後現代攝影 論 Tableau Vivant —
以 Charlie White 為例

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摘 要

自從決定性瞬間(The Decisive Moment)這個攝影哲學概念於 1950 年代被法國攝影師布列松(Henri Cartier-Bresson)提出之後，已經成為一個迷思。決定性瞬間的核心根植於文化結構，對於布列松而言它是一種超現實的擬人劇(Tableau Vivant) — 意即他在以幾何美學作為第一順位考量之下於時間之流裡捕捉了一個足以體現現實與過去的瞬間。

簡言之，布列松的瞬間是一種帶著隱喻的符號(metaphor + symbol)，它以單一瞬間去暗示、比喻某種情境。然而在後現代的領域裡，決定性瞬間質變為非決定性瞬間(The Indecisive Moment)，在後現代的世界裡，所謂的瞬間成為一種寓言，凝固的單一瞬間消失了，取而代之的是一種液態般的流動時間，美國攝影師查理懷特(Charlie White)則是箇中翹楚。本文即嘗試從決定性瞬間出發，並以後現代的視角解構懷特的擬人劇。

關鍵詞：後現代攝影、布列松，擬人劇、查理懷特、決定性瞬間

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Tableau Vivant of Reality Photographs
Charlie White, Postmodernism

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Abstract

Since French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson first put the photographic theory forward in the early 1950s. In brief, this theory held that the photographer was an observer who acted without interrupting the subject or physically altering the scene being photographed. The photographer simply waited for a decisive moment to reveal itself to the photographer who then captured, and reported upon, this instant in time.

Till now, The Decisive Moment is still blurred, a myth, it is ambiguous, a cliché rather than a paradigm, as Cartier-Bresson explained it, though I doubt if people and photographers really understand it or whether it just becomes a shield against critical arrows.

The Decisive Moment is a cultural construction that then rhetorically operates in semiotic terms as a myth. The Decisive Moment is also teased out as a metaphor, as a metonymic condensation of time, and a signifier of the unseen, forgotten or overlooked - it is a surrealist Tableau Vivant in terms of its context. In other words, a Modernist photographic strategy in a postmodern format.

Talking about The Decisive Moment as a surrealist Tableau Vivant, Charlie White is an example; he employs tableau vivant to depict his concept with regard to The Decisive Moment, which is a postmodern strategy. In spite of different styles and genres of The Decisive Moment, Cartier-Bresson and Charlie White are all embodiments of tableau vivant. The Decisive Moment of Cartier-Bresson is a symbol, which metonymically refers to daily life and Charlie White’s is an allegory which is additive. All two can be traced back to Renaissance painting but using different strategies.

Keywords: The Postmodern Renaissance, The Decisive Moment, Tableau Vivant, Henri Crtier-Bresson, Charlie White

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1.1 Charlie White, Subversive Agent of The Decisive Moment, Post Modern

The structure of representation – point-of-view and frame – is intimately implicated in the reproduction of ideology (the ‘frame of mind’ of our ‘point-of-view’). More than any other textual system, the photograph presents itself as ‘an offer you can’t refuse’. The characteristics of the photographic apparatus position the subject in such a way that the object photographed serves to conceal the textuality of the photograph itself – substituting passive receptivity for active (critical) reading. (Burgin, 2001, p.69)

Very different from Cartier-Bresson, Charlie White uses allegory to build up his tableau vivant photographs. His photographic images are overtly constructed collages that deliver us decisive moments, so to speak, as White believes the indecisive moment is the decisive moment. White’s images work in the same way as billboard film posters do, grabbing telling moments (film stills) that compress trailer-style the plot of the film into a single image. White uses different layers to tell us a story with tensions across foreground, middle and background. Every layer has its own set of moments. White plays out a form of postmodern pantomime theatre. His moments are diverged; his positive and aggressive concepts achieve his bourgeois allegory. An offer you can not refuse means it is a predominant occupation and White develops this occupation into a complicated stage.

The tableau vivant in photography has its own history, too. In the 19th century this style was in the ascendant, and many photographers exploited it for moral purposes. However, White’s works invert this morality tale of these tableau vivant parables into parodic postmodern dramas that seem more like Days of Our Lives TV episodes than holy sermons. Or we might say White’s works are postmodern sermons, exhortations, parodies.

Jo Spense suggests that perhaps a turning of the tables is in order:

Often, in the course of further development, such a group will, as a result of a careful and thorough analysis of their situation, develop a more coherent position and identity enabling them to throw away the crutch of out-dated symbolism and role reversals thus achieving a greater political awareness. During this process they may also have negatively stereotyped and invalidated the existing dominant ideology. (Spence, 2001, pp. 21-22)

White’s tableau vivant is political; he uses different layers to subvert elitism and modernism. His Understanding Joshua series is an example; his tableau vivant is an uncanny contemporary play on Renaissance ideals; it is a mutation but follows a general development in visual culture. Compared with Cartier-Bresson, White’s moment is a postmodern deconstruction of objectivity. His idea is to break down classical elitism, and he weaves an allegory of diminishing returns within photography. During this process he tries to install his own ideology and invalidates the existing dominant code. In spite of other photographers since the 1970s who have used tableau vivant as a creative method, such as Cindy Sherman, White’s ideas are even more subversive. He uses semi-human (such as Joshua) Hieronymus Bosch-like aliens to deploy his allegorical power.
Image 1.1 Cindy Sherman Untitled (Woman in Sun Dress), 2003

Image 1.2 Cindy Sherman Cindy Sherman at the Tribeca Film Festival

Image 1.3 Cindy Sherman Untitled # 132, 1984
Image 1.4  Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #22*

Image 1.5  Cindy Sherman *Untitled Film Still #14, 1978* © Metro Picture Gallery & Cindy Sherman

Image 1.6 Cindy Sherman *Untitled (As Marilyn Monroe), 1982*
White’s tableau vivant is a freak show and this puts him into a very new regime of truth. We have to understand that reality has been metamorphosed in the postmodern era. Reality is no longer as it is according to a modern definition; instead, reality is a construction as part of an individual ideology and control apparatus. According to Barthes’ analysis, photography is in fact in a phase of deconstruction and we can understand it more in terms of Theo Van Leeuwen’s statement:

In Renaissance painting, the favoured object of study of iconography, increasing naturalism led to an interest in presenting symbols in the guise of reality. Barthes’ favoured object of study was photography. Recognizing photographs, even documentary photographs, as (also) symbolic constructs, a quest in which Barthes was a pioneer, may well have played a small part in the decline of naturalism, along with the ‘constructivist’ power of the new digital technologies. (Leeuwen, 2001, p. 117)

Naturalism has been abolished and reality becomes the imagination of the constructivist. Reality is no longer constricted in a certain ‘container’; it irredeemably diverges from the past. Cartier-Bresson’s the moment was his reflex, White’s moment is also his reflex; in fact, ‘reflexivity’ plays an indispensable role in postmodern art as Marita Sturken claims:

Much of postmodern art and culture takes this modern concept of reflexivity further. Self-awareness of one’s inevitable immersion in everyday and popular culture has led some postmodern artists to produce works which reflexively examine their own position in relation to the artwork or the artwork’s institutional context. The early work of photographer Cindy Sherman is a good example of this approach. Sherman produced a series of photographs in which she struck poses evoking actresses in film stills. These images do not reproduce particular film stills. Rather, they evoke the style of a particular moment or genre, such as the Hollywood studio film of the 1930s and 1940s. A similar strategy was used by the Los Angeles Chicano art collective, Asco. (Sturken, 2001, p. 254)

Cindy Sherman’s tableaux vivants are centred on herself; she is the only actress in her works. Sherman’s tableau vivant is an embedded jest in terms of postmodern subjects evaporated in a postmodern formation. Sherman as subject appears in an incongruous way and her work becomes her social critique. Postmodern art requires a new communication between viewer and artists, formalism is banished and what is fundamental is the process of making, the dialogue. Postmodern art reaches a similar level to Chinese painting – depicting spirit with silhouette sketching, spiritual interaction transcending the visual experience of seeing. To a certain extent, postmodern art also reaches the level of the ancient Chinese I Ching, The Book of Changes as I Ching says ‘Spirit is unlimited and I Ching has no frame’. Cindy Sherman’s tableaux vivants are an experimental performance of the postmodern (at least of the 1970s). White’s freak show style is indeed exploratory, in comparison; it digs for the phenomenon/reality beneath the human spiritual horizon, and unveils our desire of sex, anxiety and apprehension – we do not normally have that intercourse in public. White pours out his emotional issues by an of observation of politics and society through his tableau vivant, which is the new archetype of postmodern art. Despite the manipulation that tableau vivant involves in photography, it has been exploited ever since photography was invented. Nevertheless, the earlier tableau vivant was
utilized as a substitution for stage, theatre, pantomime. It duplicated, not created, and the difference was just the use of modern material, photography. However, in White’s spectrum it becomes a completely new medium. White’s tableau vivant is not only postmodern but also super postmodern. The moment of Cartier-Bresson was the embodiment of modernism and it depended on mundane events, real subjects. As Julia A. Thomas states:

Capa plays the leading prosecutor with his photographs of French collaborators whose heads have been shaved, of an American soldier kicking a prisoner, and of a wounded child in Sicily. Henri Cartier-Bresson’s ‘Gestapo Informer Recognized by a Woman She Had Denounced, Deportation Camp, Dessau, Germany’ (1945) reinforces the theme. The seeming predilection for personal confrontation among Westerners demonstrated by Capa’s and Cartier-Bresson’s work was evinced even in photographs not related to the war. (Thomas, 1998, p. 1480)

This predilection is exhibited in Cartier-Bresson, he built his tableau vivant ‘on earth’, which was overwhelming with its mundane aura. He therefore illustrated reality and historical context but beyond historical scale and arrived on the shore of aesthetics. Representation was altered; his tableau vivant had the face of the historical and cultural but it always contained the aesthetic. As Allan Sekula said,

Ultimately, then, when photographs are uncritically presented as historical documents, they are transformed into aesthetic objects. Accordingly, the pretence to historical understanding remains although that understanding has been replaced by aesthetic experience. (Sekula, 1989, p. 123)

Cartier-Bresson kept documents on the one hand but transformed them into aesthetic objects on the other and this was how he became pre-eminent among photographers. Compared with Cartier-Bresson, White’s object is completely different. He fabricates a vision, a fiction, a freak show, an odd pantomime theatre, and a super hybrid. In White’s moment, the history begins with hyper-reality as it is influenced by Hollywood and TV shows. His subjects were even made by a Hollywood special effect designer of properties. White’s tableau vivant is a pure beautiful sham; it has little in common with the surrealism of Cartier-Bresson. White’s decisive moment is a variation establishing the postmodern. Although Cindy Sherman’s ‘self-centred’ tableau vivant had pioneered a ravishing chapter in photography, White’s is obviously spectacular in terms of its ironic confrontation.

Sherman’s tableau vivant formations reflexively modelled questions in relation to the spectator and more importantly involved the apportioning of the gaze by the female photographer as self-portrait and its reflexivity. Sherman was a critical artist in terms of postmodernism but not of feminism. Also Sherman’s tableau vivant was a discussion of identification for her, of the female image, especially of the body. Sherman played her tableau vivant with aggressive poses and played herself into the medium. She created reflexive critiques, and she was the centre of questions; she was an operator to use Barthes’ term and at the same time the viewer. Sherman indeed was a new prototype for postmodern art; she inserted herself into the process of making, the production became a paradoxical pasticcio. She created meaning/reality from inside rather than taking an analytical perspective from outside the image. By engaging and entwining the image with herself, Sherman was in the very sphere of being critically examined in her work. Her ‘self-centred’ tableau vivant was the
key that discriminated her annotation as postmodernist against the modernist critique offered by feminist film criticism. In other words, Sherman’s tableau vivant was not of the body as in feminism, it was a mode of dialogue between herself and the spectator. In fact, Sherman’s tableau vivant was her outlook; she observed history and reflected it in her ideology. The famous pop star Madonna duplicated Sherman’s idea in pop culture, for Madonna, stage and media were the throne; people worshipped at the shrine of the pop culture she created. If we see Madonna in terms of the Renaissance then Madonna could be portrayed as the quintessential postmodern pop figure of the 1980s and early 1990s because she made a transformation, just as Sherman did; she created a stylistic and modern classic signature of herself as production. Sherman as a forerunner of postmodern photography also adapted the Marilyn look from films, but with a more insightful ownership than Madonna’s use of the image. Sherman’s idea was a critique but Madonna’s was to capitalize on its mass appeal, in other words, it was business in terms of marketing.

