CHAPTER 5

Shirin: Absorption and Spectatorship

Shirin's title sequence consists of a shot of an illustrated version of the twelfth-century romantic epic poem *Khosrow and Shirin* by Nezami Ganjavi, the images dissolving in and out before us for nearly ninety seconds. The text on screen remains unchanged except for the larger words in the top centre, which credit the director and screenwriter, present the film's title, and inform us that the work is inspired by Nezami, based on the short story adaptation of it by Farideh Golbou. After the last dissolve we see the face of a woman sitting in a cinema, her features apparently lit by the screen before her – a screen we naturally cannot see – and on which her gaze appears to be trained. She glances off to her left as if to acknowledge someone sitting nearby, pops a snack in her mouth, chews, glances off again, then casts her eyes back on the screen. Behind her there is another woman watching the film, as well as an empty seat. This lasts for just over thirty seconds, before we are presented with another woman. She too is eating, chewing languidly with her mouth partly open, looking a little bored or perhaps aloof; she scratches her forehead; at one stage, she glances down at something. She gets about thirty seconds before we see another face, this time of a woman adjusting her headscarf. As she does so, the music (which started during the title sequence) quickly fades and is replaced by sound effects: water dripping; someone opening a door, and walking slowly in an echoing room. She settles back to watch, her head leaning to rest on her seat, cocked slightly to her right.

The movie continues in this fashion for the rest of its ninety-two-minute running time. We are shown face after face for varying periods; we hear the narrative develop through on-screen dialogue; we watch as the women respond to the screen and/or become distracted from it. Piecing together the story of the film they are watching from this is difficult, especially because there is no dialogue for large swathes of it, but it centres on a love triangle between the Sassanian king Khosrow Parviz, Shirin, an Armenian princess, and Farhad, a sculptor. Khosrow forces Farhad into exile, where he sends him false news that Shirin has died; Khosrow and Shirin marry, but Khosrow is murdered by enemies in his sleep. All of the 114 women are noteworthy

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actresses; all except for one – Juliette Binoche, whom we see on two occasions – are Iranian. Men only appear in the dark background. I recognised two of them: one of them is Homayoun Ershadi, who plays the protagonist in *Taste of Cherry*; another is Jafar Panahi.

As Sara Saljoughi shows, part of the fascination of *Shirin* consists in the web of references it weaves: it is a work of cinema based on a short story adapted from a poem; through its use of 114 actresses, it references the many hundreds of films in which they have appeared. Further, the film raises the issue of medium in a complex fashion: as a work of cinema based on two works of literature, it asks us to reflect on their unique capacities, and underscores the fact that "the history of Iranian cinema is deeply implicated with literature and poetry";[1] portraiture turns up too, as Shirin first learns of Khosrow after seeing a portrait of him, and vice versa; plus of course the film references sculpture through the character of Farhad. This is not to say that *Shirin* simply revels in a post-medium condition, however. The film is interested above all in cinema, and develops that interest in one of the most literal ways imaginable. As Kiarostami said in an interview: "I believe if you let go of the story, you will come across a new thing, which is the Cinema itself."[2] The invocations of other media could thus be taken not as some hyperbolic statement about the impossibility of distinguishing between media but as an attempt on Kiarostami's part to isolate cinematic elements through repeated acts of differentiation. As I want to argue, the elements he isolates are absorption and spectatorship, which the film inflects in politically provocative and philosophically sophisticated ways.

If this is right, then *Shirin* might be read in terms of Fried's account – developed in the opening chapter of *Why Photography Matters* – of photographic works dealing with cinema, cinemas, and movie audiences: Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Movie Theaters*, a remarkable series of photographs of films screening in empty cinemas; Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, in which the artist placed herself as a protagonist in a series of fake 'stills' from imaginary films; and Jeff Wall's 1979 *Movie Audience*, a set of seven lightbox portraits of people apparently absorbed in a movie. For Fried, what unites these photographers is a concern with the problematic of beholding, absorption, and theatricality as it comes to a head in the relation between the media of photography and cinema. But if Fried is right that Sugimoto, Sherman, and Wall respond "to the problematic status of movies . . . by making photographs which, although mobilizing one or another convention of movies (or the thought of movies), also provide a certain essentially photographic distance from the filmic experience . . ."[3] then Kiarostami's own response does not provide that distance. *Shirin* reflects on the problematic status of cinematic absorption *with*

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cinematic means, and it is hard to imagine a more absorbing treatment of it. For one thing the film discovers – or rediscovers – is that the human face and its expressiveness while absorbed is perhaps the very paradigm of an absorbing object. Yet at the same time, it does not allow us to be 'innocently' absorbed, insofar as the film also provokes a confrontation with cinematic spectatorship: we are absorbed in a cinematic image of people absorbed in a cinematic image; but through that, we are brought to consider their and our absorption.

