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Grosoli, Marco

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3. Under and On the Volcano: Rohmer's Conversion

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Abstract

In 1983, having watched *Stromboli* (Roberto Rossellini, 1949) for the first time, Eric Rohmer declared that he had decided to abandon, once and for all, the Sartrean influence that had hitherto been so important for him. This chapter explains this conversion by way of a close analysis of the film, and describes the extent to which it shaped Rohmer's subsequent vision and theory of cinema. *Stromboli*, can be divided into two parts: one alluding to Sartre's notion of freedom qua emancipation from the gaze of the Other, while the other, adumbrating Kant's notion of the Sublime and his views on ethics more generally, squarely moves away from Sartre and into unmistakably Kantian territory instead.

Keywords: Rohmer, *Stromboli*, Sartre, Kant

3.1. The Other

Before dealing with Rohmer's 'conversion', it is necessary to return briefly to *Being and Nothingness* and, more specifically, to Sartre's discussion of the Other.

As for-itself consciousness emerges by means of self-reflection, it immediately enters a set of (at least potential) relationships with other for-itself consciousnesses. As we have seen, self-consciousness cannot directly access itself *but* as a temporalizing agency; such a temporalization, though, can only take place on an intersubjective ground. That is to say, the project characterizing for-itself consciousness cannot but be one that involves outward action. If, on the one hand, for-itself consciousness cannot self-reflexively access itself directly, on the other hand it can only acknowledge itself as *out there*, the prey of an essentially intersubjective game involving other

likewise consciousnesses. In other words, Being-for-itself is automatically also being-for-others.

If, on the one hand, for-itself consciousness is, as it were, split into a reflecting and a reflected consciousness, on the other hand a similar kind of split is enacted between the for-itself consciousness and (an)other for-itself consciousness(es) (potentially) looking at it. It can even be said that when a for-itself consciousness reflects upon itself, it does so as if it were itself the object of *another* gaze, another for-itself consciousness looking at it. In this respect, the Other is the one who can see me the way I cannot, that is, from the outside. The Other is 'the radical negation of my experience, since he is the one for whom I am not subject but object. Therefore as the subject of knowledge I strive to determine as object the subject who denies my character as subject and who himself determines me as object.'¹

What is at stake is no less than freedom itself. As we have seen, freedom comes into play as soon as a for-itself consciousness emerges. Being-for-others is the negative limit and, at the same time, the positive condition of a consciousness's freedom: by looking at me, the Other objectifies me (hence my *shame*, i.e. 'the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging'²) and nihilates my freedom for the sake of his own freedom,³ but precisely by objectifying back this objectification I can regain control of myself-qua-for-the-others, which enables me to elaborate my project of freedom on that further basis. Twice in his volume, Sartre uses the effective metaphor of a game of musical chairs to suggest this 'battle' between a for-itself consciousness and its Other.

What I refuse to be can be nothing but this refusal to be the Me by means of which the Other is making me an object. Or, if you prefer, I refuse my refused Me; I determine myself as Myself by means of the refusal of the Me-refused; I posit this refused Me as an alienated-Me in the same upsurge in which I wrench myself away from the Other. But I thereby recognize and affirm not only the Other but the existence of my Self-for-others. Indeed this is because I can not not-be the Other unless I assume my

1 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 228.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 261.

3 'Thus through the look I experience the Other concretely as a free, conscious subject who causes there to be a world by temporalizing himself toward his own possibilities. That subject's presence without intermediary is the necessary condition of all thought which I would attempt to form concerning myself. The Other is that "myself" from which nothing separates me, absolutely nothing except his pure and total freedom; that is, that indetermination of himself which he has to be for and through himself.' Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 271.

being-as-object for the Other. The disappearance of the alienated Me would involve the disappearance of the Other through the collapse of Myself. I escape the Other by leaving him with my alienated Me in his hands. But as I choose myself as a tearing away from the Other, I assume and recognize as mine this alienated Me. My wrenching away from the Other—that is, my Self—is by its essential structure an assumption as mine of this Me which the Other refuses; we can even say that it is only that.⁴

