Eric Rohmer's Film Theory (1948-1953)

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1.   A Novelistic Art of Space

Abstract
The main focus of this chapter is a close analysis of 'Cinema, an Art of Space', the first article about films that Eric Rohmer ever published, in 1948. In this article, Rohmer laid the foundations of his theoretical approach to cinema, grounded essentially on the aesthetic distinction between cinema and literature, and on the premise that cinema, thanks to its mechanical reproduction of the appearances of empirical reality, is more novelistic than the novel itself. His argument rests upon a binary opposition between ontology and language, in turn, overlapping other conceptual oppositions, such as space vs. time, showing vs. telling and cinema vs. literature. Because, at that time, Rohmer was still heavily influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre, the latter's ontology is also expounded at some length.

Keywords: Rohmer, Sartre, space, ontology

Although both designate the same group of people (Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, Eric Rohmer, François Truffaut, plus a few occasional – and distinctly more inconspicuous – travel buddies), *école Schérer* (éS) and *politique des auteurs* (pda) are separated by a striking difference: the former includes the name 'Schérer' in it. When Pierre Kast invented the *école Schérer* label, in 1952, he was careful to come up with a nickname that made clear that that group had a leader: Eric Rohmer (Maurice Schérer was given name). The internal leadership was certainly more blurred in the pda years, roughly between 1954 and 1960, but in the late 1940s and in the early 1950s, as already mentioned in the Introduction to the present volume, this circle was deeply marked by Rohmer's view of cinema.

In order to unpack what that view was about, it should be made clear immediately that young Rohmer was primarily a man of letters. A high school teacher, in 1946, he published a novel, *Elizabeth*, whose over-descriptive style ostensibly treasured the lesson in objectivity delivered by those

contemporary American novels admired so much by French intellectu-
als of that era. Both as a literary author and as a literary scholar, Rohmer
ultimately subscribed to the widespread view at that time, according to
which, the best and most vital novels (i.e. those coming from the United
States) impersonally *showed* more than they *told*.

Back then, his thoughts on cinema were less driven by theoretical issues
per se, than by the intent to situate cinema in relation to literature. Indeed,
by the time that Rohmer started to write about cinema, his ideas on the
subject were already fairly clear: they were not exactly theoretical ideas,
they rather concerned the relationship between cinema and literature. It
can be argued that his take on this relationship drove and determined his
theoretical positioning, not the other way around. In short, Rohmer was,
above all, convinced that cinema was not just inherently novelistic, but
more novelistic than the novel itself, because, by its very nature, it complies
with the literary ideal 'to show and not to tell'[1] better than novels could.

Indeed, the very traditional opposition 'showing vs. telling' occupies a
central place in Rohmer's literary and cinematic aesthetics. It can be argued
that what fundamentally underlies Rohmer's theory of cinema from the
outset is a daring and conceptually dangerous conflation between three
binary oppositions: *showing vs. telling, ontology vs. language, space vs. time*. In
order to properly understand Rohmer's view of cinema, one must venture into
the indissoluble connections that he (for the most part, implicitly) posited
between these elements – which are clearly not necessarily coincident
with one another.[2]

Jean-Paul Sartre's literary aesthetics and philosophy are not at all
foreign to such a conflation. Rohmer never concealed that Sartre (along
with the phenomenological strand ensuing from Husserl's philosophy) was
a conspicuous influence on him, especially in his youth.[3] This was due
particularly to Alexandre Astruc (1923-2016), a young, brilliant writer (and

1   Rohmer, 'The Classical Age of Film', p. 42.
2   To be sure, the idea that cinema answers literature's dilemma between 'showing' and
'telling' has already been elaborated on (not least by referring to the space/time dichotomy)
by a long-standing and extremely poignant tradition in Film Studies. Rohmer's case, however,
is somewhat eccentric, in that it is complicated by the ambiguous presence of ontology within
his framework. For this reason, a serious, systematic attempt to put Rohmer in the context of
the reflections (by, say, André Gaudreault, Tom Gunning or other scholars who have studies
this topic) about the way cinema has dealt with the showing/telling divide would require an
extended study in its own right. Hence, the present chapter is content to follow the thread of
Rohmer's (mostly implicit) assumptions alone, postponing to some other occasion the task of
contextualizing them within the wealth of other voices who have tackled this issue.
3   De Baecque and Herpe, *Eric Rohmer*, pp. 35-36.

future filmmaker) whom he met in 1945, and who introduced him to the vibrant, existentialist environment of post-war Paris.[4] It is safe to assume that ideological incompatibilities played a part in Rohmer's short-lived participation to that trend, whose left-wing orientation arguably clashed somewhat with his notorious right-wing leaning. Tellingly, his guide through the microcosm of the St. Germain-des-près world, Astruc, was someone who (even in those days) always had a clear penchant for the right, as his autobiography unquestionably confirms.[5]

In effect, while Rohmer conflated showing vs. telling, ontology vs. language, and space vs. time, partly under the impulse of that leading intellectual figure of post-war France, that selfsame conflation ultimately caused the critic to *depart* from the renowned philosopher. That is to say, precisely in the aftermath of that conflation, Rohmer realized that his ideas on literature and cinema were incompatible with Sartre's perspective. Only in 1950, when he 'converted' while watching *Stromboli*, did he find a theoretical framework that suited them better: Immanuel Kant's philosophy.

The reach of that conversion away from Sartrean existentialism cannot be overestimated. If ever there was one, original phenomenon that can be retrospectively said to have eventually given rise to the pda, it was Rohmer's detachment from his Sartrean-existentialist background, the 'big bang' that the critic himself (as we shall see in a subsequent chapter) dated to 1950, right in the middle of the éS years.

It is thus necessary to briefly recapitulate what this original Sartrean-existentialist background was about, albeit sketchily. While our principal guide will be *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre's main ontological treatise, it is important to bear in mind that the stakes here are inseparably philosophical, ethical and aesthetic.

1.1.   Sartre's ontology

It must be recalled, firstly, that *Being and Nothingness* develops the premises of an earlier essay, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, that attempts to rethink Descartes' cogito in light of (itself revisited) Husserlian phenomenology. 'I think, therefore I am' needs to be supplemented with the awareness that 'the consciousness that says "I think" is precisely not the consciousness that

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4   *Ibid.*, p. 35.
5   Astruc, *Le montreur d'ombres*, p. 154.

thinks'[6] (or, as Rimbaud once put it, 'je est un autre', 'I is an other').[7] The latter, a 'transcendental consciousness', is an 'impersonal spontaneity'[8] that 'determines itself to exist at every instant, without us being able to conceive of anything before it. Thus every instant of our conscious lives reveals to us a creation ex nihilo. Not a new arrangement but a new existence.'[9] It is the flow of every phenomena being presented to consciousness; not a purely formal structure of consciousness like for Kant and Husserl, but always 'an infinite contraction of the material *me*.'[10] This 'me' occurs the moment the impersonal spontaneity gets personal, viz. when transcendental consciousness is reflected onto itself. The 'me' can do nothing to master the spontaneity of the transcendental consciousness, 'since the will is an object that is constituted for and by this spontaneity.'[11] More precisely:

> there is an unreflected act of reflection without I which is aimed at a reflected consciousness. This reflected consciousness becomes the object of the reflecting consciousness, without, however, ceasing to affirm its own object (a chair, a mathematical truth, etc). At the same time a new object appears which is the occasion for an affirmation of the reflective consciousness and is in consequence neither on the same level as unreflected consciousness (because the latter is an absolute that has no need of reflective consciousness in order to exist), nor on the same level as the object of the unreflected consciousness (chair, etc.). This transcendent object of the reflective act is the I.[12]

The Ego is nothing but the product of this reflection, the transcendent 'unity of states and actions'[13] of a single consciousness ('A consciousness can conceive of no other consciousness than itself').[14] 'The Ego is not the proprietor of consciousness, it is its object. To be sure, we spontaneously constitute our states and our actions as productions of the Ego. But our states and actions are also objects. We never have any direct intuition of the spontaneity of an instantaneous consciousness as produced by the

6   Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, p. 6.
7   *Ibid.*, p. 26.
8   *Ibid.*, p. 27.
9   *Ibid.*
10   *Ibid.*, p. 10.
11   *Ibid.*, p. 27.
12   *Ibid.*, p. 9.
13   *Ibid.*, p. 12.
14   *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Ego,'[15] because the essential role of the Ego is, on the contrary, 'to mask from consciousness its own spontaneity.'[16] It is 'limited to reflecting an ideal unity, whereas real, concrete unity has long been achieved'[17] in the guise of impersonal, undifferentiated spontaneity.

It is against this background that one should conceive the slightly distinct dichotomy being-in-itself/being-for-itself, in *Being and Nothingness*. 'It is the non-reflective consciousness which renders the reflection possible; there is a pre-reflective cogito which is the condition of the Cartesian cogito.'[18] Conscious being (for-itself) emerges out of the unconscious (that is, non-reflective, in-itself) being reflected onto itself, it being understood that these two dimensions are intimately connected, as 'every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional conscious-ness of itself.'[19] The (unconscious, in-itself) consciousness I have of a chair, is, to a degree, simultaneously a (reflected, for-itself) consciousness of my consciousness of the chair. This reflection is also a *nihilation*. Why? Because being-in-itself is nothing, and the 'something' emerging through the for-itself is a nihilation of that nothingness. It is that very nothingness, reflected onto itself. 'Nothingness can nihilate itself only on the foundation of being; if nothingness can be given, it is neither before nor after being, nor in a general way outside of being. Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being-like a worm.'[20] This is why nihilation and transcendence have to be thought together: (for-itself) consciousness is able to transcend being in-itself only by means of nihilation, i.e. by bringing forth the nothingness at the very core of the in-itself. Nihilation is thus not only a detachment, but also a kind of intimate fidelity.

With nihilation, for-itself consciousness emerges. In a strongly Heideg-gerian vein (Heidegger is notoriously one of the main influences behind *Being and Nothingness*), the emergence of the subject (that is, of the for-itself consciousness) is inseparable from the emergence of temporality. The subject is essentially that by which temporality emerges.

> Temporality is not a universal time containing all beings and in particular human realities. Neither is it a law of development which is imposed on being from without. Nor is it being. But it is the intra-structure of the

15 *Ibid.*
16 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
17 *Ibid.*
18 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. liii.
19 *Ibid.*
20 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

being which is its own nihilation-that is, the mode of being peculiar to being-for-itself. The For-itself is the being which has to be its being in the diasporatic form of Temporality.[21]

As soon as it transcends the in-itself by means of nihilation, thereby acquiring self-consistency, for-itself consciousness accesses *freedom*. Freedom is self-grounded (i.e. *groundless*) and contingent: it has no other ground but the arbitrary positing of its own emergence – hence its contingency (if it is groundless, it cannot be necessary). Crucially, freedom can exist only through temporality ('the for-itself cannot be except in temporal form'[22]), that is, *as a project*: freedom consists of opening up the possibility of future action, oriented towards a goal, while, by the same token, establishing a relatively self-determined past from which action takes off. Sartre's freedom consists primarily of 'uprooting oneself' from the thick texture of causes and effects whereby one is determined. 'Nihilation' is precisely such an act, and it always coincides with the temporalization of one's freedom; that is, with a fundamental project that articulates, together, a past (the posited causes of one's project), a present (the self-deliberated motives pushing one to act in a certain way) and a future (the goals to which the project is aimed).[23] What should be stressed is that Sartre's freedom, in accordance with the way temporality itself is, is *groundless, and contingent*. Its only ground is arbitrarily posited by the for-itself consciousness, and its arbitrariness is the necessary condition of said temporalization. It is the mere fact of always being one step ahead of the causes behind one's back, in such a way that one *never* coincides with the mere product of those causes.