Proceeding via a series of critical accounts of individual photographs, as well as extended engagements with Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Barthes, and Hegel, Fried's photography book makes a case for the claim that certain contemporary art photographers have inherited the problematic of absorption and theatricality discussed in the last chapter, which developed out of eighteenth-century French painting and became foundational for modernism. His broad explanation for this inheritance is deceptively simple: when new technologies made it possible for photographers to produce large-scale works in the late 1970s, "issues concerning the relationship between the photograph and the viewer standing before it became crucial for photography as they had never previously been".[4] As photographs began to be made for the gallery wall, in other words, photographers had to face (and face down) theatricality, because they were forced to consider the rhetorical modes in which their pictures addressed their beholders. Hence Fried's deployment of the category of 'to-be-seen-ness', which – like the category of 'facingness' he deploys throughout *Manet's Modernism* – is a specific mode in which a photograph can acknowledge theatricality. Further, however, the theatricality inherent in the very act of exhibiting artworks in gallery spaces was compounded by other problems specific to the medium of photography, taken up in different ways by the artists Fried turns to: the notion of artistic intention, crucial to the modernist paintings and sculptures Fried supported in his sixties criticism, is pressured by the apparent automatism of photographic apparatuses, a problem countered in the work of Thomas Demand, whose meticulously constructed paper and cardboard scenes "[throw] into conceptual relief the determining force . . . of the intentions behind them";[5] the standing of photographic indexicality – as we saw in the last chapter, perhaps a condition for *punctum*'s defeat of theatre – is problematised in the case of digital works, as is clear in the images of Andreas Gursky, many of which "are intrinsically not, at least not in their entirety, the record of anything that could have been seen in the real world by a human observer or indeed a mechanical recording instrument";[6] problems of naturalness, artifice, authenticity, and posing come to a head in photographs of human subjects whenever they are aware of being photographed, as cleverly highlighted in Wall's *Adrian Walker, Artist, Drawing*

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from a Specimen in a Laboratory in the Dept. of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, which depicts a subject absorbed in his task of drawing in what is nevertheless a situation that "appears patently staged".[7]

Hence Fried's claim that the photographers he champions have inherited the concerns of modernist painters and sculptors in an 'essentially photographic' way. In each of these cases, the problems of beholding, absorption, and theatricality are given particular, medium specific inflections: inflections that see the artists working not simply to negate theatricality but to manage it through its reflexive acknowledgement.[8] Like *Shirin*, Wall's *Movie Audience* depicts a series of people in a movie theatre, their faces apparently lit by the screen they are watching, which naturally we cannot see. Fried quotes from a text Wall wrote to accompany a 1984 exhibition of the work:

> When we go to the cinema, we enter a theatre (or what remains of a theatre) which has been re-installed in a monumentalising machine. The huge fragmented figures projected on the screen are the magnified shards of the outmoded thespians. This implies that the film spectator has also become a fragment of society which acquires identity through its repetitious accumulation; in this process it becomes an "audience." The audience is not watching the product of the action of a machine; it is inside a machine and is experiencing the phantasmagoria of that interior. The audience knows this, but it knows it through the labour of trying to forget it. This amnesia is what is known culturally as pleasure and happiness. On the other hand, the utopia of the cinema consists in the ideal of happy, pleasant lucidity which would be created by the revolutionary negation and transformation of amnesiac and monumentalising cultural forms. Cinematic spectatorship is a somnambulistic approach toward utopia.[9]

With an uncharacteristically "tortuous, post-Adorno idiom",[10] Wall taps here into a set of powerful intuitions regarding cinematic absorption, which manage to render it both machine-like and dreamlike: on this account, the cinema is a giant mechanical apparatus designed to produce a phantasmagoria of images, in which movie audiences are led to lose themselves as if in sleep; further, the audience takes pleasure in that very loss, experiencing its own amnesia as a happiness; thus it could be said to be complicit in its own passivity – a complicity that would presumably also form the condition for achieving the utopian lucidity that Wall tracks in the last two sentences of the passage. Now Wall figures his own project in *Movie Audience* in rather similar terms, saying that the work is supposed to

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> anticipate, even evoke, its own moment of trial and occlusion as modernist art, its own transformation into tyrannical décor. This is greatly facilitated by the lighting technology used to make the piece, which itself induces a kind of primal specular fascination or absorption which is in some ways antithetical to the conditions of reflective and artificial estrangement indispensable to the unhappy lucidity of critical modernism.[11]

So *Movie Audience* presents a structural echo of the "tyrannical décor" of the cinematic apparatus, in which mechanical means are used to create the conditions for self-forgetting. As Fried points out, however, the conditions of viewing the works are radically different from those that obtain in the cinema, on the intuitions Wall taps: "the fact that *Movie Audience* has been hung unusually high by Wall himself is on the side of estrangement rather than fascination – it is hard to lose oneself in an image considerably above one's head".[12] The inherent theatricality of the act of exhibition is thus in tension with the content of the images, which are designed to create a specular fascination: a tension underscored by Wall's decision to hang the transparencies in an unusually high position. The portraits evoke but do not invite cinematic absorption, with its occlusion of the problematic of theatricality. Here Fried is leaning on a point he made in his 1967 critical polemic 'Art and Objecthood': that cinema, because of how it absorbs audiences, "automatically avoids"[13] the issue of theatricality, as if sidestepping it. Unlike the Chardins that must employ absorptive motifs to defeat theatre, or the paintings of Édouard Manet that must acknowledge it through facingness, cinema is inherently absorptive and so does not confront this problematic; hence it cannot defeat but rather "escapes theater entirely".[14] This is the basis of Fried's more provocative claim regarding film, which I will not try to defend in full: "cinema, even at its most experimental, is not a modernist art".[15]

Before I go on to complicate this, I would like to dispel an obvious objection to Fried's account. It would run something like this: just as with painting, cinema has its share of highly absorbing films and filmmaking traditions (such as classical Hollywood) and its share of non-absorbing or distancing films and filmmaking traditions (such as European political modernism); just as with painting, cinema has its share of highly theatrical films and filmmaking traditions (such as early cinema) and its share of anti-theatrical films and filmmaking traditions (such as Dogme 95);[16] as such it is absurd to claim that cinema sidesteps theatricality, even granting Fried's account of it. The argument fails to attend to the radical nature of Fried's claim. One could start to respond by saying that the claim pertains to the mode of address of cinema *as such*, rather than the particular modes of address employed by particular

