All that is true is not naïve, but all that is naïve is true, but with a truth that is alluring, original, and rare.

Denis Diderot, *Pensées détachées sur la peinture* (1775)\(^1\)

The young woman in Althea Thauberger’s early video *not afraid to die* (2001) sits peacefully and thoughtfully in what appears to be a lush forest grove, her hands carefully folded on her lap. She is wearing a red and rust colored all-weather shell, a garment commonly worn on the West Coast of Canada, which protects the wearer against wind and rain. This long haired beauty is more country than elegant or urbane, but she is no less beautiful for that.\(^2\) Her eyes take in her surroundings with an air of carefree curiosity. Occasionally she smiles, at other times she appears pensive or mildly anxious; sometimes, lost in reverie. On the soundtrack large drops of water make musical splashing sounds while birds, squirrels, and chipmunks, chatter away in the background. Over the hum of nature, a folksy acoustic ballad, sung by the artist Althea Thauberger, is introduced.

---


\(^2\) The French art critic Denis Diderot once said that he preferred rusticity to prettiness and that he would give ten Watteau’s for one Teniers. *Pensées détachées*, 749; cited in Fried, 99.
She sings:

\begin{verbatim}
I'm down in a hole
I'm down in a hole
Down in a deep dark hole
\end{verbatim}

Near the end of the song we can hear a plane pass over head. Is it possibly searching for our lone protagonist? She does not look lost. Eventually she reaches around to her knapsack and retrieves her lunch bag. From inside she takes out trail mix, a granola bar, and a drink box. After putting the trail mix back, she begins to eat, but her actions are awkward and self-conscious, as she cannot decide to drink or eat first and attempts to do both at the same time. When she is finished she retrieves her lunch bag in order to store the leftover wrappers, but as she is doing so she notices that some of the granola bar has fallen to the ground. She picks it up, brushes it off and pops it into her mouth, pausing just for a second, smiling and nodding to herself, as she swallows down the last bite. She then puts her lunch bag back in her knapsack, wipes a crumb from the corner of her mouth, and resumes her former position. Despite the soundtrack, in the face of her unknown destiny, she appears optimistic and cheerful.

Althea Thauberger was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in 1970, and studied photography at Concordia University in Montreal before getting her Master of Fine Arts at the University of Victoria, in British Columbia, in 2002. In \textit{not afraid to die} the artist captures the essence of the Canadian female adolescent experience: firstly, the constant backdrop of the Canadian wilderness or ‘The North’, and secondly, the affinity young women can sometimes have for the melodramatic possibilities of any given situation, such as, for example, being lost or hiding out in a forest and having to survive in the woods on trail mix for an indefinite period of time: days, weeks, years even; in the snow.

Part of the appeal of \textit{not afraid to die} is how it makes the viewer feel like he or she is eavesdropping on the solitary hiker. This effect is produced by the illusion that the young woman is totally unaware that she is being watched. Her apparent obliviousness heightens the thrill of spying on her, and we get caught up in what might happen next. In this way, the art and artist are made to disappear, and we are left alone with this intriguing character, and a slowly unfolding, and permanently unresolved plot.
But the impression is not seamless: the moment when the hiker fumbles with her food, when just for a moment she lapses into self-consciousness, the effect quickly unravels. In that moment the fiction that she is unaware of her audience is undone because we know that, in reality, Lana Mitchell is of course, perfectly aware, of our presence; or rather, to be more precise, the camera’s presence.

