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Grosoli, Marco

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2. Alexandre Astruc: An Early but Decisive Influence

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Abstract

This chapter sets out to clarify the influence Alexandre Astruc had on Eric Rohmer and, by extension, on the *politique des auteurs*. While it is well-known that 'Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo' (Astruc's most famous article) has been a decisive and durable influence on that critical movement, 'Dialectique et Cinéma' (a lesser known article Astruc published in 1949) was no less seminal in that context. Therefore, this chapter closely analyses 'Dialectique et Cinéma' (particularly as it substantially references Immanuel Kant, Rohmer's most important source of philosophical inspiration) before moving to a new re-interpretation of 'Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo' in the light of that other article.

Keywords: Astruc, Kant, dialectic, *stylo*

It is well known that Alexandre Astruc's article 'Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo' greatly influenced the *école Schérer* (ÉS) as well as the *politique des auteurs* (pda). However, it can also be argued that the ÉS was no less deeply struck by 'Dialectique et cinéma'. Rohmer could hardly ignore an article written by someone who, as noted earlier, at that time, was among his best friends, to say nothing of the fact that it was published in *Combat* in 1949, only a handful of months after one of Rohmer's earliest and most decisive pieces ('L'âge classique du cinéma', 'The Classical Age of Cinema') appeared in the same journal.¹ Substantial echoes of that short essay can be eventually found even in the pda years, since Jacques Rivette quoted

¹ It should also be added that Eric Rohmer's personal archives, stored at the IMEC institute in Caen (Normandy), contain several newspaper clippings from various *Combat* issues of the same period (early 1949): for instance, among others, short articles by Roger Leenhardt and Jacques Doniol-Valcroze that appeared on the cinema page of that journal in the first half of that year.

this 1949 article as late as 1957.² Thus, it can be argued that 'Dialectique et cinéma' left a deep mark on the *ÉS/pda*.

The main reason why this piece should be regarded as an extremely important part of the history of that circle of critics, is that one year before Rohmer's conversion to Kant, it already overtly referenced the German philosopher. It is thus necessary to recall at least the most basic tenets of the latter's 'transcendental aesthetics', before delving into 'Dialectique et cinéma'. Lastly, we will turn to its more famous (and chronologically antecedent) companion piece 'Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo', an article that the more obscure 'Dialectique et cinéma' sheds a decisive light on.

2.1. Kant's transcendental aesthetics – and Heidegger's reinterpretation

For Kant, our *sensible intuitions* (for the sake of simplification: perceptions) are subjected to space and time, their a priori forms whereby things appear to us. The manifold of sensible intuitions are synthesized in a unity by *the transcendental synthesis of the imagination*. This synthesis is 'an action of the understanding upon sensibility, and is the understanding's first application (and at the same time the basis of all its other applications) to objects of the intuition that is possible for us.'³ The *understanding* (for the sake of simplification: thought) shapes our sensible intuitions in accordance with the *categories* (the pure, a priori *concepts* of the understanding). Thanks to the action of understanding, representations and judgements can be formed. Eventually, 'the power of providing unity of the rules of understanding under principles,⁴ i.e. *reason*, also plays a part in this process.

It should be stressed that understanding informs sensible intuition (whose manifold is processed by the transcendental synthesis of the imagination) *in the first place* (and not only when judgements and more complex processes come along). The moment we perceive, say, a chair, the action of understanding is already in place, because it provides the concepts whereby

2 Rivette, 'The Hand', p. 144. Although Rivette quotes 'Cinéma et dialectique' (the follow-up piece of 'Dialectique et cinéma', published in *Combat* one week later, and eventually included in the collection *Du stylo à la caméra... et de la caméra au stylo* together with its companion piece), it would be easy to demonstrate, by drawing on the rest of Rivette's article, that in fact he meant to refer to the former one instead.

3 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B152.

4 *Ibid.*, B359.

a chair can be acknowledged as a chair. Man experiences things according to a certain (in Kantian terms, 'transcendental') mediation, but is also *objectively* bound to a mediation of a specific kind: that which makes us see things *according to a synthetic principle of unity*. This unity emerges from understanding. We do not perceive things in themselves (noumena), only appearances (phenomena), but there is a character of necessity informing the way appearances are produced, because, objectively, we are bound to receive appearances in a synthetic manner: we can analyse and dissect physical reality as much as we please, but our perception is necessarily tied to certain schemes whereby what is manifold appears unified. This is how what we know as discrete objects (more precisely, the concepts thereof) are born in our mind: thanks to this synthetic coalescence of traits. Kant tells us that we can rely on a substantial, objective a priori certitude that our apperceptions come *as unified*, and that this principle of unity is directly related to the fact that our own consciousness is *one* – which is also the key to overall unity of our experience. Without the unity of consciousness/experience/apperception ensured by understanding, no sensible intuition would be able to emerge. Therefore, sensibility and understanding indeed go together.

Understanding – speaking generally – is the power of cognitions. Cognitions consist in determinate reference of given presentations to an object. And an *object* is that in whose concept the manifold of a given intuition is *united*. But all unification of presentations requires that there be unity of consciousness in the synthesis of them. Consequently the reference of presentations to an object consists solely in this unity of consciousness, and hence so does their objective validity and consequently their becoming cognitions. On this unity, consequently, rests the very possibility of the understanding.⁵

Crucially, Kant also maintains that the unity of consciousness/experience/apperception matches the *unity of nature*. Here, one should be careful: 'nature' does not mean a 'thing in itself' inaccessible by way of phenomena (appearances), but rather *the sum of all appearances*, the totality of appearances. Essentially, the 'unity of nature' is the overall coherence whereby things appear to us, that is, qua globally submitted to the mechanical laws of causes and effects. The fact that nature is globally submitted to mechanical

5 *Ibid.*, B137.

laws has to be postulated if the unity of consciousness/experience/apperception is to make any sense at all.

