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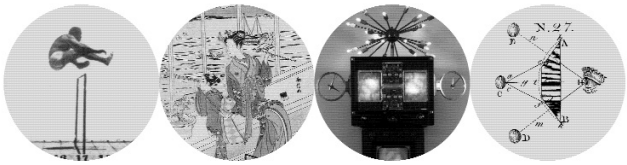

# From Structure to Enigma and Back, Perhaps

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Abstract
This article is concerned with reviewing the histories of structuralism and poststructuralism in their moment of redundancy as theoretical terms in order to unearth and instate some of the missing relations of writing and figure that we can read out of the work of the French writer Jean-Louis Schefer. Little read in the Anglo-Saxon university, his thinking on art, cinema and literature represents a unique intervention that, in its poetic denial of its own structuralist origins, offers a form of critical text that escapes the categories and methodologies of critical theory while remaining rooted in a series of different forms of profound scholarship. Schefer's work invites us to configure images and to map out the surfaces that make them visible as the invention of an equal and amorous or sometimes unequal relation with them. He invites us to invent.

Keywords
choose/chosen • painting • structuralism • surface

This article arose out of a conversation with Jean-Louis Schefer following a seminar he had given at the University of Leeds on his work concerning the colour red in a painting of Paolo Uccello (1999c), the Eucharist, the Jew and the ensemble of blood myths surrounding the Vampire. These themes, of aesthetics, literary and figural trace and theology typify his work and, in part, the ensemble of his interests, and they constitute an exercise in radical thinking beyond iconography, iconology and the historical truth values of evidence, proof or comparison. They are to be found in a number of different essays – I will return to these in due course.[1]

I said to him how much I continued to admire his 1967 book *Scénographie d'un tableau*, a study that remains one of the most exhaustive and complex

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semiotic expositions ever undertaken of painting.[2] He replied that he had no more to do with it and indeed thoroughly disliked it – a renunciation that is very evident in his *Artforum* article of 1997, 'Journey', an account of his critical life and writing in which it is not even mentioned – although the transformation of semiology in structuralism and the pleasures of *bricolage* is emphasized in its moment, in *Tel Quel* and the work of non-academic thinkers. Similarly, in his two collections of writing on art and literature, *Figures peintes* (1998a) and *Choses écrites* (1998d), there is hardly even a shadow of this passage through structuralism, even though his departure from it is densely set out in a critique of Claude Lévi-Strauss to be found in the latter, 'L'échange des animaux coupables' (1998e[1976]). Here he argues against oxymoronic and tautologous methodologies and for a conjunctural and specific understanding of the form of subject as a subject of law, of a particular form of Roman *ius*, rather than as the structured effect of an exchange. This substitution of a permutable and contingent matrix of subjectifications, performances one should say, remains important for his writing, its singular poetic – the poetic of his scholarly and loving relation to the object. In conclusion to 'Journey' he writes that:

> The final utopia is not a system (ordered, progressive, moving toward the finality of a philosophy of history). Nor is it a network of analogical connections (as Warburg dreamed of). And it's not some vague project of writing down the world's fragments, captivated by their poetic force or their intellectual stimulation. Rather, it's a work in progress, something that picks up on all the world's metaphors. So the horizon of our work is not some system that might one day close up – it's an open continent, a sort of cartography. Proust's work gives a good idea of this kind of infinite junction of metaphors, where everything is simultaneous.[3]

If he turns from both order and its finality – as well as from what might be hoped from analogy – then I understand his rejection of *Scénographie*. It is and always was a strange piece of writing; a repressed frenzy in its calculating systematics, cold, formal and ambitious in its conquest of the complex relations between sign, significance and historical moments in the conjuncture of the painted figure. Largely it explores a single painting, Paris Bordone's *Chess Players* (1540), but with a short, comparative excursus on one other image, the more famous Fontainebleau double portrait of *Gabrielle d'Estrée et la Duchesse de Villars* (1594) in which one woman takes the other's nipple with the same gesture as that with which one of the chess players lifts a pawn. The inversion of the position of the hand from horizontal to vertical, from lifting to pinching, is clearly a form for a figure that is both paradigmatic and particular and which, therefore, within the systems of structural linguistics, constitutes a crucial moment around which the endless and complex processes of establishing binary lexemes – inside/outside, nature/culture, power/subjection, surface/depth, etc. – can be swung around and over each other on axes of difference and superposition, in such a way as finally to read what is symbolized as well as what is shown.

Hence the comparative chapter is important in the forming of the central argument which is concerned, as Schefer put it in the preface, with the following: 'If the painting can be analysed in terms of system without being a language, this is also because what it *represents* is not what it "figures"' (1967: 7; emphasis in original), and the irruption of a second image both confirms, distends and dissolves the findings that precede it. While this space or difference between the represented and the figure remains part of the thematic material of his writing, as in the red or Uccello essays, it precisely no longer forms an axis of a series of structurally determined exchanges. It is, above all, exchange that must disappear as the manifestation of an immanent order.