These relationships – the relationship between the artist and her subject, and the relationship between the work of art and its viewers – are at the heart of Thauberger’s artistic practice. Using an approach similar to other contemporary artists, Thauberger builds her projects by working directly with her subjects, within their respective social and political spheres. Her relationship with these individuals and communities constitutes an integral component of the work itself. Like the radical postwar Parisian-based group known as the Situationists, though perhaps working with a lighter touch, Thauberger makes gentle interventions, creating situations that quietly shift the social and political relationships of the groups with which she works. Songstress (2001-2), A Memory Lasts Forever (2004), the performance piece Murphy Canyon Choir (2005), and Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt (Social Service ≠ Art Project) (2006-2007), all, in one way or another, turn on a collaborative project realized by the artist working with and across certain specific communities.³

This dissolution of the usually fixed categories of producers and consumers means that in these art works, there is a fluidity to the relationships that exists between the artist and her subjects, and likewise, the relationship between the work of art and its viewers. Thauberger’s ability to foreground and open up the audience for contemporary art, has been duly noted and praised, but this aspect of the work has also drawn less positive commentary, as the work is said to spotlight young women, in their most

³ In Songstress the artist put an ad in a local paper seeking female singer-song writers ages 17-25 to collaborate in an art film. Each participant, eight in all, individually composed and performed their own folk rock-video, in a natural setting chosen by the artist. The series of performances were then screen at Artspeak on digital video in a looped sequence. In A Memory Lasts forever, four teenage women wrote and performed a religious musical based on the drowning of a family dog in a swimming pool. In Murphy Canyon Choir Thauberger worked with a group of military wives in the San Diego area, helping them to compose, arrange, and ultimately perform their own songs. Finally, in Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt (Social Service ≠ Art Project), she worked with a group of young German males, assigned to a community service project.
vulnerable, and perhaps most theatrical moments. In fact, theatrical is a word that is often used to describe Thauberger’s *oeuvre*.

This subject of theatricality and art has been written about extensively, and most famously by the art critic and art historian Michael Fried; first in his discussion of minimalism in his essay “Art and Objecthood,” from 1967, and then later, in his trilogy, beginning with his book on eighteenth century painting, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. This essay will discuss what Michael Fried has called “the primacy of absorption” in relation to Thauberger’s new work *Northern* (2005) and will link it to motifs of reverie, sleep, and death in some related examples of contemporary video and photography, from the Vancouver school, and elsewhere.  

![Fig. 2. Jeff Wall, Citizen (1996)](image)

‘Playing dead’ or ‘playing possum’ has recently emerged as a theme in a variety of significant contemporary artworks. In her essay on Thauberger, curator Binna Choi has linked this current to Terry Eagleton’s concept, derived from Beckett, of unkillability.

---

4 This book was followed by *Courbet’s Realism* (1990), and *Manet’s Modernism, or the Face of Painting in the 1860s* (1996).

5 Doug Aitken’s recent *Sleepwalker*, January 16–February 12, 2007, at the Museum of Modern Art, might also be considered in this vein.

Unkillability refers to characters whom, being plagued by every sort of ineptitude, are too distracted, even to die properly. Suicide also eludes them, and consequently they suffer a kind of resentful and stubborn immortality. Choi optimistically tempers this definition, suggesting that because the lives of these protagonists are interminable, they are, to some extent, free from the controlling systems of power: bureaucratic, economic, capitalist, what have you.

She writes:

When social systems exert the authority to determine, judge and value your life, a kind of regression close to self-alienation seems to be called for. Similar to the wise man in the children’s story who saved his life by pretending to be dead when facing a lethal attack from a bear, we’d better face the “state of exception,” or death ourselves, before being put under sentence of death by powers beyond our control.\(^7\)

By looking at the meanings brought to bear by these theatrical non-deaths, and examining how they connect to questions of absorption, and the circumstances of contemporary life now, this essay seeks to open up our understanding of Thauberger’s art, and in a broader way, to deliberate upon what the reoccurrence of these themes might mean in relation to the depiction of the Canadian landscape.

In “Art and Objecthood,” written in 1967, Fried criticized what he called the literalist tendencies of minimalism, for the way it engaged the viewer through conventions of address normally associated with theatre, rather than painting or sculpture.\(^8\) Later, using the writings of the French art critic and writer Denis Diderot, he would expand this thesis. In Absorption and Theatricality (1980) Fried made the argument that in the eighteenth century a demand for a new kind of painting emerged. These new paintings had to embody a paradox; they had to: “…find a way to negate or neutralize the presence of the beholder, to establish the ontological fiction that no one is standing before the canvas. The paradox being that only if this is achieved can the beholder be captivated and held by the painting.”\(^9\)

---

\(^7\) Binna Choi, Ibid.


