

2.

ON THE OBJECT OF FIGURATION

["Sur l'objet de la figuration, "from Espèce de chose mélancolie. Paris: Flammarion (1979)]

The following very general article on figuration, although not published until 1979, both arises from and leads to Schefer's book on Paolo Uccello's Universal Deluge (1976), as we shall see in Chapter 4. That is, it sketches out an unfinished project--the project of a history of figuration and figurative systems in Western painting--of which the Uccello book would perhaps be a substantial part. The summary given here of such a history is brief but it nonetheless shows the sweep and the range of Schefer's concerns in terms of figuration and particularly the conception of the human body. In particular, he focusses upon a shift in figurative practice and its accompanying epistemologies between the classical period and the middle ages, or in the transition between pagan religion and Christianity in Europe. The general proposition here is that the suppression of paganism and the ensuing elaboration of the subject for/of Christianity (what Schefer calls the "anthropological subject") involve a disavowal of the pagan image and of the pagan body at once.

A key actor in this transition for Schefer is Saint Augustine, to whose work he has already devoted the volume, Invention du corps chrétien [Invention of the Christian Body] (1975). That book analyzes the work of Augustine as he is in effect the theorist of the disavowal of paganism. That is, Augustine formulates the new anthropological subject by redefining the relations of its body, its libido and its memory. Amongst his writings it is De Trinitate that performs the theoretical work of filling in, by way of the Christian formula of the Trinity, the experiential aporias that are for Schefer the essential topic of Confessions; Augustine's own conversion--the repression of his "pagan desires"--is symptomatic here and leads directly to the establishment of the Trinity.

The effects of the establishment of this anthropological subject and the repression of paganism can be glimpsed in the history both of the image and of writing, but in each case especially in relation to the figuration of the body. Here Uccello, with what Schefer calls his "grand fantasy of the other body," appears as the residual memory of pagan figuration. While much of Uccello's work, including Universal Deluge, has often been understood to be primarily concerned with the formal solution of perspectival problems or to be merely decorative, Schefer's claim is that Uccello's efforts in relation to representational unity are secondary to his subversion of how the developing "classical" systems figure the human body.

Like the work exemplified by "Spilt Colour/Blur," this essay continues with Schefer's expressed concern with the process of reading the historical symptoms that systems of representation throw out. Here however the emphasis is much less upon the structural and semiotic constitution of such systems and more upon the establishment of the appropriate lexie for historical interpretation. It is drawn from the book of collected essays which Schefer published in 1979, Espèce de chose mélancolie, and in common with many of the essays in that volume--including Chapter 3 of these translations--constitutes an attempt to focus less on the signifier and its systems and more upon the constitution of the signifieds which make up the socio-historical terrain of both the visual text and its readings.

*

One day I'd like to begin writing a history of the body in Europe since the fall of Rome. More exactly, a history of representations of the body (of the rules of representation and the limits of figuration). Of course, such a project couldn't work exclusively on the terrain of art-history. Especially since analyses of signification and figuration need first of all to be pulled away from mechanistic notions of representation; analysis needs to redefine the field of any given symptom's historical reach (and here the notion of the symptom has to replace that of the sign if we are to construct a properly historical field, since that would allow us to ask more openly what signifying processes are as they shift grounds, as they shift between domains of signifying work). The idea that signifying practices confirm a division of discourses based on the social division of labour is really a retrospective nineteenth century idea and is obviously hardly pertinent here since social practice is in general dictated by two particular pressures: allegorical thought and legal thought (though to be sure, in order to be seen as such pressures, these must equally be understood as conventional signifying networks). This project would also want to say that the beginning of the Christian west is not a legacy of Greek philosophy: the only Roman philosophy is juridical thought, based upon a Latin version of Stoicism.

It will be necessary, then, to mark the moment of rupture between Rome and the middle ages; to try to understand, for example, what was the status of the image in fourth and fifth century thought; to ask, in particular, what becomes of the remains of the mystery that paganism had attached to the image, a mystery that early Christianity (or Latin monotheism) could no longer comprehend. This immediately brings up one of Augustine's concerns (in City of God): the annihilation of polytheism's legal irrationalism. If Varron can no longer be considered correct (when he

says that paganism simply becomes spiritually impotent), and if polytheism doesn't put pressure on the plural libido, on that triple libido that appears with Christianity, then polytheism and what goes with it cannot be the cornerstone of Christianity's new formula--an enigmatic formula it is, certainly, but the least "metaphysical" one possible--namely, the Trinity, defined in opposition to the thought of Plotinus or pre-allegorical thinking.