Mark Dery argues that White’s works can be defined as having a post-Sherman style; White is a postmodern surrealist as are Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall. In the postmodern era, art immerses itself in a critical point of view of contemporary politics and society. The postmodern artist therefore is an active visual commentator investigating politics and society. The moment of White is ‘Distinguished Critique with postmodern eyes’. As Mark Dery argues,

White is the junior member of the school of post-Sherman photographers that includes Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall – pomo surrealists in the David Lynchian mode who conceive and create elaborately cinematic scenes from movies that only exist in their minds. Like Crewdson and Wall, White isn’t a conventional photographer: his staged, digitally manipulated images are authentic Hollywood productions, complete with production and postproduction credits. For In A Matter of Days, the artist story-boarded the concept, tracked down the sites and types he wanted through location and casting agencies, shot the actors on site, and, working with D.O.P. Craig Ashby, photographed the monsters (12-inch models made by boyhood friend and Hollywood F/X artist Jordu Schell) and seamlessly inserted them into the images during digital postproduction. Schell also created Joshua, the protagonist of Understanding Joshua. Described by White as an almost full-sized ‘movable puppet, similar to a character for film,’ Joshua was fabricated using standard Hollywood techniques for sculpting, molding, painting, hair-punching, and adding mechanics. (Dery, 2001, p. 51)

![Image 1.7 Charlie White Her Place, Understanding Joshua series, 2000](image)
Being a postmodern artist White’s path to reality is more distilled as he fabricates his subjects; every moment he creates is a fake but also hyper-reality. White is not a photographer but an artist. His stance means that he cannot be classified as a photographer but he uses photography as cultural material in the sense of the postmodern. The tableau vivant as ‘Great Vehicle’, an inevitable but articulated formation, in White’s photography is a window whereas Cartier-Bresson photography was a mirror. For White the tableau vivant is a synthetic understanding of reality. White uses the tableau vivant as his story-telling mode. For Cartier-Bresson story-telling was a metaphor yet it is an allegory for White. As Charlotte Cotton states:

This area of photographic practice is often described as tableau or tableau-vivant photography, for pictorial narrative is concentrated into a single image: a stand-alone picture. In the mid-twentieth century, photographic narrative was most often played out sequentially, printed as photo-stories and photo-essays in picture magazines. Although many of the photographs illustrated here are parts of large bodies of work, narrative is loaded into a single frame. Tableau photography has its precedents in pre-photographic art and figurative painting of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and we rely on the same cultural ability to recognize a combination of characters and props as a pregnant moment in a story. It is important not to think of contemporary photography’s affinity to figurative paintings as simply one of mimicry or revivalism; instead, it demonstrates a shared understanding of how a scene can be choreographed for the viewer so that he or she can recognize that a story is being told. (Cotton, 2004, p. 49)

White’s tableau vivant is an allegory and it tells a tale with different layers. It seems to me that White’s tableau vivant is the continuum of metaphors in the visual experience of the viewer. It has this quality of continuing due to the process of making, including the design of properties, the staging and the photograph. His decisive moment cannot be captured in a single decision; his moment has to rely on continuing elaborating and amending. For White, his moment cannot be made in a single moment, for the viewer, the butterfly needs more time to be aware.

As reflexivity, White’s work is a complete ideological cast based on his bourgeois ideology. As Mark Dery states:

_In a Matter of Days_ was inspired, says White, by “the spatial emptiness and social isolation of Los Angeles.” An X-Files chronicle of scattered monsters attacks was the obvious solution, he decided, to his desire to map “the literal landscape of the sprawling city and the figurative landscape of catastrophic disaster.” It’s a perverse version of Fredric Jameson’s ‘cognitive mapping’ project (described in Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism 1991). Jameson urged a tactical response to the social dislocation and political impotence engendered by postmodern culture, with its intangible economy, its disorienting architecture (epitomized, for Jameson, by the Bonaventure Hotel, in downtown L.A), and its decentralised cities, all of which conspire against our sense of place, even of safe. White believes that “one of the reason people live to envision the apocalyptic in Los Angeles is that it is a way of conceptualizing the city as, for once, a whole – all of it experiencing the same trauma at once.” (Dery, 2001, p. 52)
What White tries to indicate in his tableau vivant in fact is redemption; fiction is his belief instead of mundane fact. White processes his therapy with the postmodern, which is different from Capa’s. As Mark Dery states:

If In a Matter of Days is a monster movie about the return of the repressed in a city consecrated to denial (of its racial tension, its class warfare, and the Hobbesian environmental reality of a town built far from water, on one too many faultlines), White’s latest work, Understanding Joshua, is a tongue-in-cheek creepshow about the private neuroses hidden away in the city’s suburban tract homes and exurban McMansions. Days is set, with the exception of the upscale house in Rosita Drive, in public spaces; Joshua takes place exclusively in domestic interiors. Despite its over-the-top, B-movie conceit, Days takes itself with cinematic, James Cameron seriousness; Joshua exudes a sick-funny, self-mocking quality that makes the nine-photo series feel like a sitcom directed by David Cronenberg. (Dery, 2001, p. 52)

White uses an ironic way to mock modern arts. His postmodern shrine stocks this type of image and its style of staginess is close to film in terms of its moment. However, White is not a real filmmaker since he trades in frozen moments that are not single but a continuum; his moment has been painstakingly designed, with a film director’s attention to detail in relation to lighting, make-up and special effects. As White said, ‘I was more interested in still images and painting than film’ (Dery, 2001, p. 51) and also ‘Although the images index film in their format and sense of suspended animation, I was really aiming to create a landscape and not a celluloid moment’ (Dery, 2001, p. 51).