> Indeed by the sole fact that I am conscious of the causes which inspire my action, these causes are already transcendent objects for my consciousness; they are outside. In vain shall I seek to catch hold of them; I escape them by my very existence. I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence, beyond the causes and motives of my act. I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself or, if you prefer, that we are not free to cease being free.[24]

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21   *Ibid.*, p. 142.
22   *Ibid.*, p. 136.
23   Regarding the 'cause-motive-end' triad, see Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 449.
24   Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 439.

By the same token, freedom needs this texture of causes and effects in order to impose itself as difference. In other, more Sartrean words, it needs a *situation* to uproot from. It is 'the paradox of freedom: there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom.'[25]

1.2.   A novelistic ontology?

This conception of (for-itself, subjective) consciousness, temporality and freedom heavily informed Sartre's immensely influential (at least in mid-century France) theory of literature, as shown in many of his writings, particularly those gathered in his *Situations I* collection.

It is easy to see how the kind of consciousness outlined in *Being and Nothingness* lends itself particularly well to being regarded as novelistic. The (unconscious, in-itself) consciousness I have of a chair, is, to a degree, simultaneously a (reflected, for-itself) consciousness of my consciousness of the chair: consciousness is always already self-consciousness, and lies in my being conscious of the chair *as well as* in my being conscious of *myself* being conscious of it. From this twofold arrangement binding consciousness to self-consciousness, it is but a short step to the kind of consciousness implied in novels: that to which the appearances of an imaginary world consistently unfurling through time are presented, *plus* some *individuated* consciousness adding its own variously interpreting agency to them – particularly by arranging their temporal unfolding in a particular, idiosyncratic, contingent, ultimately subjective way. This individuated consciousness, like for-itself consciousness, is a contingent, temporalizing agency that cannot be regarded as 'a thing', or even a 'something', but rather as a nothingness nestled in in the sheer, 'non-reflected' unfolding of phenomena being presented to consciousness. To be sure, this individuated, for-itself consciousness is the one distinguishing the narrator, but not exclusively so: all consciousnesses variously involved in the writing and the reading processes (the writer's, the reader's, the characters' and the like) are for-itself consciousness, and all of them mutually communicate and interact in the space that the novel opens up.[26]

Typically, for Sartre, Dos Passos' or Faulkner's jumbled temporal structures, strongly diverging from the uniform flow of chronology, display precisely the inherent contingency of this reflective consciousness qua

25   *Ibid.*, p. 489.
26   See especially Sartre's *What is literature?*

temporalizing agency. Therein, the groundless irruption of the present, as well as the weight of the past, do not lend themselves to any straight past-present-future kind of articulation, and those warped, inherently idiosyncratic temporalizations are, as it were, each time attached to some individuated reflective consciousness (again: the narrator's, the reader's, a character's, etc.). This feature is elaborated upon, for instance, by Jean Pouillon in his *Temps et roman*, one of the many critical works that not only abundantly quoted Sartre, but also modelled their conception of the novel after his ontology. According to this perspective, the peculiar temporality of the novel does not merely follow the unfolding of narrative action, but also gives shape to the strictly *contingent* temporality projected and experienced by for-itself consciousness (that of the character/narrator as well as that of the reader, as they are constantly in touch during the reading process). 'Events follow one another without necessarily determining one another,'[27] because they are filtered through the for-itself consciousness, which can only conceive a contingent, quintessentially human kind of temporality: one in which the single moments in time relate together thanks to an articulation that can never coincide with a steady, unambiguous, objective kind of time.

> It seems Faulkner's worldview can be compared to that of a man sitting in an open-topped car and looking backwards. At each moment, formless shadows rear up to right and left; flickerings, subdued vibrations, wisps of light, which only become trees, people and cars a little later, as they recede into the distance. The past acquires a sort of surreality in this: its outlines become crisp and hard – changeless. The present, nameless and fleeting, suffers greatly by comparison; it is full of holes and, through these holes, it is invaded by things past, which are fixed, still and silent, like judges or stares. Faulkner's monologues are reminiscent of aeroplane journeys with lots of air pockets. With each new pocket, the hero's consciousness sinks back into the past, rises and then sinks again. The present *is* not; it becomes; everything *was*.[28]

According to Sartre's perspective, the contingency of (inseparably) freedom, subjectivity and temporality also entails their inescapable *situatedness*. No freedom, no temporality, no consciousness without a concrete situation. This is why one should not regard the primacy of consciousness (as the agent of

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27   Pouillon, *Temps et roman*, p. 26. Originally: 'Les événements se suivent sans qu'ils se déterminent nécessairement'.
28   Sartre, 'Temporality in Faulkner', pp. 109-110.

temporalization whereby the novel unfolds) in simply psychological terms. What is at stake is much less the psychological depiction of a consciousness than that consciousness *qua situated* in the world. Accordingly, in novels, consciousness is the nothingness adding itself to the seemingly transparent, 'realist' deployment of the appearances of a world. This means that the emphasis is primarily on the literary depiction of *sheer appearances* unfurling over time; that is, filtered by the contingent, groundless temporality of that nothingness known as (all too human) for-itself consciousness. Every conscious perception (the perceiver perceives *something*) is accompanied by the consciousness of that consciousness, i.e. by a reflective self-consciousness (*the perceiver* perceives something) that is ultimately a nothingness. The novel revolves around the contingent temporality of for-itself consciousness, but the latter, because it 'is nothing', only matters insofar as it is that by which appearances appear over time. This is where time and space, the inside and the outside, display their bond.

> We are neither mechanisms, nor possessed souls, but something worse: we are free. Entirely outside or entirely inside. Dos Passos' human is a hybrid, internal-external creature. We are with him and in him. We live with his vacillating individual consciousness and, suddenly, it falters, weakens and flows off into the collective consciousness. We follow him and suddenly, here we are, outside, without having noticed it.[29]

Thus, for Sartre, the quintessential kind of novel can only be a contemporary American novel, because it is *impersonal*, primarily devoted to the literary depiction of non-psychological perceptual flagrancy of the appearances of empirical reality as they emerge and unfurl over time, unencumbered by consciousness insofar as they are filtered by a consciousness that 'is nothing' (but a contingent, temporalizing agency). This is also why this kind of novel can easily be deemed *cinematic*. In this respect, it is particularly useful to refer to Claude-Edmonde Magny's *The Age of the American Novel*, arguably the most representative sample of the several mid-twentieth-century existentialism-inflected attempts to articulate together Sartre's philosophy, the novel (most notably the American novel) and the cinema.

According to Magny, cinema and the American novel are inherently close. They both try to stick as closely as possible to ordinary human visual perception: they are both, as it were, after a certain objectivity of the depth-less,

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29   Sartre, 'On John Dos Passos and *1919*', pp. 28-29.

psychology-less perceptual/visual exterior surface.[30] In short, they are both after the *naked fact*, unencumbered by any interpretation of commentary, the way it normally appears to human eyes. Behaviourism is an obvious case in point, since it can be

> defined by its assumption that the psychological reality of a person or an animal is limited to what can be perceived by a purely external observer (exemplified in its extreme form by its camera lens) and that everything only the subject himself can know, through self-analysis, must be eliminated. In short, psychological reality is to be reduced to a succession of acts, with words or cries having the same weight as gestures or expressions.[31]

Who came first? The cinema or the novel? The answer is particularly relevant.

> The novel thus appears to be much less an art of language than we might a priori have expected it to be. Its aim is to show rather than to say, and it is therefore related to the cinema even when it is not in the least influenced by it. The great lesson the American novel learned from the movies – that the less one says the better, that the most striking artistic effects are those born of the juxtaposition of two images, without any commentary, and that the novel, no more than any other, should not say too much – was very well understood by Hemingway, Faulkner, and Steinbeck. But Stendhal, Balzac, and the naturalists had anticipated it: long before the twentieth century, they had already invented the journalistic novel.[32]

Ultimately, the novel came first: not the American novel though, but the French realist/naturalist novel of the nineteenth century, pushing both the twentieth-century American novel and cinema to influence one another in its wake. 'The introduction into the novel of changes in perspective analogous to those of the cinema was made necessary by the vast inner transformation of the novel, a transformation that began with Zola and continues today, especially in the United States.'[33] This priority enjoyed by the novel is not only historical, but also aesthetic: the objectivity shared

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30 Magny, *The Age of the American novel*, p. 39.
31 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
32 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
33 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

by films and novels is ultimately *a matter of techniques*. 'Techniques' here can be defined as all forms of manipulation of the novel's temporality (like ellipses, or a floating point of view) liable to be ascribed to a definite consciousness (the novelist's and/or the narrator's and/or the character's/s', etc.). It can be argued that they correspond to 'narration' in the classical 'narrative/narration' divide, where narrative is 'a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in space and time,'[34] while narration is 'the activity of selecting, arranging and rendering story material in order to achieve specific time-bound effects on the perceiver.'[35] Because it is a matter of expressive intentionality (by means of the perturbations of the temporal sequence, some consciousness finds expression), the objectivity at stake here is still a matter of language; hence, it belongs to the field of literature inevitably more than it does to that of cinema. Cinema uses 'a whole new arsenal of extremely efficacious techniques, some of which, of course, had been used long before the invention of the film – though more timidly and less systematically – by Balzac, Stendhal, or the naturalists.'[36] For Magny, when cinema wishes to be objective, it has to stick to expressive devices (ellipses, changes in point of view, etc.) – which means that the domain of language (and thus literature) is never very far. Even when literature tries to borrow expressive devices from cinema, it is still, essentially, a matter of techniques, so the 'instrumental' privilege of literature, the domain of language, remains intact.

In his 'American Novelists in French Eyes', Sartre wrote:

> For a long time we have been using certain techniques to make our readers understand what was going on in the souls of our characters. [...] The American writers freed us from these obsolete techniques. Hemingway never enters inside his characters [...]. He describes him always from the outside. He is only the witness of their conduct. It is from their conduct that we must, as in life, reconstruct their thought. He does not admit that the writer has the power to lift the tops of their skulls as the Club-footed Devil raised the roofs of houses to see what went on inside. We have to wait with him – page after page – to understand the actors in the drama. We are, as he pretends to be, reduced to conjectures.[37]

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34   Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, p. 60.
35   Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. xi.
36   Magny, *The Age of the American novel*, p. 47.
37   Sartre, 'American Novelists in French Eyes', p. 117.

However, in the same article, Sartre also makes clear that with the advent of contemporary American novels, techniques are not simply dispensed with once and for all: they are simply *replaced* by newer and better techniques (typically, in Faulkner's case, a jumbled temporal order).

> In other words, the influence of American novels has produced a *technical* revolution among us. They have placed in our hands new and supple instruments, which allow us to approach subjects which heretofore we had no means of treating: the unconscious; sociological events; the true relation of the individual to society, present or past. [...] These American novelists, without such traditions, without help, have forged, with barbaric brutality, tools of inestimable value.[38]

These novelists do not try to penetrate the inner dimension of the characters, they just look for it on their outside. Nevertheless, it is again a strictly technical matter: what enables the inspection of that outside are, again, literary techniques. Accordingly, Magny could only conceive a relation of equivalence between cinema and the contemporary American novel in terms of equivalence *of techniques*.