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films or typical of specific traditions: that cinema addresses its audience by absorbing it. But this is insufficient. On this account, even when cinema may appear to employ modes of direct address – such as when actors in early cinema "greeted the camera's gaze with gusto, employing glances, winks and nods",[17] or when Michel speaks to camera in Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960) – the result will be neither theatrical nor anti-theatrical, for cinema *has no mode of address* in the strict sense. This is how we might distinguish it from works made for the gallery wall where, thanks to the pressures associated with the act of exhibiting an artwork, the question of address – and so the question of theatre – rears its head as a matter of course.

The idea is borne out by the ontology of film developed in Cavell's *The World Viewed*, whose preface acknowledged the influence of Fried in emphatic yet general terms ("I would have written a little book about film if Michael Fried and I had never met. But it would not have been this one"[18]), and which turns to him on a number of occasions as its arguments develop. Particularly relevant are Cavell's claims that film "screens me from the world it holds – that is, makes me invisible",[19] that movies reproduce the world "[n]ot by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it unseen",[20] and that film "present[s] the world by absenting us from it".[21] We could also turn here to Cavell's investigations in that book (which read as if he were following up on Fried's 1967 suggestion that someone pursue "a phenomenology of the cinema that concentrated on the similarities and differences between it and stage drama"[22]) of the difference between the abyss established between actor and audience in a theatre and the abyss established between them in the cinema. For example:

> In a theater, the actors appear in person; it is part of the latent anxiety of theater that anything can happen to break the spell – a cue missed, a line blown, a technical hitch. The abyss between actor and audience is not bottomless, unless convention is bottomless. In a movie house, the actors are not present in person and the screen is metaphysically unbreachable; the abyss between actor and audience is as bottomless as time.[23]

If all this is roughly right, then there is a set of intuitions regarding cinema that may need to be reviewed: the notion that, as in Brechtian epic theatre, a certain kind of critical distance can be achieved through the employment of strategies designed to bring the audience's attention to the illusions inherent in cinema; the idea that one can break the 'fourth wall' in cinema in the way one can in theatre; the notion that the magic of movies consists in a kind of illusionism, where audiences are invited to participate in the fiction that what

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they see before them is real – a fiction it will be the task of the modernist filmmaker to reveal as such.[24] I will return to these claims at the end of this chapter, and again in the final chapter. Now I want to emphasise that this is not to say that nothing aesthetically significant is happening when Michel speaks to camera; it is just to say that bringing out just what is significant about it is going to be complicated (and cannot baldly proceed with terms borrowed, whether implicitly or explicitly, from theatre). In particular, it would require attending to cinematic absorption without presupposing it is a function of illusion.

This gives a way into Fried's claim, which I take to be accurate, that mediocre and even bad films can be perfectly acceptable and enjoyable to a modernist sensibility, while bad paintings, sculptures, and poetry are not: films are not in the game of defeating theatre; hence they are not forced to bear the same burden of seriousness;[25] hence bad films are not necessarily affronting in the way that (say) bad abstract paintings are, especially when hung in galleries.[26] On Fried's account, a modernist painting succeeds if and only if it compels conviction, if and only if it can convince the viewer that what she beholds represents a decisive response to the formal problems bearing down on the medium;[27] a film, on the other hand, does not have to respond decisively to formal pressures to succeed, and does not ask for our conviction when it does[28] (Rothman and Keane: "Movies do not have to establish the world's presentness, the way painting does. The world is simply there"[29]). This also gives a way into that philosophical watershed of Kiarostami's career as a filmmaker, the paradigm of his characteristic gesture: the coda of *Taste of Cherry*, which reveals the director and his crew. The discovery he makes here, as I understand it, is precisely that the 'reveal' does not cancel or even dampen one's response to the film: if it achieves a distancing, it is a distancing that does not trouble my conviction in the movie – whatever that would mean – but complicates my absorption in it.

In the first chapter of *Why Photography Matters*, Fried cites his remarks from 'Art and Objecthood':

> It is the overcoming of theater that modernist sensibility finds most exalting and that it experiences as the hallmark of high art in our time. There is, however, one art that, by its very nature, escapes theater entirely – the movies. This helps explain why movies in general, including frankly appalling ones, are acceptable to modernist sensibility whereas all but the most successful painting, sculpture, music, and poetry is not. [Basically, I was saying that this is why I could enjoy even mediocre movies whereas all but the greatest high art left me cold.] Because cinema escapes theater – automatically, as it were –

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> it provides a welcome and absorbing refuge to sensibilities at war with theater and theatricality. At the same time, the automatic, guaranteed character of the refuge – more accurately, the fact that what is provided is a refuge from theater and not a triumph over it, absorption [in the sense of the viewer's being absorbed in and by the movie] not conviction – means that the cinema, even at its most experimental, is not a modernist art.[30]

In 2008 he gestures toward qualifying this: "Today I perhaps want to qualify the final conclusion, but my basic claim, that the absorption or engrossment of the movie audience sidesteps, automatically avoids, the question of theatricality, still seems to me – very broadly – correct."[31] Though he does not explicitly say what led him to "perhaps want to qualify" his conclusion, he does add that his use of "automatically" is not meant to imply that