Hence the order and regularity in the appearances that we call nature are brought into them by ourselves; nor indeed could such order and regularity be found in appearances, had not we, or the nature of our mind, put them into appearances originally. For this unity of nature is to be a necessary, i.e., an a priori certain, unity of the connection of appearances. But how indeed could we have the ability to institute a priori a synthetic unity, if our mind's original cognitive sources did not a priori contain subjective bases of such unity, and if these subjective conditions were not at the same time valid objectively, viz., by being the bases for the possibility of cognizing an object in experience at all?⁶

But, if understanding performs the 'transcendental synthesis of imagination', what about *imagination*? Has our account not neglected it along the way? One thing is clear, the actual place of imagination in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* has been highly controversial for centuries.

Imagination 'is the power of presenting an object in intuition even without the objects being present.'⁷ It is that which mediates between sensibility and understanding: it is that which brings together the synthesis of the manifold *as such*, while the synthesis *according to concepts*, which is also inseparable from the synthesis according to the unity of consciousness/experience/apperception, is the task of understanding.

What is first given to us is appearance. When appearance is combined with consciousness, it is called perception. (Without the relation to an at least possible consciousness, appearance could never become for us an object of cognition, and hence would be nothing to us; and since appearance does not in itself have any objective reality and exists only in cognition, it would then be nothing at all.) But because every appearance contains a manifold, so that different perceptions are in themselves encountered in the mind sporadically and individually, these perceptions need to be given a combination that in sense itself they cannot have. Hence there is in us an active power to synthesize this manifold. This power we call imagination; and the act that it performs directly on perceptions I call apprehension. For the imagination is to bring the manifold of intuition

6 *Ibid.*, A126.

7 *Ibid.*, B137.

to an *image*; hence it must beforehand take the impressions up into its activity, i.e. apprehend them.⁸

In addition to this *reproductive* imagination, (whose synthesis is subject only to the empirical laws of association), Kant also affirms the existence of a *productive* imagination, one that is transcendental, a priori and spontaneous, in that it produces representations that are not derived from experience, but *provide* conditions of experience (that is to say, the unity of the manifold as internally relating to the unity of consciousness/experience/apperception enabled by pure understanding, rather than to objects of experience). The relation of both to understanding can be summarized as follows: '*The unity of apperception [considered] in reference to the synthesis of imagination is the understanding; and the same unity as referred to the transcendental synthesis of imagination is pure understanding.*'⁹

The exact relationship between imagination thus conceived and understanding has been the subject of infinite speculation. Most importantly, Martin Heidegger, undoubtedly one of Sartre's most important influences, tried to demonstrate that the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* implied that the imagination was somewhat independent and distinguished from understanding, and its 'productive' side definitely overshadowed the 'reproductive' one. Moreover, imagination *subordinated*, at least to some extent, understanding. The unity of consciousness/experience/apperception depended on the synthesis delivered by the imagination, and not the other way around. This utter primacy of the imagination, from which Kant retreated (as if he were afraid of the power of his own insight) in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, lies in the fact that imagination was the *transcendental agency of temporalization*. By being the principle whereby the manifold are synthesized in a unity, imagination provided the a priori form of arranging all the 'nows' into a sequential succession.

Pure imagination, thus termed because it forms its images [*Gebilde*] spontaneously, must, since it is itself relative to time, constitute [form] time originally. Time as pure intuition is neither only what is intuited in the pure act of intuition nor this act itself deprived of its 'object'. Time as pure intuition is in one the formative act of intuiting and what is intuited therein. Such is the complete concept of time.¹⁰

8 *Ibid.*, A120.

9 *Ibid.*, A119. Emphasis is in the original.

10 Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, p. 180.

For Kant, time is self-affection. As per Kant's definition, the self can only experience itself as appearance and not in itself. Imagination is time affecting itself: the power of making the manifold into a sequential succession being exerted on something necessarily different from itself. This is where experience enters the picture: experience qua temporalized enters, as it were, the slot self-affection cannot help but prepare for it.

This reading of Kant clearly interweaves the latter's philosophy with issues pertaining to Heidegger's own agenda, like finitude and Being. Man is characterized by finitude (which also means that man's mode of Being lies in the separation from Being) in that it is characterized by temporality, so imagination qua the source of temporality is also the key to man's finitude. This is evident, for instance, in the following passage, extensively formulating the same point as the passage quoted above:

Time is pure intuition only in that it spontaneously preforms the aspect of succession and, as an act both receptive and formative, pro-poses this aspect as such to itself. This pure intuition solicits itself [*geht sich an*] by that which it intuits (forms) and without the aid of experience. Time is, by nature, pure affection of itself. But more than this, it is that in general which forms something on the order of a line of orientation which going from the self is directed toward [...] in such a way that the objective thus constituted springs forth and surges back along this line. As pure self-affection, time is not an active affection concerned with the concrete self; as pure, it forms the essence of all auto-solicitation. Therefore, if the power of being solicited as a self belongs to the essence of the finite subject, time as pure self-affection forms the essential structure of subjectivity. Only on the basis of this selfhood can a finite being be what it must be: a being dependent on receptivity.¹¹

For Heidegger, Kant's imagination is the key to the fact that Being is finitude, and that finitude, as temporalizing being-in-the-world (*Dasein*), is what is most primordial in man.

In his *The Imaginary*, heavily indebted to Heidegger, Sartre went even further, and distinguished even more radically imagination from perception, thereby (implicitly) rejecting Kant more strongly than Heidegger's rather eccentric reading did. Indeed, imagination, according to Sartre, is *nihilation*, a withdrawal from Being that is also, simultaneously, the most authentic form of Being man can aspire to (Heidegger's *Dasein*, albeit different in

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 194-195.

certain respects, is clearly not far away). It is through imagination (that is, nihilation), *as opposed to perception*, that I can attain freedom, by opening up the possibility of future action, oriented toward a goal (a *project*), while, by the same token, establishing a relatively self-determined past from which action takes off. As we have seen, for Sartre, freedom is a temporalization, and this idea deeply affects his theory of the novel. For him, this is meant to recreate man's temporality qua fundamentally marked by contingency (hence, in Sartrean terms, freedom). In a sense, Heidegger's appropriation of Kant's imagination (qua temporalizing agent) lies at the very core of Sartre's view of the novel.