\(^9\) Fried, Absorption and Theatricality, 108.
The theory is that only when the audience is successfully captured in this way, can the art and artist be made to disappear from the equation, thereby allowing the artwork to directly reach its audience, and to become a mode of access to truth and conviction.\(^\text{10}\) In other words, it is the denial of the presence of the viewer that paradoxically, opens the painting up to the viewer. And conversely: that the slightest impression on the beholder’s part, that the depicted personages were acting, or even worse, posing for him, was registered as ‘theatrical’ in the pejorative sense of the term, and the painting was accordingly judged to be a failure.\(^\text{11}\)

---

\(^{10}\) To paraphrase Diderot, and Fried, the idea is to reach the beholder’s soul by way of his or her eyes; to first attract, then arrest, then enthral the viewer. Diderot wrote: “La peinture est l’art d’aller à l’âme par l’entremise des yeux. Si l’effet s’arrête aux yeux, le peintre n’a fait que la moindre partie du chemin” (Painting is the art of reaching the soul through the eyes. If the effect stops at the eyes, the painter has traveled less than half the road). From the Salons II, 174; cited in Fried, 74 & 92.

\(^{11}\) Fried, Absorption and Theatricality, 108. In the later books Fried goes on to argue that, with Manet in works like Déjeuner sur l’herbe and Olympia, this current or tradition reached a point of crisis and the theme of absorption gave way to something that Fried calls ‘radical facingness.’
in an unnatural and unlikely pose, that has more in common with shampoo commercials than absorption. Thauberger explains the difference between the video and the photograph, made in the same year, like this:

The two works were partly an exercise in time based work and photographic work. They were originally made as a diptych, or inversions of each other, the actor model is the same person in the two works. Not afraid was like a monument which had been stretched out in duration, or a work with movement that ultimately harkened stasis, and Hiker’s Bliss was like an entire event that had been compressed into a fraction of a second and was a work that was frozen but ultimately harkened movement. I thought of these works as trying to exploit and subvert the essence of each specific medium.12

Just as Thauberger exploits and subverts the essence of each specific medium, she also exploits and subverts the categories of absorption and theatricality. The two projects are one and the same, and the moment in not afraid to die when Lana falters, when she momentarily hesitates, is when the issue crystallizes. Addressing this exact moment Thauberger writes:

…because I could only afford two rolls of film (no margin of error) we tried and retried a lot of things. The eating came up then – I asked her to eat in front of the camera. I started to think of this predator/prey relationship when she is self-conscious then kind of takes back the power when she is consuming the snack. Lana and I were pretty much on the same wavelength. She just kind of got it and was just allowing herself to be naturally uncomfortable in front of the camera and kind of playing herself, as herself, in front of the camera.13

What does it mean to play yourself, as yourself, in front of a camera? I think it means that in the instant between the juice box and the granola bar Lana is conscious of being watched, or as Michael Fried would say, of being beheld, and represents herself as such. Writing about the recent film Zidane: un Portrait du 20e Siècle by Douglas Gordon and Philippe Parreno, Fried writes:

… the viewer’s conviction of the great athlete’s total engagement in the match is not thereby undermined. Instead, the film lays bare a hitherto unthematized relationship between absorption and beholding—more precisely, between the persuasive representation of absorption and the apparent consciousness of being beheld—in the context of art, a relationship that is no longer simply one of opposition or complementarity but that allows a sliding and indeed an overlap that would have seemed unimaginable to Diderot…Zidane’s inspired investigation of

---

12 Interview with the artist over email, January 27-29, 2007.
13 Ibid.
its protagonist’s capacity for absorption under conditions of maximum exposure to being viewed, as well as of the modified and shifting meaning of absorption itself under such conditions, makes it, if not quite a modernist film, at the very least a film that is of the greatest interest to anyone engaged by these and related topics.  