> the avoidance of theatricality I associate with movies results simply from the nature of the apparatus – the camera and projector – as distinct from the deployment of a host of techniques of acting, directing, scene-setting, lighting, photographing, sound recording, editing, and so on.[32]

In 2012's *Four Honest Outlaws*, Fried appears to take this a step further. Referring once again to those remarks from 'Art and Objecthood', now he writes:

> There are problems with this formulation, in particular with the use of the phrases "automatically, as it were" and "the automatic, guaranteed character of the refuge," both of which can be taken to imply, first, that it is simply the mechanical (in that sense the automatic) aspect of film that counts in this regard, and second, that *all* movies, even, as I say, "frankly appalling ones," provide the kind of refuge I was trying to evoke. The emphasis on the automatic and the guaranteed fails to make clear that the successful construction of what might be called a "movie world" is an extremely complex achievement, requiring the cooperative work of a large team of artists and technicians (in that sense there is nothing automatic or guaranteed about it), just as the reference to "movies in general" ignores the fact that such attempts at construction may fail . . . Nevertheless the basic idea – that there are countless successful movies, many of them mediocre or worse, and that such movies escape theatricality by involving or indeed immersing the viewer in their narratives (more broadly in their "worlds" . . .), and that therefore they cannot be said to defeat or overcome theatricality in the ways that "Art and Objecthood" maintains works of high modernist painting and sculpture crucially do – still seems to me to be right.[33]

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So Fried is happy to acknowledge that there is nothing truly 'guaranteed', in the strict sense of the word, about a film's absorbing its audience. On such an account, the claim could not be that movies achieve absorption just in virtue of the nature of their physical apparatus; rather, absorbing viewers is a complex matter, often involving large teams of people; further, we might add, what absorbs and what does not will naturally shift over time as film conventions shift, along with audience tastes and expectations (think of the first-year student who finds classical Hollywood movies – paradigms of absorbing cinema – 'boring'; or consider the fact that quite a number of the women in *Shirin* appear distracted and/or otherwise disengaged from the screen). This is all obvious and straightforward enough. Importantly, however, Fried also wants to say that this will not upset his commitment to the idea that movies sidestep the problematic of theatricality. The point, I take it, is that when films do succeed at absorbing us, it is not because they have defeated theatricality: that 'failure' in this regard means something very different in cinema than it does in (say) pre-modernist painting, for example in a Chardin that successfully deploys an absorptive motif. Movies are not exhibited but screened.[34] If I fail to be absorbed in a 'film world' (to use Fried's 2012 terminology) it is not because the director has failed to negate, manage, or face down the theatricality inherent in the act of screening. And it is not because I have somehow lost conviction in what I see on screen. After all, movies project reality – they are (as Cavell puts it) "*a succession of automatic world projections*"[35] – and it is not at all clear what it would mean to be convinced (and therefore unclear what it would mean to be unconvinced) by a sequence of world projections. This must apply equally but differently to film in its narrative and reflexive modes: when a classical Hollywood film fails to absorb, it just fails (it is an unsuccessful film); when Michel speaks to camera, I do not lose conviction in what I am seeing on screen, but am forced to reconsider the nature of my absorption.

After all, the account is not simply 'negative': if the absorptive propensity of film exempts it from the requirement of compelling our conviction through the defeat of theatre, this naturally also places cinema in a particular, ambiguous but in certain respects privileged position with regard to the problematic of absorption. It is not for nothing that the very first chapter of *Why Photography Matters* opens with an account of photographs of cinemas, movie audiences, and a set of fake film stills. Nor is it for nothing that one of its most compelling chapters treats a film at length: Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno's *Zidane*, a study of Zinedine Zidane's performance during a 2005 football match between Real Madrid and Villareal shot from seventeen synchronised movie cameras all trained on him, which Fried reads as laying bare "a hitherto unthematized relationship between absorption and behold-

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ing – more precisely, between the persuasive representation of absorption and the apparent consciousness of being beheld".[36] If film is an absorptive art then that does not imply it is unable to reflect on absorption; on the contrary, perhaps it implies it can do it with particular depth and perspicacity.

Let me turn to a central sequence from *Shirin*, which takes place just after the forty-two-minute mark, when the dying queen speaks with a distraught Shirin of the pleasures and agonies of the world, imparting some final advice to her before she is to take the throne. Part of what strikes as strange in it is the occasional incongruences between the audience reactions and the narrative that unfolds through the dialogue between Shirin and her aunt, the queen. One is led to wonder: is it really worth all these tears? And not just tears from one or two of the actresses: *all* of them are either weeping outright or have tears in their eyes. The queen is dying, but we are only halfway through the story: a long way from its dramatic and tragic climax, as anyone familiar with the conventions of tragic romance (or the work of Nezami, considered one of the greatest Persian poets) would know. And of course, the film the women are watching is clearly a rather unsophisticated, melodramatic, and maudlin one. Consider too that Kiarostami has deliberately chosen notable actresses here, and not his usual cast of amateurs and/or non-professionals. Would such sophisticated and worldly people – most of them immediately recognisable as such to an Iranian audience – really be *so* moved by such a film (consider, for example, Taraneh Alidoosti's expressions during her time on camera, which jar as particularly exaggerated)? The point is not that the answer is no: it is that the question arises in virtue of Kiarostami's preventing us from seeing the screen the women are watching. We don't know what they are seeing, so how are we to know if their responses are appropriate to it?