In truth, White is a postmodern landscape painter and equally an auteur whose movie stills make him a hyperrealist. For instance, White’s the Understanding Joshua series is his episode in hyperrealism. White uses Joshua to delineate his understanding of the society of the United States and I believe Joshua is White himself. White criticizes society and creates his postmodern scenes by his tableau vivant. In the Understanding Joshua series we see human landscapes, which we have never seen before in photography and art history. White’s landscape shows our deep desire and emotion in a sense of voyeurism. In the Understanding Joshua series Joshua appears as a semi-human being, a self-alienated ‘person’; by so doing White dignifies Joshua with his distinguished and critical eyes on society and politics. In the Understanding Joshua series White offers a voyeur’s point of view into one human being’s very inner life. White’s landscapes are a psychoanalysis both of him and society, being a human being White is like the titular character himself, a personality without personality, an individuality without individuality. In the image, every bit is misshapen, every detail is artificial and every decisive thing is indecisive. White’s story-telling is nonlinear, not like Cartier-Bresson’s who used perspective. White’s reality is built among layers and the protagonist of White’s narrative/moment is always abnormal; for instance, Joshua is a freak with a scrawny body, lipless, earless and noseless; in the Femalien series the femalien has her offspring by a monogenetic birth. In the In a Matter of Days series Los Angeles becomes a flaky city, people there becomes L.A.liens. In the Understanding Joshua series Joshua has been created as a semi-human being with sexual anxiety. White breathes desire onto Joshua and it deforms his personal psychic trauma. Joshua signifies
dysfunctional persons who can be condemned to live in L.A., which for White is the land of the Apocalypse.

As I argued above internalization plays a virtual part in any arts performance. For the postmodern artist, internalization has been shown to be an ‘alienation’ genre and it demonstrates with gravity from the artist’s memory, the past perfect. As Jean Baudrillard states:

If one thinks about it, people no longer project themselves into their objects, with their affects and their representations, their fantasies of possession, loss, mourning, jealous: the psychological dimension has in a sense vanished, and even if it can always be marked out in detail, one feels that it is not really there that things are being played out. Roland Barthes already indicated this some time ago in regard to the automobile: little by little a logic of ‘driving’ has replaced a very subjective logic of possession and projection. No more fantasies of power, speed and appropriation linked to the object itself, but instead a tacit of potentialities linked to usage: mastery, control and command, an optimization of the play of possibilities offered by the car as vector and vehicle, and no longer as object of psychological sanctuary. The subject himself, suddenly transformed, becomes a computer at the wheel, not a drunken demiurge of power. The vehicle now becomes a kind of capsule, its dashboard the brain, the surrounding landscape unfolding like a televised screen (instead of a live-in projectile as it was before). (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 127)

Reflexivity as the principal consideration of the postmodern works in this way: The ecstasy of communication in postmodern art comes from ultimate transformation. Mark Dery points out that TV shows play a conclusive part in White’s works,

(White, a Sesame Street fan, describes him as ‘a human Grover….a very fragile and scared character….The everyday, for him, is a complex maze of emotions, fear and pain.’) According to the artist, Joshua is a poster boy for the concept of ‘ontological insecurity,’ which, in The Divided Self (1965), R.D Laing describes as the first crack in the psyche, portending the schizophrenic shattering of the self. The condition is characterized by consuming fears, among them the fear of being engulfed by others, especially through love, and often inspires a defensive psychotic reaction in which the self splits off into separate parts. (Dery, 2001, p. 52)
If we scrutinize White’s oeuvre we will understand his apprehension over his memory of his childhood. When Christian Metz commented that Cartier-Bresson’s works had a similar point as his, he said,

Photography has a third character in common with death: the snapshot, like death, is an instantaneous abduction of the object out of the world, into another kind of time – unlike cinema, which replaces the object, after the act of appropriation, in an unfolding time similar to that of life. The photographic take is immediate and definitive, like death and like the constitution of fetish in the unconscious, fixed by a glance in childhood, unchanged and always active later. (Metz, 1991, p. 158)

Apart from reflexivity, we can not neglect another main characteristic in postmodern art, the pastiche. White’s subjects are all pastiche. With regard to pastiche Fredric Jameson said,

One of the most significant features or practices in postmodernism today is pastiche. I must first explain this term, which people generally tend to confuse with or assimilate to that related verbal phenomenon called parody. Both pastiche and parody involve the imitation or, better still, the mimicry of other styles and particularly of the mannerisms and stylistic twitches of other styles. It is obvious that modern literature in general offers a very rich field for parody, since the great modern writers have all been defined by the invention or production of rather unique styles: think of the Faulknerian long sentence or of D. H. Lawrence’s characteristic nature imagery; think of Wallace Steven’s peculiar way of using abstractions; think also of the mannerisms of the philosophers, of Heidegger for example, or Sartre; think of the musical styles of Mahler or Prokofiev. All of these styles, however different from each other, are comparable in this: each is quite unmistakable: once one is learned, it is not likely to be confused with something else. (Jameson, 1983, p. 113)

White’s pastiche works in this way: it is a unique blending of things we learned from Sesame Street, The X Files and some of David Lynch’s films. His tableau vivant is a parody but with a sublime sense of postmodern science fiction. White’s tableau vivant is his Utopia, his Eden. Photography, a two dimensional medium, is shallow but there is a profound transformation in postmodern art and White’s manipulation builds a fourth dimension as exemplary mode. The image has its gravitational time dilation producing different layers. As pastiche, White’s tableau vivant is concerned with representation in reality but with another aspect; he revalues the purpose of art and accentuates the role of the institutional and political context in producing meaning.