So what happens to pagan images? The project would demonstrate that a certain mode of the image ceases to be relevant as its historical and ideological background is erased. For example, the image of Janus is no longer used because the persistent division of its faces goes from two to four, so it's too unstable a figure for the problem of numerical disproportion--signifying moments are no longer possible in this mode. So there's already at least a strong disavowal of the image in paleo-Christianity or the pre-scholastic period, insofar as the image's referent becomes first of all the object of a displacement; it comes to be textualized (under only one of its aspects). Thence the image is not so much tied to a practice (except in relation to the remains of Roman painting); rather it's caught up in the first attempts to define the anthropological subject. If one tries, from that standpoint, to deal with the figurative production of the middle ages, theological and juridical thought (with both their usual conventions and their aporias) become more important than the persistence of Roman figures. Strictly speaking, the image is not forbidden, but rather it becomes impossible after this displacement of its system of reference.

On another track, fiction probably had a very long latency period: the symbolic novel arrives only with Prudentius. (One could also re-read Tacitus's Dialogues here: there's no place for the writing subject in Rome; the choice has to be made between the public and historical work. And for a long time, it wasn't possible to transform the text of Petronius.) Christianity begins not with the writing of novels or drama, but with biblical commentaries; these meld together language and philosophy to

produce the new position of the anthropological subject. That subject is furthermore a measure or the moral consequence of the position of the commentator. There also, or there first of all, we see two men in man: the one who interprets, and the one who is the moral effect of the interpretation; the latter occupies the privileged place of the image. And all of Augustine's work on the image rests upon the hypothesis of such a body's autonomous existence: the one who writes is constantly effaced or written off by the one who is imminently written.

Such a transformation is probably essential for this discourse which has no fiction (that discourse, from Origen to Dante, is also the starting point of poetry and it cannot feign, cannot introduce a fictional subject). The Augustinian (for the sake of dating it) rule for the symbolic: writing will produce two subjects, but will not produce a hero for the text (no fictional actor, but rather someone who acts out the writing process, as with Dante). One might also consider the way in which the Roman novel and theatre are obsessed by the question of the identity of their heroes (as in Petronius, Plautus, or Terence) according to juridical formulations, or by what in Ovid becomes the question of the identity of mythological figures.

Who is the hero of the text? He is an allegorical man in so far as he can turn his back upon (he pre-scribes) the one who writes.

The man in question is always double because he is defined only by his relation to the Scriptures: his identity is split and requires the introduction of a dialectics; the bifurcation of knowledge [scientia] and memory indeed works in this way as the generalized extension of the symbolic mode's having divided all other signifying fields; the symbolic mode reinscribes as cause what was in fact only the effect of the extrapolation of signifiers: namely, revelation (the appearance of a contradiction which becomes a paradigm, an anacoluthon for the "history of humanity" that religious historiography has already pre-scribed).

So this is where one would have to start (and it's the starting point of the only historically possible philosophy--the philosophy of law); start with this language that's not novelistic but rather the language of commentary. And scriptural commentary foreshadows the effect of a division in the writing subject (for that subject writes only scriptural readings) across the signifier as signifier of Truth. Thus this language at first can only pre-scribe the subject as a particular effect, the result of the moralization of scriptural interpretation.

Guaranteed by the symbolic mode and acting as the clearing house for the making of textual rules, such a subject is logically only an image, and is certainly just the same thing as a juridical subject--it's not constrained by the real and it becomes a subject only because of this interpolation of Truth.

The second body, that of memory, of jouissance, is reduced to a static moral entity by allegorical thought; and in the same way, allegorical thought reduces the question of writing--a question which can only ever be one of giving body to its own paradox (to give it a body. In this project, one would have to try to understand, too, what the art of memory might mean after the rupture with an antiquity which, like the Bible for early Christianity, is now a kind of hallucination produced by the misrecognition of historical signifiers and by this disavowal of an historical legacy).

By way of these same sorts of claims, it would be possible to bring under the rubric of writing (that grand fantasy of the other body) Uccello's Deluge because of the legibility and literalness with which it presents the paradoxical body (by showing figures divided beneath the weight of a material pressure, against the mazzocchio).¹

Uccello seems to me a decisive departure from Dante's text, an exit from allegory and from Christianity's perspective on the minute observation of the body's suffering (to borrow from Nietzsche). The global body, the body in its totality, does not exist for a Christianity which knows the body only in its signifying articulations, by its "joints" that represent it as a symptom only, and thereby make a bridge of knowledge of

its meaning. Later Christian philosophy intensifies this tendency (most obviously in Condillac's legal fictions, or in Hegel's progressive / reflexive fiction--the history of philosophy / phenomenology) and everywhere, beginning with Kant, this division around the general principle of the body-as-symptom is taken up by and as philosophy itself .