1.3.   Cinema: Novelistic consciousness qua actual nothingness

When Rohmer reviewed Magny's *The Age of the American Novel* in *Les Temps modernes* (Sartre's own organ) in March 1949, he had mixed feelings about it. As long as he recapitulated the main features of the American novel the way Magny (and Sartre) identified them, no serious objections were raised. This included the stigmatization of plot and dramaturgy as opposed to a sense of 'pure event' and of 'situation', the preponderance of the present instant to the detriment of the future, the lack of customary psychological determinations (whereby man could presume to dominate time), and so on and so forth.[39]

Problems arose when cinema came along.

> Both arts have completely different ways of representing their relation to an object: that which becomes an absolute necessity for one – to express the interior by the exterior, the thought by the behaviour – is, for the

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38   *Ibid.*, p. 118.
39   Rohmer, 'L'âge du roman américain', pp. 563-564.

other, a matter of convention. I don't think that the deep nature of cinema can be defined as an 'art of ellipsis' or that its function is to make itself comprehensible by sparing the spectator the 'lengthy speech'. Instead, cinema establishes between the spectator and the visible world a mode of understanding, whose specificity is guaranteed by this very exterior viewpoint the spectator is forced to adopt.[40]

Rohmer opposed literature's inside-outside dynamics to cinema's absolute exteriority. What is at stake here is no less than the interrelation itself between Sartre's philosophical stance on self-reflection (self-consciousness) and the philosopher's novelistic aesthetics. Rohmer was well aware that the novel (as theorized by Sartre, Magny, Pouillon and the like) seeks a certain absence of consciousness, in the guise of a reflective, de-psychologized consciousness, which 'is nothing' but a contingent, temporalizing agency whereby the appearances of the imaginary world of the novel consistently unfurl in time. At the same time, Rohmer seemed to suggest that this novelistic for-itself consciousness *is not nothing enough*.

In his opinion, cinema gave rise to a consciousness that is truly and indeed a nothingness, one that is characterized primarily by a lack of any definite consciousness, including the literary and Sartrean kind of consciousness that is nothing, but which nonetheless temporalizes. Indeed, Rohmer seemed to subscribe to the then relatively widespread (one need only think of such 1920s French film theorists and critics as, among others, Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein – to say nothing of André Bazin himself) theoretical leaning regarding cinema, above all, as a machine; accordingly, cinematic consciousness, viz. that which enables moving images to appear on a screen, is supposed to essentially consist of a mechanic spatialization of time, as opposed to the contingent temporalizations characterizing the 'literary' individuated consciousnesses of the Sartrean variety. It is necessity as opposed to contingency: cinema can *only* (that is, necessarily) rely on that which is external, because it has no inner side, and the only temporal dimension it can access is mechanically spatialized (that is to say, it becomes spatialized thanks to a process ruled by the necessity characterizing every mechanic unfolding).

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40   *Ibid.*, p. 565. Originally: 'Les deux arts nous révèlent des rapports entièrement différents entre l'objet et son mode de représentation: ce qui est nécessité absolue dans l'un – exprimer l'intérieur par l'extérieur, la pensée par le comportement – n'est plus chez l'autre que convention. [...] Je ne crois pas que sa [cinema's] nature profonde soit d'être un 'art de l'ellipse' ou d'une façon plus générale qu'il ait pour fonction d'habituer le spectateur à 'comprendre sans longues discours', mais d'établir entre celui-ci et le monde visible un mode de compréhension dont le caractère spécifique est garanti par l'extériorité même du point de vue qu'il l'oblige d'adopter'.

This, of course, is not to say that 'contingent' temporal arrangements (for instance, ellipses) cannot be attached to films (for instance, by a narrator imposing a deliberately jumbled or elliptical temporal structure for definite aesthetic purposes), but rather that even these techniques must be submitted to and cope with cinema's more original and primary mechanicity (there will be more on this assumption in the next chapter).

In a literary context, techniques can function as that *minimal* and essentially temporal presence of consciousness whereby consciousness can dissimulate its own absence. However, the advent of cinema has shown that these conventions artfully intertwining the inside (a temporalizing, individuated consciousness qua nothingness) and the outside (whatever is presented to consciousness) *can be done away with*: it 'retroactively' showed this novelistic reflective consciousness to be too cumbersome to really be the nothingness it aspires to be. By mechanically spatializing time and by embodying a completely exterior point of view devoid of subjectivity in the first place (although, of course, any kind and number of subjectivities can be variously added and attached to it *in the second place*), cinema does not strictly need individuated consciousnesses, or the contingent temporalizations they carry. It can thus dispense with techniques and writerly conventions, in that it stands for a radical lack of consciousness as opposed to the kind of consciousness that is nothing, but which, nonetheless, temporalizes contingently, implied in the Sartrean kind of self-reflection.

It thus seems that cinema, according to Rohmer, strikes a soft spot in the Sartrean conception of the novel (defended by, for instance, Magny and Pouillon). It shows that such a conception cannot help but violate its own premises, namely reify, substantialize and personalize a reflective consciousness supposed to be a mere nothingness, by bestowing upon it a temporalizing agency ultimately preventing it from actually being a nothingness. Clearly, this deadlock in Sartrean novelistic aesthetics corresponds as well to a deadlock in his own ontology, but, for the time being, Rohmer was not interested in discarding that theoretical/philosophical frame – only his 1950 'conversion' would push him to do so.

As a rule, when actions and descriptions are outlined in a novel, they are accompanied by some kind of (more or less implicit) self-consciousness as regards *whose* consciousness is outlining what is going on (the narrator's? A character's? Somebody else's?); cinema, by contrast, can easily stick to that outline *alone*, with no need to attach it to an individuated consciousness. Whereas Sartrean consciousness qua always already self-consciousness lies in my being conscious of the chair *as well as* in my being conscious of *myself* being conscious of it, cinema lacks the latter: it lacks an *individuated,*

contingent, temporalizing, reflective consciousness perceiving phenomena while asserting itself. The cinematic image of a chair embodies not only the consciousness of a chair, but also *nobody's* consciousness of a chair, because it is a consciousness stemming primarily from a machine. More precisely, in cinema, that reflective consciousness (qua distinguished from that which is consciousness of) is *actually* nothing: because cinema shows us nothing but the image of a chair, in cinema any possible kind of consciousness is entirely embedded in the image of the chair, and is nowhere to be found beside it. The cinematic image of a chair points at the disappearance of every non-positional (reflective, for-itself) consciousness of the consciousness of the chair, *in* the simply positional consciousness of the chair. This is why cinema should do without any literary techniques: they are meant to convey an individuated, contingent, temporalizing consciousness that cinema does not need, because every likewise reflective consciousness is potentially already encompassed and inscribed in the images and their impersonal unfolding in the first place.

The most obvious consequence of this 'disappearance' of for-itself, reflective consciousness is the fact that cinema and *language* (which is temporal by definition, and can in principle only be ascribed to a consciousness of that kind) are literally worlds apart. Rohmer's conception of cinema is marked by a strong anti-linguistic bias. Cinema is emphatically not a language; its nature is not at all linguistic. 'It is not certain that the purpose of cinema is to suggest, to evoke an absence from a given presence; rather, it is to ground the necessity of this presence when it comes to that which it is supposed to signify.[41] With linguistic signs, some ideally preceding inner content is conveyed by a subsequent outside (the sign proper, resting upon the customary arbitrariness of the relationship between signifier and signified), and then inferred in return from the latter. With moving images, the inside-outside relation is severed: there is only the outside. There is no inner meaning or being 'making it on the outside', but one that immediately *coincides* with the outside. The word 'chair' can suggest whatever chair, while the moving image of a chair only and *necessarily that* chair; as he wrote in a later article: 'we can see why reality would be useful here, its necessity coming from the contingency of its introduction into the film: it could not have been, but it can no longer help but be, now that it was'.[42] Of course, the

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41   *Ibid*. Originally: 'Il n'est pas certain que son [cinema's] but soit de suggérer, d'évoquer une absence à partir d'une présence donnée; il serait plutôt de fonder la nécessité de cette présence en fonction de ce qu'elle doit signifier'.

42   Rohmer, 'Such Vanity is Painting', p. 46. This is why, in the third instalment of his essay in five parts 'Le celluloïd et le marbre' ('III. De la métaphore'), he affirms that poetry has always

fact that the moving image of a chair points at that particular chair does not mean that it reproduces that chair 'as it really is', but only that the moving image of a chair, rather than expressing some definite way to represent a chair, shows a particular chair *virtually encompassing every potential and subsequent 'interpretation' attached to that particular chair*. In a sense, this is not without recalling later theories by Christian Metz, who argued that because the image is too closely related to the object which it represents, its meaning is fixed, and not arbitrary, as is the case with linguistic phonemes,[43] hence an insurmountable gap between cinema and language.[44]

A few months after Rohmer's review, Jacques Rivette put the same point in the following way:

> Film certainly is a language, and a profoundly signifying one. But it is a language composed, precisely, of concrete signs, which resist being reduced to formulas. It seems unnecessary to recall the unity of the frame, of the take: irremediable record of the instant. There lies the mistake of every literary approximation (grammars, syntaxes, morphologies) no matter how well intentioned. Invariably, systematization neglects, a priori, the complexity of sensible reality as it mounts its theoretical edifice. In this medium, it cannot have grammars, or rule-bound syntaxes, but only empirical routines, hasty generalizations. No shot can be fit to a formula that misses its rich complexity, the virtuality and power that, in their very confusion, are the reality of the shot's existence. [...] This is nothing at all like words, like abstract and conventional signs, which are organized according to stable rules. A shot always remains on the side of the accidental, of a momentary success that cannot be repeated. A sentence, conversely, can be rewritten at will.[45]

Rohmer and Magny agreed that the purpose of both cinema and novel is 'to show and not to tell',[46] but they ultimately meant something different. In the wake of Sartre's novelistic aesthetics, significantly ensuing from his philosophy of consciousness, Rohmer too believed that the gordian knot

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been handicapped by the arbitrary character of linguistic signs, but cinema can give poetry a new life by complementing it with the *necessary* character of moving images.

43   Metz, *Film Language*, p. 93.

44   A gap that Metz tried to surmount nevertheless, in ways that fall beyond the scope of this book.

45   Rivette, 'Nous ne sommes plus innocents'. An English translation (from which all subsequent quotations will be taken) appeared in the issue 61 (2011) of *Senses of Cinema* online movie magazine: http://sensesofcinema.com/2011/feature-articles/we-are-not-innocent-anymore/.