1.2 Charlie White – The Postmodern Renaissance

White foregrounds the use of the tableau vivant as a means of commenting on American mythologies. Cartier-Bresson used a single moment in time as a symbol of life against death, while White uses allegory and the pantomime theatre tradition to show how American life is like death warmed up. They each use different strategies involving the decisive moment to build dramatic images that display pathos or bathos. The moments of Cartier-Bresson can be defined as modern while White’s moment is postmodern – ironic, integrated, playful and a pastiche.
Image 1.9 Charlie White The Inland Empire, In a Matter of Days series, 1999

Image 1.10 Charlie White Fleming House, Caltech, Pasadena, In a Matter of Days series, 1999

Image 1.11 Charlie White Friday Night, Understanding Joshua series, 2000
I argue that White’s moment is a continuum, not a momentary single instant due to its ontology and its duration, which seems to be lasting longer in terms of its allegorical style. Despite seeing being as a continuum in relation to an individual past perfect, White’s tableau vivant moment is indeed a continuum not only concerning the viewing experience but also in its making as a production. White’s moment is metacommunication. It aggressively takes a vantage point to allure the viewer; when the viewer stands in front of it, he/she is forced to muse. Postmodern photography is a deep sigh; it is a transformation rooted in metacommunication, which can be interpreted as a strategy of addressing viewers in a more sophisticated way. In the postmodern or post-industrial era, advertising photography can be described as a kind of metacommunication; if we scrutinize White’s works we recognize that his image has a very strong connection with advertising, and advertising is a hyper-reality. In other words, the advertisement is a hypothetical field particularly speaking to consumers/viewers with a collusive tone, engaging with business and industry and products. Advertisers and rulers address the viewer/consumer/citizen in a sly or canny insider voice. This voice tries to bring the viewer/consumer/citizen into the process of making and it is a form in which metacommunication works. Advertising speaks to the viewer as a postmodern strategy in the process of viewing the advertisement. So does White’s tableau vivant work like an advertisement? Yes, but at a different political level, one I call ‘The Postmodern Renaissance’. As Roland Jones said,

In considering these three projects by Charlie White, I thought first of Francisco de Goya, particularly his 1820 mezzotint, The Colossus. The mezzotint portrays a gargantuan fiend crouching in the serene countryside, bathed in moonlight. He is alone, and for the moment, chaos is suspended. Without doubt, mayhem still looms in the future, but for now the world is at peace. The empathy we might find for the monster rests with his dependence on havoc as his only instrument for socialization. Dependent solely upon violence as his avenue for self-expression, the colossus truly has nothing else, and thus for all his power he is helpless, and ultimately alone. This monster requires kindness. It is precisely the allegory of the grotesque as a conduit for social behaviour that made me think of Goya while considering Charlie White. (Jones, 2001, p. 6).
White’s works are The Postmodern Renaissance with an eerie face and a very deep understanding of politics and society. Therefore White’s works are not only works of art but critiques of politics and society in a tableau vivant style. He exploits his allegory with tableau vivant. As Gregory L. Ulmer said, quoting from Craig Owens,

The importance of allegory for postmodernism has already been discussed by critics such as Craig Owens (among others) who in fact uses the writings of Derrida and Paul de Man to define the question. Owens identifies allegory with Derrida’s notion of ‘supplement’ (one of the many names Derrida assigns to the effect of the gram): “If allegory is identified as a supplement [‘an expression externally added to another expression,’ hence ‘extra,’ yet supplying a lack], then it is also aligned with writing, insofar as writing is conceived as supplementary to speech.” Owens also makes good use of Derrida’s notion of ‘deconstruction’ to suggest how postmodernism goes ‘beyond formalism’: The deconstructive impulse is characteristic of postmodernist art in general and must be distinguished from the self-critical tendency of modernism. Modernist theory presupposed that mimesis, the adequation of an image to a referent, can be bracketed or suspended, and that the art object itself can be substituted (metaphorically) for its referent…. Postmodernism neither brackets nor suspends the referent but works instead to problematize the activity of reference. (L. Ulmer, 1983, p. 95)

Or as Theo Van Leeuwen argued,

Contemporary art may disguise symbolism in another sense. When artists draw on unconscious inspiration rather than on consciously known symbolic traditions, symbolism will be repressed on a conscious level. When critics then nevertheless give a symbolic interpretation of such works, the artists will often contest it. In the age of postmodernism a conscious use of symbols and intertextual references seems to have become more acceptable again. (Leeuwen, 2001, pp. 109-110)

Thus postmodern art becomes a mixture of opacity and clarity, and symbolism coheres with deconstruction formalism. Or as a level of interpretation in Chinese painting, depicting spirit with silhouette sketching. White’s works not only reach the shore of symbolism as The Postmodern Renaissance but he also achieves a Chinese metacommunication of depicting spirit with silhouette sketching. White’s image obviously occupies a curious position somewhere between the statements of visual language in terms of postmodernism, which is intended to convey a meaning with metacommunication, with tableau vivant, and to convey the things of reality, to which we can only give a meaning in a sense of postmodernism. That was why Gombrich argued,

As soon as we start to ask awkward questions the apparent triviality of representational meaning disappears and we feel tempted to question the need invariably to refer the artist’s form to some imagined significance. (Gombrich, 1972, p. 3)

White’s works are exemplary in their attempt to signify that there is something beyond the image and that the connotation is opaque and clear at the same time. Despite White’s allegory having been revealed through the science fiction genre, his tableau vivant still needs a shell, for example, a Hollywood style, and this parasitism is his feature of pastiche. As Stephen A. Barney said,
The allegorist and his audience would need to be familiar with the ways meaning will flow through metaphoric channels, and they would need some sense of the usual types of things which mean (the biblical tokens) and the ways in which they mean (the set of Articulators). (Barney, 1982, p. 103)

Therefore Hollywood is the biblical token White takes. He adopts and re-uses materials from TV shows and films and his allegorical tableau vivant becomes his personal imprint. Stephen A. Barney also said,

Our metaphor, that meaning ‘flows,’ draws attention to another visual image which the format of the Abel calls to mind: the sets of strings from the Titles to the various sections radiate (in the best manuscripts) like a river debouching across a delta into an ocean. It is an image of abundance divided. The meaning flows across numerous channels: the idea of division involves the idea of a plurality contained within a unity. (Barney, 1982, p. 104)