There is in Christianity a pressure--albeit surrounded by and working with both allegory and mysticism--the pressure of a necessity: that of the interior body, that--in a way--of anatomy; and it's only resolved through the annihilation of the body and of the very symptom that the body represents more than it can figure. (In relation to this, Huizinga has a fine chapter on the disappearance of images and mystical writings: Chapter XVI of The Waning of the Middle Ages).

In Uccello's Deluge, for instance, the painted body exists as the very limit of the imaginable body; not the limit of a real (anatomical) body, but the limit of a body pre-scribed as to its significations. Its special physical coherence derives from the unfinished plastic space around it (and its production is akin to that of a Sadeian effect).

Uccello's decisive point (his "lesson," if you will), both in the picture's totality and in its smallest aesthetic effect, is that the body constitutes the irrational limit of all spatial construction. It's also a limit on irrationalism (a further way in which antique culture comes to an end is in Greek statuary, where space always exerts pressure on the body, and the body is neglected): in Uccello the body is still there--as the locus of a cultural and ideological blindness and of a non-erotic symbolic overinvestment. The body presents a trace of irrationalism and of primitive perspective (thus "composition" and the importance of mazzocchio become symptomatic in Uccello). His point is that the body historically cannot be reduced to its allegorical and symbolic treatment; it's not sacred, it doesn't transcend what surrounds it, it isn't plastic; but rather it's limited to minimal effects of volume and proportion. Uccello's most powerful gesture is to make that body produce an effect of coherence, to lead the misrecognition of the body back to

the mythical (to the problem of mythology, which is the division of the species, marked by "creatures" with no identity except the marks of their tracks). Equally, Uccello can discolour the body, making figures vary even if they are substantially undifferentiable.²

Similarly, this body can be without colour because it has no function, no position, no social name (it's an autonomous body, representing not a hero but exactly no-one--as opposed to Mannerist mythologies which are theatrical acts, novelistic fictions. Colour also has the function of allowing the body's repetition--that is, of producing a memory trace from it: the memory of color).

Uccello's lesson brings us closer to the possibility of elucidating the status of the body in painting (and what if painting has been used to absorb--to resolve, to free up, to hide, or to annul--something like the problem of the body's inarticulateness in our culture?); brings us closer to the question of the symbolic body's division and of the body's imaginary (simultaneously the figurative body and the very surface of the canvas which, according to Alberti, is the skin itself).³

The question, too, of the body in its allegorical place. The body, as an enigma of sexuality (and probably as the unreduced state of the object of pleasure), allegorically figures the liberal arts, the sciences--these are all women, with attractive bodies that are pierced, gaping, and split (as, for instance, in the Santa Maria Novella, the Spanish Chapel, Andrea di Bonaiuto, The Triumph of St. Thomas and The Allegory of Science). I mean that allegories, by way of what they do not figure, take over the mystery of both the object and the organization of pleasure on the body; they even take over the effects and the histories of objects and bodies. The only locus of knowledge constituted as knowledge proper, and that takes account of experience as a symbolic pressure, is henceforth the mystical body: the one which escapes both juridical and figurative regulation, the one which is constituted as the very knowledge of its own transitional function as the caesura of desire. This is what's at stake as well in the

execration of God by the mystics and, later, in Campanella's last revolt against the scholastic motto, scientia est de singularibus non de universalibus.

So here, in Uccello, we find at least a profound reinscription of the motif of the image as division (in Augustine, where "man is double because he is an image," he is double also because he is a sexed being and he is sexed as an effect of the scriptural text from which he receives his circumcision). The image as a kind of failed figurative solution to the dialectics of love.

Perhaps figuration needs to be studied with this in mind: it blindly drains and elaborates a remainder, the remains, of the problem of the body's coming to represent the very mystery of the object of its own pleasure. More than a mystery of the body as organism--Descartes' pineal gland, the body and the soul (that is, the pleasure principle), the obsession with the anatomy lesson. Everywhere the question of finding that little particle, that self-pleasuring nexus that could irradiate the whole organism, the principle of the soul's thought: there where it first pleasures, there I emerges.⁴

And painting devotes itself to pre-scribing the invisibility of this place (the problem of the nuvola or of autonomous figurative objects can be approached in this way).⁵

The question broached by Uccello is not of knowing where the visible body is to be found, but of knowing where is the visible in the body. Compare, too, the anatomical drawings, the penetrating incisions of Da Vinci--anything that painting cannot reproduce. What's he looking for? For the place of pleasure in fiction where it's visible but cannot be figured).