Yet the transubstantiation of semiology into image and back that *Scénographie* undertook made for a complex and complicated text, thoroughly sadistic as a discourse on the image and in its use of rhetoric. If it appealed so strongly, this is probably because of the situation in which *Scénographie* appeared to me. I will not attempt to give more than an outline of the overall flow of the book, which shifts between elaborate exposition and reprises in the form of glossary – a language was being disclosed, and reading it was in some respects and for this comparable with encountering Peter Wollen's *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1969). That structures, lexemes or semic flows of one shape or another, within and beyond the image may, once disclosed, occlude what had brought them into visibility, certainly gave the process an aporetic character: I would say as much aporetic as tautological, tacking here and there rather than a mere short circuit. Anyway, my own attempt to think through the book, in both meanings of that phrase, was shaped in using it to discuss their work with fine art students in the early 1970s – something that may or may not have been a thankless thing to have attempted. In all probability, trying to teach Schefer's impossible book was something that could have made sense only in an art school in the early 1970s, in the company of constructivist artists and other severe practitioners, many of them steeped in a complicated mixture of Claude Lévi-Strauss's then new *La pensée sauvage* (1962), the Noam Chomsky of *Cartesian Linguistics* (1966), Charles Biederman's theories of visual knowledge in *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge* (1948), Richard Paul Lohse's structuralist painting, John Cage's *Indeterminacy* and general systems theory after Norbert Wiener, as well as late Adorno and early Marx – impure *bricolage* in search of a pure figure, via (non)representation, before the interdictions of poststructuralism were to fall.[4] The relation between system and chance as a perceptible trace that could be thought of as somehow sublimed *in* the artwork was figured as a utopian potential of thinking and making, as a character of beauty in art itself, in its formal and figural elaboration. With its complex orderings of the visible, *Scénographie* was a possible guide to how one might think about this presence, at the same time a residuum and an essence of a practice, in whatever medium and without reducing one to another.

Thinking about all of this today also entails thinking about Maoism, or the 'moment' of *Tel Quel*: different but imbricated phenomena with strangely

unpredictable futures. Yet it is liable to generate an edenic longing for one of theory's many infancies; something that is, of course, only to be reproached, as must be any yearning for an origin. But that cannot be helped. Much has been published on the history and fate of structuralist thinking, and here it is rather this oddity of the future of the then present than a history that I want to indicate. After all, in the same year that *Scénographie* was published Jacques Derrida made his fundamental critique of the Saussurean certitudes that underpinned it in his famous interview with Julia Kristeva: a strange superposition in itself that, somehow in its polynarrative perversity, seems only to bear out the Lévi-Straussian notion of an infinitude of interweaving myth(eme)s. Really the narrowness of the space between the two events, which is little more than a few pages of *Tel Quel*, should imply that they both continue to exist for thinking to have a future.

Yet in the event, the future of Derrida's even more systematic and manipulative critique of Lévi-Strauss in *De la grammatologie* (1967a) was to ensure that this would not be largely the case, and that *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) would become the villain of a certain theoretical history as it became entrenched in the universities. Taken from behind by what I see as Derrida's own abuse of the notion of *différance*, in making that concept into the position before discourse from which all Lévi-Strauss's discursive strategies could be a priori invalidated, the values of his writing, its textual belonging to the time, were largely effaced; and this despite Derrida's entirely more sympathetic critique of *bricolage* and positive evaluation of a later Lévi-Strauss – *Le cru et le cuit* (1964) and *La pensée sauvage* (1962) – in his *Écriture et différence* (1967b). By the 1980s, in institutional terms – in the university – *bricolage* and theoretical experiment were to be overwhelmed by textbook explication and doxa, a kind of prissy eclecticism or syncretism, invariably abetted by the short-circuitry of Luce Irigaray's incisive wit in her critique of the great structuralist (monster) in *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1971), and despite the ongoing, radical effects of feminist and queer interventions in the question of exchange from the later 1970s (Derrida, 1972; Dosse, 1991–2).[5]

Yet in the face of Schefer's renunciation one could say that it was as if *Scénographie* had chosen its proper readers already, and despite him; we have little reason to conceal it as a stratum in our own archeology, on account either of the author's rejection or of his modesty or the subsequent fate of structuralism. For within its reading, whether from a practice of art or of teaching, it had contradictory and overdetermined effects, even something like that of realising *différance* in the crazed pursuit of its finalities, its very systematics generating an excess of enigma and only improbable resolutions. Being invited to contribute an essay to a celebratory volume for Schefer gave me an opportunity to hold him to the *Scénographie* by whatever means I could, and in that sense to preserve an element of intellectual history as well as to look again at how, in some important respects, the problem of visual culture is a problem that never was.