2.2. 'Dialectique et cinéma'

Let us return to Astruc's article.

It is as if cinematic viewing imposed an a priori structure on the work; exactly like in Kant's philosophy, the human spirit puts things in a priori frameworks of understanding. Because it is a moment within a movement, no image of a film can be a thing in itself, without meaning and only pertaining to the category of identity. Far from being a self-sufficient and passive whole, it is none other than an instant whose meaning only appears in light of a past and a future. That is, of a story and a project.¹²

These lines commence with Kant, progress with Heidegger, and end with Sartre. Astruc says that while human spirit seizes the world only in compliance with the a priori frame of understanding, cinema does so in compliance with a basic principle of temporalization. Cinema does not show any 'thing': it does not provide a disorderly wealth of sensations to be unified by the understanding according to concepts, for instance when we attach the concept of a chair to a certain set of sensations, thereby acknowledging them all as 'a chair'. Of course, spectators *also* do so, insofar as whoever watches a film consciously recognizes a certain number of objects shown

12 Astruc, 'Dialectique et cinéma', p. 337. Originally: 'Tout se passe comme si la vision cinématographique imposait à l'oeuvre un cadre à priori; exactement comme dans la philosophie de Kant, l'esprit humain fait rentrer les choses dans le cadre a priori de l'entendement. Parce qu'elle est un moment d'un mouvement, aucune image de film n'est une chose en soi, sans signification en ne relevant que de la catégorie de l'identité. Loin d'être un tout passif et suffisant à soi, elle n'est qu'un instant dont la signification n'apparaît qu'à la lumière d'un passé et d'un futur. C'est à dire d'un histoire et d'un projet.'

therein, by attaching the relevant concepts, thanks to understanding (not to mention reason, etc.). However, this is *not* the most fundamental aspect of cinema. Cinema shows *moving* images. At every instant, it primarily shows a moment in time that only makes sense in relation to what follows and what precedes it. Only secondarily does it show 'discreet objects'. A moving image is nothing but a moment in a series: it is the outcome of temporalization. Cinema is 'the art of movement',¹³ hence it is a temporal art: it puts things in a temporal sequence. Precisely as such, it strikingly matches Kant's imagination qua temporalization, viz. Kant's imagination qua appropriated by Heidegger. Cinema enacts the transcendental synthesis of the imagination, synthesizing the manifold (frames, shot, scenes and whatever kind of fragment cinema comes across) into a flow (albeit only understanding can eventually acknowledge it as a flow – more on this later). Indeed, the above passage echoes *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* almost literally

As the pure succession of the now-series, time is 'in constant flux'. Pure intuition intuits this succession unobjectively. To intuit means: to receive that which offers itself. Pure intuition gives to itself, in the receptive act, that which is capable of being received. [...] The receptive act of pure intuition must in itself give the aspect of the *now* in such a way that it looks ahead to the *just coming* and back to the *just passing*.¹⁴

That this temporalization is envisaged as 'a project', is obviously due to Sartre's influence (which was still strong on Astruc at that time). Astruc does not at all shy away from the 'Sartrean' analogy between this kind of temporalization and that which takes place while reading a novel, and overtly posits this analogy in the text. More generally, Astruc seems to conceive cinema in terms of Heidegger's Kant.

In the following chapters, whenever 'cinema as externalized imagination' is mentioned, this turn of phrase will refer to the conception implicit in Astruc's article, according to which cinematic apparatus is an embodiment of Kant's imagination (the faculty synthesizing the manifold) qua reinterpreted by Heidegger. It will broadly refer to the complex of practices (whose ultimate outcome is the film strip) intervening between the shooting and the moment when the film is screened in front of an audience; that is, when the synthesis of the manifold of appearance into a series (typically the imagination's task)

13 Astruc, 'Dialectique et cinéma', p. 337. Originally: 'L'art du mouvement'.

14 Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, pp. 178-179.

meets the joint action of the viewer's sensibility/understanding/reason, acknowledging it as a unified flow.¹⁵ Astruc implies not only that cinema is the mechanical embodiment of Heidegger/Kant's imagination (organizing the manifold ensuing from sensible intuition – that is, whatever kind of fragment has been filmed – into a virtual flow) apart from understanding, but also that it *needs* understanding (qua transcendently informing sensibility) in order to exist at all. The film is the mechanical embodiment of human imagination (a pure flow of fragments), but if it does not get screened and seen, it is just nothing at all.

Because a film is as much a roll of film as a novel is a closed book, left on a bedside table. It exists only to the extent that we screen it, just as a novel exists only when read, that is to say that cinema can only be when the eye associates and unites several cinematic images with one another, by providing them with a temporal dimension.¹⁶

On the one hand, the unity of the manifold prescinds from the unity of consciousness/experience/apperception (ensured by understanding), in that cinema is the embodiment of imagination qua detached from the understanding. On the other hand, it needs them in order to exist. It needs a unitary consciousness for which the film exists. In other words: it needs 'human spectators, that is to say, [...] beings for whom and through whom time is a component of the world.'¹⁷

One could object that long before the sensibility/understanding/reason of the viewer meet this synthesis of the imagination, the sensibility/understanding/reason of everyone implied in the making of the film (first of all its author) have already affected this supposedly separate action of cinema's externalized imagination; such an objection would, of course, be justifiable, but would also miss the point. Why? I shall get to an explanation by degrees.

15 Indeed, the concept of 'cinema, qua externalized imagination' must be left in its generality, rather than identified with a single and definite practice like, say, montage – not only because Astruc never really did so, but also because an 'externalized imagination' to be accordingly conceived in terms of montage alone cannot but be heavily influenced by all the phases coming before (the writing, the shooting, etc.) and after (the moment when the film is actually seen by someone).

16 Astruc, 'Dialectique et cinéma', p. 338. Originally: 'Car un film n'est pas plus un rouleau de pellicule qu'un roman est un livre fermé, abandonné sur une table de nuit. Il n'existe que dans la mesure où il est projeté comme un roman n'existe que lu, c'est-à-dire en d'autres termes qu'il n'y a cinéma que lorsque l'oeil associe plusieurs images cinématographiques et, leur donnant la dimension temporelle, les prolonge les unes dans les autres.'

