



## SPILT COLOR/BLUR

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*During the late 1960s and early 1970s Jean Louis Schefer's research was fully involved with structuralist and poststructuralist efforts aimed at redefining the nature of traditional intellectual disciplines by way of a change in methodologies and epistemologies. In the fields of art and art history, this meant, generally speaking, dispensing with, for instance, the iconology and the reading of master codes that had been refined by Panofsky and Gombrich, and installing in their place the practical concept of the artwork as semiological system. Schefer's first book, Scénographie d'un tableau (1969), appeared at this time and in this mode, roughly coincident with important articles such as "Note sur les systèmes représentatifs" (1970a) and "L'image – le sens 'investi'" (1970b). Like "Spilt Color/Blur" each of these not only is concerned with critiquing traditional art historical methodology but also practices the new methods of reading.*

*"Spilt Color/Blur" has been chosen to represent this period of Schefer's writing for several reasons. First of all, it is the only writing from the period for which Schefer himself still retains much affection: what he now thinks of as the pseudoscientism of the semiological project has for a long time held little further interest for him, despite the fact that this is the genre of work for which he is often recognized. Notwithstanding Schefer's own hesitancy, it seemed important to use this essay to introduce his work, not simply because it is of this early period, nor because it represents a strand of his writing which became quite influential; but rather more because the essay can be considered as a kind of foundation stone for much of the rest of the work translated in this volume. Equally important, it contains and deploys a number of the insights that semiological work was able to generate and can thus give the reader an opportunity to assess the value of such work, which should perhaps not be so summarily dismissed as Schefer would seem to want it to be.*

*The sense and import of the semiological approach for Schefer's work is primarily the task of Scénographie to introduce. The basic gesture of that book is a semiological analysis of Pierre Bordone's painting, A Game of Chess, and its gambit is the structural description and designa-*

*"Les Couleurs renversées/la buée," Cahiers du Cinéma (1971), 230.*

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tion of the picture's elements into a set of binary oppositions. So, for instance, the painting is structured by the black-and-white oppositions of a chessboard; it organizes the similar patterns of a chessboard and a marbled floor; it distributes its background between architectural and natural elements; it depicts two players and two games (a chess game and a card game); and so on. Schefer's elaboration of these binaries is complex but is put to the use of producing a set of almost Barthesian codes for reading the picture.

Part of the point here is to counter the Panofskian use of code which, Schefer suggests, tends to delimit reading and interpretation to the operation of a single overarching code that will eventually "explain" the picture on the basis of internal organization and thus reduce it to an illustration of that master code. What Schefer is interested in is, in a sense, the opposite of what a Panofskian reading produces: that is, he wants to demonstrate how the elaborate interplay of binary elements actually produces a blurring or leakage of meaning in the picture. That is to say, for him the logic of the signifier in this picture is one of deferral, whereby the elements of the binaries always, as it were, miss each other by dint of being continually taken up into other organizational structures and codes. This deferral of signification is, for Schefer, the important lesson of semiological analysis in general and of Bordone's picture in particular.

This interest in the blurring of signification will be a constant throughout Schefer's writing, in ways that we shall see. But this early semiological work also deploys a concept which will have profound effects in the course of Schefer's writing: that is, the notion of the *lexie*. This is in effect the intertextual field in which the visual object and its readings exist. The *lexie*, to paraphrase Roland Barthes, is a field of signifieds that points to a body of practices and techniques that together constitute a given system of knowledge or culture. Barthes calls this set of signifieds "a large unit of reading," which is to say that it constitutes the field of meaning into which the object can possibly be drawn by both connotation and denotation. Importantly, the notion of the *lexie* points to the possibility of an idiolectic field, a *parole*, which, "without ceasing to belong to a given langue," implies a degree of interpretative freedom for the reader or spectator.<sup>1</sup>