In Thauberger’s work’s theatricality is also thematized, and nowhere does this aspect of the work play itself out so sharply, as in the relationship Thauberger sets up between women and the landscape. The theme of the coming of age of young women returns again and again in Thauberger’s works, and this idea is explicitly linked to ‘nature’ or the beautiful wilderness of the Canadian North. Not afraid to die, and the accompanying photographs, is only the first example. In Songstress winsome hippies sing their hearts out in a variety of unbelievably lush landscapes, while in the rock-opera A Memory Lasts Forever, drunken middle class girls beg God for guidance and forgiveness, after the family dog drowns in the pool; again this preposterous scenario takes place in an impossibly green garden setting, that could only be the suburbs of Vancouver. The fluctuating theatricality and anti-theatricality of the women in Thauberger’s video’s is distracting to be sure, but there is a sense, and I am not the first person to notice this, that in fact these young girls are really only playing supporting roles; the real star of the show in Althea’s videos, which in any case cannot be totally separated from the girls, is the landscape itself.

National identity in Canada has always been connected to the depiction of the land, specifically Northern landscapes. This trope depends on two ideas: first, that

---


15 Articles I consulted for this essay include Maureen Ryan’s “Picturing Canada’s Native Landscape: Colonial Expansion, National Identity, and the Image of a ‘Dying Race’” in *RACAR* XVII, 2, 1990: 138-150; Brian S. Osbourne’s “The Iconography of nationhood in Canadian Art” in *The Iconography of Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Paul H. Walton’s “The Group of Seven and Northern Development.” *RACAR* XVII, 2, 1990: 171. Jeff Wall wrote the following on west coast iconography and trees: “The image of a forest devastated by clear-cut logging has become decisive in the culture of critical discourse in British Columbia. Continuous campaigns of protest, lobbying, civil disobedience and education are now required to preserve the few remaining stands of ancient timber and their related ecosystems. The success of these efforts is far from assured. The Masters of British Columbia’s semi-colonial, natural resource-based economy regard the natural world as simply an obstinate material form of future money which must be transmuted into real money as quickly as possible. The standing tree is an affront to these “owners of nature,” whose real totem poles must lie in piles on trucks. The same tree however, remains a real, living totem to the citizen-ecologists struggling to retain tracts of land for the sake of a rational future. This urgent political and economic conflict preserves and renews ancient totemic meanings and transforms real tracts of land into what Ernst Bloch called “wish landscapes,”
geographically the Canadian landscape rivals anything that the old world has to offer; and secondly, that the Canadian landscape is an eternal source and model of spiritual virtue. The early twentieth century Canadian painter and theosophist Lawren Harris, the painter responsible for one of the iconic images of Canadian art history, *North Shore, Lake Superior*.

In 1926, the painter had this to say on the subject:

...we are on the fringe of the great North and its living whiteness, its loneliness and replenishment, its resignation and release, its call and answer – its cleansing rhythms. It seems that the top of the continent is a source of spiritual flow that will ever shed clarity into the growing race of America, and we Canadians being closest to this source seem destined to produce an art somewhat different from our southern fellows – an art more spacious, of a greater living quiet, perhaps of a utopian visions of possible harmony, but also into terror images of looming catastrophe” From, “Into the Forest: Two Sketches for Studies of Rodney Graham’s Work” in *Rodney Graham Works from 1976 to 1994*, with Essays by Jeff Wall, Matthew Teitelbaum, Boris Groys and Marie-Ange Brayer (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 1994), 19.
more certain conviction of eternal values. We were not placed between the Southern teeming of men, and the ample replenishing Virgin North for nothing.¹⁶