17 Astruc, 'Dialectique et cinéma', p. 337. Originally: 'spectateur humains, c'est-à-dire d'être pour qui et par qui il y a du temps dans le monde.'

Crucially, in Heidegger, the whole process of cognition is ultimately led by, above all, temporalizing imagination; accordingly, in Astruc's model, too, the temporalization ensuing from cinema's externalized imagination decisively drives the overall experience of the spectator.

Even composed of still images, placed end-to-end without any connection between them, a film passes, temporally, and in a certain direction. It unfurls from the beginning to the end of itself and, by its essence as film, acquires an internal link which is precisely given by its duration. This relation is not necessarily logical, it is in fact dialectical, and inherent to whatever film, so that there can never be an isolated image in cinema; even if such order does not exist in the creator's thought, the temporal dimension creates it.¹⁸

Thus, in cinema, the dimension of *time* leads the way – an *irreversible* time, at that. After light has impressed the film strip in a way that is optically similar to human perception (the shooting qua assimilated to 'sensible intuition'), cinema makes the ensuing manifold of appearances (the frames, the shots, the scenes – whatever kind of fragment is available) into a virtual flow, and binds meaning to this mechanical, irreversible flow (everything depends on what comes before and after). Astruc, in a Heideggerian fashion, seems to imply that, to some extent, the joint action of sensibility and understanding (on the part of the viewer) is driven by (the cinematic embodiment of) the imagination, and not the other way around. Usually, the understanding arranges phenomena according to its categories – among which, causality. This means that it orders them according to a necessary, objective succession following the laws of causality (A causes B, which causes C, and so on). *Vis-à-vis* cinema, this ordering is, as it were, anticipated by cinema's externalized imagination, synthesizing the manifold of appearances into a series to be unravelled in the mechanical, *irreversible* time of the projection; this irreversibility, in a sense, fosters and predisposes in advance the character of causal necessity to be bestowed by understanding once the latter acknowledges it as a unified succession.

18 *Ibid.* Originally: 'Même composé d'images immobiles, mises bout à bout sans liaison entre elles, un film s'écoule temporellement et a un sens défini. Il va du commencement à la fin de lui-même et, par son essence de film, il acquiert un lien interne qui lui est précisément donné par sa durée. [...] Au cinéma il n'y a jamais d'image isolée; même si cet ordre n'existe pas dans la pensée du créateur, la dimension temporelle la crée.'

The human eye in front of which this movement of images develops builds links with one another because movement necessarily involves a connection. It secretes a thread along which images inflate and puts each one of them on the twofold perspective of a past that once occurred, and of a future to come. Each element of this spatiality in motion is linked to all those elements preceding or following it, and this precisely because it is being preceded and followed. Without the need to provoke it with artificial means, the eye establishes a natural connection between the images of a film, and sets them in a duration that gives them meaning.¹⁹

In this respect, creators are on the same side as viewers. Creative contributions of any kind must inescapably comply with the fact that the final result has to be a 'sequentialization' unfolding through an irreversible time – in that sense, too, imagination (the externalized imagination of cinema) 'comes first', as it decisively drives and affects every creative contribution the sensibility/understanding/reason of anyone involved in the process might bring about. An author, a director or whoever claims control over a film may well organize the footage according to some creative principle (naturally falling under understanding – and reason), but he or she must still comply with the temporal *irreversibility* whereby the film's sequential succession unfolds, fundamentally conditioning whatever kind of control one might choose to impose on the material to be screened. Only in this way can cinema reveal 'the abstract element which organises it, whether it be an idea, a passion or an obsession.'²⁰ This is why the viewer and the creator (every creator implied in the process) are to be thought of as sharing the same side.

The whole point is the distinction between imagination (qua mechanically embodied by cinema) and understanding (brought about by the living consciousness experiencing or shaping the moving images, and essentially driven in both cases by the temporal irreversibility the projection produces), in compliance with Heidegger's stance on Kant. Not incidentally, the first

19 *Ibid.* Originally: 'L'oeil humain devant lequel se déroule ce mouvement d'images les lie les unes aux autres parce que le mouvement implique nécessairement la liaison. Il secrète un fil le long duquel s'enflent les images et inscrit chacune d'elles dans la double perspective d'un passé qui a eu lieu et d'un futur à venir. Chaque élément de cette spatialité en mouvement est lié à tous ceux qui le précèdent ou le suivent, et ceci précisément parce qu'ils le précèdent ou le suivent. Sans qu'il y ait besoin de la provoquer par des moyens artificiels, l'oeil établit naturellement une liaison entre les images d'un film et les enchassent dans une durée qui leur donne un sens.'

20 Astruc, 'Dialectique et cinéma', p. 338. Originally: 'L'élément abstrait qui l'organise, que ce soit celle d'une idée, d'une passion ou d'une obsession.'

passage by Astruc quoted above stated that man's consciousness imposes on the world the frame of understanding, *whereas* cinema makes it into a temporal sequence. On the other hand, Astruc insists that neither of these two faculties is conceivable without the other. Cinema is a temporalizing machine, and this makes it an embodiment of imagination; nevertheless, it still needs what it subordinates, viz. a viewer and/or a creator, in that both contribute sensibility qua necessarily informed by the unity of consciousness/experience/apperception ensured by the understanding.