46   Rohmer, 'The Classical Age of Film', p. 42.

between 'showing' and 'telling' could only be cut by ontology. But whereas Magny thought that, all things considered, cinema could only privilege the 'showing' by following in the footsteps of nineteenth century literature, Rohmer maintained that cinema had sealed the triumph of 'showing' over 'telling' by making the way for a *different* kind of ontology, one that broke with the 'novelistic', *chiefly temporal* ontology of *Being and Nothingness*'s for-itself consciousness. What Rohmer had in mind, in contrast with Sartre's perspective, was a *chiefly spatial* ontology *as opposed to* language; 'techniques', cherished by Magny and opposed by Rohmer, stood precisely for the linguistic representation of time cinema could and should dispense with. While for Magny 'to show' means 'to show by means of deliberate, expressive techniques', cinematic objectivity according to Rohmer cannot be a matter of techniques: it cannot be the outcome of any kind of (broadly intended) linguistic choice, however far from verbal language that which carries out an original intention might be, but of a spatiality inscribed in the DNA itself of the cinema medium, as opposed to the temporal bias language[47] carries along by its own nature. While the literary theories by Magny, Pouillon and the (Sartrean) like can only envision aesthetic depictions of outward appearance relying on a temporal interplay between narrative and narration, cinema, so Rohmer seemed to imply, is an innately external point of view on things; its eminently spatial externality, spatializing time rather than articulating it by way of the contingent temporalizations characterizing individuated consciousnesses, can do away with literature's dependence on linguistic, temporal techniques. Whereas in literature the 'showing' can only prevail by still being subordinated to the 'telling' (that is, by still relying on inescapably linguistic, time-based writerly techniques), in the cinema time is subordinated to space, and by the same token 'telling' (something essentially temporal) is more thoroughly subordinated to 'showing' (something essentially spatial) – as argued in 'Cinema, an Art of Space', the first article about films Eric Rohmer ever managed to publish (on the June 1948 issue of *La Revue du cinéma*).

1.4. An art of space

Cinema and the novel share the aesthetic goal of getting rid of any psychological depths, of anything exceeding the mere visual surface of things and

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47   Including any form of *visual* language: a visual metaphor of, say, the Eizensteinian variety clearly relies on the *non-simultaneity* between the images that are metaphorically juxtaposed; hence these images cannot be arranged but temporally.

beings as it unfolds through time,[48] but they are inescapably separated by their *means*: one tries to achieve that through language, while the other does not. And to Rohmer, this made all the difference in the world. No matter how hard literature tries to adhere to the surface of phenomena, it is condemned to re-enact Sartre's revised cogito: an object is consciously perceived while that very consciousness is the object of a reflective for-itself consciousness, which, at the same time, is nothing; however, only cinema's mechanical eye can *indeed* be 'a nothing of consciousness', viz. wholly external and impersonal in the first place.[49] This also means that cinema is far less bound to for-itself consciousness's temporality than the novel is: it is an art of space. In Rohmer's review of Magny's book, however, this spatial bias is extended even to Faulkner's novels, right in the midst of a discussion on the essentially temporal nature of novels in general:

> What matters is that the language at issue proves its authenticity on the basis of the fact that each of the signs it employs relates to our overall way of apprehending objects according to a necessary relationship. From this perspective, the concept of time is the most indicative (still, the study of a sense of space in the chosen situations or metaphors should also appear in a phenomenology of Faulkner's art). Art of duration, the novelistic narrative only appears to bring forth the reality of the narrated moments through their integration into a temporal totality.[50]

The novel is a temporal art, but cinema is an art of space. It may well be that some of the greatest novelists (like Faulkner, or Hermann Melville) 'bent' the novel's temporality toward cinema's spatiality, but the difference remains.

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48   'The contemporary novel (I include those of the last century) learned the art of making things almost as visible to us as if they were shown on a screen. Many of the things we have said about cinema and its specificity would almost apply to the novel'. Rohmer, 'Lesson of a Failure: *Moby Dick*', p. 107.

49   This is why he also said that the impersonal detachment *vrais romanciers* ('true novelists') have always looked for is to be found in cinema much more than in contemporary novels. See for instance Rohmer, 'I. Le bandit philosophe'.

50   Rohmer, 'L'âge du roman américain', p. 563. Originally: 'Il importe que le langage qui nous est ainsi proposé justifie son authenticité par la nécessité du rapport qu'entretient chacun des signes qu'il utilise avec les modes généraux de notre appréhension des objets. De ce point de vue, le concept de temps est le plus révélateur (encore que l'étude d'un sens de l'espace dans le choix des situations ou des métaphores dût également figurer dans une phénoménologie de l'art de Faulkner). Art de la durée, la narration romanesque ne semble pouvoir fonder la réalité de chacun des instants qu'elle retrace que par leur insertion dans une totalité temporelle'.

The novel's temporality depends on language, cinema's lies in the *spatial* deployment of a temporality, of a temporal sequence of moments and deeds.

Having said this, it should be immediately made clear that both share common ground. As said earlier, in literature the 'showing' can, according to Rohmer, only prevail by still being subordinated to the 'telling', while in the cinema time is subordinated to space, and by the same token 'telling' is more thoroughly subordinated to 'showing' – but these are clearly two sides of the same coin. The virtual, imaginary space being deployed by both cinema and novel is essentially a space-time.[51] In 'Cinema, an Art of Space', its title notwithstanding, the inseparability between space and time is very clear from the outset.[52] Films have no spatial dimension without its own temporal deployment, through a series of variously interconnected shots gradually composing an imaginary space. Here, Rohmer is very close

51   Needless to say, Eric Rohmer was not a naïve realist (neither was Bazin, for that matter). He did not believe that cinema can 'faithfully reproduce reality' (whatever this might mean). Several passages from his writings attest this obvious truth (despite many scholarly accounts on Rohmer and Bazin over the last few decades have affirmed the contrary). Even such an early article as 'Cinema, an Art of Space' is careful to make it clear. In a brief discussion of the difference between the plasticity of actors' gestures in theatrical space and in cinematic space (p. 21), Rohmer says that the screen does not reveal the 'natural' gestures of the actors, but *distorts* them, or at least encourages a certain type of gesture which is different from the theatre's but that is required, like theatre's, to comply with a certain need of plastic equilibrium that has nothing to do with 'the real gesture' (whatever that is) to be reproduced. The fact that this equilibrium is differently achieved in theatre and in cinema does not prevent the necessity for some 'non-realist' (but rather plastic) equilibrium to exist in both cases in the first place. Thus, the spatial bias of cinema does not derive from an alleged capability to reproduce the space of empirical reality 'the way it is'; it rather has to do with the potential deployment of a spatiality inherent in the cinema *medium*.

52   'You have to be careful about space. The cinematic being reveals himself in space as well as in time. To tell the truth, he reveals himself in space-time, since in film one cannot dissociate one from the other.' Rohmer, 'The Critical Years', p. 11. The irreplaceable importance of time in this 'art of space' is corroborated by the abundance of *musical* metaphors in Rohmer's film reviews, like for instance: '... because after the *fortissimi* and the *prestissimi* of the preceding passage, the film, in which the soul's effervescence always finds lyrical expression, requires a slower, more muffled movement, just as in a symphony the andante follows the allegro' ('Ingmar Bergman's *Dreams*', p. 166); Nicholas Ray's 'tempo is slow, his melody usually monochord' ('Ajax or the Cid?', p. 111); 'The harmony that can be heard in this film has nothing of the soft purring of ordinary rhetoric. Its melody is hardly one of those which can be hummed on the way out. It requires a certain effort to be in tune with its rhythm, and, even so, the most warned spirit is forced to sense its internal logic' ('Amère victoire'); originally: 'Ce film fait entendre une harmonie qui n'a pas le ronron ouaté des rhetoriques ordinaires. Sa mélodie n'est pas de celles que l'on frédonne à la sortie. Il faut un effort certain pour s'accorder à son rythme, et, pourtant, l'esprit le plus prévenu, est forcé d'en pressentir la logique interne'. Other similar metaphors can be found in (among others) 'Rue de la honte'; 'L'esclave libre'; 'Les feux de l'été'.

to André Bazin,[53] who defined cinematic space as 'centrifugal', as opposed
to theatre's 'centripetal' one: whereas the former primarily extends *beyond*
the four edges of the frame ('the screen reveals a space that is not closed
but is spilling over on all sides, like a landscape from a window or a room
from a keyhole'[54]), the latter is entirely contained *within* the stage area.
'Compared with theatrical space, cinematic space would thus be defined
by the narrowness of its visual surface and by the breadth of its place of
action. The director must therefore determine not only the interior of
each shot according to a certain spatial concept but also the total space
to be filmed: the coming and going of the train in Buster Keaton's *The
General* depicts a very precise spatial obsession.'[55] Time (the unfolding of
a series of shots) is precisely what bridges 'the interior of each shot' with
'the total space to be filmed', and for this reason it is essential in shaping
the spatial dimension. Crucially, Rohmer's description of cinematic space
in this article is entirely in accordance with Bazin's ideas regarding the
affinity between cinematic space and the imaginary space being formed
in the mind of the reader of a novel. In both cases, a centrifugal space is
put together, as opposed to the centripetal one of theatre (and painting).
'Let us agree, by and large, that film sought to give the spectator as perfect
an illusion of reality as possible within the limits of the logical demands
of cinematographic narrative and of the current limits of technique. Thus
the cinema stands in contrast to poetry, painting, and theatre, and comes
ever closer to the novel.'[56]

> It is because cinema as the art of space and time is the contrary of painting
> that it has something to add to it. Such a contradiction does not exist
> between the novel and the film. Not only are they both narrative arts,
> that is to say temporal arts, but it is not even possible to maintain a priori
> that the cinematic image is essentially inferior to the image prompted by
> the written word. In all probability the opposite is the case. But this is not
> where the problem lies. It is enough if the novelist, like the filmmaker,
> is concerned with the idea of unfolding a real world. Once we accept
> these essential resemblances, there is nothing absurd in trying to write
> a novel on film.[57]

53   See, for instance, Bazin, 'Theatre and Cinema', pp. 102-112.
54   Rohmer, 'Reflections on Colour', p. 39.
55   Rohmer, 'Cinema, an Art of Space', p. 19.
56   Bazin, 'An Aesthetic of Reality', p. 26.
57   Bazin, '*Le Journal d'un cure de campagne* and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson', p. 143.

This idea that cinematic space is basically the extension of novelistic space by different means is fairly recurrent in the éS/pda's writings – for instance, in his 1958 review of Alexandre Astruc's *Une vie*: Jean-Luc Godard praises the film for a novelistic quality that ultimately coincides with the way cinematic space unfurls through time.

> With most directors, the *geometrical locus* of the theme they are supposed to be dealing with extends no further than the location where it is filmed. What I mean is that although the action of their films may take place over a vast area, most directors do not *think* their *mise en scene* beyond the area of the set. Astruc, on the other hand, gives the impression of having thought his film over the whole perimeter required by the action – no more, no less. In *Une Vie*, we are only shown three or four landscapes in Normandy. Yet the film gives an uncanny feeling of having been *planned on the actual scale of Normandy*, just as *Tabu* was for the Pacific, or *Que Viva Mexico!* for Mexico. The references may be exaggerated. But they are there. The fact is too remarkable not to be pointed out, and it is all the more remarkable in that Astruc and Laudenbach have deliberately made difficulties for themselves by only showing, as I have just noted, three or four aspects of the Norman woodlands. The difficulty is not in showing the forest, but in showing a room where one *knows* that the forest is a few paces away; an even greater difficulty is, not in showing the sea, but a room where one *knows* the sea is a few hundred yards away. Most films are constructed over the few square feet of decor visible in the viewfinder. *Une Vie* is conceived, written and directed over twenty thousand square kilometres.[58]

This is no doubt an evocative kind of reading, one that is probably not meant to be taken literally, or as an actual piece of analysis. Still, the underlying idea is conspicuous: films and novels share a similar spatiality. Novels suggest a mental image of what they do not show, while films suggest a mental image of what they can *only partially* show: the piecemeal deployment of an area that can only be shown one fragment at a time, as it always extends beyond the limits of the single frame. *Une vie*, the way Godard describes it, is a crossbreed of both kinds of space: it suggests an area that it does not show, but also shows areas that are adjacent to other, unseen ones (like the room by the forest and the room by the sea). Incidentally, this conception is echoed in a passage Rohmer wrote two years before, regarding *Paris Does*

58   Godard, 'Une vie', pp. 96-97.

Strange Things (*Eléna et les hommes*, Jean Renoir, 1956): 'What kind of shot is most common in *Eléna*? The master shot, you unhesitatingly answer. Well, the detail images are much more numerous than those of the whole, but by using the correct proportion, the director is able to give us the impression that we are seeing all of the set at each moment and that at the same time the characters are as close to our eyes as we would like'.[59]

However, this crucial similarity between novel and cinema aside, what exactly does Rohmer mean by 'an art of space' (as opposed to the novel, a temporal art)? In short, he means 'an art of appearances', a different arrangement between 'showing' and 'telling' than that of literature. Better still, he means 'an art of *appearance for appearance's sake*'. This turn of phrase (not Rohmer's own, but nonetheless aptly encapsulating his point) needs to be explained. To this end, it is worth referring to Rohmer's 'Chaplin/ Keaton' divide.