We know that landscape painting first emerged in Holland in the seventeenth century. Ann Jensen Adams has attributed this phenomenon to the fact that as the Dutch had no individual, such as a King or Queen for example, in whom to invest the symbols of national identity.¹⁷ According to Jensen, his new form of painting provided a sense of history, and stability to a diverse population which was, at that time, a dramatically fragmented society, thereby offering the illusion of security and cohesion, where in fact none existed.¹⁸ In a similar way, since the beginning of the twentieth century, Canada, a massive country, divided socially, culturally, linguistically, economically, and geographically, has also come to rely on a certain concept of the Canadian landscape to maintain a sense of community; specifically the concept of the pristine and pure Virgin North. In its most concentrated form this idea manifests itself in the vision of the lone tree, symbolizing the resilience, ruggedness, independence and beauty of the Canadian spirit. Leaning heavily on the important precedent of the Totem poles of the Northwest Coast, this motif can be observed in Canadian paintings throughout the twentieth century, beginning with the Group of seven, in the 1920s, the previously mentioned North Shore, Lake Superior by Lawren Harris, Tom Thompson’s paintings and photographs, particularly Jack Pine, but also famously in the works of one of the West Coast’s most famous artists, Emily Carr.

¹⁸ Ibid.
Landscape was not considered a serious subject for high-minded art in the immediate postwar period, but in the Sixties, when the west began reckoning with the legacy of industrialism, it returned in America with the development of Land art and Earth art.\textsuperscript{19} In Canada, it resurfaced via conceptual photography. In the eighties and nineties works by Jeff Wall, Rodney Graham, Stan Douglas, and Roy Arden, all of whom were deeply influenced by conceptual art, all delivered trees, in one form or another.

Examples might include, Jeff Wall’s *Pine on the Corner* (1990), *Park Drive* (1994), *Logs* (2002), Rodney Graham’s *Detail of Flanders Trees* (1989), and Stan Douglas’ *Gold River Mill* (1996) to name just a few. In these photographs soaring mountains scenes are often visually circumscribed by factories and mills, hinting at the fact that these breathtaking landscapes are constantly under threat from the forestry industry, which happens to be one of the biggest industries in Canada. Canada owns ten percent of the world’s forests, and as the disturbing and ominous hairy eyeball that peers grotesquely out from in front of the lurking suburban home in Roy Arden’s unsettling *Tree Stump, Nanaimo BC* (1991), suburbia’s appetite for land and building supplies is insatiable.

![Image of Tree Stump](image)

Fig. 9. Roy Arden *Tree Stump, Nanaimo BC* (1991)

And that is one of the definitive ironies of the Canadian psyche. We draw so much of our identity from the landscape but cutting down trees is one of our specialties. Canadian settler Catherine Parr Trail (1802-1899) wrote in her book *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836): “Man appears to contend with the trees of the forest as though they were his most obnoxious enemies; for he spares neither the young sapling in its greenness, nor
the ancient trunk in its lofty pride; he wages war against the forest with fire and steel.”

While the nineteenth century British author Anna Brownell Jameson (1794-1860), writing in her book *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* (1838), made the observation that:

A Canadian settler hates a tree, regards it as his natural enemy, it is something to be destroyed, eradicated, annihilated by all and every means…[she goes on to say that there are two ways of killing a tree, by burning it and by draining the sap out of it.] Is not this like the two ways in which a woman’s heart may be killed in this world of ours – by passion and by sorrow?

This gap between what constitutes the Canadian landscape in the collective imagination, and the more complete truth of the matter, is the subject of Thauberger’s new video *Northern*. Or to put in another way, *Northern* dispels the dominant myths regarding the Canadian landscape by revealing the inherent theatricality in historical representations of this landscape.