This no doubt contributes to the explanation of why Rohmer so often²¹ reiterated that cinema should stay clear of ellipses – a rejection that could otherwise be explained simply by their being a somewhat typically literary technique, manipulating the timeline of the story in order to achieve definite expressive effects, and trying to express some content by means of allusions and a cunning use of the 'unsaid', rather than displaying 'appearance for appearance's sake', which by definition reveals with no need to conceal anything. Ellipses clearly rely on a contingent temporality (typically, the temporality of the novel), that is, on a narrative timeline that is liable to be broken and recomposed at will. But according to 'Dialectique et cinéma', cinema's irreversible time pushes the viewer to establish a chain of causal connections marked by necessity: in front of the screen, the synthetic bestowal of a linear flow prevails over intellectual analysis. An ellipsis consists of moving from a moment A to a moment C while skipping a moment B that is logically placed between them, so that the viewer is obliged to mentally reconstruct what took place between A and C. However, as argued by André Bazin (whom Astruc introduced to Rohmer in the late 1940s), in an article he published in 1945,²² the very functioning of cinema consists of bridging these gaps *all the time*: discontinuous frames merge into a seemingly continuous flow, as much as every other kind of fragment the film is made of morphs into a continuity posited by the viewer in the wake of the irreversible time of the projection. While reading a novel, the omitted B moment can be reconstructed intellectually a posteriori after C, simply because one is in control of one's reading time: the reader can stop, think, read back, resume reading, and so on and so forth, in whatever order, and no matter how long each of these actions takes. In front of a screen, *there is no time to do this*: the only moment that counts is the next one, which, every time, is to be bridged with whatever moment precedes. When C comes along, it must be quickly linked with

21 For instance, in Chapter one of this volume, in the first quotation from his 'L'âge du roman américain'.

22 Bazin, 'A propos de *L'Espoir*, ou du style au cinéma'.

whatever moment came before (be it A or B), before D (or even, say, P) turns up immediately thereafter. It follows, says Bazin, that there can be no real difference, on the screen, between bridging A with C or bridging A with B,²³ so ellipses, the way one is accustomed to conceive them in literature, simply do not work on the screen. The viewer is automatically driven *at all time* to posit a continuity between *whatever* discontinuous elements are presented, thereby systematically defusing the very effect of ambiguity and indeterminacy upon which ellipses and their power to indirectly allude rest. Hence, for this line of thought (connecting, at least in this particular respect, Bazin with Astruc and Rohmer), ellipses are inherently anti-cinematic.

Astruc's claim that the connection emerging by placing the manifold into a sequence (which cinematic imagination regularly does) 'is not necessarily logical, it is in fact dialectical'²⁴ should be read in a similar vein. In the final part of his article, he writes that 'cinema is only possible through movement, which gives an internal logic to a certain succession of cinematic images. For this reason, there is no movement without a linking process. Finally, there is no cinema without dialectic.'²⁵ The crucial part here is 'there is no movement without a linking process'. It means that imagination, qua pure synthesis of the manifold, *drives* the category of causality, in compliance with Heidegger's idea that, in fact, Kant's imagination subordinates sensibility and understanding. Because irreversible movement by itself makes succession into an *orderly, oriented* succession, 'this and that' automatically becomes 'that because of this'.

23 This conception helps explain an otherwise fairly obscure passage quoted in the first issue of the third year (1950) of the *Bulletin intérieur du Ciné-club du Quartier Latin*, namely a brief praise of continuity editing in the short films by Anthony Barrier (the pseudonym for none other than Eric Rohmer) that Bazin is reported to have published some months before in *Cinémonde* movie magazine: 'What can be discerned behind the deliberate banality of montage is not really a return to the origins and a refusal to employ the widespread cinematic device of ellipsis, but rather a concern to push elliptical style to its extreme consequences. In this film, there is a continual ellipsis of ellipsis itself [...].' Originally: 'Dans la banalité voulue du découpage, je vois non pas tant un retour aux origines et un refus d'user de cette figure cinématographique courante qu'est l'ellipse qu'un souci de pousser le style elliptique jusqu'à ses extrêmes conséquences. Il y a dans ce film, une ellipse continue de l'ellipse même [...].' Cinema has no need to employ ellipses in the literary sense, because its own regular functioning lies in bridging holes at *all times*. It does away with ellipses because in the cinema ellipses are *everywhere*: it is in a position to elide ellipses themselves in that it pushes elliptical style to its extreme consequences.

24 Astruc, 'Dialectique et cinéma', p. 338. Originally: '[...] n'est pas forcément logique, en fait il est dialectique.'

25 *Ibid.* Originally: 'Il n'y a pas cinéma sans une logique interne conférée par le mouvement à une certaine succession d'images cinématographiques, pour cette raison qu'il n'est pas de mouvement sans liaison. Autrement dit, enfin, il n'y a pas de cinéma sans dialectique.'

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, 'dialectic' is essentially 'a logic of illusion.'²⁶ On the one hand, 'general logic analyzes the whole formal business of understanding and reason into its elements, and exhibits these elements as principles governing all logical judging of our cognition.'²⁷ On the other hand though,

the mere form of cognition, however much it may agree with logical laws, is far from being sufficient to establish that a cognition is true objectively (materially). Hence with mere logic no one can venture to make judgments about objects and assert anything about them. Rather, we must first go outside logic to obtain well-based information about objects, in order then to attempt merely employing this information and connecting it in a coherent whole in accordance with logical laws, or-better yet-in order only to test the information by these laws. Yet there is something very tempting about possessing so plausible an art, whereby we give to all our cognitions the form of our understanding—even though we may still be very empty-handed and poor as regards the cognition's content. So great is this temptation that this general logic, which is merely a canon for judging, has been used-like an organon, as it were-for the actual production of at least deceptive objective assertions, and thus has in fact been misused. Now general logic, when used as supposed organon, is called dialectic.²⁸

Astruc calls cinema 'dialectic' precisely because it engenders a temporal succession automatically characterized by causal necessity due to the irreversibility of its temporal unfolding, *and uses this power as an organon*, in order to produce a deceptive logical concatenation unfolding on the screen. 'So plausible an art,' cinema creates a mechanical semblance of necessity that is not only formal (like general logic), but also attached to a certain content (viz. whatever is shown in the images that unfold on the screen), whose 'necessary' deployment cannot but be illusory. In contrast with general logic, which 'teaches us nothing whatever about the content of cognition; it teaches us merely the formal conditions for the agreement [of cognition] with the understanding, and these conditions are wholly inconsequential otherwise, i.e., as regards the [cognition's] objects,'²⁹ cinema, like dialectic, *cheats* on logic by improperly extending it to empirical objects.

26 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A293.