Holbein's The Ambassadors asks the question again: what is, not the organization of, but the emblematic apparatus of pleasure? Holbein's picture responds with a doubly inscribed apparatus, a catalogue of measuring instruments (those of astronomical procedures out of proportion to our species), and with a symbolic apparatus designating the loss of all inscriptions of pleasure even in the very place

where pleasure irrupts in the form of an autonomous body. This all rests on a unique base: that of a dis-figuration of death (an anamorphosis) that supports the picture's "characters."⁶

Occasionally one does find some evidence of autonomous bodies trying to break through into paintings. Allegory and the division of the body as artefact, as distinct from a body of pleasure that can be isolated: division conceived as a contradiction.

The question posed by Deluge is largely the paradoxical question of all painting (religious painting can hide for only so long the fact that there's no progress, no progression in the plastic arts except within the terms of this very paradox)--the idea that the body can be made into a figurable term only by some arbitrariness: the body is a complex irrationalist solution to the very principle of figuration (of its systematic or its logical--not its historical--principle; this is the problem for the Renaissance); and that principle is the projection of space. Space is not supported by bodies (and so what could we make of the gross overcrowding of bodies in this painting?). At this point, what is the object of figuration in terms of a set of logical presuppositions? It is the body represented as the mystery of a pose in any composition, which is why it is repeatable, that is, variable, in its determinations.

(Notice how bodies grow old in painting; how their synecdoche is reduced, how they stop emblazoning themselves in space, cease to have value, stop showing themselves, showing their skin.)

In the history of painting there is a place of madness, of anamorphosis, of mystery, of mazzocchio. That place is reserved for changeable objects: they simply figure the fact that death can be credible only when dis-figured (Holbein). Pictures maintain a fiction of a place: a window through which a patch of colour watches the enigmatic body floating free, away from painting's geometry.

NOTES

¹ This part of the project is carried out in Schefer's Le Déluge, la peste (1976)—see chapter 4 where one section of that book is translated. The mazzocchio (see Figure 0) plays a crucial role in Schefer's bringing of this painting "under the rubric of writing." A note in the standard translation of Vasari's Lives describes the mazzocchio as follows: "Circlets armed with points or spikes and placed on family escutcheons," and "caps of peculiar forms." or the "heraldic cap of maintenance" or circlets of wood covered with cloth for the head. Tom Conley, in his introduction to a complete translation of Le Déluge, la peste, cites a contemporary article that traces the genesis of the mazzocchio to intarsia work used as a training in perspectival construction. But rather than seeing it as a device that derives from painterly research on perspective, Schefer installs the mazzocchio as a privileged moment in Uccello's figuration of the paradoxical or resistant body. In Uccello's Deluge it is an object around the neck of two of the fresco's figures and it acts as a kind of commutational focus, or switching point, between the perspectival structure and the figurational structure while itself "belonging" to neither. In that sense its function, akin to that of colour for "Spilt Colour/Blur," is in excess of the determinations and overdeterminations existing between the two structures. Or, as Schefer alternatively puts it, this is Uccello's "introduction of a heterogeneous element into the whole" (1976, 149). For Schefer this commutational object is the painter's mark: "mazza: the painter's tools, his touch; occhio, the painter's eye..." (36). Schefer's view would owe something to Damisch (1972).

² See the remarks in "Spilt Colour/Blur" on the distinguishing function of colour.

³ Alberti quote? Schefer's trans and intro.

⁴ The original French is "là où cela jouit d'abord je surviens," an ironic allusion to Freud's well-known formula for the development of the ego from the id--where the id was, there shall the ego emerge--and probably also to Lacan's transmutation of the same phrase. Schefer suggests that the obsession with the inside of the body, and the search for a material explanation of pagan (Augustinian) or unconscious (Freudian) desires are both symptoms of the divided state of the body in Christian culture.

⁵ The nuvola is a device used in theatre and public spectacles in the 15th century to represent clouds, and its use in Quattrocento painting as a figurative artifice has been remarked by Francastel (La Réalité figurative. Paris [1965]), and elaborated upon by Hubert Damisch (Théorie du nuage. Paris: Seuil [1972], 102ff) as an important moment in the elaboration of figurative systems. Vasari credits Cecca with the importation of this device into painting.

⁶ This passage is in implicit disagreement with Lacan's well-known reading of the same picture in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (New York: Norton [1981], 85-90). While Lacan sees the anamorphosis as a cipher of the castration complex, Schefer sees it as marking a loss of a different kind--the loss of an historical sense of the body.