For if Schefer's book was first and foremost an intervention in the field of the theoretical and linguistic understanding of the complexity of the artwork,

it was conceived of neither as an art-historical discourse – although it sometimes refers to such a discipline – nor as a replacement for one of the kind that visual culture has pretended later to be, at least in some of its guises. The radical structuralist elaboration and intrication of the image with the words that fill it – which is neither an iconography nor an iconology – words that name and unpick the image's parts, which are already too multifarious and heterogeneous properly to be named, the chiasmic relation of the words and the image, rhetoric, grammar and procedure in their mutual constitution and undoing; these processes make for something that is neither word nor image as such, neither visual in a sense restricted or delimited by the nature of the object – a Venetian painting – nor something demanding that different forms of narrativity – visual/verbal – need to be brought into being as the terrain from which each will finally signify its specificity or difference. Significantly, Schefer achieved this with a relatively minor work, far removed from the canon of great Bellinis, Titians or Veroneses, although his writing bears some resemblances to Julia Kristeva's equally dense thinking on Giotto or Bellini, in their preoccupation with the limits of discourse and our understanding of what moves discourse and of how it moves. Schefer indicates this in a footnote to the Appendix of *Scénographie* (1967: 203) and the unities and discontinuities in her work over the last 37 years make an interesting comparison with his own.

So, in the introduction to *Figures peintes*, Schefer comes to remark that works of art choose us as much as we choose them – something that is already implicit in Kristeva's notions of excess and hypercathexis – but then Schefer is *not* a psychoanalytic thinker but one of the 'world's images'. Images choose us, he states, neither in search of our 'explanation nor an estimation of their value', but of dialogue: 'through figures, they present us enigmas with which we dialogue' (1998a: 7–8) It is in setting the image and himself as uneven equals that the logic of *Figures peintes* (a chronological collection of his work on painting from 1962 to 1996) is one of distance and ellipsis in which he puts a distance between himself and the system of critical inquiry that was high structuralism. As I have suggested, this is evident in the selection itself, as apart from the very first piece that he published, the 1962 'Watteau' and an entry in the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, 'Cimabue' (1969), the period of *Scénographie* is missing. The selection gets going again in the later 1970s, by which time Schefer has published 'L'échange des animaux coupables' (1998e[1976]). In effect this is a highly political essay and also inscribes his thinking in a field that includes, at various stages, Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben in their different facings of subject in community and as a trace. And yet the very notion that an object may choose is far from alien to that of the gaze as *objet*.

I am arguing that if he – like so many of the thinkers around *Tel Quel*, once high structuralists – came to be thought of as rather paradigmatic of the postmodern, then this was not so much on account of the great renunciation in itself but also something to do with the oddities of structuralism as they became more evident, and as they had already been hypostatized in his writing as well as that of Lévi-Strauss. If he renounced the mastery of system,

which may be seen as a postmodern motif, and if *Scénographie* hardly offered the promise of enigma in *its* opening pages, it was a brilliant thread in the tissue of new knowledges that established the notion of a signifying object that necessarily could not but foreground its enigmatic character exactly in the quality and intensity of the attentions that it demanded. Nor, as we will shortly see, did his renunciation foreclose on Schefer's using the word *scénographie*; nor indeed, as I have suggested, on what happens between a reader and the text when the reader is chosen by it. Freed from the constraint of the structuralist moment as from its poststructural and postmodern (terms that at last have acquired a deserved redundancy) aftermath, the Schefer, along with the contemporary texts of a Barthes or a Kristeva, for example, can be seen for its particular luminosity, both belonging to and going beyond the moment, even as it was written. The urgencies were immense, finding words to tell other words and words proper to images untranslatable into words, against the background demand for a political clarity that might as well be invested in a militant demand as in ideology-defying rhetorical austerity. In these circumstances this complicated approach to the relation between a primary, nominal or descriptive discourse of the *Chess Players* and a second discourse of its parts began to meet the criterion of a discourse itself articulating the constructive–negative as an intellectual politics:

> The second discourse signifies the first (and simultaneously suspends the signified of the first) discourse; it is that which, through this double ground, gives depth to the painting: this depth, I would insist, is not a depth of sense, but of the system. (1967: 50)

It suited perfectly, this highly elaborate and formal, dense process of ordered speculation on the very possibility of pictorial signification: quite what it is, which element in a series holds it, where it might occur through the many ellipses of linguistic theory, its system and discourse on and in the object. It made part of a genealogy of intellectual experience, one where, importantly, the making of a painted surface or an object was as much a vector as were words. Schefer's text belonged here and was appropriated willy-nilly in a way that both embraced and defied its spirit, even as he renounced it – and if it does indeed have an afterlife, then this is *as if it too* were a work of art. In its own potential for enigma it joins the mysterious and sometime involuntary irrationalities of structuralist art itself, in the way that they too conjoin the aleatory fields of making and of viewing in something that we could also call a gaze.