For in fact the women aren't really watching a film adaptation of *Khosrow and Shirin* at all. Indeed they aren't really watching much of anything: Kiarostami had them sit on a chair in his own house, stare at three dots on a sheet of paper above his camera, and emote for it.[37] Kiarostami even claims not to have decided on his imaginary film until after the conclusion of this process, after which point the dialogue was produced, a soundtrack created, and everything pieced together in post-production. So Kiarostami seems to have wanted to create a disconnect between the unfolding narrative and the women's responses to it, and thus between the spectator and those spectating on screen. After all, why not simply screen a real film, and have the actresses respond? It would have saved a lot of work.

Taking *Shirin* in formal terms as a reflection on absorption and spectatorship is not to downplay its political and feminist concerns. For of course it is crucial that this is a film about women's spectatorship in the context of

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post-Revolutionary Iran. This can be brought out with particular sharpness if we consider Mottahedeh's fascinating study of the effects of the modesty rules imposed in the wake of the Islamic Revolution. Explicitly designed to 'purify' Iranian film of decadent Western influences, these rules – which were both written and unwritten, formal and informal – proscribed any further depiction of unveiled women, and led to the removal of all images of such women – or, where this was unfeasible, their blacking out via magic markers – from domestic and international films already in circulation.[38] Veiled or not, women were not to be treated as sexual objects, and had to be shown as chaste. Mottahedeh's point is that this new cinematic regime did not simply have the effect of removing women from Iranian films – and then, when they returned to screens in the mid to late 1980s, of leading filmmakers to be very cautious about how they were depicted (usually from a distance, or after relegating them to the background of a scene). For Mottahedeh, they also transformed the underlying visual logic of Iranian cinema, which could no longer proceed on the basis of the scopophilia that feminist film theorists were then critiquing in the West. On the one hand, the modesty rules reinforced the male gaze, insofar as, by requiring women on screen to be veiled, they effectively set up the spectator as male. On the other hand, however, rules and attendant anxieties about the depiction of women led Iranian filmmakers to eschew the voyeurism of Hollywood film. Thus, she argues, "innovative codes and conventions were created in the Iranian cinema of the 1980s and '90s that resonate with a feminist negative aesthetics";[39] Iranian filmmakers adopted "the governmentally imposed veiled, modest, and averted gaze, producing the national cinema as a woman's cinema".[40] Evaluating Mottahedeh's claims – which, sweeping as they are, are grounded in a series of compelling analyses of the formal structure of canonical Iranian films – is beyond the scope of this book. My point is simply that her kind of analysis is not precluded but can in fact be deepened by bringing it to bear on the accounts of cinematic absorption I have been treating, and vice versa.

I want to bring out three interrelated thoughts here. The first pertains to the provocative nature of *Shirin*'s images of absorption in the context of Iranian film, where until relatively recently it has been rare to see close-ups of women's faces.[41] This is compounded by a range of factors, perhaps including Kiarostami's decision to include a number of actresses who made their careers under the Shah (the film concludes with a close-up of Hamideh Kheirabadi, who started appearing in films in the middle of the 1950s, and returned to the post-Revolutionary screen in 1985). As well as this, there are the sexual themes – and to some extent scenes – of the narrative, and the fact that the original story is pre-Islamic[42] (note that in 2011 the Ministry of

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Culture and Islamic Guidance prevented a publishing house from reprinting a version of Nezami's poem[43]). There is the fact that the absorption of these women renders them vulnerable in a certain way, as they exhibit a range of unguarded expressions, tics, and gestures, thus placing the spectator in a voyeuristic position, as private moments are made public; this theme is borne out in the narrative too: when Khosrow first encounters Shirin in the flesh, she is bathing in a spring while lost in reverie:

> O water . . . water . . . embrace me, caress me with your droplets, hold me like a lover, take my breath away. O water, I have such thirst for you, keep your thirst for me. Immerse me in your kisses, O water. Who is there? Who are you? A stranger who like a thief spies on me at night? Was it he? Khosrow? The prince of Persia? What was he doing there?

The women are all wearing headscarves, but there is a sense in which their intense absorption threatens to unveil them (note that the men, when we see them, generally appear impassive). Indeed in many ways this aspect of the film does render it at least partly scopophilic in the sense the term was given in early feminist film theory:[44] it is of course important that these women are very beautiful, and that we as viewers are invited in no uncertain terms to take pleasure in that (at the same time, of course, it is crucial that we are nevertheless denied the pleasure of seeing the narrative unfold on screen). The problem of absorption is thus inflected politically in *Shirin* – the film's scopophilia, and its reliance on a visual logic that is in certain key respects indebted to Hollywood – demonstrate that it is a deliberate provocation.

The second thought complicates the first. By depicting an audience of women, the film challenges an unspoken tenet of spectatorship in both Iranian and Hollywood cinema. In this sense, the film can be read as celebrating the ironic outcome of the application of censorship and modesty rules that Mottahedeh identifies, where the anxious attempt to exclude female bodies from Iranian screens rendered Iranian film a women's cinema. Even as the movie partakes in a scopophilic logic, then, it also seeks to problematise it, as the viewer is brought to question the nature of his absorption, and the meaning of the absorption displayed on screen. In Kiarostami's film, the scopophilic regime of Hollywood is brought to bear on a scopophobic regime that was designed as a corrective to it. By rendering the spectator female, he plays on the contradictions inherent in that very dialectic, where scopophobia works to negate scopophilia but inadvertently produces something distinct from both. Hence the film, through absorptive means, brings to light not just cinematic absorption as such, but also the gendered, political inflections of

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it and the tensions and resonances between them. This leads me to my third thought: through the inclusion of Binoche (who went on to appear in *Certified Copy*) Kiarostami also situates that dialectic in a transnational context,[45] demonstrating just how porous all this is.