The above quotation is an explanation of White’s allegory. White’s tableau vivant is like a sponge with symbolism twisting his individual past perfect and essentially prints it out with the ‘de-formation’ of postmodernism. Hence in White’s tableau vivant reality and definition, the shackling of objects more often meant depleting exhibitions. The allegory river drifts through The Renaissance, modernism and postmodernism, and postmodernism is finally its destination. We thus can identify White’s work in the postmodern taxonomy rather than alienating and separating its distinctive faces. As White refines his postmodern indecisive moment, his ironical tableau vivant mocks contemporary politics and society. He, the same as Cartier-Bresson, becomes resistant. All two use different strategies to interpret what reality is. Cartier-Bresson worked in the field of Modernism and White within the castle of postmodernism. White’s oeuvre can be described as radicalism because it breaks the boundary between human and objects and the viewer’s seeing experience is being pushed further out. By so doing White generates his postmodern knowledge and White’s work becomes conceptual art rooted in political issues. As Douglas Crimp, quoting Barbara Rose, says,

For some time I have felt that the radicalism of Minimal and Conceptual art is fundamentally political, that its implicit aim is to discredit thoroughly the forms and institutions of dominant bourgeois culture. …Whatever the outcome of such a strategy, one thing is certain: when an institution as prestigious as the Museum of Modern Art invites sabotage, it becomes party, not to the promulgation of experimental art, but to the passive acceptance of disenchanted, demoralized artist’s aggression against art greater than their own. (Crimp, 1981, p. 70)

However, it will be difficult to identify whether White’s works belong to bourgeois culture. From my point of view, it is a part of bourgeois culture but a very critical one. After all, White comes from the bourgeoisie. What White tries to do is build his postmodern art, which can break the upper limits of class. White’s oeuvre is like the Apocalypse and it encourages the viewer into a sense of metacommunication.
1.3 Charlie White – Tableaux Vivant

The exploitation of tableau vivant in postmodern art started before White. Yet White, Gregory Crewdson and Jeff Wall promote tableau vivant into an important watershed. I believe White’s oeuvre especially is ‘radicalism’ because his subjects undergo a complete metamorphosis. When seeing his subjects, whether human or not, we empathize with the subjects through a sense of fiction. This transformation often appears within postmodern art. It is partly because post-industrial consumer culture pervades our society, which affects our point of view in the visual arts. On the other hand, postmodern art cannot easily be classified since the subjects have been deleted. In postmodern art, the subjects disappear, and so the viewer is placed in a superior position. The producer/artist of
postmodern art has his or her purposes but now the viewer takes over the predominant position the artist used to occupy. The viewer takes the main role in the process of metacommunication. To this extent, postmodern art does not subvert the modern but it enhances the reflexivity of the viewer. Taking White as an example, what confuses the viewer is being created in indecisive moments. As Barthes said, the author may be dead, however, are we certain of the death of the author? I believe the author merely pretends to be sleeping. Postmodern art often raises such questions. Postmodernism is an ironic mode of viewing the complexities of contemporary culture; it addresses the viewer as a complex reader and the postmodern image must be decoded individually. As a kind of individualism, postmodernism is deeply cynical about all art being on a level which appears to be commercial. Postmodernists argue that all features of life are being synthesized with consumer culture.

As I argued above, postmodern art does not subvert the modern and postmodernism is not necessarily liberating; just because it breaks with the principles of modernism does not mean that it breaks with predominant ideology or is resistant to modernism. However, postmodernism can indeed be explained as the ideology of the consumer culture and it engages strongly with the individual consumer. Modernism values nostalgia very much in order to accept and reproduce classical tenets. Postmodernism in contrast rejects nostalgia, and also denies that there is a single concept of truth or a universal humanism.

Postmodern art combines classical and commercial, design and advertising, fake and real. In its rejection of nostalgia, postmodern art blurs the boundaries; in postmodern art every image is complex and becomes multi-layered and blurred in meaning. Postmodern art indicates the increase of a universalizing self-consciousness which can be seen in both the reflexivity and the metacommunication in all features of daily life. In one sense of everyday life, White’s tableau vivant is ingenious, as it breaks the meaning of the defined norm. For instance, when Barthes explained tableau vivant, he said,

As is well known, the whole of Diderot’s aesthetics rests on the identification of theatrical scene and pictorial tableau: the perfect play is a succession of tableau, that is, a gallery, an exhibition; the stage offers the spectator ‘as many real tableaux as there are in the action moments favourable to the painter’. The tableau (pictorial, theatrical, literary) is a pure cut-out segment with clearly defined edges, irreversible and incorruptible; everything that surrounds it is banished into nothingness, remains unnamed, while everything that it admits within its field is promoted into essence, into light, into view. Such demiurgic discrimination implies high quality of thought: the tableau is intellectual, it has something to say (something moral, social) but it also says that it knows how this must be done; it is simultaneously significant and propaedeutical, impressive and reflexive, moving and conscious of the channels of emotion. (Barthes, 1977, p. 70)

Barthes argued that tableaux vivant was a channel shedding emotion – its classical definition. In fact, tableau vivant was always didactic and morally correct in the nineteenth century. Even when tableau vivant was performed by photography, it still remained in this classical style until the postmodern era. Graham Clarke argued,
In 1861 C. Jabez Hughes (writing on ‘art’ photography) distinguished between three main levels of photograph. Mechanical photography consisted of those photographs ‘which aim at a simple representation of the objects to which the camera is pointed…’ In these, everything is to be depicted exactly as it is. This is called ‘literal photography’. As distinct from such basic recording there is Art-photography, where the photographer (as artist) ‘determines to diffuse his mind into [objects] by arranging, modifying, or otherwise disposing them, so that they may appear in a more appropriate or beautiful manner’. And thirdly, high-art photography, consists of ‘certain pictures which aim at a higher purpose than the majority of art-photographs, and whose purpose is not merely to amuse but to instruct, purify, and ennoble’. (Clarke, 1997, p. 43)

When tableau vivant appeared in photography, it was high-art photography because it was made with highly intense artistic elements of morality. Yet White’s postmodern tableau vivant is still intense and not only a channel shedding emotion but also an outlet to radiate his postmodern ideas. White’s tableau vivant merges consumer culture and post-industrial myth. It is White’s reflexivity but also the object of public critique. As a Sesame Street fan, fetish is a clear tendency; however, White’s works also have a dualism – it is reflexivity and pastiche at the same time as most postmodern art is. It is White’s fetish complex but an embodiment of post-industrial image production. Therefore, as Barthes argued,