Schefer's work will continually take advantage of this putative freedom. For instance, he uses several other paintings to help interpret the Bordone, each acting as what he calls a "commutational moment" or switching point for the widening of the lexical field. In this way the Bordone painting comes to be located in a langue which consists of the readings that can feasibly be given of it. Part of what is made possible by this application of the concept of the *lexie* is the notion of what we might call a non-linear tradition; that is, the range of intertextual reference for interpretation need not remain within a strict historical context or chronology but may import what traditional scholarship would think of as "anachronistic" elements. Equally, the idea of the *lexie* points to the possibility (indeed,

the inevitability) of some part of the spectator's experience being included in the reading and therefore in the picture's very field of definition. In sum, then, whereas traditional "objective" criticism of art depends upon the distance of the interpretation from the picture, Schefer attempts to make them one and the same – the work becomes its readings.

Like *Scénographie*, "Note . . ." (1970a) consists largely in a critique of the methodologies of art criticism and theory – iconology and orthodox structuralism come under particular scrutiny. But it also lays out a semio-logical approach to analysis, the initial move being the analysis of the visual object as system. Since "Spilt Color/Blur" depends somewhat upon Schefer's particular understanding of the system of painting and of the elements within that system, a word or two about "Note . . ." is in order here. As we have said, for Schefer a system is crossed by numerous codes, none of which will exhaust or finally account for the picture's signification. Equally, the picture and the codes themselves are historically located, but not in the sense that one can establish from that proposition a neat duality of "text" and "context," as in traditional art history. Rather, the text and its context are irrevocably marked by acts of reading, such that the codes of picture and readings, as it were, meld to become the constitutive entity, the thing being looked at. In that sense a picture is its readings.

Yet at the same time, there is an internal organization of determinations within the visual object which makes up its system. Notably, for Schefer the analysis of the total system of a picture depends upon a distinction between figuration and representation. The distinction is important because it is not only the condition of possibility for the leakage of meaning, but also allows the analysis in "Spilt Color/Blur" of color as a kind of excrescence – or even a kind of embarrassment – to the systematization of classical painting. Schefer schematically expresses the relationship between figurative and representational systems by the formula  $S_I/S_x$ . The representational system or the system of the space in the picture is called  $S_x$ , whereas  $S_I$  refers to the figurative specification of those spaces or the filling of space with objects.  $S_x$  aims at the production of a unity, a unified field, and Schefer tracks this down in Leonardo da Vinci's establishment of grounds for the science of perspective. On the other side,  $S_I$  is its own signifying economy, attached to objects and their meanings which the system  $S_x$  would necessarily tend to delimit. That is, in Schefer's theory  $S_x$  exerts a determination over the painting as a whole as it seeks unity and closure; but  $S_I$  exerts another determination of meaning by dint of its attachment to objects and figures and their signification. If the two systems are conceived as delimited lines exerting determination in relation to each other, the space of their properly overdetermined relationship constitutes the lexie for the picture's reading. Schefer's own schema from "Note . . ." perhaps best illustrates the relations of determination, and thence overdetermination, that exist between the systems (see accompanying illustration).

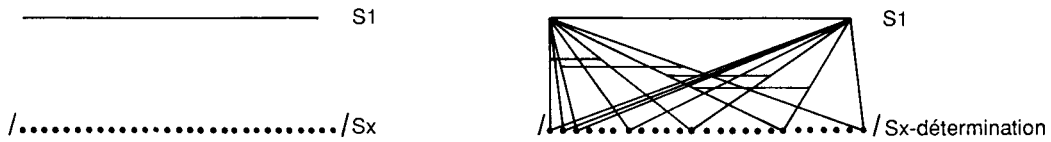
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Excerpt

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Schefer proposes, then, that there is, on the one hand, a representational system whose function is to organize space (that is, produce a unity of the visual field). But, on the other, hand there is also a figurative system that functions typologically and is thus bound up with signification as such. These two systems overdetermine each other, and not to the benefit of simple or unified meaning; rather their interference leads to the blurring of signification that we have mentioned.

