of art is suspended and becomes akin to Fried’s idea of ‘presentness’ because of photography’s reflexivity. Even more than late modernist painting, Fried asserts, photography is a particularly reflexive medium.

In order to be persuaded by the overall argument of the book, the reader must see the break brought about by minimalist sculpture as decisive. We must overlook, as Fried does, the incursion of photography into space of painting seen in Pop art practices of the 1950s and 1960s, and the complex uses of photography by conceptual and performance artists around the same time. The former is the more typical landmark in the history of photography’s ‘white cube’ status when its new large-scale wall-oriented gallery presence becomes aligned with painting. In this historical narrative, photography is significant because it allowed the work of art to assert its connection to the social world, both in terms of the naïve realist invocation of depictions of everyday life as well as in relation to its status as part of the dominant visual regimes of modernity. Moreover, photography’s place within conceptual and performance art is one of the most important ways in which its complex
reflexivity has typically been explored. An issue that complicates Fried’s discussion of reflexivity, but such practices are unimportant to him, and as such require no mention much less any critical engagement. Thus does the author embrace his 1960s roots in art criticism. He frequently refers to photographs that do not ‘work’ and instead of analytic argument, he returns us to a language of aesthetic value – of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ art – that is less familiar to those of us schooled in contemporary notions of ‘criticality’.

While the idea of criticality in contemporary art is rooted in a particular reception of Frankfurt School writers of the interwar period, this now commonplace view entered more general art critical discourse largely as a result of postmodern debates in the 1980s. In the UK this intellectual shift was principally indebted to post-68 political formations that lent an avant-gardist impulse to the transformations that first took place in film theory as it intersected with feminism, semiotics and psychoanalysis. The effects were felt more readily in the ‘new art history’ and in a theoretical turn on the part of artists, such as Mary Kelly, Victor Burgin, Douglas Crimp and Art & Language, and less so with regard to the figure of the art critic. (Except to the extent that artists themselves began to occupy the ground of ‘criticism’.) In the United States this intellectual history is slightly different, and came about somewhat later. The late 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of a new art critical avant-garde associated in particular with the journal October and writers such as Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss and Craig Owens. This new ‘postmodernist’ art critic took a stand in political opposition to the previous generation’s investment in formal aesthetic values over and against consideration of social questions. In this New York milieu Fried’s own prominence, as a protégé of the foundationally influential art critic Clement Greenberg was also decisive and he became something of a ‘false noiretor’ for this group. This makes Fried’s return to a pointedly evaluative language as an answer to postmodernism all the more intriguing. But, much to my disappointment, he largely refrains from any direct critical engagement with issues raised by postmodern art criticism. Instead, Why Photography Matters relies on the force of his stand-alone analyses over and against a more discursive interrogative mode.

One of the central concerns in Why Photography Matters is the position of the beholder in relation to the ‘tableau form’ of photography. Despite feminism’s vigorous critique of the gender-neutral viewer in the context of cinema, photography and art viewing, Fried boldly asserts the idea of the universal beholder. He even begins the book with three photographers whose work evokes cinema viewing, Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall and Hiroshi Sugimoto. In the context of these cinematically themed works, Fried introduces one of the central concepts of the book, ‘to-be-seenness’. Can it really be the case that he is unaware of Laura Mulvey’s idea of ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ that is so clearly echoed in his own phrasing? This phrase is repeated like an incantation throughout Mulvey’s landmark article, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1975), a widely cited essay that is known in particular for its theorization of gendered spectating. Indeed, Fried cites her essay on Sherman, and has demonstrated some awareness of feminist scholarship in his earlier books. Moreover, Mulvey’s argument rests on a Freudian analysis of cinema viewing as a gendered form of voyeurism, and voyeurism also figures largely in Fried’s own notion of ‘to-be-seenness’. His unexplained appeal to a universal viewer thus begins to read like an anachronistic throwback to a pre-feminist era. And if it is not that, what does he think of Mulvey’s argument? Where would he situate himself in relation to it?