Chaplin's films are handicapped by the fact that

gestures, stances, and movements take on meaning only in reference to the series of states of consciousness or intentions that they reveal, one by one. Spoken language or mimicry is replaced by an 'allusive' mode of expression, less conventional than the first, subtler and richer than the second, but whose values depends not on the necessary quality that gesture acquires by means of its presence in a certain space, but on the relationship we establish between the gesture and its significance.[60]

The point here is strictly *linguistic*: Chaplin's images are still bound to an inherently anti-cinematic dimension: that of *expression*. Chaplin, in other words, treats images like *signs*, i.e. like mere means whereby a *meaning* is conveyed.[61] What Rohmer rejects is the existence itself of an intention to

59   Rohmer, '*Paris Does Strange Things*: Venus and the Apes', p. 185. As early as 1949, Rohmer wrote that 'Renoir is one of those who deeply felt that the mise-en-scène of a shot should not be done according to the surface of the screen, but according to the totality of the space wherein characters move' (Rohmer, 'Le Festival du film maudit', p. 761); originally: 'Renoir est un de ceux qui ont le plus profondément senti que la mise en scène d'un plan ne devait pas s'effectuer en fonction de la surface de l'écran, mais de la totalité de l'espace où évoluent les personnages'.

60   Rohmer, 'Cinema, an Art of Space', p. 22.

61   Rohmer reiterated his anti-Chaplinian bias in a 1949 article ('Preston Sturges, ou la mort du comique') where he set that director against Preston Sturges. 'Chaplin's art consisted precisely in bringing forth, by convoluted ways, a tenderness in ourselves taking us directly to his heroes' heart, like in the famous scene from *The Golden Rush* where Georgia contemplates the photo she found under the bolster. Conversely, Preston Sturges wants our gaze to always come from outside, as attested by his more-descriptive-than-allusive style of *mise en scène*. The serious in his

signify, separated from the means whereby it is effectively signified. The same reproach is extended to William Wyler (who 'has merely created a specific language to express a predetermined psychological content by visual as well as spatial means'[62]) and René Clair, who

> was able to have his characters evolve inside a universe where their smallest intentions were immediately translated into spatial language. Even the choice of a setting for *Quatorze juillet* allowed him to tell his story by simply moving the camera back and forth from one side of the street to the other. Space here is more a convenient means of signifying than it is a creator of signification.[63]

Albeit 'less intelligent' than Chaplin's, 'a less refined cinema' like Mack Sennett's and 'the first American burlesque films' are 'closer to a pure art of movement', because they rely on more purely spatial dynamics, like 'the simple confrontation of two dimensions' or 'the mechanical repetition of a gesture'.[64] But nobody could access the secrets of cinematic spatiality better than Buster Keaton.

> The reason is that the psychological significance of a movement counts much less for him than does the comical aspect, which is revealed in the way the movement is etched on the space of the screen. In *Batling Butler*, for example, for almost fifteen minutes we watch the novice boxer try in vain to recreate the simple uppercut movement that his manager is trying to teach him. This comedy of failure would not be original if the awkwardness of the gesture had not been developed, so to speak, in its own right – to the extent that the gesture can finally find an aesthetic justification through repetition – but especially because it appears as a sort of questioning of space, an inquiry into the 'workings' of the three dimensions – in this case ludicrous, but one that could just as well be troubled and tragic.[65]

works is not to be taken seriously, but rather to be our laughingstock.' Originally: 'L'art de Chaplin était précisément de faire naitre en nous, par des voies détournées, un attendrissement qui nous introduisait au coeur de ses héros, comme dans la scène fameuse de *La Ruée vers l'or*, où Georgia contemple la photographie découverte sous le traversin. Au contraire, Preston Sturges veut que notre regard vienne toujours du dehors: son style de mise en scène, plus descriptif qu'allusif, en témoigne. Ce qu'il y a de sérieux dans son oeuvre n'y est pas pour être pris au sérieux, mais faire encore l'objet de nos rires'. Whereas Chaplin expresses the feelings of his characters and wants to put the audience in contact with them, Sturges sticks to description, to the surface, to the outside.

62   Rohmer, 'Cinema, an Art of Space', p. 28.

63   *Ibid.*, p. 22-23.

64   *Ibid.*, p. 23.

65   *Ibid.*

In Keaton's films, as opposed to Chaplin's, there is no trace of 'the relationship we establish between the gesture and its significance', i.e. of a relationship that cannot but be essentially *temporal*, as the two related terms (like more generally the signifier and the signified in language) are clearly not coincident, distinct and dislocated.[66] In Keaton, all takes place in the space delineated by the images. Whereas 'the novelistic narrative only appears to bring forth the reality of the narrated moments through their integration into a temporal totality,'[67] cinema works differently. It still owes the signification of each of its moments to the overall temporality they are inserted in, *but this temporality is deployed in spatial terms*. That is to say, the sequence of discreet moments unfolds in space, if only the virtual space deployed in a piecemeal fashion by the succession of shots. Time unfurls through purely spatial relations, and space does not refer to anything beyond itself and its own deployment in time. This is why cinema does not need literary techniques: the latter deliver manipulations of time qua emanations of some consciousness (the novelist's and/or the narrator's and/or the character's/s', etc.), while in cinema temporality is spatialized: whatever series forms the temporality at stake, it is inscribed in space. This inscription in space allows the various moments making up a temporal series to seemingly unfold by means of a logic and coherence *of their own*, and not because of an arbitrary logic and coherence coming from the kind of temporalization a contingent for-itself consciousness can provide. Thereby, cinema is able to prescind from the expressive/linguistic bias still implied in literary techniques: because of the latter, novels can only *show* on the basis of time, while cinema can only *tell* on the basis of space. Reflective consciousness in this case indeed manages to be nothing; the non-positional consciousness of the (positional) consciousness of what is shown in the images is not 'nothing but a contingent, temporalizing agency,' but rather 'nothing but the spatial deployment of a temporalization.' Narration disappears in the spatialization of narrative. Notoriously, a likewise conflation between spatialization and narrative concatenation typically characterizes classical narrative cinema: 'in general the classical film translates narrational omniscience into spatial omnipresence.'[68] Suffice it to mention Stephen Heath's 'Narrative Space', arguably a deliberate crowning summary of a more than decade-long stream

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66   *Ibid.*, p. 23-24. This is also why, the critic says, a verbal account of a Keatonian gag is never funny, whereas one of a Chaplinian gag often is.

67   Rohmer, 'L'âge du roman américain', p. 563. Originally: 'La narration romanesque ne semble pouvoir fonder la réalité de chacun des instants qu'elle retrace que par leur insertion dans une totalité temporelle'.

68   Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 125.

of structuralist and post-structuralist reflections (among a number of others, by Jean-Pierre Oudart, Christian Metz and Noël Burch), published in *Screen*, a journal that, at that time (1976), had long chosen to side against any neo-Kantian tradition.[69] As a partisan of classical, narrative cinema, Rohmer would have almost totally agreed with Heath's depiction,[70] the difference between the two being instead downright *ideological*: while Heath claimed that cinema had to move away (and forward) from the illusory recreation of spatial and narrative uniformity, Rohmer (as we shall see in the next chapters) maintained that it had to stick to it, because cinema *is essentially* classical, narrative cinema.[71]

In the aforementioned example from Keaton, time is subordinated to space, since sequentiality is a mere backup to simultaneity: through repetition, a series of gestures unfolds so that, at some point, in one single gesture an unexpected difference can spring up. Keaton has what Chaplin lacks, i.e. 'the necessary quality that gesture acquires by means of its presence in a certain space';[72] 'necessary' here is to be thought alongside the 'necessity'

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69   Brewster, 'From Shklovsky to Brecht: a reply'.

70   Classical, narrative cinema creates a spatial continuity by means of the piecemeal deployment of time and narrative. Movement is gradually integrated within the artificial continuity mastered by the spectator from his own privileged position. Thereby, space is converted into *place*, that is, a *scene* where things happen. 'The centre is the movement, not movements but the logic of a consequent and temporally coherent action. The vision of the image is its narrative clarity and that clarity hangs on the negation of space for place, the constant realisation of centre in function of narrative purpose, narrative movement. [...] Which is to say, of course, that the tableau space of the early films is intolerable in its particular fixity, must be broken up in the interests of the unity of action and place and subject view as that unity is conceived from the narrative models of the novelistic that cinema is dominantly exploited to relay and extend. [...] The need is to cut up and then join together in a kind of spatial *Aufhebung* that decides a superior unity, the binding of the spectator in the space of the film, the space it realises' (Heath, 'Narrative Space', p. 86). Rohmer would basically agree to this: in the wake of the novel, cinema is expected to deploy in front of the spectator an imaginary spatial continuity ('an order of the pregnancy of space in frame', p. 92) through time ('one of the narrative acts of a film is the creation of space but what gives the moving space its coherence in time, decides the metonymy as a "taking place", is here "the narrative itself", and above all as it crystallises round character as look and point of view,' p. 92).

71   A more thorough explanation of the reasons why their positions differ would lead us too far astray. To cut a long story short, it can be argued that their main divergence has to do with the fact that Heath singles out a sort of historical origin (the advent of central perspective) for the kind of viewing subject that narrative space 'positions' within its piecemeal deployment (thereby also engendering an 'other scene', made of everything that this positioning leaves out: heterogeneity, contradiction, history etc.), while Rohmer's bias is more metaphysical than historical, and is as such less inclined to historicize the vicissitudes of the viewing subject and more to regard it as timeless and given once and for all.

72   Rohmer, 'Cinema, an Art of Space', p. 22.

sketched a few pages ago: a chair on the cinema screen can only be *that* chair, but this 'that' can only mean 'a specific one, which is inserted in a given spatio-temporal context'. Thus 'necessary' here also means *relational* (that is, spatial): images are not signs supporting the temporal, arbitrary process of signification, but rather take part in a spatialization of time whereby each of them is confronted over time with the other images belonging to the same environment all around (that is, to a space whose deployment and figuration also occurs over time). What matters is not the signifier-signified, inside-outside kind of relationship characterizing linguistic signs (whose inherent arbitrariness is now replaced by the necessary dependence on a surrounding spatio-temporal context), but, should these visual objects ever be seen as signs of some sort, they would rather form a signifier-signifier-signifier- (and so on) kind of relationship. No wonder that Rohmer compared Buster Keaton to Franz Kafka,[73] whose way of writing has often[74] been described in terms of a completely external system of differences among signifiers that had nothing to do with representation or signification.