Is the tableau then (since it arises from a process of cutting out) a fetish-object? Yes, at the level of the ideal meaning (Good, Progress, the Cause, the triumph of the just History); no, at that of its composition. Or rather, more exactly, it is the very composition that allows the displacement of the point at which the fetish comes to a halt and thus the setting further back of the loving effect of the decoupage. Once again, Diderot is for us the theorist of this dialectic of desire; in the article on ‘Composition’, he writes: ‘A well-composed picture (tableau) is a whole contained under a single point of view, in which the parts work together to one end and form by their mutual correspondence a unity as real as that of the members of the body of an animal; so that a piece of painting made up of a large number of figures thrown at random on to the canvas, with neither proportion, intelligence nor unity, no more deserves to be called a true composition than scattered studies of legs, nose and eyes on the same cartoon deserve to be called a portrait or even a human figure. (Barthes, 1977, p. 71)

White’s tableau vivant is a fusion of several different facets but based on a single point of view in postmodernism. White starts his tableau vivant with a personal angle in politics and society and creates his hyper-reality by so doing. His subjects are science fiction species, what they give us is a hyper-epic, a spectacular banquet which never exists in reality.

The content of White’s works introduces the very idea of the postmodern tableau vivant; the whole body of White’s tableau vivant is produced and coherently composed by the magnetic power of transcendence and fetishistic power and eventually presents a sublime substitute for meaning. In White’s works, the meaning has been transformed, surpassed. Expecting this transformation in fact is White’s root of creativity. His moment is a kind of still science-fiction film but completely different from Cartier-Bresson’s. With regard to the meaning of representation, it had been stuck in a historical
context, for instance, in the moment of Cartier-Bresson. Representation has inevitably to be realized with a social gesture, in other words, tableau vivant is the presentation of an ideal meaning, the perfect past; the actor must reproduce the very knowledge of the meaning. Despite Cartier-Bresson utilized tableau vivant, he did this with everyday/normal events. Compared with Cartier-Bresson, White’s work is an artificial perfection and a complete articulation of his knowledge. This knowledge, which the contents of his tableau vivant must demonstrate, is neither knowledge of secular events nor the knowledge of an actor. His tableau vivant is transcendence.

When Lisa Anne Auerbach interviewed White, she asked him:

Would you see yourself in the role of ‘director’? “That’s a correct way of looking at; I think the role of director is appropriate.” You oversee all the casting, set dressing, wardrobe, staging…. “I put it together. It’s similar to a film scene except that it’s reduced to a still.” And how does your practice differ from a more conventional idea of collaboration? “I see my process in relation to painting because starting point acts as a sketch of an idea, then you have to build that idea, and then you have to render it, both on film and then finally with the computer. This entire procedure requires a team effort.” (Auerbach, 2001, p. 100)

Thus White’s intervention is aggressive and subjective and differs from previous tableau vivant. For White, he is an observer but at the same time a creator. In the past, the meaning of tableau vivant brought with it a social gesture, outside this gesture; there was only haze, insignificance. However, White’s tableau vivant transcends this vagueness since the meaning does not lie in the choice of a subject but in the choice of the pregnant moment, the indecisive moment.

As I said, White’s tableau vivant is also a performance of allegory. It is a postmodern pantomime theatre and White pastes different layers onto it, therefore it becomes indecisive rather than decisive, hyper-real, more real than real. White’s tableau vivant is a hybrid, to this extent; his moment is akin to that of Diane Arbus but by the use of a completely dissimilar strategy. Here I quote Samuel R. Levin’s definition of allegory:

Allegory, as based on personification, is a mixed mode. It can be ‘unmixed’ by replacing the allegorizing nouns with others that conform with the predicates. This move reduces allegory to literal narrative – a narrative by humans about humans. Conformity could be achieved in another way if we were to add to the lexicon species-specific predicates for all those contingencies where in default of specific terms we employ human predicates. (Levin, 1981, p. 28)

Samuel R. Levin argued that allegory has its contingency and this exterior meaning affects the meaning of allegory. As we understand things and their meanings, they are never from just one source, but many sources; the theatre, pantomime, film and traditional narrative. White’s work differs from that of others not only through his postmodern stance but also in his fetishist matter. His science-fiction geometry builds the representation and his subject is required in the tableau.

Where White’s postmodern tableau vivant allegory is concerned, surrealism has been signified as one of the a priori potential models of construct – the issue in personification in his series such as In A Matter of Days, Understanding Joshua and Femalien. Meanwhile, some of White’s series have a
priori models of depersonification, such as *The Americans, US Gymnastics 2005* and *Champion 2005*. Yet in all White’s series is a radical type of personification; *The Americans, US Gymnastics 2005* and *Champion 2005* use real human beings as subjects. In White’s tableau vivant, the standard case of personification leads the viewer to an interpretation in which the predicate is possibly understood to have a meaning which is compatible with the representation.

*Image 1.15* Charlie White *The Americans Gymnastics Team, Everything is Americans series, 2005*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge argued,
And an allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principal being more worthless even than its phantom proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot. (Coleridge, 1972, p. 30)

White’s tableau vivant indeed is an abstraction with overlapping, different layers. We can take the Understanding Joshua series to illustrate this issue. In Understanding Joshua, the backgrounds and foregrounds play crucial roles to enrich the meaning. Without these layers, the series would be impoverished; in other words, White renders his knowledge by capitalizing on layers, he pastes context among layers and together they reach their perfect goal.

The myth White fabricates is beyond repetition and juxtaposition; he breaks traditional regulations and history is even being built by him; in other words, White transforms his indecisive moment into a decisive moment. In the simplest definition, allegory says one thing and means another. Or as Samuel R. Levin, quoting Northrop Frye, said,

> We have allegory when the events of a narrative obviously and continuously refer to another simultaneous structure of events or ideas, whether historical events, moral or philosophical ideas, or natural phenomena. (Levin, 1981, p. 23)

So allegory has its disjunctive or dualistic nature. However, White’s allegory breaks the boundary between history, morality, philosophy and natural phenomena. Through his indecisive moment with its multiple meanings – in a surrealist way and timeless construction – the history White builds is a divinely authored myth. In his allegory every deployment seems arbitrary, but each detail is a necessary signifier that contributes to a transcendental representation. They seem to be random, yet they work in total collaboration. There is a complex relationship in his tableau vivant between what is in time and what is out of time, and it is a model for the surrealist poetic form; it is a variation with a postmodern tune.