27 *Ibid.*, A60.

28 *Ibid.*, A60-61.

29 *Ibid.*, A61.

Thus we should read Astruc's quotation above: cinema is movement, movement engenders a succession automatically characterized by a kind of *illusory necessity* thanks to the mechanical, indifferent irreversibility of its temporal unfolding, so this succession is dialectical (it is a 'logic of illusion'). Hence, cinema is dialectical.

However, one must hasten to add that, for Kant, dialectic is not just a bunch of junk thoughts. (Transcendental) dialectic is also the name for a *critique* of dialectical illusion.³⁰ Dialectic is not just illusory: it is a *necessary* illusion, an illusion we cannot help but fall prey to, due to the very way our reason is shaped.³¹ Thus, the word 'dialectic' (more to the point, transcendental dialectic) refers not only to 'idle chatter [...] in no way compatible with the dignity of philosophy,'³² but also to the very uncovering of those illusions.

Of course, this has little to do with what Astruc is trying to say here. Astruc is simply claiming that the illusory (viz. 'dialectical') but *somehow actual nonetheless* (because our faculties cannot help but posit it) logical and causal necessity brought forth by cinema is what makes the latter a means of expression of thought. Cinema conveys 'the abstract element which organises it, whether it be an idea, a passion or an obsession' by means of the irreversible temporal succession it puts together, and 'articulates the real and thinks through its material just as the language of words submits the organic to the logical and bears the stamp of the intelligible. Now, it is this very movement that allows cinema to become a medium for expressing thought, because it is precisely that which makes it, fundamentally, a language.'³³ One must take care not to conclude from this passage that Astruc is merely saying that cinema is a language. Rather, he is saying that

30 *Ibid.*, A62.

31 'Hence the transcendental dialectic will settle for uncovering the illusion of transcendent judgments, and for simultaneously keeping it from deceiving us. But that the illusion should even vanish as well (as does logical illusion) and cease to be an illusion-this the transcendental dialectic can never accomplish. For here we are dealing with a natural and unavoidable illusion that itself rests on Subjective principles and foists them on us as objective ones, whereas a logical dialectic in resolving fallacious inferences deals only with a mistake in the compliance with principles, or with an artificial illusion created in imitating such inferences. Hence there is a natural and unavoidable dialectic of pure reason. This dialectic is not one in which a bungler might become entangled on his own through lack of knowledge, or one that some sophist has devised artificially in order to confuse reasonable people. It is, rather, a dialectic that attaches to human reason unpreventably and that, even after we have uncovered this deception, still will not stop hoodwinking and thrusting reason incessantly into momentary aberrations that always need to be removed.' Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A298-B355.

32 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A62.

33 Astruc, 'Dialectique et cinéma', p. 338. Originally: '[Il] articule le réel et raisonne sa matière tout comme le langage des mots plie l'organique à la logique et le marque du sceau de l'intelligible.

cinema can only be a language *insofar as it is driven by movement*, viz. as it relies on the synthesis of the manifold performed by imagination (rather than on understanding, as would normally be the case of language). It can express something only by radically twisting the premises of expression themselves (precisely like that called 'manifestation' in the previous chapter). Only under that condition can cinema be a *caméra-stylo*.

2.3. From and beyond Sartre's Heideggerian perspective

Before dealing with 'Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo', it is necessary to highlight the thorough *ambiguity* of 'Dialectique et cinéma's positioning. On the one hand, Astruc conceives cinema as the equivalent of Kant's imagination the way Heidegger read it (that is, as a temporalizing agent), and basically in compliance with Sartre's views on the novel, itself revolving around the temporalization brought about by imagination, whereby a project is engendered in freedom and contingency. On the other hand, this conception of cinema as the equivalent of Kant's imagination the way Heidegger read it *is simply incompatible with Heidegger's framework*. Kant's imagination the way Heidegger read it is a temporalizing power *within* man, grounding *man's* finitude. Cinema, qua the equivalent of Kant's imagination according to Astruc (as the pure power of synthesizing the manifold of appearance), is *external* and *inhuman*. Man only activates through sensibility and understanding an imagination that lies *outside of* man. This ultimately discombobulates the distinction (which Heidegger himself stubbornly struggled to articulate) between time 'in me' and time 'as such', 'between the individuated temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) of *Dasein* – the time which is in each case mine – and the Temporality (*Temporalität*) of being in general,'³⁴ between *Dasein's* *ekstasis* of time (the 'stepping beyond' whereby one accesses temporalization, thereby founding one's being-in-the-world) and *ekstema* (the 'horizon' of *ekstasis*, 'that with which transcendence encompasses and delimits the bounds of its own stepping-beyond'³⁵). According to Astruc's perspective, cinema qua the equivalent of Kant's imagination the way Heidegger read it engenders an external time, one that is *irreversible* and *not mine* (even though only I can enable it), hence quite distinct from *Dasein*.

Or, c'est ce mouvement qui permet au cinéma de devenir un moyen d'expression de la pensée, car c'est lui qui en fait fondamentalement un langage.'

34 Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, p. 155.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 157.

It can be argued that Astruc's article ultimately subscribes to Kant's conflation between 'objective succession' (the fact that one thing B necessarily follows another thing A in a sequence) and causality, but only after an Heideggerian detour envisaging the primacy of succession. In Kant, imagination performs the synthesis of the manifold of appearances, but the outcome is not an ordered succession: it is only the understanding that imposes an order (an objective succession) *and* a system of causes and effects to it.³⁶ In Heidegger, the temporalization performed by imagination engenders a succession characterized by a contingent order that is *the key to the understanding's activity itself* (whereby unity and necessity are provided). Cinema according to Astruc does what Kant's Heidegger's imagination does, *minus the human contingency informing temporalization*: it is a temporal succession driving causality, but precisely because it already imposes from the outset (thanks to the mechanical, indifferent irreversibility of cinema's temporal unfolding) to the moments of the series the character of necessity the understanding is expected to eventually provide. Put differently, cinema according to Astruc is a *subjective* succession (of frames, scenes, etc. that can be edited together in whatever way) acquiring a character of necessity (hence becoming objective) from the very fact that it follows an order (*whatever* order) unfolding (once this succession is played out and projected) according to an irreversibility principle that is apart from the temporalizing, contingent imagination of men. Thereby, Kant's conflation between objective succession and causality is maintained, but only by taking a different route (Heidegger's).