Interestingly, this applies to aural signs as well (typically: words). For the critic, verbal language matters not so much for what it signifies, but as a physical object in itself, inserted in a definite context. Three months after signing 'Cinema, an Art of Space', Rohmer published an article in which he argued that a talking cinema worthy of the name should not consider the spoken word as an indifferent piece of matter, or as an instrument to signify, but rather as something endowed with an existence of its own.[75] As such, it should not be conceived as a mere backup of what the images show, but as an autonomous element whose role and function is wholly relational, that is, depending on the relations it establishes with every other (and not necessarily visual) element of the film.[76] Thus, the spoken word is for him less an instrument to speak (or tell), than something to be *shown*, no less legitimately in an aural fashion. In 1971, in a letter in reply to a critic accusing him to make literary films, he wrote:

> There is certainly literary material in my tales, a preestablished novelistic plot that could be developed in writing and that is, in fact, sometimes developed in the form of a commentary. But neither the text of these

73 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
74 For instance, by Maurice Blanchot way more than once, or in Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*.
75 Tom Gunning noticed this feature too, in his 'Eric Rohmer and the Legacy of Cinematic Realism', pp. 30-31.
76 Rohmer, 'For a Talking Cinema'. See also his 'Politics Against Destiny', where he acknowledges *dialogues* as the pivot of the *mise en scène* of Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *The Quiet American* (1958).

commentaries, nor that of my dialogues, is my film: Rather, they are things that I film, just like the landscapes, faces, behaviour, and gestures. And if you say that speech is an impure element, I no longer agree with you. Like images, it is a part of the life I film.[77]

1.5. An art of appearance for appearance's sake

For all these reasons, appearance is not the means whereby some inner essence, some meaning or some 'beyond' is expressed: it is appearance *for appearance's sake*. It is 'manifestation' as opposed to 'expression': while the latter presupposes some ideally pre-existing 'inside' (some essence, meaning, content or else) being conveyed by means of an 'outside' (a sign of some sort), the former stands for the immediate coincidence between inside and outside, i.e. for something in relation to which there can be no essence/meaning/ content/etc., liable to be located anywhere else than in its immediate surface. Similar to those theorists (like Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein) who invented the notion of *photogénie* more than twenty years before, Rohmer thought of cinema as the seat of revelation through a specifically cinematic kind of appearance.[78] It does not matter much whether what is revealed ('by', say, 'sinuous bodies intertwined in the usual brawl or by a frantic gallop across the screen'[79]) is called 'being', 'meaning', 'essence' or else; what truly matters is that it can be located nowhere but in appearance itself, and that it points

77   Rohmer, 'Letter to a Critic: *Contes moraux*', p. 80. Such a subject would obviously lend itself to infinite speculation. However, Rohmer never really elaborated on it while working as a film critic; only after he became a filmmaker he resumed and delved deeper into the ideas he had sketched in 'For a Talking Cinema': see for instance his 'Valeur pédagogique du document iconograpique filmé', as well as 'Confronter le texte avec le monde qui l'a inspiré.'

78   Twelve years later, Rohmer maintained that 'the evolution of the past ten years' (that is, 'the advent of color, the wide screen, the zoom lens' and so on and so forth) led to 'the progressive abandonment of a notion that was quite suitable and successful in its time: that of the photogenic, in the sense that Louis Delluc, the inventor of the term, gave it.' Rohmer, 'Faith and Mountains: *Les Etoiles de midi*', p. 118. Put differently, Rohmer acknowledged that the classical notion of *photogénie* was of little use after the war, because it didn't sufficiently take into account cinema's realist vocation, greatly enhanced by the technical evolutions that occurred in the meantime. *Photogénie* was a more genuinely visual, more artfully *plastic* (more on this later) notion than Rohmer's appearance for appearance's sake. Moreover, either *photogénie* per se and the reproduction of reality per se were less and less sought after by Rohmer after 1948; rather, as we shall see in the last chapter, he got increasingly interested in a sort of grey area where the two appear inseparable and indistinguishable.

79   Rohmer, 'Cinema, an Art of Space', p. 28.

to no 'beyond' whatsoever.[80] Put differently, whereas 'expression' points at a potential meaning (or essence, etc.) becoming actual, 'manifestation', is the mere display of some potentiality of meaning (as in the example of the chair outlined a few pages ago).

Is this enough to make Rohmer a 'spiritualist' film theorist? Yes and no. Actually, this 1948 article seems rather free from such suspicion; if anything, this suspicion only proved to be definitely more grounded later on in his career. When he praised Murnau for having eliminated 'all elements that draw our attention to something other than the immediate feeling of transcendence within the gesture,'[81] thereby implying that there is no beyond ('the immediate feeling of transcendence') but in appearance itself ('within the gesture'), the word 'transcendence' is to be read less as a sign of spiritualism than a reminiscence of Sartre and of his *Being and Nothingness*. Indeed, 'Cinema an Art of Space' interweaves genuinely Sartrean stances with others announcing the 'conversion' to come.

Because in Rohmer's written production some kind of vaguely Heideggerian 'revelation of being' is often at stake, it is necessary to examine the chapter of *Being and Nothingness* most closely related to this topic. It is the chapter about *quality*, that is, 'the being of the *this* when it is considered apart from all external relation with the world or with other *thises*.'[82] It is important to emphasize that Sartre does not conceive quality as a subjective determination: 'The yellow of the lemon is not a subjective mode of apprehending the lemon; it is the lemon.'[83] Is it then something 'objective'? Yes and no. More precisely:

> in order for there to be quality there must be being for a nothingness which by nature is not being. Yet being is not in itself a quality although it is nothing either more or less. But quality is the whole of being revealing itself within the limits of the 'there is'. It is not the 'outside' of being; it is all being since there cannot be being for being but only for that which makes itself not to be being. The relation of the For-itself to quality is an ontological relation. The intuition of a quality is not the passive contemplation of a given, and the mind is not an In-itself which remains what it is in that contemplation; that is, which remains in the mode of indifference

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80 'It would be useless for [cinema] to try to make more of the instant than the instant itself contains.' Godard, *'No Sad Songs For Me'*, p. 21.

81 Rohmer, 'Cinema, an Art of Space', p. 26.

82 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 186.

83 *Ibid.*

in relation to the this contemplated. But the For-itself makes known to itself what it is by means of quality. For the For-itself, to perceive red as the colour of this notebook is to reflect on itself as the internal negation of that quality. That is, the apprehension of quality is not a 'fulfilment' (*Erfillung*) as Husserl makes it, but the giving form to an emptiness as a determined emptiness of that quality. In this sense quality is a presence perpetually out of reach.[84]

Consciousness of man (for-itself) does not 'project' the quality onto the (in-itself) object; rather, it is the object itself that commands that projection, by means of being that nothingness that (for-itself) consciousness *also* is, albeit in a different way. In this respect, it is not that being-in-itself reveals being by itself, as it were 'oozing' it: it only does so because for-itself consciousness is, as it were, *embedded* within the in-itself the very moment the former finds itself detached from the latter. 'We shall best account for the original phenomenon of perception by insisting on the fact that the relation of the quality to us is that of absolute proximity (it "is there", it haunts us) without either giving or refusing itself, but we must add that this proximity implies a distance. It is what is immediately out of reach, what by definition refers us to ourselves as to an emptiness.'[85]

Let us return to the passage where Rohmer mentioned the 'transcendence within the gesture,' duly complemented by the immediately preceding sentences:

> Murnau was able not only to avoid all anecdotal concessions, but also to dehumanize those subjects richest in human emotion. Thus, *Nosferatu* is constructed entirely around visual themes corresponding to concepts that have physiological or metaphysical equivalents in us (the concepts of suction or absorption, of being held or being crushed, and so forth). All elements that draw our attention to something other than the immediate feeling of transcendence within the gesture are eliminated.[86]

Murnau supremely embodied the 'art of space', not just because he excelled in staging bodies and things in front of the camera, but because he turned cinematic appearance into revelation. What was revealed was nothing but appearance itself (again: cinema is an art of space as the art of revealing appearance for appearance's sake) – or better still: appearance *plus a certain*

84   Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 186-187.
85   *Ibid.*, p. 187.
86   Rohmer, 'Cinema, an Art of Space', p. 26.

nothing. What is this nothing? It is an 'abstraction [that] does not enrich being; it is only the revelation of a nothingness of being beyond being.'[87] This abstraction is the for-itself, the consciousness of man transcending being-in-itself by a nihilation that is nonetheless embedded in what is nihilated. Only *a nothingness*, precisely, separates the for-itself from the in-itself, and that is the nothingness 'added' to and by appearance qua revelation.

> Abstraction [...] is a phenomenon of presence to being since abstract being preserves its transcendence. But it can be realized only as a presence to being beyond being; it is a surpassing. This presence to being can be realized only on the level of possibility and in so far as the For-itself has to be its own possibilities. The abstract is revealed as the meaning which quality has to be as co-present to the presence of a for-itself to-come. Thus the abstract green is the meaning-to-come of the concrete this in so far as it reveals itself to me through its profile 'green-brightness-roughness'. The green is the peculiar possibility of this profile in so far as it is revealed across the possibilities which I am; that is, in so far as it is made-to-be.[88]

Murnau emphasizes visual themes that resonate within us ('the concepts of suction or absorption, of being held or being crushed, and so forth'), that is, in our own consciousness *as embedded in the in-itself* (*that is, in appearance*). 'All elements that draw our attention to something other than the immediate feeling of transcendence within the gesture are eliminated': there is a transcendence, a for-itself, but it remains wholly within appearance (that is, within the gesture appearing on the screen). Murnau does not use the images to express a content formulated by some separate for-itself consciousness, but rather shapes them so that the viewer can feel his own for-itself consciousness *there*, enshrined in the images. Accordingly, cinema is for Rohmer an art of space insofar as it is the art of appearance for appearance's sake, i.e. appearance qua revelation of 'nothing' beyond itself, that 'nothing' being the for-itself consciousness of man, which is included in appearance by its very nihilation.

'Appearance for appearance's sake' is literally cinema's answer to Sartrean novelistic for-itself consciousness: whereas the latter is too cumbersome, 'not nothing enough' in that it too heavily relies on contingent, linguistic/ temporal articulations, in the former the reflective consciousness accompanying the images (the non-positional found along with the positional) is really *nowhere but* in the images.

87   Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 189.
88   *Ibid.*, pp. 188-189.

1.6.   Space vs. language

The notion of space outlined in *Being and Nothingness* also resonates with the one in 'Cinema an Art of Space'.