The subsequent scenographies of Schefer's work are multiple, they are the scenes of the cinema, of medieval devotional art as well as paleolithic painting, of Dutch and French still life and architectural views, of mythology, folk tale and theology in their intertwining, of colour itself, of literature and of their intertextuality. It would be possible to write an essay just on the title of each of his three (now four) major collections of essays, *Figures peintes* (1998a), *Choses écrites* (1998d) and *Images mobiles* (1998b). Each of these in its own way playfully and confoundingly succumbs to the specific but

complex charges of image, text or cinema in such a way as to unsettle the nature of the object, its framings and its capacity to make meanings so that it is now it, the object itself, promises language the semiotic depth that semiotics once appeared to have offered it. Each volume charts both the efflorescence and mutual contamination of Schefer's principal subjects, and traces the dispersal of *his* being a writer across the knowledges with which these subjects overwhelm him, in their gaze. In *Choses écrites*, for example, the essay entitled 'Dracula, le pain et le sang' (1998f) temporarily arrests his thinking around the colour red, the Eucharist and the Augustinian body, to isolate the principal thematic materials – if to do so, hierarchically, is not already the abuse of explication. For the method itself is not hermeneutic.

Between the red of Uccello's *Miracle of the Desecrated Host* (Urbino, 1465–89), the *marron* of the *Deluge* (1447–8) and another red of the 15th-century, this time the red robe of the Rhenish *Virgin in a Garden* (1479) in *Question de style* (1995c), the colour becomes an anachronistic thing, set loose in its various appearances – or apparitions – both across time and within the organization of individual images; it is neither a colour nor a theme, but an anamorphic object: one that takes on the shapes and modes of figurality in the superposition of meanings that it enables, apart from chronology, determining structure or fixed arrangement. The essay 'Dracula' witnesses the traces of such an object, and traces its forms in film, literature, painting and theological histories. Schefer indeed enacts his own proposition in the introduction to *Choses écrites*:

> But these languages, these improbable reasonings, these indirect and poorly argued thoughts (these demonstrations of retouching [repentance][6] that *all texts make*) are also my own; they build the meager surface yet perhaps the only link that attaches us to all other men: we all speak the same languages, we all speak of the impropriety of our desires and their stubbornness about objects that soon disappear. (1998d: 7–8; emphasis added)

Surface, which might be the connective power of text, is none other than image in the sharing of something which is not in effect difference, but a certain minimum that is envisaged through 'retouching'. It is easy enough to see how this writing such stands uneasily in the face of a post-Derridian model of what writing may mean.

So, in the astonishing coda of *Du monde et du mouvement des images* (1997a: 69ff), as Schefer brings together The Joker from Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) with Francis Bacon's *Figure with Meat* (1954), each member of this abusive and tentative *rapprochement* takes on the other's surface as an unexpected depth, which becomes the depth of the book itself; although up to this point the names who have punctuated and filled his discourse have been Valéry, Wells, Poe, Leopardi, Hoffmann, Rimbaud or Nerval. Bacon, then Burton and The Joker lead the paradoxical elaborations of time in the image and of the image in time, '[the] infinite vibrating in a closed room', the long spans of a Vician historical temporality, to a space slightly apart from or

beside their canonical resonances in Catholic historiography (1997a: 89 ff). And in consequence the film's play between the 'dreary' Batman and The Joker, who proceeds from being a Balzacian provincial on-the-make to the pure 'Néron-artiste' of communication's narcissistic parthenogenesis – a passage that Schefer engages with a dizzying imagination – becomes a curiously lighthearted parable or figure for something quite terrible of which we had been warned at the very beginning of the book: that the recognition of our civilization's mortality and the fact that it (the purloined letter) had been before our eyes all the time, are revelations of the same order. Now for Schefer the scenographies have come to be the substance and method of his writing rather than its object, and in this dispersion of substantiality between what had been subject and object the body of his thinking has become the very process that he once wished to master, map, explain through semiotic theory; the urgencies of this in the elliptical metonymies of body, atoms, time, the filmic and the paleolithic body are to seize on a new moment in the figurality of the human, temporarily, no more:

> Let's consider this paradox à la Diderot: a character invented out of play, made entirely dependent on fiction, on the suggestion of reality, on the modulations of action, all of them impossible, produced the invention of the spectator. An extraordinary inducement of imaginary behaviours, the invention of the spectator did not succeed in becoming a sociological object: it is a science-fiction novel entirely unto itself.
>
> But, what does it still mean – Poe, Valéry, Wells and Einstein in cinema – this quite Platonic fable of an end of the world of which there only remains (and for whom?) specks of images, that is, specks of matter dancing in the void of some universes? The figure. (1997a: 22–3)

The realization of this disturbance also sustains my holding Schefer to his book of 1967; the knowledges of *Scénographie* are still needed, if only to be undone, whose undoing is one measure of a text. This passage I have just quoted is intense in exactly such a precision, as each word tends to designify its context through a series of refined but weak catachreses: 'produced the invention': 'quite Platonic: 'end' with 'remains': 'matter' singular with 'universes' plural, and so on. It is as if the second discourse, in arriving, now signals only the frailty of the chain rather than the system's strength. If semiotics was before, figure is after – what is left over after signification, but figure is also always present. In any event such as that of the flow of reds in Uccello (1995c: 73ff) or in the imbrication of the Virgin's red robes in different levels of her surroundings (1995e), we are left with Schefer's *fiction* and its economies:

> I value this fiction for its economy: it sends a motif of irrigation from the figurative space onto the idea of a figurative 'quantity' and offers, in an abrupt way, some myths of origin or fables of the engendering of the color (red): on their own they cast onto the last figure, the Rhenish Virgin that I am attempting to approach. They reach it from afar through these two intertwined motifs that are the blood of women and the blood of Christ. (1995c: 82)

This is to say that the fictional nature of the suppositional process enables him to envision an economy of the colour (red) in which its flow as colour and as blood ensures, eventually, the liaison of heresy and religious practice in that of painting itself. At least, he insists, his 'sentimental fiction' recognizes the ordering of an affect. If this writing is neither 'social' nor 'psychoanalytic', neither 'formalist' nor 'aestheticizing', then it is engaged in the resituating of those materials with which these terms or approaches have tried to treat with the enigma of affect.

In his 1993 essay on Warhol, 'Papier bonbon' (1998f), a title that recalls a childhood figure of Warhol himself and that yields the acidity of the piece, Schefer wrote with something more of a political urgency and vitality, addressing his material as something charged and saturated by historical, social and aesthetic movements, yet he is still undone in the face of their overflowing energies; energies that force the affect of the surface figure to transgress the taxonomic rules of the old semiology and or political recognition alike. So if in 'L'échange des animaux coupables' he settled his accounts rather from the borderlands of a structuralist problematic, 17 years later he resigns himself to the enigma of signification rather than controlling the figure of critique – a culmination in the acceptance of the random relation between knowledge and affect, arrived at in a reading whose disclosures reiterate, each time newly discovered, what it is that cannot fully be named:

> Maybe this latecomer dandy, nevertheless so distant from our Baudelairean knowledge, recalls this knowledge of the abyss as surface, as pause, as fabric of illusions. I was not thinking that I would be led here in these lines. In any case, perhaps this effect saves us from the refrain of commodities; it is this theatre, this empty stage, the awaiting stage, the sour candy drop lighting and the hanging straps. The *Scenographics:* this one is Wagnerian, that one is burlesque, another escapes from a draft of a novel, spewed out by a rotary press: game around the nullity of life...
>
> Warhol's narcissism, passivity (the coquettishness of bad taste), or image make no difference: they led to something that burns, that wrinkles. The very short distance separating the image from the image of the real. Men seized in the process of crossing the surface of human life. Men, things, surfaces in their catastrophic arrangements, the condition of their fitting together, of their fitting exactly into each other. These are nothing but images? This is what images are. (1998a: 300–1)

If what images are is nothing but images, or if this nothing-but is what images are, it is hard to fully disaggregate the grammatical ambiguity. And the image of Warhol, the candy paper one, is the crumpling of the surfaces for and as catastrophe, because of which, and in the recognition of its indifference, another surface, the surface of human life, is to be seen. In these spaces, between the scenographics of Warhol's disasters (the electric chair, the car crash, the Kennedy assassination), Schefer has to say this, 'that I did not think

I would be led here'; and somewhere between salvation from the commodity's old tunes and the surface as an abyss, a pause – between passive seduction as a saving and the abyss as what we see, between 'ce ne sont', 'ce que sont' and antinomy of Schefer's own making, Warhol's art and Burton's Joker can recognize each other in the deferred action of Baudelaire's knowledge of the 'surface as an abyss'. Warhol, the 'latecomer dandy', brings before us the anterior knowledge of Baudelaire's discovery as again our most immediate knowledge, which is also that of the borderline states of word and word and word and image and images among themselves, 'men, things, surfaces'. Here *Scénographie*, or rather what it had once mapped, is both a trace and a substance, where the materiality of art slides as a palimpsest of its enigma, and the kinds of knowledge that have made such an enigma visible at all.

Louis Marin refers to Schefer in one of the early essays of his *Sublime Poussin* (1995). This is in his discussion of an initial descriptive 'telling' that takes place 'by design' on the 'pictorial surface':

> Once described the painting loses its status as an object and becomes a text on which successive readings are deposited. Are these successive readings – which constitute the pictorial text-object itself, at least to a certain extent, infinite in number? ... And does the painting of the meaning not lie in this disordered displacement of discourse throughout its readings? (1995: 30)

Writing under the immediate impact of *Scénographie*, Marin seems to be coping with its fallout, with its unsurpassable character – precisely that character which calls for Schefer's own renunciation. For incongruously, and despite the precision of Marin's sentence structure, it does seem to follow that if the 'pictorial text-object' is only 'to a certain extent' these readings, then their possible infinitude is rendered partial or conditional – a rhetorical, catachrestic realising of the aporia engendered by a type of theoretical discourse that risks treating the naming of specific signs in the framework of an absolute generality of their potentially unlimited signifying chains. An aporetic which, as I have noted, uncannily points to Walter Benjamin's slowness, to the trap embedded in the denotative strategies that drive him to the discovery of ever-more fragments of an ever-more unnameable system or structure of historical being. We can see here the motif to depart from Lévi-Strauss, who behaves as if this were not the case even as he acknowledges infinitude, knowing as we do, that naming (rather than marking a point of rest or silence) is the moment of *différance* itself.