Tellingly, no 'incompatibility issue' of the kind outlined above arises in the case of Sartre's fairly Heideggerian view of the novel (revolving around imagination qua firmly distinguished from perception). The space-time of the novel emerges in the mind of the reader, thanks to a temporalization enacted by the reader's imagination *along with* understanding. Clearly, in the reading process imagination and understanding work together – a process in which perception obviously plays little part. In an unmistakable nod to Sartre, Astruc compares cinema's temporalization with the temporalization of a 'project', and openly acknowledges that cinema temporalizes its matter like novels do. However, Astruc also heads in the opposite direction. To conceive cinema as the externalization of (Heidegger's view of) Kant's imagination means to embrace and, at the same time, undermine Sartre's firm distinction between imagination and perception: to make imagination

36 In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, this is explained in the Second Analogy of Experience (Principle of Temporal Succession According to the Law of Causality).

the object of perception means to push their detachment to its extremes, but also to reunite them by the same token (what the viewer sees is, precisely, *imagination at work*). Similarly, Astruc maintains that cinema is a temporal art (like Sartre's novel), but undoes the Sartrean knot between temporality and contingency by insisting on necessity instead. This makes his argument closer to Rohmer's view of cinema as 'an art of space', as outlined in the previous chapter.

2.4. The 'Camera-Stylo'

As previously said, Rivette quoted 'Dialectique et cinéma' in the mid-Fifties, and it is most likely that Rohmer knew it too. It thus appears that 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Stylo' (published in March 1948 in *L'Ecran français*) is not the only article by Astruc to have considerably influenced the *ÉS/pda*. Moreover, these two articles are linked by an 'umbilical cord', namely a passage right in the middle of 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde' encapsulating in advance the short essay that appeared only 14 months later: 'One of the fundamental phenomena of the last few years has been the growing realisation of the dynamic, i.e. significant, character of the cinematic image. Every film, because its primary function is to move, i.e. to take place in time, is a theorem. It is a series of images which, from one end to the other, have an inexorable logic (or better even, a dialectic) of their own.'³⁷

Indisputably, then, there is a strong connection between the two pieces of writing. It could even be argued (even though there is no direct, definite evidence in support of such claim) that Astruc wrote 'Dialectique et cinéma' in order to clarify what he really meant in 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde' – or at least as a prolongation, a spin-off thereof. Be that as it may, by reading them alongside each other, one realizes that they definitely shed reciprocal light. By taking into account the virtual presence of the ideas eventually expressed in 'Dialectique et cinéma' *within* 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde', it becomes clear that the latter can by no means be confused with a plain statement in favour of cinema as a means to express one's thought. Such an idea would be rather banal, and hardly novel: already in the 1920s (and possibly even before then), similar claims were rather widespread in movie magazines and within film culture in general. Thus, it is hard to believe that the *pda* looked at that article in such a simplistic way. In all likelihood,

37 Astruc, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde', p. 34.

they were perfectly aware of its *actual* point, i.e. the one emerging from a closer reading, and by fully acknowledging the importance of that later article, 'Dialectique et cinéma'.

The point of 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde' is not *that* cinema can express thought, but *how* it does so. It makes a distinction between two different ways for cinema to be a language ('a form in which and by which an artist can express his thoughts'). One way is behind cinema's back: the 'heavy associations of images that were the delight of the silent cinema' (for example, falling leaves followed by apple trees in blossom in order to suggest the passing of time). The 'old avant-garde', encompassing among others Sergei Eisenstein, the surrealists, the poetic documentaries and the abstract films of the 1920s, is 'the slave of a static conception of the image,' whilst the other way, the veritable way of the 'caméra-stylo', entirely revolves around *movement* (qua the backbone of the necessity-marked sequentiality of which cinema, qua externalized imagination, consists).

We have come to realise that the meaning which the silent cinema tried to give birth to through symbolic association exists within the image itself, in the development of the narrative, in every gesture of the characters, in every line of dialogue, in those camera movements which relate objects to objects and characters to objects. All thought, like all feeling, is a relationship between one human being and another human being or certain objects which form part of his universe. It is by clarifying these relationships, by making a tangible allusion, that the cinema can really make itself the vehicle of thought. From today onwards, it will be possible for the cinema to produce works which are equivalent, in their profundity and meaning, to the novels of Faulkner and Malraux, to the essays of Sartre and Camus. Moreover we already have a significant example: Malraux's *L'Espoir*, the film which he directed from his own novel, in which, perhaps for the first time ever, film language is the exact equivalent of literary language.³⁸

Astruc's point here is very close to 'Cinema, an Art of Space': cinema is more novelistic than the novel itself, because instead of conveying meaning through language, it inscribes the temporal sequentiality, bringing about meaning *in space*, i.e. in a series of visual relationships. 'In this kind of film-making the distinction between author and director loses all meaning,' because the latter, as the 'inscriber' of these spatial relationships, is like a

38 *Ibid.*

writer: 'direction is no longer a means of illustrating or presenting a scene, but a true act of writing. The film-maker/author writes with his camera as a writer writes with his pen.'³⁹ It is important to stress that a few sentences ahead of this claim, Astruc makes clear that what interests the new avant-garde is no longer the *static* visual dream of the surrealists (and the like), but 'problems such as the translation into cinematic terms of verbal tenses and logical relationships.'⁴⁰ In other words: the inscription of time in space ('the translation into cinematic terms of verbal tenses') and the unfolding of a causally necessary succession ('logical relationships'). Astruc and Rohmer incite us to think of these two aspects together: *necessity* (as opposed to the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign in all its forms, including the static, associative combination of images in order to produce a definite meaning) qualifies *either* the spatiality wherein a temporal succession is 'carved', *and* temporal succession qua marked by irreversibility thanks to cinema's externalized imagination.