> [Space is] a moving relation between beings which are unrelated. It is the total independence of the in-itselfs, as it is revealed to a being which is presence to 'all' the in-itself as the independence of each one in relation to the others. It is the unique way in which beings can be revealed as having no relation, can be thus revealed to the being through which relation comes into the world; that is, space is pure exteriority. [...] Space is not the world, but it is the instability of the world apprehended as totality, inasmuch as the world can always disintegrate into external multiplicity. Space [...] depends on temporality and appears in temporality since it can come into the world only through a being whose mode of being is temporalization [...] In this sense it would be useless to conceive of space as a form imposed on phenomena by the a priori structure of our sensibility. Space can not be a form, for it is nothing; it is, on the contrary, the indication that nothing except the negation-and this still as a type of external relation which leaves intact what it unites-can come to the in-itself through the For-itself. As for the For-itself, if it is not space, this is because it apprehends itself precisely as not being being-in-itself in so far as the in-itself is revealed to it in the mode of exteriority which we call extension.[89]

It should be noticed in passing that Sartre (unsurprisingly) refuses to think of space as an a priori form of sensible intuition, unlike Kant (to whom Rohmer returned after his 'conversion'). Space is rather pure exteriority, the separateness of the various in-itselfs that the for-itself (that is, human consciousness) discovers as soon as it has emerged by means of self-reflection.

> Thus space and quantity are only one and the same type of negation. By the sole fact that *this* and *that* are revealed as having no relation to me who am my own relation, space and quantity come into the world; for each one of them is the relation of things which are unrelated or, if you prefer, the nothingness of relation apprehended as a relation by the being which is its own relation.[90]

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89   *Ibid.*, p. 184.
90   *Ibid.*, p. 191.

Space thus callously *isolates*. Therein resides its properly existential relevance. It displays all single beings as inherently, reciprocally unrelated – and this applies to the for-itself as well, faced with the foreignness of the beings from which it has nihilated. The awareness of *this* aspect of space is what makes Buster Keaton great.

> Solitude for Chaplin, even in the famous scenes of *The Circus* or *The Gold Rush*, is never more than man's solitude in an indifferent society. For Buster Keaton, the isolation of beings and things appears instead as intrinsic to the nature of space. Such isolation is expressed particularly by a back-and-forth movement – as if everything were continually 'returned' to itself – as well as by the brutal falls, the flattening on the floor, and the awkward grasping of objects that turn or break, as if the external world were impossible to grasp.[91]

Cinema is thus an art of space, because it is the art of *absolute exteriority*. It shows that interiority, the internal self-relation grounding the for-itself, has no place in a world dominated by space, i.e. by the complete exteriority of the relations between reciprocally unrelated beings. The only place it can have is, precisely, that of the nothingness between appearance and appearance itself, as in the sentence lengthily explained above: 'appearance for appearance's sake' (clearly just another way to say 'absolute exteriority').

What is far less Sartrean is the fact that, in Rohmer's article, space is set radically *against* language. Cinema is an art of space insofar as it is not an art of language (whereas the novel can be the former only through the latter). It is striking that, already in this early phase, Rohmer's always overt endorsement of ontology (the study 'of the structures of being of the existent taken as a totality'[92]) takes the form of an *opposition* (as in Keaton vs. Chaplin). Here, as in most of his subsequent film-critical production, ontology seemingly concerns less the self-revelation of some positive being per se, than that of whatever does *not* fall under the grip of language. Put differently, his ontology is very often ontology *as opposed to* language, an ontology whose scope apparently could be singled out only negatively. In 'Cinema, an Art of Space', Rohmer's point is *oppositional*: he does not really seem to want to list a series of positive, identifying features of cinematic moving images; rather, he is at pains to provide a strikingly exact reversal of

91   Rohmer, 'Cinema, an Art of Space', p. 24.
92   Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 632.

Ferdinand de Saussure's principles defining the linguistic sign: its arbitrary nature,[93] and the linear nature of the signifier.[94]

Rohmer rigidly opposed ontology vs. language, manifestation vs. expression. Cinema is unambiguously on the side of space, and space is unambiguously on the side of ontology and manifestation. There is no such rigidity in Sartre. In *Being and Nothingness*, language is 'the proof which a for-itself can make of its being-for-others, and finally it is the surpassing of this proof and the utilization of it toward possibilities which are my possibilities; that is, toward my possibilities of being this or that for the Other.'[95] The meaning of this 'Other' with a capital 'O' will be clarified later; the fact remains that this treatise attributes no small role to language: it is the mediation itself between the 'solitude' of the for-itself and its being-for-others. Rohmer's stigmatization of language seems rather distant. For him, cinema is on the side of space, that is, of the absolute separation among the reciprocally unrelated *thises*, *as opposed to language*, and it is precisely this feature that makes cinema valuable. As hinted at in our previous discussion of Keaton's cinema according to Rohmer, the critic also frequently associated space (the spatial character of moving images) with *necessity*, as opposed to the arbitrariness of language (that is, of the relation between signifier and signified): '[In expressionist films] movements and gestures whose meaning seemed contingent are in a sense – by their insertion into a certain spatial universe – grounded in necessity: Lips spread in laughter, an arm raised in self-defence, a face convulsed in anger – all are enriched by new meaning that can deprive them even of their direct emotive powers and leave them with only their pure quality of *fascination*.'[96]

This is already a considerable shift from Sartre's 'novelistic ontology', revolving around temporality and contingency. Freedom and contingency are on the side of the internal self-relation of the for-itself consciousness, while destiny and necessity are on the outside (or at least outside of the structure of time, which remains contingent). As Jean Pouillon put it, 'in fact, time ties its components together with no need to attach other notions on it in order to think and describe this connection. On the other hand, connections in space – which are the responsibility of the physicist rather

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93   De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 67.
94   'The signifier, being auditory, is unfolded solely in time from which it gets the following characteristics: (a) it represents a span, and (b) the span is measurable in a single dimension; it is a line.' De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 70. Instead, according to Rohmer, moving images are spatial/relational, and privilege simultaneity over sequentiality.
95   Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 373.
96   Rohmer, 'Cinema, an Art of Space', p. 26.

than the novelist – require, in order to be thought and described, to do violence to the absolutely dividing character of space by presenting its connection as absolutely necessary.'[97] Rohmer would add that not only the physicist, but also the *filmmaker* must cope with space and the sense of necessity it brings along, as opposed to the freedom and the contingency of the novel qua 'an art of time'. Sartre was not unaware of the fact that cinema differed from the novel, especially in that cinematic time lost the novel's contingency in favour of a quantified, irreversible kind of time.[98] Rohmer, though, went as far as to embrace that necessity and irreversibility by acknowledging it as fully spatial, and as such fully cinematic. This is not very Sartrean, to say the least.

It can be argued, then, that in the late 1940s, after the publication of a 'behaviourist' novel (*Elizabeth*) blatantly trying to reproduce the kind of objectivity Sartre and the existentialist-inflected literary theory and criticism of the day tended to praise in American novels, Rohmer was struggling to wrestle cinema away from the novel, while still acknowledging a strong affinity between the two.[99] Cinema was simply more novelistic than the novel itself, because it could better serve the latter's tendency to privilege 'showing' over 'telling', and because it fulfilled the promise of 'reflective consciousness *qua nothingness*' that the novel can never really accomplish, because it can only be too bound to language and to the contingency of an individuated temporalizing agency. Instead, cinema is an art of space, that is, an art of appearance for appearance's sake: it can focus on sheer exteriority more than the novel can, because while the latter deploys a temporality marked by the contingency of consciousness, cinema can make temporality into a spatialized series, by making the moments and phases

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97   Pouillon, *Temps et roman*, p. 29. Originally: 'C'est qu'en effet le temps lie ses composants, sans qu'il faille, pour penser cette liaison et la décrire, plaquer dessus d'autres notions, alors que la liaison dans l'espace – dont s'occupe le physicien et non le romancier – exige, pour être pensée et décrite, qu'on fasse violence au caractère absolument diviseur de l'espace en la présentant comme absolument nécessaire.'

98   Chateau, *Sartre et le cinéma*, pp. 87-88.

99   In a 2009 interview with Noël Herpe and Philippe Fauvel (in Patrick Louguet (ed.), *Rohmer ou le jeu des variations*), Rohmer avowed that 'one can be surprised that I couldn't catch the train of the Nouveau Roman to which *Elisabeth* had straightforwardly led me. Truth is, I didn't believe in literature any longer.' Originally: 'On peut s'étonner que je n'ai pas su prendre en marche le train du "Nouveau Roman" où me conduisait tout droit *Elisabeth*. Mais je ne croyais plus à la littérature' (p. 214). The relationship between the éS/pda and the *nouveau roman* literary trend (which Rohmer here regards as the natural prolongation of Sartrean/existentialist cult for the objectivity and for the behaviorism of contemporary American literature) will be tackled in the last chapter.

whereby it is composed unfold in space. In Sartrean philosophical and novelistic perspective, consciousness is also self-consciousness, in that it is positional (consciousness of the chair) *and* non-positional (consciousness of *myself* being consciousness of the chair); in place of the latter (a contingent, individuated, temporalizing for-itself consciousness), cinema displays a temporality that is *one with* the spatiality being 'positionally' deployed. In other words, to Rohmer cinema was the embodied refutation of the Sartrean philosophical premise the novel rests upon: a reflective consciousness that can hold some grasp *on itself* (as well as on that of which it is the consciousness). Accordingly, at that time, Rohmer held one foot in Sartre's philosophy and novelistic aesthetic, while the other was already walking away from it, toward a soon-to-be 'conversion'.

1.7.   An art more novelistic than the novel itself

Rohmer often insisted on the fact that, because cinema *immediately finds* what literature is compelled to eternally look for in vain[100] (a non-linguistic adherence to showing the surface of phenomena, a reflective consciousness filtering phenomena 'qua nothingness'), films should not try to imitate literature and to adopt its writerly tricks and gimmicks. The latter articulate a temporality corresponding to a contingent, definite consciousness, while in cinema the deployment of temporality (the unfolding of a temporal series) is, as it were, carved in space by default, with no need for it to be 'signed' by a specific reflective consciousness. Because cinema is automatically novelistic by virtue of its spatial nature, there is no point in deliberately reproducing the stylistic features characterizing the novel, viz. more generally a kind of narration shaping narrative in a typically literary way. 'The novel and film are close relatives, no doubt, but we may also find that the former exerts too great a tyranny over the latter, to the point that we often speak of cinematic quality when the word novelistic would be more appropriate.'[101] 'Why should [cinema] imitate a literature that, born of cinema, can offer cinema only

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100   It should be noted in passing that André Bazin propounded the opposite view, that is, cinema follows in the novel's footsteps. The novel has little to gain from imitating cinema, but cinema has even less to lose in drawing inspiration from the novel. See, for instance his 'In Defence of Mixed Cinema', or '*Le Journal d'un cure de campagne* and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson'. A worthwhile elucidation about the novelistic roots of Bazin's notion of 'cinematic *mise en scène*' can be found in Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, pp. 1-86.
101   Rohmer, 'Renoir's Youth', p. 191.

a pale reflection of itself?"[102] This idea appeared at the very beginning of his film-critical career and would heavily inform his subsequent written production[103] until he quit film criticism to become a filmmaker – and even thereafter. It can be safely argued that this is Rohmer's original, basic, fundamental idea, as it always remained the same while theoretical frames came and went in a relatively indifferent and contingent way.

While often insisting that cinema is *essentially* American cinema (itself variously related to the American novel of that century), he not infrequently slated films that tried to not only adapt some twentieth century American novel for the screen, but also imitate the stylistic features commonly associated to that literary trend, like for instance *The Wayward Bus* by Victor Vicas[104] (1957, taken from Steinbeck) or *God's Little Acre* by Anthony Mann (1958, taken from Caldwell). John Huston's *Moby Dick* (1956) encountered the same fate, but with an aggravating factor: the original novel was particularly unsuitable, because it was already *too cinematic*; Melville managed to create by means of verbal language a universe that was more purely visual/spatial than that staged by John Huston, who relied on too many literary artifices instead of finding/recreating Melville's intensity on the surface of things and beings.[105] Because he relied on techniques less than Huston did, Melville was ultimately more cinematic than the filmmaker, and more able to *show*.