For it is just this indecipherable relation, which is in part one of the 'text-object's' autonomy, of its being excess, to its readings, however many of them may be undertaken, or to its semiotic character, that sets it outside the travails of deconstruction. And it is just such an indecipherable-ness that returns us to quite reduced or concentrated particularities as a consolation for the loss engendered by even a partial infinity. (This too is a problem made vivid by Yves Bonnefoy in his *Notes sur la couleur* (1968), and it is probably

not the question of the fold in Deleuze.) It is in his *La lumière et la table: dispositifs de la peinture hollandaise* (1995b), with the partial objects such as a lemon peel, that Schefer will find a lyrical space between allegory and denotation; in the misshapen, re-formed exterior of the interior of a natural object, which is the subject and the object of human desire, whether that desire be for a refreshment or a meaning. Oddly again, this intensity will escape through a description of some paintings by Schalken that Schefer is actually setting aside, as secondary in his discussion; writing of the lemon, 'the yellow of its skin and its white lining, the translucent appearance of its flesh against the flesh of the oyster' (1995b: 76). These half-rapt phrases only arrive after he has declared ambivalently that these paintings 'restrict somehow the enigma of the lemon through the attestation of a use; however, they leave intact the hypothesis of an otherwise allegorical usage'. It is as if an object may never be left, nor finally set aside, even in a text where, in utter distinction to *Scénographie*, it is the multiplicity of objects that exceed the text.

So if Marin, in that seeming lapsus, was going beyond Schefer, *Scénographies*'s previous understanding of the complex condition that is to 'a certain extent' the object itself, but in infinite displacement, was wholly necessary in order to build upon and then surpass both the semiology and iconography of painting and so shift out into a terrain where they overlap and interact without ever touching each other in the form of a closure or a conclusion. It is important to underline this, as it was certainly not through Derrida's critique of structuralism that he was to arrive at a satisfactory writing of the visual arts – the passages on Adami in the otherwise extraordinary displacements of *La vérité en peinture* (1978) are probably amongst the weakest that he was ever to publish. The object-construct that is Schefer's constellation of red in his work on Uccello is hypothetically a kind of object made possible by his reluctant resting with *Scénographie*'s own cruel and sadistic tracking of the image, the *Chess Players,* through the polydimensional structures of the board, the chequered floor, nature culture and the rules of language, where excess always runs ahead, around and before – despite the controlling system. The red and the stories of Dracula are neither a case of 'interdisciplinary' thinking nor of difference. Rather they register a disclosure of meaning that can only occur in the transgression of the *logic* of different knowledges, through a methodology that has itself become a deposit of the utter (and ab-original) impossibility of their discreteness.

If *Scénographie* was a master discourse of over-interpretation, tormenting the paintings to yield the secrets of their figurality, then in the excess of its sadistic procedure it put itself beside the supreme rationality that it set itself as a goal. In the convoluted and arcane elaborations of a field of inexhaustible difference, now 'structural', 'structuring' or 'merely denotational', it had already become both a possible poetic *and* a poiesis of theoretical and aesthetic writing. When, in conclusion to the chapter 'Supplément', Schefer wrote that:

> It is manifest, we have seen it by the way, that the two games are brought together in our painting, (we find there, as it were, the "two species" in one) the chess board appears as the synecdoche of the

> painting: it is from the play of numbers that a moralization of the world is produced. (p. 144)

it is exactly our difficulty in sustaining an intellectual stability in the face of the mapping of such discrepant categories, the one onto the other in the density of the system, that excites a muted sublimity. The modulation of the argument between the 'as it were, the 'synecdoche' and the 'moralization' – that is, to say between the metaphorics of argument, the technical and rhetorical displacement and concentration of the whole meaning and ethical understanding of the figural relations – stretches reading between understanding and imagination. It was itself a powerful figure for the spaces then opening up between the precipitous struggles of Kantian procedure and the quasi-infinite mappings of the structural turn.

This approach to Schefer's renunciation suggests how we might still hear the rustling of his text alongside that of Barthes, all the more perversely as its theoretical apparatus might also remind us of the table of waiting implements that so strikes Barthes in his writing on Sade; the table itself is a metaphoric for the space between theory and the object in *Scénographie*, or a staging post of the relation between a 'science' of the thing/body and a poetic of its using, but also for the connection between intensive and extensive knowledges. One of the curious things about Schefer's intensity is that it explodes into the encyclopaedic, as if Condillac had constructed the whole of his *De l'art d'écrire* on a single trope rather than from a compendium of words, images, social situations and their long term *historia*; or as if Longinus had extrapolated a poetic from a couple of lesser verses rather than from Homer and a lost fragment of Sappho. Sebastien Bordone had little importance before Schefer was chosen by his *Chess Players*, and his non-canonical status remains a challenge to subsequent developments in the field of a theoretically reflexive history of art and visual culture and to how they are written. *Scénographie* remains a historic *tour de force* in the hypertrophic realization of the object's undoing, the dissolution of two paintings in the structures of an immense periphrase of which they, in the end, had been nothing but the occasion, but from which they escape intact. Bordone is apt to meet Burton in Schefer's later work.