Here, one can detect a significant divergence between Astruc and the *ÉS* (to which he never really belonged, as well as he never really belonged to the *pda*). 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde' affirmed that cinema,

although blessed with an enormous potential, is an easy prey to prejudice; it cannot go on for ever ploughing the same field of realism and social fantasy which has been bequeathed to it by the popular novel. It can tackle any subject, any genre. The most philosophical meditations on human production, psychology, metaphysics, ideas, and passions lie well within its province. [...] But with the development of 16mm and television, the day is not far off when everyone will possess a projector, will go to the local bookstore and hire films written on any subject, of any form, from literary criticism and novels to mathematics, history, and general science. From that moment on, it will no longer be possible to speak of *the* cinema. There will be *several* cinemas just as today there are several literatures, for the cinema, like literature, is not so much a particular art as a language which can express any sphere of thought.⁴¹

Chabrol, Godard, Rivette, Rohmer and Truffaut were more conservative: they really were only interested in cinema qua physiological prolongation of the realist novel of the nineteenth century. They seemingly took very

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

seriously Rohmer's divide between manifestation and expression, and believed that cinema could be more novelistic than the novel itself only insofar as it manifested rather than expressed. Astruc's position is more mixed: to some extent, the expression of thought, and even self-expression, always remained among the main premises of his writing and filming practices.⁴² This ambiguity is attested in, among others, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde' itself – an article seemingly endorsing a conception of cinema as the expression of thought *in terms of self-expression*. Later, 'Dialectique et cinéma' suggests instead that cinema, as externalized imagination, brings about an irreversible succession that *automatically* produces thought (thanks to the character of necessity bestowed by the irreversibility of that unfolding), which does not necessarily mean it is *somebody's* thought in particular being expressed, but rather that a kind of thought, a kind of logic, is played out no matter what the original intentions are, thanks to a sequentiality unfolding in an irreversible and hence seemingly necessary way (film, as Astruc wrote in 'Dialectique et cinéma', 'unfurls from the beginning to the end of itself and, by its essence as film, acquires an internal link which is precisely given by its duration[, and is] inherent to whatever film [...]; even if such order does not exist in the creator's thought, the temporal dimension creates it'). The inspiration the *ÉS/pda* drew from 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde' seems to have less to do with the simple idea of cinema as a language whereby one could express oneself, than with the idea that it is a language *only insofar as it is not really a language*, i.e. as it complies with movement and all that ensues from it (the 'dialectical', inexorable logic brought about by the irreversibility of the unfolding, etc.). There is a rift, then, separating the otherwise close *ÉS/pda* and Astruc. As late as 1998, Jean-Luc Godard was still at pains (in a voice-over in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma*) to highlight the differences between them. 'The camera-stylo, it was Sartre who urged the idea onto the young Alexandre Astruc, so that the camera fell under the guillotine of meaning, never to recover again' (my translation). Forty years before, when the French New Wave was about to burst in, Truffaut 'repudiated' Astruc and wrote a negative review of his new film, after he had praised all his previous ones.⁴³

On the other hand, no doubt they agreed that cinema had to be more novelistic than the novel itself. But here, too, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde' is less clear-cut than it seems.

42 In this regard, see for instance his 'L'avenir du cinéma'.

43 Truffaut, 'Astruc a manqué *Une vie*'.

Maurice Nadeau wrote in an article in the newspaper *Combat*: 'If Descartes lived today, he would write novels'. With all due respect to Nadeau, a Descartes of today would already have shut himself up in his bedroom with a 16mm camera and some film, and would be writing his philosophy on film: for his *Discours de la Methode* would today be of such a kind that only the cinema could express it satisfactorily.⁴⁴

Yet, such formulation, on closer view, begs the question whether a Cartesian cogito with a camera in one's hands can still be regarded as a Cartesian cogito at all. In his *Discourse on Method* (1637), Descartes stated that he could doubt anything around him, but not his own consciousness, precisely because his own consciousness is that which does the doubting in the first place. A pen and a piece of paper can easily account for such an inner experience of self-awareness – but what about a movie camera? Is it (according to Rohmer himself, as we have seen in the previous chapter) not incapable of showing anything but the external side of things? How could it ever cope with a cogito-like kind of self-acquaintance? Rather, if anything, an attempt to enact the cogito by brandishing a movie camera, whatever way one used it, would immediately lay bare the radical *inaccessibility* of the subject to itself by means of self-reflection. No matter what the camera is used for, and how, it would still beget nothing but appearances. It would be, if anything, a *refutation* of Cartesian cogito (as well as, by extension, of Sartre's reconsideration of it), and would point at a non-Cartesian kind of self-reflection instead – for instance one that, like Kant's, radically denies the subject the possibility to actually access itself through self-reflection (more on this in the next chapter).

It follows that Astruc's reference to Descartes in his article is not to be taken to the letter, but as a paradox. Precisely by turning to the *Discourse on Method*, Astruc implies that camera-stylo is ultimately anti-Cartesian: although Astruc openly says that Descartes would put his *Discourse* on film, the anti-Cartesian character of such an hypothetical endeavour is too blatant for Astruc's claim not to be turned upside down.

The same goes for 'Dialectique et cinéma'. On the one hand, that article theorizes cinema in terms that are very close to Heidegger's appropriation of Kant's imagination (qua synthesizing the manifold of appearances and hence qua the agent of temporalization), and (thus) to Sartre's view of the novel; on the other hand, it points at a way *out* of them, a way the *éS/pda*

44 Astruc, 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde', p. 33.

will follow in various ways. This contradiction is overly apparent, and even though Astruc did not voice it as such, 'Dialectique et cinéma' and 'The Birth of a New Avant-Garde' (itself an article that is less about cinema qua language whereby to express one's vision, than it is about *the kind of non-linguistic, non-expressive, movement-driven, necessity-oriented language* cinema is and can only be) lay the foundation for Rohmer's and the others' subsequent rejection of Sartre's Cartesian/Heideggerian perspective.

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Abbreviations

éS = *école Schérer*

pda = *politique des auteurs*