These notions of the system of painting are exploited in “Spilt Color/Blur” as a basis for understanding the function of color in classical painting. Always considered in classical painting as a mere supplement to these systems, color cannot be absorbed into the frameworks which systematize painting and attempt to unify it. Schefer demonstrates that color is, in this sense, a difficulty for classical painting. This is why it is often assigned to the function of “symbol,” where its signifying power is of the crudest and most supplemental kind. (At the same time, and as we shall see in the final essay in this volume, “What Are Red Things?,” this level of signifying power can turn out to produce powerful mythological belief.)

Color’s subordination to the “scientific” rules of perspective that are crucial to classical painting is thus the primary concern of “Spilt Color/Blur.” The essay examines the role color plays in intensifying, so to speak, the process whereby signification is lost in the image. Because of the way it is poised dialectically in the system of determinations between figuration and representation, color is both attached to and resistant to the signifying function. It remains autonomous because it is not expressive (expressivity is the function of the figure itself). Schefer’s own lexie in the demonstration of color’s subordination and resistance pulls in a number of germane texts, such as Freud’s work on dreams and Mallarmé’s notes on theater. Here the proposition is that figuration is the domain, not just of expressivity, but of theater and dance – a notion further developed in other of the essays in this volume.

“Spilt Color/Blur” is perhaps the least prepossessing of Schefer’s work. Certainly, the reader’s indulgence will be called upon by the extraordinarily complex syntax and punctuation, not to mention the semiological jargon, deployed here. At the same time, the essay offers theoretical and interpretative justification for much of the work that is to follow.

In what’s conventionally called classical painting, color is the object of a characteristic sort of neglect (and we’ll see later that the “convention” relies on particular denomination only because it also relies on a particular statute, a characteristic rule for what one might under-

stand as a representational system). This neglect and lack of consideration are practiced by both the painter and the art historian and have always been explicitly rationalized or implicitly forced into figurative equations by one or the other of them. As this is the case, color becomes something that still remains to be explained: first, in relation to representational systems; and second, because both formal and material determinations preexist it, and these arise from the representational structure that systematizes them and composes the (system) from them.

To put it another way, this lack of consideration for color – manifest in the limited and discrete application set aside for it – finds its theoretical justification in the actual denomination of the painting we so precisely call “classical.” The exact character of such painting is, moreover, at the very moment we define it, to see itself actually finding a definition to absorb it: it is not theoretically constituted and is practiced only in the subordination of all the elements of such painting to a single defining class (first noting the area to which they belong formally. We know that figurative systems make their rules of constraint bear upon typological characterizations rather than upon any signifying determination. We also know, and must demonstrate once more, that the level of signifying determination originates from the representational structure that is overshadowed in all figurative systems). The immediate efficacy of this sort of painting lies, then, in its only ever approaching an object under the auspices of that object’s own class, continually rejecting any notion of its species: repudiation of color is, appropriately, an act of aspection, since color is an effect that cannot be integrated into any economy (of a system) that is based upon the principle of substitution.

In the history of Western painting (the painting for which Europe has formulated all systems of representation into a definition of historical classes, beginning with events or *produced* objects – which is how painting has been conceived of since the Renaissance) color is the object of symbolic codification; starting with Byzantine art, and then at the start of this century becoming the object of a theory for Chevreul; in between those two moments codification shifts from color toward figure in such a way that, although the two terms remain in opposition, we see a decodification of figure (of perspective) in favor of color, and the culminating point of this was, clearly, the eighteenth century.

This has meant that, under the constitution of a body of formal definitions, all that has been produced (in the practice of perceptual discernment) is the repression of color by the characteristic *outline* of such practice: that is both the necessary effect and the subsidiary aim of the practice.