The later writing is then marked by a fate rather than by a logic. Schefer establishes a new kind of object relation, mutually amorous, established in the energies that the object discharges through his writing. The old Sadeian–Cartesian framing of 'I think, therefore it is' has yielded to a defocused enchantment, one rendered material in grammar, in unfolding the movements of its revelation; precision and uncertainty or, rather, an aporetic curiosity intertwine to produce at once a 'scholarship effect' and the mirage of a different plenitude. This scenography of text and image-figure is possibly at its most vivid in *La lumière*, where the writing is overwhelmed with paintings, drawings, details, each in their own particularity demanding to be written on a borderline between description and allegorical analysis:

> This poetics of the Dutch world, gathered in little subjects, is irresistible: it is introductory; it operates an extraordinary cleansing of

> pictorial bombast on us; it still responds to a taste for measure and balance. I believe it comes close to constituting an ethic of objects and manner; more than an exercise ('describe what you see') it corresponds to a programme of style. (1995b: 48)

It is not just the poetic apprehension that needs to be underlined here, that would be sentimental, for the word 'style' has a profound materiality in Schefer's thinking. To understand this is to see how he makes a quite incisive break into signifying something that, in more conventional discussions, we would call modernity, but in twisting its historical shape and temporalities out of any recognition, least of all as a dogma of cultural theory. If Uccello's red lies both before and behind Bram Stoker or Tim Burton, then we can begin to see how Manet's lemon peel in his *Déjeuner dans l'atelier* (1868) is not so much one of modernity's starting points as an ethical contemporary of the Dutch lemon in use in their common betrayal of the ground of allegory, even if with Manet the use is more the use of the 'painter who paints' than that of the figure who might put 'it' in 'his' tea. The designifying of the allegorical and symbolic in the act of painting itself is the surface of an ethic neither within the teleology of a discourse about the object nor within the objectives of a discipline.

Reading another reader overwhelmed by her object leads me to offer a conclusion in the form of constructing an objet à la Schefer. I think of one, and only one of Mme de Sévigné's letters to her daughter – that alas I can no longer find – but that is an imperative to carry on reading and reading again. It is a correspondence that here, as in 'Waiting and Seeing' (Rifkin, 2003), haunts me as a kind of inappropriate ego ideal insofar as I might ever have an addressee other than a general figure of academic propriety. Rendered inconsolable as usual by the distance that divides them and that provokes the letters – although distance is not necessarily an impulse to the epistolary – Sévigné writes that her one possible comfort is the knowledge that the same moon shines on both of them. There is the beginning of an object, a map of France in the late 17th century, the linear geometry that connects her to the shabby Chateau de Grignan, with its shining, sunny parterres: the accidents of the countryside that impede her couriers from flying as swift as birds; a slight difference in latitude that means the moon will never be at just the same inclination to either of them, or the passage of a cloud or a storm, or the reading of a letter deferred to a moonless night; the consolation of togetherness can never be more than that of mourning its impossibility, as a structure.

Centuries later, the same consoling optative is voiced in quotidian culture, the popular culture of the seaside, repeated here and there across and along the shorelines of postwar England, in the pleonasm that was the provincial entertainment of the seaside resort; before mass access to television, cold before mass travel to the south, wrapped in rugs and anoraks, waiting for the fireworks to begin, they sing:

> I see the moon,
> the moon sees me

through the branches of the great oak tree.
Oh please let the light that shines on me,
shine on the one I love.

Different tones, imperious longing, anxious invocation of good weather for the fireworks, both specifying the single line between you and me, the generalized performance of a general idea of love in the time of the gramophone and radio, waiting for no response other than the gratification of the fireworks. Between them, in time and cultures, they begin to complete the circuits of the subject's incompletion, an introversion or a narcissism that mourns being never fully chosen, either together or alone. Such a disposition of voices, gestures, texts, illuminations, it is this that begins to shape the object, a surface that connects as if there might yet be structure, but only in the travails of contingency; an object-surface that, in its dispersal through times of cultural form both activates and subdues difference – yet without the comforts of sameness. The object, one could say, is nothing more than the process of the subject being chosen, the enigma of two particularities which lose themselves in their asymmetry. The object-surface as this conjunction and disjunction – I am avoiding matrix, web or rhizome – has as its substance metonym and synecdoche, like the abyssal surface of Warhol's disasters. Timely and untimely such an object may well choose us, beside and despite a teleology or systems of spatial and temporal certainty. The subject chosen, like Augustine's present, is both now and never (it is now or never), full, distended, for immeasurably short a time, or the immeasurable time of writing in Schefer's texts. Anamorphically engendered, the object floats between the registers of our theoretical presuppositions and undoes them. It is, after all, not a method.

