

3.

THANATOGRAPHY/SKIAGRAPHY

["Thanatographie/skiagraphie," from Espèce de chose mélancolie (1979)]

"On the Object of Figuration" ended with some remarks on the necessarily anamorphic place of death in figuration, suggesting that the death of the body is--like the pleasure or libido of the body--another problem for figuration within the regimes of post-Augustinian ideology.

"Thanatography/Skiagraphy" constitutes a further adumbration of how the figure of death as it were "splits" representation, or of how death can be figured only at the interstices of the body and in the body's articulations with other objects. The essay furthermore links that tenuous figuration with the practice of writing..

Schefer's consideration of the body, death, and writing is in this case followed through a discussion of a canonical art-historical object, Poussin's The Arcadian Shepherds (Figure 0).¹ In Schefer's reading of it, this painting stages what we might understand as the historical onset of the apparent necessity of writing and interpretation due to the loss of the human body. This is the crux of Schefer's concern throughout his writings with the question of figuration. For him the conventions of representation and/or figuration in Western painting (and, indeed, in cinema as we shall discuss later) rest upon the "disappearance" of the body or, more simply, on the displacement of what is the object of figuration par excellence. It is the paradox of Western representation that its systems are built around a body that disappears as it is represented and Schefer here tries to establish this impossible or paradoxical condition of the representability of the body as the determining feature in the history of Western figuration.

The result is what is intimated in "Spilt Colour/Blur"--representation produces a construct wherein "space is entirely taken up by the fiction of whatever it is representing"--for

Schefer this is the "funerary" condition of representation. The history of Western art--and, indeed, of Western social institutions--is a history, then, of this "funerary conception and its juridical correlative...[of this fiction of instituting the present in the name of the past," a history which may be emblemized by the tombstone in Arcadian Shepherds.

Another way of saying all this is to suggest, as in the previous essay's discussion of Uccello, that the paradoxical or "dead" body is continually present as a pressure upon the doxical, juridical body. Thus Schefer sees his task as not the undertaking of endless hermeneutic analyses of his object (which would always be to submit to the doxa), but as the solicitation of the object for what it hides--that part of us which has been disinherited or made to disappear--"the enigmatic body."

Equally important as this point, however, is Schefer's stress in this essay on the place of writing in both the history of visual systems and in the spectator's possible response to such systems. Apart from showing how Poussin introduces "the anachrony of writing into the theatre of the picture," Schefer wants to play out the drama, exactly, of the tension that this produces; that is, as he writes about the image and its theatrical scene, his own writing attempts to register what we might call the intrusion of writing into the pictorial system. Schefer's chosen topic of address always seems to be primarily "a surface upon which Schefer's commentary acts out its own representational drama, writing the crisis that it concomitantly reads in the object it describes."² In other words, there is simultaneously a reading and a writing always working dialectically together in Schefer's texts and this essay provides a good instance of how that works. The reading of a picture brings to the fore the position, function, and effect of the "letter" (of writing, of fiction, interpretation, or the law, etc.) for the spectator.

It is perhaps worth noting at this juncture that Schefer's sense of the nature and place of writing seems almost the inverse of Derrida's view. For Derrida writing is always the other, or the supplement for the systems of rationality and interpretation with which we are familiar.

Schefer, on the other hand, literally sees writing, and sees it as the agent of an alienation--not as Derrida would have it, as the repressed of a Western logocentrism. The other, for Schefer, is that unattainable body which has died and cannot be replaced by an image or a resemblance but only by writing. What we might call this flaw in figurative rationality is a sort of Achilles' heel for the tradition of Western visual arts, and it is one of the main items of business in this essay and in other of Schefer's works to describe it.

