

Schefer, Jean-Louis. 2016.
The Ordinary Man of Cinema.
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Albeit little known in the Anglophone world until recently, readers may have briefly glossed over philosopher and “film poet” Jean-Louis Schefer in Deleuze’s commentary in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. In this book’s second chapter, “Recapitulation of Images and Signs,” Deleuze’s thesis crystallizes: that cinema does not “represent” time but, via Bergsonian *durée* (or “pure duration,” which is a product of movement), allows us to directly perceive temporal presentation. Following Bergson, Deleuze speaks of affects, which, unlike sensation and emotion, are tied to flux and movement. This thesis, however, was prognosticated by Schefer’s little book on cinema, *The Ordinary Man of Cinema* (originally published in 1980), in which Schefer similarly speaks of film as an experience of time relayed as perception. As Deleuze corroborates, “Jean-Louis Schefer ... showed that the ordinary cinema-viewer, the man without qualities, found his correlate in the movement-image as extraordinary movement” (1989, 37). The shared conclusion between Schefer and Deleuze is on the “aberration” of movement that is uniquely filmic, prodding cinema into “extraordinary” territories, unbinding temporal restraints and wresting the moving image from its material stasis by engendering a direct presentation of phenomenological time.

Schefer emphasizes that cinema is the art of gestures, as it makes manifest the unconsciousness “force of action latent in things” (2016, 29). If affect is Schefer’s unmooring, then gesture is his berth. Schefer’s writing on cinema designates gesture as presymbolic and a well of pure means, whereby taxonomy is displaced in favor of a kind of sublime breach. This is made clear in cinema’s moving images, wherein “[t]he reproduction of gestures” is translated into “the reproduction of movement in images.”

However, in addition to movement, Schefer's thesis on cinema is also couched in a nexus of *philia* that is a profoundly social vector. As Nico Baumbach prudently remarks, Schefer is deeply interested in the public, ritualized experience of film viewership, where the cinema-viewer shares a dark room with strangers (Baumbach 2017). This social experience is far removed from our new media/post-cinema semblance of reticulated laptop screens and media prostheses, which have ushered cinema into the personalized becoming of the *viewser* (a neologism of viewer-user; Daly 2010). Schefer also shares another point of convergence with Deleuze, this time on the "Postulates of Linguistics"—on the overdetermination of the signifier. In tune with Deleuze and Guattari's remarks from *A Thousand Plateaus*, Schefer writes that cinema illuminates affects that are "urgently invisible, non-represented, and unformulated," producing a "criminal pleasure," whereby "signification, words and images no longer represent anyone" (2016, 196).

Schefer, much like Deleuze, is interested in a kind of "pure affect" produced by internal bodies that addresses an occluded "interior history," which consciousness is barred access to but made aware of upon its filmic mediation—that occurs as the viewer unwittingly becomes an extended object recast within the film's scenographies. Surveying a cinematic backdrop of "body genres"—Schefer's book is exclusively composed of references to horror and burlesque genre films such as Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932), Terence Fisher's *The Mummy* (1959) and Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932)—Schefer is "concerned not with the effects on our physical bodies" (Baumbach 2017, 2) but, instead, with the assurance of a kind of "perpetuity outside" of immediate conscious knowledge (Schefer 2016, 17). If it is through Bergson that we can phenomenologically root Deleuze's notion of affect, it is through Schefer that we can gesture beyond affect-as-apprehension and somatic response: "[f]or those new appearances—in which we must sometimes accommodate partial objects in order to grasp them, and whose full form and reference we always misapprehend—are affects" (2016, 210). Cinema's wry secret is how we are foreclosed access to its full epistemic terrain, which produces sublimity.

According to Schefer, the cinema-goer is actively complicit in "a crime." However, this "crime" is neither that of perpetrating abuses in the world nor of passive voyeurism but, instead, a crime of "historical origin," in which the spectator regains lost time and memory (history's annals of world-images) through the labor of cinematic memory. Consequently, Schefer's movie-goer is historically ingratiated, complicit in the archive of moving images that record history and the Earth's lesions.

Schefer's bodily concerns with cinema are aporetic, invested in the violent limits of apperceptive noetic activity, wherein our frustrations, terrors or yearnings seduce us into the overpowering cinephilic experience. As Schefer notes in *The Enigmatic Body*:

“[a]t bottom, the cinema is an abattoir. People go to the abattoir, not to see images coming one after the other. Something else happens inside them: a structure that is otherwise acquired, otherwise possible, painful in other way, and which is perhaps tied inside us to the necessity of producing meaning and language” (1995, 121)

Rather than speaking of beauty, the “sublime” reappears as a trauma. For Schefer, cinema is a public spectacle of “death and deformation,” or something of a sublimated “side show.” Thus, Schefer's curious penchant for Browning's *Freaks*, a film that was met with such revulsion that an MGM test-screening audience member famously claimed that viewing the film resulted in her miscarriage. The “sublime” that Schefer returns to in *The Ordinary Man of Cinema* is not Kant's notion of the mathematical sublime of propensity or the dynamical sublime of mortality but, instead, akin to Edmund Burke's articulation of the empirical-philosophical underpinnings of what John Dennis had dubbed “delightful horror,” stilted on a notion of “complex,” or mixed, pleasure and pain (Doran 2017, 11). Here unfolds Schefer's description of *jouissance* as “a suffering that is not linked to a particular suspension of the world but ... privileged transition of meaning ... that suspends the world” (2016, 142). While Burke's language of the sublime similarly details “positive pleasure ... impressed with a sense of awe” (2015, 31), Schefer's enumerative account of horror evinces the relationship between *jouissance* and sublimity via the privileged spectator-position of the suspended cinema-goer, where the horror depicted on-screen is presented through an order of removal.

Schefer is a poet, philosopher, and theorist of enigmas—thus, Deleuze called *The Ordinary Man of Cinema* a “great poem.” Schefer's enigmatic writing often flirts and lapses between circular whimsical versification, at times veering closer to literature than to cogent theory. Nonetheless, Schefer's style adequately maps his concerns with inchoate phenomena, which will not, or cannot, be accounted for by our legitimized systems of representation or our rational procedures of interpretation. As Tom Conley notes, Schefer's text “makes physic demands on the part of everyone willing enough to work through its often imponderable reflections” (2010, 13). Nonetheless, Schefer's work is rewarding and ought not to be simply reduced to the superficial terms of a Deleuzian primer or poetic musings. Schefer's interest in repressed violence and

debris—of sublimity and phenomenology—uniquely situates itself within a kind of poetic wakening of cinema that is often neglected in today’s film theory, which all too often deviates towards the emotive experience of the body or cognitivist scientism. Schefer offers us a glimpse at what an unpretentious film theory may look like when it “philosophizes by accident.”

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