So we must recognize that this marks the Renaissance as the limit outside of which (and exactly “outside,” if the Renaissance may be

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characterized as the time of a categorical obliteration of all practice)<sup>2</sup> painting can become a practice of modernity. For in fact, as we shall see in Leonardo, at that time color could only be thought of as a predicate because: (1) color theory was subordinate to perspectival thought; (2) perspectival thought is bound up with causality (by the intermediary of optical rays, all images are of their own source); and, finally (3) in this system perspective (optical causality), with its explicit empirical foundation, is in fact nothing less than the image of some final cause, or part of an equation (eye–sun–god) whose terms may be combined in pairs (where in fact the binary relations that hold will exhaust all the relations, because any third term is excluded as being either product or condition: thus Leonardo’s induction of material cause is both limited and enabled by the deduction of a divine cause which can circumscribe the whole field). From this third condition, the foundation of the Copernican landscape, Leonardo forges the opening declaration of his work; an image is always just the third part of an analogical equation that lays bare the path of a cause (right up to the sketchwork) whose figure is at once its distinguishing mark and its most radical loss. Here it is understood that all causality is reversible, so that the eye rebounding and returning (that is, in accordance with a specular definition) reassembles all those lost causes for the sake of the subject, itself: this is done by the delegation of a cause (god) of which the eye is furthermore the image.

So there is an absolute necessity in the subordination of color to figure (the form of a repression). We see once more that the infinity of a code for color (susceptible of giving account of pictorial productivity without resorting to systematic reduction) becomes conceivable only when Leonardo’s theory (in which color is never a proper object but just one part of the system of definition) is integrally inverted. Color’s function in Leonardo is purely auxiliary, a distinguishing function that helps the representational structure in its implicitness; it’s both the overdetermining and complementary structure of the figurative system (and never manages to free itself of it); it’s the depression beyond which signification cannot happen – indeed, it’s the structure within which an *operation* is produced as a formal and material system of foregrounding (of the picture, of course) and the production of a signifier takes place (as far as that can happen) and the articulation and production of such can take place inside a representational system (this happens analogically: insofar as a denotated plan is not precisely known in advance of the structure that will determine it (1) in a categorical way or (2) in the terms that are never those of its species. There’s never any specificity given to the signifier, or in a representational system the specificity of a given particular cannot spring straight from its signifier – that’s a fundamental rule of representational systems – because anything that could constitute the object of some sort of phonematic analysis pre-

cisely cannot be articulated (1) in painting and (2) figuratively in a representational system, or cannot be its categorical product).

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It is important, then, to see first that figurative painting is incapable of identifying its own production with the production of the signifier, since the signifier is entirely predetermined – indeed, overdetermined – by the implicitness of a system of reading which excludes the production of specificity from its product, and this exclusion is then the payee for the object of representation; and second, that painting in the quattrocento and cinquecento thus eliminates what might at first appear to be no more than a surplus of the signifier (matter, color, gesture). All this, elaborated to try to establish a pure condition for representation, sets out all the possible transgressions of the principles of figuration, and in so doing determines infractions against representation that always employs another aspect of the signifier. In this context the signifying *function* is first of all a property of figure.

Nonetheless, color – and this is the fundamental level of its resistance to definition, in that it is never the proper subject, never accedes to the signifier, and is thus continuously repressed so that it becomes a mere attribute – color escapes definition and doubles back under the species of the subject itself, painting. It is important to see that this change, too, is marked in Leonardo: color is what is attributed to things, but things are distinguished by means of color: this double distinguishing function can be applied only to color because it's primarily a function of a way of seeing whose terms are reversible: that is, in a formulation of the world which is specular. Due to this very disregard of color's specificity, the history of painting has included this productive paradox: that color has retained an absolute autonomy because, once again, it's not included in Renaissance definitions (because it never constitutes the object to be defined) except as a distinctive quality; color's *effect* is not expressive except in that it expresses what it is not (precisely because it is caught inside a system of essential definitions): color, then, is a variable in the figurative equation.