Since Fried’s larger art historical argument about contemporary photography is grounded in the history of painting, it is not surprising that he more frequently uses comparisons with painting rather than photography. This accounts for the privileging of Jeff Wall, whose work so clearly refers to painting (and Wall appears in five of the ten chapters in the book). But Fried comes a little unstuck when another kind of history of photography is directly referenced. For example, in Thomas Ruff’s early portraits, where he applied the ‘objective’ approach (and Wall appears in five of the ten chapters in the book). But Fried comes a little unstuck when another kind of history of photography is directly referenced. For example, in Thomas Ruff’s early portraits, where he applied the ‘objective’ approach of the Bernd and Hilla Becher to human subjects, the invocation of the visual conventions of criminological and ethnographic photography seem unavoidable. These unexpressive faces in head and shoulder view most immediately resemble the compositional simplicity of passport photographs, and the large-scale high-resolution print gives an excess of detail that suggests the camera’s role in the evolution of the human sciences. Fried overlooks this in favour of an extended comparison with Edouard Manet’s portraiture and his own argument about ‘faceness’ (pp.150–52), a reading that seems especially laboured when applied to Ruff. Fried is not, however, entirely unaware of a certain history of photography; what is more, he offers sometimes dazzling visual analyses of individual images. For example, his discussion of Jeff Wall’s Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona (1999), Thomas Struth’s

Furthermore, his account of certain photographers, most notably Jeff Wall and Thomas Struth, provides a fascinating insight into each of their working methods. But Fried’s history of photography is a very limited one. His approach is much like the erstwhile director of the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, John Szarkowski. Szarkowski, together with his successor Peter Galassi, was vigorously criticized in the 1980s for resurrecting the formalist values of high modernist criticism and retrospectively applying them to the history of photography. This meant denying photography’s intracations within the most heterogeneous of discursive fields; its use in the modern production of institutions as varied as the family and the criminal justice system, as well as its function within the military industrial complex, the late capitalist market place, the scientific community, etcetera. So that even when photography is located squarely within the art world, more than any other artistic medium, it is able to question its autonomy as a work of art and retain connections to multiple discursive sites. As writers on photography such as Roland Barthes, Victor Burgin, Douglas Crimp, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Susan Sontag and John Tagg have insisted, photography is a particularly social art form.

It would serve us well to be reminded in this regard of Douglas Crimp’s incisive critique of photography’s belated framing in high modernist terms by the Museum of Modern Art back in 1981. ‘When modernism [read: Greenbergian high modernism] was a fully operative paradigm of artistic practice, photography was necessarily seen as too contingent – too constrained by the world that was photographed, too dependent upon the discursive structures in which it was embedded – to achieve the self-reflexive, entirely conventionalized form of modernist art.’ Photography’s latter-day ‘persion of modernism’, Crimp goes on to point out, ‘can happen only because modernism has indeed become dysfunctional’. Crimp is responding to the swift institutional assimilation of photography that paved the way for the art historical shift in the status of the medium – the very turning point that is addressed by Fried in this volume. But this is only part of the story. The significance of photography in the evolution of critical postmodernism also plays its role, and Crimp is directly implicated in this. While Fried seems to pick up where Szarkowski left off (with a good deal more philosophical baggage), he does not quite answer his earlier detractors, which leaves rather too much left to account for in this larger historical picture.

Fried’s art historical argument does not evolve through much direct engagement with art historical writing, except for his own published work (and those who cite his ideas). Instead, he offers visual analyses of a series of photographic examples together with the use of various philosophical texts including writing by Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Hegel. In relation to individual readings of images he cites art historians and critics, such as Hans Belting, Peter Galassi and Susan Sontag, but this is only in order to confirm his own particular readings rather than activate a larger art historical argument. While the individual analyses of photographs are engaging and convincing up to a point, this reader was never persuaded of their broader historical and evaluative significance. The particular examples did not manage to coalesce to a sufficient degree, leaving the ‘big question’ posed in the book’s title inadequately addressed. We learn ‘why photography matters as art as never before’, but only to Michael Fried. Thus, as a contribution to art historical knowledge about contemporary photography, Fried’s account remains too unreflectively personal.

Notes


2. For a recent exploration of this, see the excellent volume by Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen, Photography after Conceptual Art (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).


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The College of Staten Island,
The City University of New York
DOI: 10.1080/15334645.2011.605587

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