If this sounds paradoxical, it is because Rohmer's view of cinema and literature essentially is. According to him, the purer cinema is, the more novelistic it is, but at the same time, the purer cinema is, and hence the more novelistic it is, the less it should try to resemble the novel, otherwise it would lose either its novelistic and cinematic values.[106] This means that cinema should try to be novelistic (that is, to privilege the outside over the inside, and to treat reflective consciousness as a nothingness) while 'forgetting' the novel's features, styles and forms, i.e. all that belongs to the typically literary

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102   Rohmer, 'The Classical Age of Film', p. 41.

103   For instance, in Rohmer, 'Rediscovering America', pp. 91-92, or in his interventions during the roundtable with Bazin, Doniol-Valcroze, Kast, Leenhardt and Rivette 'Six Characters in Search of *auteurs*: A Discussion about the French Cinema', (particularly p. 41).

104   Rohmer, 'Les naufragés de l'autocar'. Claude-Edmonde Magny's *The Age of the American Novel* is quoted within the review.

105   Rohmer, 'Lesson of a Failure: *Moby Dick*'.

106   Such paradoxes are interestingly explored in the article ('Films and the Three Levels of Discourse: Indirect, Direct and Hyperdirect') he wrote to justify the choices behind his filmed adaptation of Kleist's *The Marquise of O...* (1976). Part of the article aimed at showing that it is wrong to assume that while the three traditional levels of discourse (indirect/direct/hyperdirect) are available to the novel, only one (the hyperdirect) would be available to cinema: precisely because cinema is 'literary at heart', all three actually (and most naturally) belong to it.

way to intertwine narrative and narration. Very few directors managed to do so; one of them was Howard Hawks: 'What makes [Hawks's] style so difficult to define, is that it does not correspond to the point of view of the narrator – of God (there is no descriptive camera movements, or any Wellesian static shot), neither to that of the characters (the style involving association of ideas).'[107] The typically literary dilemma of point of view is solved by *eschewing* it. A writer is obliged to choose between the narrator's or the character's point of view, but Hawks managed to choose *neither* of them: cinema should stick to a literary agenda by inventing means that are non-literary; it should face a literary question ('should one choose the narrator's of the character's point of view?') by providing answers that are not literary ('neither of them'). It should fulfil the novel's calling for a reflective consciousness qua nothingness by being able to choose *no* individuated consciousness in particular.

A passage in a review by Jean-Luc Godard, interestingly, mirrors this very topic.

> Let us take another example, this time from *Man of the West*. In the deserted town, Gary Cooper comes out of the little bank and looks to see if the bandit he has just shot is really dead, for he can see him stumbling in the distance at the end of the single street which slopes gently away at his feet. An ordinary director would simply have cut from Gary Cooper coming out to the dying bandit. A more subtle director might have added various details to enrich the scene, but would have adhered to the same principle of dramatic composition. The originality of Anthony Mann is that he is able to enrich while simplifying to the extreme. As he comes out, Gary Cooper is framed in medium shot. He crosses almost the entire field of vision to look at the deserted town, and then (rather than have a reverse angle of the town, followed by a shot of Gary Cooper's face as he watches) a lateral tracking shot re-frames Cooper as he stands motionless, staring at the empty town. The stroke of genius lies in having the track start *after* Gary Cooper moves, because it is this dislocation in time which allows a spatial simultaneity: in one fell swoop we have both the mystery of the deserted town, and Gary Cooper's sense of unease at the mystery.[108]

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107 Rohmer, 'Ceiling Zero', p. 22. Originally: 'Ce qui rend son style [Hawks's] si difficile à définir, c'est qu'il ne répond ni au point de vue du narrateur – de Dieu (pas de mouvements d'appareils descriptifs, ou de plan fixe wellesien), ni des personnages (style d'associations d'idées).'
108 Godard, 'Supermann: *Man of the West*', pp. 119-120.

Godard here describes a literary problem and a cinematic solution. The literary problem is: 'should the point of view be impersonal or the character's?' The cinematic solution is, once again: 'neither of them'. The 'stroke of genius' of that tracking shot lies in its being external to both the character's point of view and the impersonal depiction of the deserted town. More than ten years after 'Cinema, an Art of Space', space ('spatial simultaneity') is still the non-literary overcoming of a literary deadlock; exteriority is the very solution to the impossibility of choosing between two inner ('for-itself') consciousnesses (the impersonal narrator's and the character's). Only a few months earlier, Luc Moullet had reiterated the equation among 'novelistic subtlety', *mise en scène* and 'full exteriority'.[109]

This goes a long way towards accounting for the fact that Rohmer's impulse in the éS years decisively contributed to shaping the pda's (mainly unspoken) idea that cinema was the quintessence of a novelistic aesthetic born in France in the nineteenth century and most brilliantly developed in the United States in the twentieth. In one of his first film reviews, Jacques Rivette wrote that Nicholas Ray's *They Live By Night* (1948) was the cinematic equivalent of Ernest Hemingway's novels.[110] Countless further examples (such as François Truffaut's remark that Max Ophuls pushed his character's feelings to their *physical* limit, just like Balzac[111]) could easily prove this point,[112] and Thomas Elsaesser already noticed long ago that the first decade of the *Cahiers du Cinéma* was heavily influenced by a literary bias best exemplified by Magny's *The Age of the American Novel*.[113]

However, if, on the one hand, '*politique des auteurs*, a strategy to promote and support *auteur*ist film practice, was a way of shaping the history of cinema according to the model derived from literature,'[114] on the other hand it would be wrong to assume that film directors were assimilated to writers just because they all used their respective medium in order to express themselves.[115] According to Magny, 'The error of naturalism is to have believed that the story would be more objective precisely to the degree that the narrator could be made more neutral, more impersonal,'[116]

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109   Moullet, 'Re-création par la récréation' p. 56.

110   Rivette, 'Les principaux films du rendez-vous de Biarritz'.

111   Truffaut, 'Lola au bûcher', p. 30.

112   Not to mention the innumerable references to writers and books Godard loved to scatter throughout his writings.

113   Elsaesser, 'Two Decades in Another Country', pp. 241-242.

114   Ostrowska, *Reading the French New Wave*, p. 48.

115   This view is seemingly implied, for instance, in Gaut, 'Film Authorship and Collaboration'.

116   Magny, *The Age of the American novel*, p. 99.

whereas later generations of French and American literature proved this opinion wrong by affirming a very existentialist truth instead; namely, 'the idea that every observer,' every for-itself consciousness (as *Being and Nothingness* would have it) projected on the outside, 'has its own point of view, that every person is in a particular place.'[117] Absolute impersonality is inherently impossible, hence the inevitability of authorship. However, as we shall see in the next chapters, this bears little relation to the éS/pda's idea of authorship. Rather, the key analogy between films and novels (that is, the one the éS/pda was interested in the most), was a different one: the relatively similar way whereby a virtual space was put together and presented to reader/viewer's consciousness through time.

It is safe to argue that Sartrean existentialism, in all its various forms, be they philosophical or literary or else, is the very background from which the éS *moved away*; the eventual emergence of the pda was, ultimately, the ripe outcome of this disruption. In this transition away from Sartre, Alexandre Astruc played a key role. A young writer (his first novel, *Les Vacances*, was published by France's most important publishing house, Gallimard, in 1945, when he was only 22 years old), he was very close to Parisian existentialist environment in the Forties.[118] As a film critic (for *L'Ecran français* and other journals), he was regularly in touch with the members of the éS (particularly with Rohmer). If, on the one hand, he increasingly lost touch with that group after his 1952 debut behind the camera (*Le rideau cramoisi*), on the other hand his article 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo' is widely acknowledged as one of the most decisive sources of inspiration for the pda.

In his monograph on Astruc, Raymond Bellour makes it clear from the outset that the entire work of this novelist, film critic and director 'should be defined by the novel and in relation to the novel.'[119] Astruc himself repeatedly declared that films and novels share a common ground:[120] they are both arts of appearances. For him, *mise en scène* belonged indifferently to the novel and the cinema, and consisted of the art of making the inside

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117 *Ibid.*, p. 100.

118 Regarding the links between Astruc and existentialism, see Lipkin, *The film criticism of François Truffaut*, pp. 83-115.

119 Bellour, *Alexandre Astruc*, p. 30. Originally: '[...] doit être définie par le romanesque et par rapport au romanesque.'

120 *Ibid*. Jacques Aumont rightly added that cinema, according to Astruc, is close to the novel *as opposed to* painting and theatre. This also explains why neither plastic nor dramatic dimensions are taken into account in his conception of *mise en scène*, designating first and foremost the way the inner truth of beings makes it on the surface. Aumont, *Le Cinéma et la mise en scène*, p. 57.

and the outside coincide.[121] 'The entire classical psychology is based on the fact that appearances are deceptive. I believe, however, that they are not.'[122] What distinguishes the cinema from the novel is precisely the way they relate to the outside. 'Film is defined by its exteriority whereas the novel is defined by the double possibility of an exteriority and an interiority, and of the free play between both.'[123] In cinema, the relationship between the outside and the inside is immediate, whereas in literature it relies on various degrees of linguistic mediation.

> To be sure, cinema is the art of appearances; the word and the image do not pursue this knowledge [psychological knowledge] in the same way. But the goal remains unchanged. What Astruc is seeking does not seem very different from Flaubert's: there is not anymore, like in classical psychology, an *inside* and an *outside*. The movements of the body, nevertheless, reveal the movements of the soul.[124]

One particular article by Astruc, 'Dialectique et cinéma', crucially suggests that as early as 1949 (that is, when the article was first published, one year after 'Cinéma, an Art of Space') the premises of Rohmer's 1950 conversion were already fully there. On the one hand, 'Dialectique et cinéma' faithfully follows Sartre's literary aesthetics as well as his philosophical approach; on the other hand, it clearly foreshadows the overcoming of both, most notably towards a return to Kant. Hence, the need to examine it in detail.

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121 Astruc, 'Quand un homme'. See also his 'Notes sur la mise en scène'.
122 Untitled declaration by Astruc, published in *Radio-Cinéma-Télévision* 470 (18 Janvier 1959). Originally: 'Or, toute la psychologie classique est basée sur le fait que les apparences sont trompeuses. Je crois, moi, qu'elles ne le sont pas.'
123 Bellour, *Alexandre Astruc*, p. 33. Originally: 'Le film se définit par son extériorité, le roman par la double possibilité d'une exteriorité et d'une intériorité et d'un jeu libre entre les deux.'
124 *Ibid.*, p. 52. Originally: 'Assurément, le cinéma est l'art des apparences, le mot et l'image ne visent pas cette connaissance [la connaissance psychologique] de la même manière. Mais le but reste inchangé. Ce que cherche Astruc semble peu différent de ce que cherchait Flaubert: il n'y a plus, comme en psychologie classique, de *dedans* et de *dehors*, mais les mouvements du corps n'en livrent pas moins les mouvements de l'âme.'

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Abbreviations

CC = *Cahiers du Cinéma*

éS = *école Schérer*

pda = *politique des auteurs*

ToB = Jean Narboni and Eric Rohmer (eds.), *The Taste of Beauty*, trans. by Carol
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