1.4 Conclusion Charlie White and the Regime of Truth

This is not the power of the camera but the power of the apparatuses of the local state which deploy it and guarantee the authority of the images it constructs to stand as evidence or register a truth. (Tagg, 1993, p. 64)

A regime of truth is that circular relation which truth has to the system of power that produces and sustains it, and to the effects of power which it induces and which redirect it. Such a regime has been not only an effect, but a condition of the formation and development of capitalist societies; to contest it, however, it is not enough to gesture at some ‘truth’ somehow emancipated from every system of power. Truth itself is already power, bound to the political, economic and institutional regime which produces it. We must forget the claims of a discredited documentary tradition to fight for ‘truth’ or ‘in favour’ of ‘truth’ and see that the battle is one that should be directed at the rules, operative in our society, according to which ‘true’ and ‘false’ representation are separated. It is a battle waged against those institutions privileged and empowered in our society to produce and transmit ‘true’ discourse. It is a battle-going beyond the spectral and professional interests of photography-around the specific effects of
power of this truth and the economic and political role it plays. (Tagg, 1993, p. 94)

The reality White wants to showcase in his tableau vivant is ambiguous. He establishes the castle isolated by postmodernism and the truth he cultivates is inside the castle. His works try to reflect the truth of the American bourgeoisie but at the same time criticize it. As Michel Foucault argued, power generates knowledge, and so, too, does White try to build a place which belongs to his bourgeois subjects who are also his clients and his market.

Mark Dery believes that the reality White achieves is,

The truth, in White’s eyes, is that “we are more an idea of who and what we are than we are a real person who has superseded the idea and entered a space that is honest to oneself and others. I do not think this condition is terrible; I think it is logical because we use it to survive within ourselves and among others. The…mind has to do this; if not, the pressure of outside ideas of who, what, and why we are would destroy us. I do not think this is an exaggeration in a society moving towards a pharmaceutical solution for all personal problems and personality traits that we would rather subdue than work through.” (Dery, 2001, p. 53)

In other words, what White deduces is a real world but within a science-fiction structure. The gravitational time of dilation in White’s moment is floating above the earth but it originates from the earth; White’s story-telling is an umbilical cord connecting fiction and the secular but shown in a surrealist mode. To this extent, White embraces the surface – the way that images supersede the real and the true – as I above argued, postmodernism is not necessarily going beyond modernism but achieving a more accurate register of truth. White regards the surface as the fundamental factor of political and social life, which unfolds the reality which is hidden underneath. In postmodernism, the surface transcends the idea of the real, which used to be buried beneath the horizon. As Jean Baudrillard argued, the surface is all we can have access to and all we can see and this plays a new significant part in postmodern culture. The viewer finds nothing beneath the surface because there is no longer any true meaning there. According to Michel Foucault, images are not only facets in interpersonal relationships of power such as between those who look and those who are being looked at, but also are factors in the functioning structure of institutional power, the national machine, which is an ‘inspecting’ gaze through frameworks of apparatus. If we take Foucault’s position to account for White’s works, White’s ‘discourse’ is the relation between his point of view overlooking this given American society and the ideal meaning he represents in relation to reality. Thinking about it in another way, White tries to pit his tableau vivant against instrumental power and in White’s works Foucault’s concept of discourse switches over to a new phrase. His tableau vivant images are counterparts to Foucault’s discourse, but in a sense of personal reflexivity, not a gaze from a governing instrument. White knows how power systems work, how things are given a meaning and what they represent in a controlled society. The term ‘discourse’ Foucault used has usually been described as passages of writing or speech. White turns it into an image of a passage of conversation, the act of depicting social phenomena. Foucault argued that discourse generates certain knowledge and subjects. I believe that White’s tableau vivant produces not only a ‘blind field’ in Barthes’ terms,
but also ‘discourse’ in Foucault’s terms, with a new face. The viewer occupies to varying degrees the
subject positions defined within a broad array of discourses. As a result I do not think I can use the
semiotic method to undertake a photographic anatomy of White’s works since, as postmodernism is
personal individualism, the viewer becomes the author.

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Brief Biographies of Charlie White

Brief Biography of Charlie White (from Charlie White, Goliath Verlagsgesellschaft)

Born 1972, Philadelphia, PA, USA
1998 MA Art Centre College of Design, Pasadena, CA
1995 BA School of Visual Arts, New York.
1994 Yale, Norfolk, Summer Program

Solo Exhibitions

1999 Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY, ‘In a Matter of Days’, March 5 – April 10
1999 Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum, Santa Barbara, CA, September 25 – November 7, 1999

Selected Group Exhibitions

2000 P.S 1 Centre for Contemporary Art, New York, ‘Sometimes Warm and Fuzzy: Childhood and Contemporary Art’ February 4 – April 8, 2001
Travels to Fundacio La Caixa, Barcelona, Spain; April 26 – July 28, 2001; Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento; August 30 – November 4, 2001; Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada; November 24, 2001 – January 20, 2002
1999 Yerba Buena Centre for the Arts, San Francisco, CA; ‘Above Human’, February 26 – April 30, 2000
Centro de Arte La Recova: Espacio Cultural El Tanque, Canary Islands, Spain, ‘2000 anos luz’, October 17 – November 22, 2000
P.P.O.W Gallery, New York NY, ‘True West’, July 8 – August 6, 1999

Des Moines Art Centre, Des Moines, Iowa, ‘Sometimes Warm and Fuzzy: Childhood and Contemporary Art’, September 12 – November 21, 1999

Travels to Tacoma Art Museum, July 8 – September 17, 2000;
Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, October 6, 2000 – January 14, 2001

1997 Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York, NY, ‘The Name of the Place’ organized by Laurie Simmons, January 10 – February 8, 1997


Solo Published Projects