Fig. 10. Video-still from Althea Thauberger’s *Northern* (2005)

In this film the camera opens onto a tract of forest that has been completely ravaged by clear-cut logging (what treeplanters refer to as *slash*). As the camera pans slowly to the left, the bodies of twelve men and women come into view; entangled and

---


strewn among the remains of a scarred and mutilated landscape, filled with uprooted deadwood, stumps and branches, their arms and legs akimbo, randomly piled, sometimes on top of one another, as if they have survived an explosion, or some other natural catastrophe. The camera keeps moving left, until the bodies are completely out of sight, and comes to a stop before an Alpine landscape made up of dark green rolling hills, beautiful soaring mountains, and an impossibly blue sky, complete with perfectly placed white clouds. The contrast between the ecological destruction on the right, and the breathtaking scenery on the left, could not be more dramatic.

Slowly we recognize the sound of a helicopter; in seconds we can identify it rising in the distance, and then coming towards us, before it lands in the foreground, on an old logging road. A young woman gets out, and pauses to take in the entirety of the situation, and begins to wake up the survivors. As each one awakens, together they move to wake up the next person, in a kind of chain, and so on and so on, until they are all grouped together looking searchingly out of the screen toward the horizon; or sort of the horizon, because for a split-second it appears as if they are looking directly at us. Heroically filmed in one long continuous take, like a möbius strip, the camera returns to its initial position, and the action ultimately ends exactly where it began.

This film draws its force from the combination of the representation of Canadian landscape, with the radical traditions of French painting in the nineteenth century. The composition of *Northern* has been compared to Gericault’s *Raft of the Medusa* (1819), but Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), and Jean-Louis Ernest Meissonier’s paintings of destroyed barricades, *Memories of Civil War* (1849), cannot be far behind. More contemporary works such as Marcel Duchamp’s *Etant’s Données* (1968) and Jeff Wall’s *Dead Troops Talk* (*a vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Maqor, Afghanistan, winter, 1986*) (1992), must also be taken into consideration here, especially because both works address our theme of the undead, and because, make no mistake about it, *Northern* describes a state of siege.
Every year in Canada thousands of young people, mostly students paying off University loans, heed the call each spring and travel hundreds of kilometers from home into isolated and devastated, clear-cut landscapes to plant trees. It is intense backbreaking and brutally repetitive work, and though it is often framed as an exercise in revitalizing the forest, when it is, in fact, the exact opposite. As Kate Kuitenbrouwer has written, “Treeplanting is not reforestation. It is difficult to compare a replenished clear-cut to a forest. Perhaps we should call these constructs meta-forests – the forest as an ironic reminder of forest.” Thauberger herself worked in the forestry industry for ten years, as both a treeplanter and as a foreman. In the summer of 2005 Thauberger worked in various remote regions of Northern Alberta and Northern was filmed in Kananaskis, featuring treeplanters, who came together, under Thauberger’s guidance, to form a theatrical troupe. In the film they, like Lana Mitchell in the video not afraid to die, play themselves as themselves.

One of the important features of the film is the strong visual rhyming that develops between the tangled dead roots of the trees and the bodies of the treeplanters. The result being that the planters and the landscape cannot be separated from one another, formally or metaphorically. As the figures sleep, so does the land. Their resurrection harkens the renewal and restoration of the forest, and by metaphorical extension, the restoration of the social body itself. Fried discusses the relationship between the state of absorption and sleep at some length in Absorption and Theatricality,

---

guiding the reader through a series of examples to argue that absorption unconsciousness are closely related to one another.\textsuperscript{23} This theme has also surfaced in the work of Vancouver artists, notably in Rodney Graham’s \textit{Halcion Sleep} (1994), and more recently, and one might add more spectacularly, in Douglas Gordon’s \textit{Play Dead: Real Time} (2003).