*

I introduce a certain subterfuge (that of an analysis, a gaze and a staging) as I allude to this picture by Poussin, The Arcadian Shepherds (Figure 0). This picture--in my analysis, at least--is peculiar because it puts on stage a little drama of reading, against a backdrop that rehearses one of the symbolic functions of painting, against the background of a tomb. One of its oblique figures--the one that interests me here--is a crouched body pointing out on a stone one of the letters in the phrase "et in Arcadia ego." The link between this body and the letter--which is its absolute vanishing point--is here a shadow, a projected shadow. In a longer analysis it could be shown that this shadow is the result of an incorrect projection, but it's notable for the way it sketches out three ages, in a kind of fugue that takes up (in three stages--Poussin's discovery of the fundamental schema that appears later in Warburton or Vico) the halting history of writing, scanned in three stages. Three ages: gestural writing, pictography, and the alphabet. Here the intermediate phase--the literal--in the relation of the reading body to the letter or this Arcadian formula, is presented as a sort of Egyptian hieroglyph: the one that would designate the subject. The "I" as it were in Egyptian: a figure with no phonetic value, placed after the sequence it determines and casting a retrospective glance across it; this is perhaps the visible looking at the literal, at a structure of consonants.

But what interests me here is the confirmation that there's a sort of alphabetical perspective in Western painting, and that this perspective is both what regulates the status of seeing in classical figuration and also what makes two-dimensional painting disappear. In fact, Poussin's gesture here is, in some manner, to introduce the anachrony of writing into the theatre of the picture. Meanwhile something else is at play in the

background: that is, the very thing that cannot be communicated in writing--the fiction of a triple fugue of the body, the collapsing of reader and writer. So, what we're witnessing is roughly this: there is in the reading body a collapse of its relation to the letter, and of its future--historical, perspectival--in the letter. The moral of the picture calls upon painting to intervene as a kind of mongrel stage in the history of writing. It doesn't matter that this history is mythical: its movement remains. This movement takes in hand, ideologically, the otherwise unengendered specificity of figuration. Yet this history of writing is in its turn merely a symbolic scansion, or the loss of the body in the constitution of the letter. The collapse of the reading body is written, in all its phases, upon a tombstone. What is this tomb here, in painting, in this picture? It is, no doubt, that which closes, seals and makes confidential the very atopia of the symbolic--Arcadia.

There's also another gesture in this picture's little drama--a pointing gesture: the moment when the kneeling person holds, at his fingertips, his own shadow and the very disappearance of his body into the letter. What's the picture doing at this point? It seems to be using the finger to write a third dimension into the scene: the dimension of its own absence from figuration--a dimension that is, perhaps, that of interpretation. This is what we can witness, through the sort of reading that I'd say is not, at any point, an analysis, but rather an absolute solicitation of the picture. We can assist, almost in the etymological sense of "standing nearby," assist at a tearing of tissue; here the painting is holding at its fingertips its own imaginary semiotics--its imaginary is "semiotics" or the morality of the letter, the process at which we assist being nothing other than the division of the reading body: that gesture, this shadow, skiagraphy (the writing of division) as the only real moment that can situate painting here, the pronoun in the epitaph, ego in Arcadia, or in "atopia," in an atopia sealed by the tombstone--the supporting ground and the place where figuration itself is inscribed in the picture.

Thus, athwart what it can actually represent, this painting figures--and never figures anything but--a third dimension, namely, interpretation itself. Furthermore, in order to find its laws, it demands that this fiction not be dispensed with, so as to become its support, exactly. In a way it's this fiction that gives painting its lasting effect; and it's the subject of the fiction who, by the tips of his fingers, speaks for figuration in painting. The nearest thing to a subject, to the alienated commotion of an "I," is this fugue. What it catches on the end of its fingers in the shape of its own shadow is just fiction. Novels and mythography become painting's very permit. They constitute the rights of freedom that exempt what has not yet been given the problematic and unusable name, "the pictorial signifier," from any minimal structure of decision or splitting.