## Notes

1. Jean-Louis Schefer's bibliography is vast, and extends across a range of books, collections and uncollected essays in diverse journals. Here I give a number of basic references that are germane to this article. These include the three collections of essays: *Choses écrites – essais de littérature et à peu près* (1998d); *Figures peintes – essais sur la peinture* (1998a); and *Images mobiles – récits, visages* (1998b). *Du monde et du mouvement des images* (1997a); *L'Homme ordinaire du cinema* (1980/1998); *La Lumière et la table – dispositifs de la peinture hollandaise* (1995b); *Question de style* (1995c). Schefer is a noted contributor to film culture both in *Les cahiers du cinéma* and *Traffic*, although his thought remains less well known than that of Raymond Bellour or, more recently, Jacques Rancière. I am quite shocked at how little of his works I have really covered in this article in the end. I have not even touched on the books concerning single artists, *Sommeil du Greco* (1999a), *Chardin* (2002), *Goya: la dernière hypothèse* (1998c), *Lumière du Corrège* (1995a), nor indeed his writing on paleolithic art, *Questions d'art paléolithique* (1999b), and his recent more synoptic *Une maison de peinture* (2004). An essay I especially like is his contribution, entitled 'La pudeur d'Adam', in *La création d'Ève* (2001), where his writing is set alongside the theological approach of Henri Dominique Saffrey and Jean-Claude Lebensztejn's Jewish exegesis of images of this moment in Genesis.

Schefer's characteristic density is something that defies coverage and explication and invites rather an exploration of his own modes of scholarly procedure, a kind of mimetic critique. The renounced work at the heart of this essay is *Scénographie d'un tableau* (1967) and I stick with it throughout. There is a compact exposition of some of the material from the seminar in *Question de style*, 'Les choses rouges' (1995d). Here, Schefer sets up alongside one another Aristotle's theory of red as 'an expansion that undoes the body' – there are no red surfaces in nature – with the tale of the desecration of the host in Uccello's predella of that name as two myths of origin that establish the enigma of red. Each scene of the predella is a haemorrhage of the 'first sign to be broken', tending to put back in place an unreproducable body of the beginning – Christ's body, but in what we can, ironically, see as a form of Augustine's understanding of the spiritual weakness of paganism in its figuring of a series of gods to represent each human trait. On p. 39 he shifts into the different register of red, and of critical–historical discourse, in the robe of the Rhenish Virgin, 'the most neutral and legitimate form is a cloth, a system of folds, a pure strategy of space' (p. 41) (Musée de l'Oeuvre Notre-Dame). *Paolo Uccello, le Déluge* (1999c) is another Uccello altogether, although again one in which the figure is suspended in an overiding colour, the red-brown of the walls of the whole scenario of the retreating water of the *Deluge* (Green Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence). In piecing these together it is worth citing quite a long passage from *le Déluge,* the opening paragraph on the *mazocchio* that surrounds the neck of the female figure at the lower left:

> So the mazocchio is the only body that one constantly trips over, the one which in effect changes the writing of the species: it is an exception but more or less in that *an enigma.* It has the power to '*send back*' the painting to the constant irresolution of its own position as a figure. It is at the same time the only thing that is susceptible to being *understood* [learned] in the painting: but the knowledge of this second object as it is set [enshrined] is fantasmatic: in the measure that it only '*figures*' on the instance of that work which blurs another autonomy of art. (p. 96; author's alternatives)

This in a sense represents Schefer's own work or 'art'.

2. Alongside Schefer it is worth citing a list of writers who worked in or around *Tel Quel* and later *Peinture*, such as Jean-Louis Houbédine, Marcelin Pleynet and Philippe Sollers. But the aesthetic moment of high structuralism probably has to include as odd a collection of names as Meyer Schapiro, Morse Peckham, Jack Burnham, the Marcel Duchamp of *Notes on the Large Glass*; although here we will just record the Louis Marin of *Sublime Poussin* (1995) and the Jean-François Lyotard of *Discours figure* (1971). Prague school aesthetic linguists such as Matejka should also figure (see Matejka and Titunik, 1997).
3. The main collectors and transmitters of Schefer in English have been Stephen Bann and Paul Smith, whose translations of Schefer in *The Enigmatic Body* (1995), remain the only viable collection of his writing to be translated. This quotation is from the article in *Artforum* (Schefer, 1997b; trans. Paul Smith and downloaded from Smith's website with acknowledgements for his generous public offering).
4. Much of this eclectic jumble is a memory – however inaccurate – of discussions and teaching with the painter Jeffrey Steele and the group of artists shown at the Systems exhibition, Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1972 (see the eponymous catalogue with an introduction by Stephen Bann). I intend to exaggerate the

extreme incompatibility of the models within structuralist thinking to underline a certain poetic of the desire for system. Politically, this could fall in any direction of course, and I would hesitate to measure the inclination of Schefer's text.

5. The Kristeva interview dates to the Linguistics Conference, 1967. The obvious feminist intervention that took exchange elsewhere without renouncing it is Elizabeth Cowie's 'Woman as Sign' (2000), and in queer studies, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985).
6. *Repentir*, the French word used here, has a dual meaning of 'repent' or 'retouch'.

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