Consequently, due to [color's] subordination in this type of painting wherein we have seen the role played by the term "classical" (the founding return, the retroactive effect of a predicate, the effect of total delimitation in this sort of painting whose theoretical formulations assume – with Alberti and Leonardo – that its definition does not transgress the laws that the painting imposes upon itself: it has no frames, its only limit being its reverse side), consequently what's classical about it is that, treated under the heading of its class (Ripa: "an image is a definition," so that a well-made image is a well-made definition), it is the means by which the painted picture can inscribe itself in the taxonomic picture; and, inversely: figure, Ripa says, is governed by the order of predicables, and so is susceptible of analysis

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in terms which are the terms of its categorical borrowings. Similarly, Leonardo da Vinci: “Perspective comes to our aid where judgment fails in things that diminish” (2:372).<sup>3</sup> In this equation, too, where judgment has perception as its petitioner in the same way as the image petitions for definition (where we can show that judgment always ends up relating to figure because perception is itself, according to the equation, a definition), we can grasp that the principal prohibition in classical painting relates to something that is not an element of definition in representation nor a constitutive term of representational structure; rather, it relates to the thing that is treated as a distinctive element: that is, to color – not figure, because figure, where art theory and art history have focused their problematic over the signifier, is still a definable term in the characteristic substitutional movement of the loss of the signifier in representational systems.

If color for its part *resists* (that is to say, if it can’t be formalized in the figurative equation except as a variable that *cannot represent*) and if the linguistic formalization of a representational system takes it merely for what it is in the figurative system (a distinctive level which has autonomy only when opposing, or superimposing upon, figure), that is precisely because it’s repressed there: if it’s present as such, color becomes the waste product in any transformatory operation based upon the figurative structure (in order to realize what representation *clings to*, since all representation works on the actual consistency of the elements it displaces). In other words, color can resist this substitutive movement so long as it is seen as an attribute of figure: figure is charged with reducing color to a principally distinguishing function (such a delimitation occurred in the Renaissance under the influence of Aristotle’s *Poetics*: as *subject* is to drama [the subject of the drama], so *drawing* is to painting); so the predication of color is thus the very form of its repression.

And when Leonardo da Vinci insists on the necessity of finding colors that are real or natural, it is out of a concern for the truth of perception or the fidelity of images (an image is only ever faithful to its cause, never to its own appearance: thus it can be referred back to a better construction): color is then an auxiliary for perceptual judgment – “Darkness steeps everything with its hue, and the more an object is divided from darkness the more it shows its true and natural color” (2:379). This means that real or natural color exists only as a property of the object, that the “hue” of darkness, insofar as it can “steep” things, is not a pertinent element in (perceptual) judgment; and so it is neither real nor natural, because it inverts the order of subject and predicate which is the very formula of the naturalistic convention, and remains, in the Aristotle reference, the very formula of the *subject*; what’s *unthinkable* in all this is that objects could be seen as attributes or accidents of pure color (which Leonardo only ever refers to as a *fog*): that is, it’s unthinkable that these



things could be produced within the picture. Here again, the same may be said of color as has always been said elsewhere of nature (in that a picture never understands it except as a term of opposition in the rhetorical system upon which it is constructed and in which all articulations are merely references back to the system that is both the origin and the product of the pairs of oppositions that implicitly refer back to it): the problem of Renaissance definition is absorbed by the perspectival problem corresponding to an imperative on the predicability of figure: compare again “Perspective *comes to our aid* where judgment fails. . . .” When, from being the subject of an utterance, a term becomes the predicate, then there is repression, or it is present only as a repressed term.