A real structure of oscillation, then, as a result of which figurative painting explicitly unleashes the third dimension and installs it as the dimension of interpretation. And yet it can't be argued that language is the actual foundation of figurative painting: more exactly, it's that language sees figurative painting. Language is the principle that stimulates, by replacing the problem of space with semantic space--or, because painting is painted, already, replacing it with interpretation (this "already" is the very condition of seeing in figuration)--language stimulates the impossibility of detaching the question of space from the question of interpretation. So painting is articulated upon the very thing that's missing in a painting: the overwhelming symbolic conditioning of figuration as interpretation. So it's figuration that painting doesn't include or can't comprehend in this case; which means that the picture has already been interpreted before it even takes place for us, now, as we look at it.

So, the position of reading fiction, staged in this picture, is to see painting at the moment when it oscillates, changes registers, becomes lost to its own space. Now what does this mean here?--what's inscribed here, as the scorchmark of interpretation, is the

very possibility of painting losing its specificity in order to be read.

Looking at this old painting again: it's a form that's renegotiated, exchanged, simply because it started out as a movement and not as a place, and because its material is primarily the figuration of a process of replacement. The edict of figuration demands such conditions as these--these modes of replacement, these figures, exactly--so that, in this regard, painting can become the game in which every signifying being loses its consistency. And yet interpretation doesn't come to an end at this point--and, what's more, it never will, because any representation of what it requires (that is, a desire to see and the contradiction of seeing as a passion) ties us up in it once more.

As a result of this kind of tourniquet of seeing, which still resists the position of being interpreted, the remains of what can be read in this picture return--as is the case with the person busily deciphering the epitaph only to learn that his "ego" designates both nobody and nowhere, the place of the dead in the symbolic: the remains return over our shoulders and burn us, look at us. And this is the moral of the picture, the moral that frames it: that even for the person who scans the inscription and begins to lose his body--the body is relayed from the index finger, to the deictic gesture, and to the "ego" in the inscription--even for him there still remains some seeing that burns his shoulder; which is to say that, because of this desire to interpret, we are enjoined to that place of repression where "seeing turns upon us"; or rather, it's just that moment when, thinking we're going to the theatre, we find ourselves already on stage with the symbolic undoing itself within us. So what is this particular contradiction and the passion for seeing in this space?

Saint Augustine's question: Quid autem voluptatis habet videre in laniato cadavere quod exhorreas?. "What pleasure is to be found in looking at a mangled corpse, an experience which evokes revulsion? Yet, wherever one is lying, people crowd

around to be made sad and to turn pale. They even dread seeing this in their dreams, as if someone had compelled them to look at it," and so they go, in the hope of finding some beauty at the very heart of this horror.³

That's Augustine's response to the question of seeing. Seeing itself, its pleasure, that stranded heart of our "libido spectandi," the spectacle of corpses. To go to see in a corpse the very thing that annuls death in the species itself. And it's this, he says, that drives me to see: because the "signifier" is never really the thing that has died except that it's already caught in the desire to deprive another real of its specificity; that is, "to expropriate."

And if it's true that, in order structurally to live off them, the symbolic locks up some archaeological positions within us (and that's obviously why we're so "complicated"), then painting remains as the thing that dictates that a body today should be tattooed with it whenever it looks; and that's why, Augustine says, he likes it so much.

What's the point, then, in going to this corpse?

We go, as if to a source, in our desire to see, to find something contradicted.

NOTES

¹ Arcadian Shepherds has been the object of many a study and critique, including an important interpretation by Panofsky himself in Meaning in the Visual Arts (Garden City: Doubleday [1955]). Some of the many other considerations of the painting are cited in the course of one particularly interesting reading which shares important assumptions with the present essay and whose sophisticated semiological analysis bears comparison with Schefer's approach: namely, Louis Marin, "Towards a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin's 'The Arcadian Shepherds'," in N.Bryson (ed.), Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. P. (1988), 63-90.

² T. Corrigan and D. Judovitz, "The Figure in the Writing," SubStance, 39 (1983), 32. This article, one of the few published in English on Schefer's work, is a fine introduction to some of his thinking and it accompanies a translation of "On the Object of Figuration."

³ Augustine, Confessions (Book X), (tr. H.Chadwick). Oxford: Oxford Univ. P. (1991), 211