In the half an hour long \textit{Halcion Sleep} (1994) (originally conceived as a performance piece), we see the artist dozing in the backseat of a car, being driven from the suburbs into the city. The static quality of the image, which was originally shown as a loop, links it to Rodney’s longstanding preoccupation with Nietzsche’s notion of the eternal return, evident in videos such as: \textit{Vexation Island} (1998) and \textit{How I became a Ramblin’ Man} (1999). The scenario of \textit{Vexation Island} is also concerned with various states of consciousness, and features a shipwrecked individual who is knocked out by a falling coconut, only to regain consciousness, stand up, and be knocked out by a falling coconut, and so on. The possibilities presented by video’s endless loop, which is one of the definitive characteristics of this video, have also been marvelously exploited in the Scottish artist Douglas Gordon’s \textit{Play Dead: Real Time} which features an elephant, displayed in the white cube of the contemporary art gallery (actually the relatively new Gagosian Gallery in New York), who carefully lowers himself to the ground to play dead, before standing up, and then again, slowly returning to the ground to play dead.

Dreamy states are standard in Thauberger’s compositions, from our hiker lost in reverie, to our distracted chanteuses, to the unconscious or even dead tree-planters, but what might it mean to depict the blurring of the formerly discrete categories of absorption and theatricality: particularly in relation to the representation of Canadian landscape? In conclusion I want to return to Michael Fried’s discussion of Douglas Gordon and Philippe Pareno’s \textit{Zidane: un Portrait du 20e Siècle} where he writes about the:

“protagonist’s capacity for absorption under conditions of maximum exposure to being viewed, as well as of the modified and shifting meaning of absorption itself under such conditions.”\textsuperscript{24} What is the author is getting at when he writes about this condition of “maximum exposure to being viewed”? Since 9/11, in the western world, the social,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{23} Fried, \textit{Absorption and Theatricality}, 31.
\end{flushright}
political, and aesthetic terrain, have changed, significantly. What does the notion of theatricality in art mean now, at this point in history, when theatricality has become the dominant paradigm: i.e. the theatre of the war, the theatre of homeland security, the theatre of a free market economy, the theatre of freedom of information, the theatre of democracy, the theatre of freedom etc?

Just as the boundaries that separate the producers from the consumers of contemporary art have been blurred, so have the lines between theatricality and anti-theatricality, between the watchers and the watched. There are sixteen spy agencies in operation in the United States; more if you count the telephone companies, businesses, universities, and other institutions that blithely pass along information about their employees, students, and anyone else who may pass through their halls. In such an environment, where less and less seems to be ‘out of the picture’ the discreet categories of, and the original distinctions between, absorption or anti-theatricality become harder to sustain, and harder to discern.

Hugo Williams recently related the following anecdote concerning a question and answer session that took place at the Hay-on-Wye festival in 1990, after a reading by the Nobel Prize winning poet Seamus Heaney. Though ostensibly about the creative process, it has implications for the political potential of sleep.

His country home was where he worked, “Or feel as if I do.” “I take it you don’t get up at 6:00 am like Paul Muldoon?” asked the Welsh Poet Laureate Gwyneth Lewis. “No but I like to put it about that I do.” He said, “…it might not be a good idea to get up that early if you want to keep the given thing alive. If you get the right dreaming time you can do the poem quite quickly.” I was just jotting this down for future use when he moved the concept up a peg: “Self-forgetfulness is the sine-qua-non of secret action.” I felt more at home with his next thought,”…anxiety has something to do with it too.”

As Fried reiterates, time and time again, self-forgetting - or what the French call oubli de soi - is very close to intense absorption, and sleep. In this era of “maximum

---


26 This makes Zidane’s intense focus all the much more incredible. Eventually I would like to develop this idea more in relation to what Jeff Wall has called “institutionalized neo-Situationism.” See Jeff Wall, Hermes lecture, October 29, 2006, in Den Bosch, The Netherlands. For a clip of the lecture: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CMFjxkmy1-0.

exposure” sleep, apparently our most innocent and inert state, might just prove to be otherwise. In a footnote near the end of the book he cites the eighteenth century German author Melchior Grimm on the subject:

Sleep which appears to be a purely passive state, a kind of death, is on the contrary, the first state of the living animal and the foundation of life. It is not a deprivation, annihilation; it is a mode of being, of existing, just as real and more general than any other. It is with sleep that our existence begins.²⁸

²⁸ Fried, Absorption and Theatricality, 190.