This goes beyond the problem of natural and conventional color (and generally beyond Lessing’s whole problematic about the motivation of pictorial “signs”); Leonardo’s realist alibi: displacement (from the apparent to the natural) only ever operates, within convention, from the moment when color is turned into an attribute; or else, the problem of real and natural color doesn’t present itself and *cannot be formulated* except from within its distinguishing function, that is, from inside a space governed by the imperative problem of definition (or in other words, within a single aspect of perspectival figuration). Color is absolutely efficacious in this its distinguishing role, which characteristically eliminates it from the representational structure, and, conjointly, from the problem of the signifier insofar as it can even be formulated here; color – by virtue of its repression (without which, once again, representation is impossible) – makes this clear: that the unthinkable (as described above) animating Renaissance definition (and which might be called its ideological space) is not its complement but its contrary: historically we can only add to the equation by suppressing it. This is also what we can read in Leonardo and what color itself can reveal insofar as it is only ever the exponent of a system, its petitioner; and in this system its most efficacious function – the result of the reduction we have examined – is an expressive one.

So there is another reason for the preeminence of figure in the question of the signifier: here, *space is entirely subsumed by the fiction of whatever is being represented*, and every time there is a resistance from color there is also a resistance, thus marked, to representation (in the sense that we’ve given that term: the total structure wherein figuration is rationalized; as the sum of the series in which the signifier of *S1* is determined). One might, moreover, note that the same applies to gesture, something that doesn’t really appear in *painting* (in that a “picture” doesn’t include it) except as its own productivity, never as representation; in classical space a picture exists only by virtue of the fact that there is no movement; or, more exactly, the movement figured in the painting is present only as an articulation that has

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strayed from its own system: there are, literally, “figures”: “signa” = statues (cf. “Reading Poussin” by Philippe Sollers, where the Poussin character is a statue, a “signum” within the rhetoric of the picture in which it is determined, and which it helps constitute).<sup>4</sup> So with Giotto, or Uccello’s *Flood* – the rule might be as follows: *each figuration of movement is reabsorbed into what it is a priori constructed upon – a construction figure.*

So we can say that, because of the fundamentally predicative and analogically distinct function in which it is held (by the fact that it’s only ever *one* of the variables within a system),<sup>5</sup> color – and this, I think, is its *calculated effect* – retroactively illuminates what a representational structure might exist as. Insofar as – and inasmuch as – figurative painting allows itself to be enclosed by the definition of a system of figures, color has the calculated effect of becoming its limit; or rather, in escaping it color points out the type of reduction and/or substitution that characterizes representational systems: it points out *by default* (the very default by which figurative painting holds perceptual judgment) that only commutative operations (which Hjelmslev reserves for paradigmatic relationships), or substitutional ones, are susceptible of working on representational structure where the problem of the signifier is posed only by means of an implicit logical (grammatical or linguistic) structure that might be the object of an inverse shift in its semantic and phonological levels (literally, then, each system [*S*<sub>1</sub>] is absorbed by the fiction of what it is representing).<sup>6</sup> So we need to recall the following definition: “representation consists in the borrowing of signifiers. It is the economy of such a borrowing (and, by way of the signifiers, it is the entire body of the implicit system whose retroactive and *implied effect* is representation itself), giving off figures that are proposed as (pretended to be) analogical signifiers.”<sup>7</sup>

In this pre-tension of the analogical sign (Lessing), a blurring of the signifier occurs under a given representational meaning: we know, too, that in the seventeenth century, in court usage, representation meant a “funerary simulacrum”; a year afterward – or at least in a ceremony not involving the dead man,<sup>8</sup> so that he can attend his own funeral – an empty coffin is used for absolution, and the funeral oration is delivered over it, while the signifier is really what the verse is actively concerned with. Thus, representing is not a matter of recalling *what has already been present* in flesh and blood, as a person, but of producing a displaced figure (that installs its prototype/hypostasis *elsewhere*) from something that has never been present as such, so that, preferably, it can never be there, that is to say, anywhere, except in the place where it’s *said* to be: “the imaginary.” This representational illusion obtains by a false repetition (the illusion is also a chain of substitutions: what is figured = what is represented =