Let me underline the confluences between the images of cinematic absorption at work in the accounts I have been tracking in this chapter. We have Wall's account, on which movie audiences are encouraged by the cinematic apparatus to participate in their own passivity, entering a dreamlike state in which they enjoy a phantasmagoria of images.[46] We have the classic feminist accounts on which Mottahedeh draws, on which the visual logic of Hollywood film is underpinned by an objectifying voyeurism, which places the spectator in a highly asymmetrical, sadistic position with regard to what he views. We have Fried's account, on which the theatricality inherent in the act of exhibiting artworks is sidestepped by the cinema, which sets up moviegoing as a kind of refuge. And we have Cavell's account, which may be indebted to Fried's, and on which there is a 'metaphysically unbreachable' abyss between actors on screen and movie audiences, which allows spectators to view the world unseen. These accounts share a certain picture of spectatorship, where viewers are absorbed in cinematic images in virtue of being separated from them, enjoying them voyeuristically; they share a picture of the cinema as an apparatus designed to relieve us from a burden of responsiveness to what we see. These are pictures drawn by scepticism, which I have been describing in terms of a fantasy of taking a 'sideways on' view of the world: a fantasy of seeing the world from an absolutely secure, detached position, of viewing it from a standpoint outside it.[47] This gives a way of fleshing out Cavell's claim, broached in my introductory chapter, that film is a "moving image of scepticism".[48] But what, on these accounts, would it mean to undo that sceptical fantasy?

Here the accounts diverge. For Wall (or at least for the Wall of this particular text) and the feminist theories informing Mottahedeh's book, successful modernist films bring spectators to lucidity, waking them from their voyeuristic dream by directing their attention to the apparatus in which they find themselves, leading them to confront their own spectatorship. For Fried and Cavell, by contrast, there is an incongruity between this model of modernism and the cinema, because cinematic absorption bypasses the problematic of theatre. On their accounts, what takes place when (say) Michel speaks to camera is not a direct address to the viewer, a means of breaking the spell and drawing her out of her absorption, because the world on screen is sealed, and the spectator thus sealed off from it. In this spirit, maybe one could venture that when characters speak to camera, the wall between them

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and the viewer is not thereby broken but emphasised: as if, in the opening scenes of *Breathless*, Michel does not address us but that which cuts him off from us; as if, to modify a couple of lines of Wittgenstein's, the fly is hitting against the wall of its fly bottle.

Perhaps *Shirin* gives us another way of figuring all this, and staking out the grounds of this divergence. For one of its discoveries is that the women on screen are absorbing in spite of the disconnect Kiarostami introduces between them and the audience who views them, and sets about subtly underlining: that even when I am left wondering about whether the faces on screen are expressing genuine or appropriate emotion, I am far from unaffected by them. As with the moral claims emerging from *Ten* and *ABC Africa*, I find it very difficult to describe satisfactorily the majority of these expressions in propositional terms: I could say that one is 'sad', another 'pained', another 'exasperated', another 'bored', another 'apprehensive'. It's not that the words are wrong but that they are simplifying. What's moving about these faces is not that they convincingly express whatever deep or powerful emotion, but the fact that they express, and each in its own singular way. What we see on each one, and which the category of conviction is so ill equipped to capture, is something like expressivity itself. For it isn't quite that the women are 'acting', in the usual sense of performing a role. Perhaps what we see is the condition of acting, that which renders possible the act of performing.[49]

On Fried's account, cinema is not a modernist art, because there is no theatricality inherent in screening to defeat; on Cavell's account, the gap between audience and actor cannot be bridged by modes of direct address, because address in cinema means something very different from what it does in theatre; implicit in both accounts is the idea that the category of conviction has no firm purchase on cinematic images, because films consist of world projections, and it is not clear how we could become convinced by them, short of mistaking image for reality. If for these reasons the task of reflexive cinema cannot be the defeat of theatre, then perhaps that task is better understood as the defeat of scepticism. The sceptical fly bottle may be unbreachable; in fact the desire to breach it may be part of what sustains it: in this context, we might say that the fly bottle *is* the thought that we need to break the fly bottle, to overcome scepticism through an experience of overwhelming conviction that grants an unmediated connection to what we see on screen. The rub of the sceptical picture of spectatorship is that one cannot be extracted from it like this, nor through being brought to confront the illusion manufactured by the cinematic apparatus, because both notions presuppose one of the ideas that gives scepticism teeth: that absorption is a function of conviction. But perhaps *Shirin*'s absorbing, absorbed faces can indicate an exit. They would

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do it in virtue of how they move us without convincing us, making a claim on us that upsets scepticism by drawing us out of our detachment, and leading us to rethink the nature of our absorption. Though this is very close to modernism – so close that it should allow us to retain, if in slightly modified terms, accounts of the project of critical modernism in cinema – it is perhaps more accurate to call it philosophy.

Notes

1. Saljoughi, 'Seeing, Iranian Style', 524.
2. Quoted in Saljoughi, 'Seeing, Iranian Style', 534.
3. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 13.
4. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 2.
5. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 271.
6. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 166.
7. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 41. Fried goes on to quote Wall's own account of the production of the work, in which he asked the subject to 're-enact' a moment from his practice as a draughtsman:

   > he and I collaborated to create a composition that, while being strictly accurate in all its details, was nevertheless not a candid picture, but a pictorial construction . . . There was such a moment in the creation of his drawing, but the moment depicted in the picture is not in fact that moment, but a re-enactment of it. Yet it is probably indistinguishable from the actual moment. (41)

8. In this sense, the photographers Fried champions are participating in the problematic handed down to them from Manet, rather than from the comparatively 'naïve' (pre-modernist) French anti-theatrical tradition Fried identifies in *Absorption and Theatricality*. The crux of Fried's account of Manet is that, by the early 1860s, the problems of beholding that French painters of a Diderotian stripe had been negotiating became insurmountable, as their anti-theatrical, absorptive strategies lost their efficacy. The claim, in other words, is that Manet's work registers the coming to a head of a *crisis of beholding* in which "the primordial convention" (*Absorption and Theatricality*, 93) that paintings are made for beholding could no longer be convincingly denied. Instead Manet's approach was more complex, indeed dialectical: to acknowledge explicitly the presence of the beholder, but to do so in such a way that disorients him, calling into question the relation it establishes with him even as it establishes it.

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In 1863's *Olympia*, for instance, the subject of the painting seems to stare directly at the beholder, violating a fundamental tenet of anti-theatrical painting; yet her stare is highly ambiguous and questioning, challenging and confrontational. Combined with the painting's bizarre narrative structure and its acknowledgement of the flatness of the canvas – achieved by refusing a robust sense of depth, in a deliberate counterpoint to the sophisticated illusion of perspective created by Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, the painting after which *Olympia* was modelled – Manet's painting does not allow the viewer to forget she is looking at an artwork. More than this, it is as if the painting stages in a nearly explicit way a new sense of the fraughtness of that very act, as if it registers a crisis not only of beholding but of the ontological status of artworks more generally.

In Fried's terms, the beholder of a Manet is placed in an "ontological double bind" (*Manet's Modernism*, 344) in which his own presence before the piece is both affirmed and interrogated. In the process, fundamental questions are forwarded about what it means to behold an artwork, and so perhaps what it means for something to be an artwork in the first place. Manet thus liquidates the Diderotian tradition of anti-theatrical painting, such that defeating theatre through the depiction of absorbed figures would no longer be a viable option. But this would not liberate painting after Manet from the problem of beholding or the wider "concerns of that tradition . . . least of all when a final step in a formalist-modernist evolution would purport to go beyond painting into Minimalist objecthood" (*Manet's Modernism*, 407).

Here Fried subtly broaches a crucial issue that I have been unable to treat in this chapter: the aesthetic standing of the minimalist (or as he preferred to call it 'literalist') artworks produced by Donald Judd and his contemporaries in the 1960s, and against which Fried's polemic in 'Art and Objecthood' was directed. The key claim in this polemic, of course, was that literalist artworks fail to compel conviction because of their failure to manage – indeed because of their open embrace of – theatricality.

9. Quoted in Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 12.
10. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Befor*e, 12.
11. Quoted in Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 12.
12. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 12.
13. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 13.
14. Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', 164.
15. Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', 164.
16. For a useful taxonomical account along these lines (which nevertheless

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does not address Fried's claim regarding theatricality and cinema at length, even though one of its key arguments – that "the dialectical tensions" between absorption and theatricality on display in certain of Manet's paintings "is also precisely the characteristic of a cinema that is modern" (242) – would seem to challenge it directly), see Rushton, 'Early, Classical and Modern Cinema'. As well as Fried, Rushton's account draws heavily on Tom Gunning's classic essay, 'The Cinema of Attractions'.

17. Gunning, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film*, 261.
18. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, xxv.
19. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 24.
20. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 40.
21. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 226.
22. Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', 171, fn. 20. Fried suggests the following as examples of the kinds of differences he has in mind: "that in the movies the actors are not physically present, the film itself is projected *away* from us, and the screen is not experienced as a kind of object existing in a specific physical relation to us . . .".
23. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 229.
24. Richard Allen gives a perspicuous characterisation of this set of intuitions in his description of the theoretical commitments regarding illusion at work in 'Anglo-French Film Theory of the 1970s and Early 1980s' (*Projecting Illusion*, 7):

> Mass culture – classical Hollywood cinema – was deemed illusionistic and manipulative, and an alternative filmmaking practice was celebrated in which cinematic illusion and the pleasures of narrative involvement it afforded were eschewed in favor of the cerebral pleasures of films that sought to foreground the manner of their construction and undermine the effect of cinematic illusion. (9)

25. Cavell writes:

> Movies from their beginning avoided (I do not say answered) modernism's perplexities of consciousness, its absolute condemnation to seriousness. Media based upon successions of automatic world projections do not, for example, have to establish presentness to and of the world: the world is there. They do not have to deny or confront their audiences: they are screened. And they do not have to defeat or declare the artist's presence: the object was always out of his hands. (*The World Viewed*, 118)

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26. Cavell: "in the case of films, it is generally true that you do not really like the highest instances unless you also like typical ones" (*The World Viewed*, 6).
27. In a crucial footnote to 'Art and Objecthood', Fried writes:

> essence – i.e., that which compels conviction – is largely determined by, and therefore changes continually in response to, the vital work of the recent past . . . the task of the modernist painter is to discover those conventions that, at a given moment, *alone* are capable of establishing his work's identity as painting. ('Art and Objecthood', 169, fn. 6)

28. Though this is not the place for it, it would be rewarding to trace in detail the highly complicated development of the categories of conviction, absorption, and theatricality throughout Fried's writing, from his 1960s criticism, through his art historical studies of the 1980s and 1990s, to *Why Photography Matters*, which mixes the historical with the critical. For our purposes, what is particularly notable about this development is the shifting role of conviction in it. In pre-modernist painting of the French anti-theatrical tradition, the artist's goal pertains to content: the convincing depiction of absorbed figures. In the context of modernist painting, the artist's goal is to compel conviction in the artwork as a whole through decisive responses to formal problems posed by the art of the recent past. In the photography book, however, the category of conviction is mostly absent. What to make of these shifts?

    One could speculate on the roles of abstraction and indexicality here: perhaps the increasing abstractness of modernist art – to put it baldly, the fact that it does not 'realistically' depict reality but concerns itself with problems of form – is what summons the full-blown problem of conviction. Photography, however, has a special relationship to reality, born (as I have argued) in virtue of its apparent automatic indexicality. In the case of photography, then, perhaps the category of conviction loses purchase because photographs (like traditionally 'realistic' paintings) are (thought to be) *of* the world. In the case of film, perhaps the case is even clearer, insofar as movies consist of world-projections, and becoming convinced by them would have to mean mistaking cinematic images for reality.
29. Rothman and Keane, *Reading Cavell's* The World Viewed, 199.
30. Quoted in Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 13 (see 'Art and Objecthood', 164 for the original remarks).
31. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 13.

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32. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 13.
33. Fried, *Four Honest Outlaws*, 182.
34. Cavell writes:

> Movies from their beginning avoided the shadowing of seriousness by exhibition, because they are simply not exhibited (or performed), but distributed and screened and viewed. One print of a movie is as full and authentic an instance of it as any other, so long as it is fair and complete. It is not a substitute for an original, but its manifestation. (*The World Viewed*, 122)

35. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 72 (original emphasis).
36. Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, 230.
37. Anne Démy-Geroe writes:

> When Debra [sic] Young filed a review for the Hollywood Reporter from Venice after the film's premiere, she described *My Sweet Shirin* as "simply a parade of close-ups of 113 Iranian actresses who are watching a film which only exists in the mind of the viewer." Unusually for a film review, she detailed Kiarostami's working method. "Kiarostami has stated that the actresses are staring at three dots on a sheet of white cardboard off-screen, while imagining their own love stories; he chose the Shirin narration only later, after he finished filming." The Variety review also filed from Venice, by Ronnie Scheib, follows this almost verbatim. This focus on the technical nature of the film and on noting the almost incidental use of the Shirin story for the soundtrack is typical of the film's reviews and even Kiarostami can be found in interview on YouTube describing the process. It is clear that he was deliberately focusing attention on this aspect of the film in his Venice and subsequent media interviews. ('Persian or Islamic?' 149–50)

38. See Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Volume 4*, 111–14.
39. Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 4.
40. Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 4–5.
41. Saljoughi writes:

> Because he is filming in Iran, Kiarostami is required to observe, at a basic level, the modesty laws by exhibiting women in veils. But his lengthy meditation on the female face as it careens through various emotions offers a bold challenge to the law's emphasis on not looking at women, at avoiding a spectator–image relationship based on the fulfillment of the desiring male gaze. ('Seeing, Iranian Style', 533)

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42. In 'Persian or Islamic?' Démy-Geroe argues that *Shirin* is "protesting the suppression of pre-Islamic culture" (149).
43. See Démy-Geroe, 'Persian or Islamic?' 153.
44. The classic work here, of course, is Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'.
45. Saljoughi writes:

> The inclusion of Juliette Binoche functions to both include Kiarostami's subsequent film *Copie conforme* (*Certified Copy*, 2010) . . . but also locates Iranian cinema in a global context. Binoche's face thus serves as an index for European cinema in the same way that the Iranian actresses' faces point to the work of Kiarostami's colleagues at home. ('Seeing, Iranian Style', 526)

46. The account is reminiscent of psychoanalytic 'apparatus theory' as deployed by Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry, to which it may well be indebted. I return to these accounts in Chapter 7.
47. David Macarthur writes:

> Since film is reality projected and screened, a displaced reality that we view from outside it – a position in which we (the audience) are essentially unseen – then the moral of recovering the world which film seemed to achieve is at the expense of our total absence from the recovered world; which is another way of saying that the renewed intimacy with reality is achieved, paradoxically, at the cost of a skeptical relation to it. ('What Goes Without Seeing')

Schmerheim brings out the imperious elements of this sceptical set-up when he recommends

> understanding the traditional skepticist position as a *desire for control*. The craving for generality, the desire for a detached, all-encompassing view of the world underlying the skepticist position is a desire for control, because a world I know everything about is a world I can control, a world subjected to my will to power. (*Skepticism Films*, 87)

48. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, 188. Later, Cavell writes: "I have spoken of film as satisfying the wish for the magical reproduction of the world by enabling us to view it unseen. What we wish to see in this way is the world itself – that is to say, everything" (101–2).
49. It would be interesting to compare this display of expressivity with Fried's 1967 account of the sculptures of Anthony Caro:

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> they defeat, or allay, objecthood by imitating, not gestures exactly, but the efficacy of gesture; like certain music and poetry, they are possessed by the knowledge of the human body and how, in innumerable ways and moods, it makes meaning. It is as though Caro's sculptures essentialize meaningfulness as such – as though the possibility of meaning what we say and do alone makes his sculpture possible. ('Art and Objecthood', 162)

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