Sartre famously referred to the example of the man looking through a keyhole and hearing the steps of another man approaching and potentially 'stealing' him his voyeuristic privacy,⁵ in order to explain this 'game of musical chairs' between Self and Other. It is worth stressing that it is not simply a matter of returning the gaze, because the eye and the gaze are, for Sartre, as distinguished as perception and imagination are.⁶ To apprehend the gaze of the Other does not necessarily mean to look back at him: it means to be *conscious* of being looked at.⁷ I can perceive an eye, but not the gaze of the Other: if I perceive his eyes on me, then I miss the gaze, and if I am conscious of his gaze, I just don't see them. Of course, most of the time the gaze of the Other can come with 'a pair of eyes,' but 'the look will be given just as well on occasion when there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain.'⁸ It is not a matter of actually being seen by someone, but 'the permanent possibility that a subject who sees me may be substituted for the object seen by me,'⁹ that is, the permanent possibility that a subject might be reversed into an object and the other way around – both neatly distinguished from each other. For all the occasional overlapping between the eye and the gaze, they are neither reciprocal, nor coincident.

Precisely because the eye is not the gaze, the Other is not necessarily embodied in a person or in a group of persons; it is, more fundamentally, a system of representations that does not belong to me but that includes me, and hence concerns me and compels me to face it somehow, even when I am dealing with nobody but myself. It is, in a sense, myself qua external and liable to be seen.

4 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 285.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 259ff.

6 Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 288.

7 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 258.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 257.

9 *Ibid.*

I aim at the Other in so far as he is a connected system of experiences out of reach in which I figure as one object among others. But to the extent that I strive to determine the concrete nature of this system of representations and the place which I occupy there as an object, I radically transcend the field of my experience. I am concerned with a series of phenomena which on principle can never be accessible to my intuition, and consequently I exceed the lawful limits of my knowledge. I seek to bind together experiences which will never be my experiences, and consequently this work of construction and unification can in no way serve for the unification of my own experience.¹⁰

All of which is just another way of saying what has already been said: it is through imagination (that is, nihilation), *as opposed to perception*, that I both project my freedom into the future and I apprehend the objectifying gaze of the Other (that is, of myself qua object, qua virtually seen by a subject, from the outside) which I objectify (that is, nihilate) in turn to regain and re-elaborate my freedom.

3.2. The triumph of exteriority over interiority

In September 1950,¹¹ Rohmer attended a preview of Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli*. During the screening, something clicked in his mind.

If you want to retrace my aesthetic and ideological itinerary, you'd have to start with the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre, which made its mark on me in the beginning. I never talk about Sartre, but he was still my starting point. The articles that appeared in *Situations I*, which discovered Faulkner, Dos Passos, and even Husserl, contributed a great deal to my thinking. I went through an existentialist period before I began thinking about film, but the influence remained, I think, and continued to affect me in my first films. Rossellini is the one who turned me away from existentialism. It happened in the middle of *Stromboli*. During the first few minutes of the screening, I felt the limits of this Sartrean realism, to which I thought the film was going to be confined. I hated the way it invited me to look beyond that. Right then and there, I converted. That's what's so great about *Stromboli*. It was my road to Damascus: In the middle of the film, I converted, and I changed my perspective.¹²

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹¹ De Baecque and Herpe, *Eric Rohmer*, p. 55.

¹² Rohmer, 'The Critical Years: Interview with Eric Rohmer by Jean Narboni', pp. 1-18.

What is so special about *Stromboli*? What is the 'Sartrean realism' the film apparently espoused?

Stromboli is, firstly, the name of the Italian island that the heroine of the film, Karen, moves to having married a local fisherman. Love is only partially (if at all) involved in their marriage: the main reason behind her decision is probably the opportunity to leave the refugee camp she had been confined to, right after the war. Soon, life on the island proves harsh, especially for a stranger unused to local habits – and not only because its volcano periodically threatens to erupt. The inhabitants are somewhat narrow-minded and, in their view, a woman is not entitled to any independence. Her husband behaves accordingly, and locks her inside their house as soon as she tells him that she wants to leave the island. She manages to escape though, and tries to reach the other shore of the island, where a boat would take her to the mainland. But she must pass the volcano and, as she approaches the crater, the spewing smoke and fumes make her (she is three months pregnant) pass out. When she wakes up, she suddenly seems reconciled with the island, its nature and its inhabitants. She cries out 'My God! Oh merciful God!' But then the film ends, without resolving which side of the volcano she chooses, the one with the boat or the one with her husband.

Stromboli quite literally enacts an existentialist quest for freedom. The villagers (including her own husband) are, evidently, Karen's Other – all the more so as they constantly gaze and spy upon her in order to keep her under strict control. She has no privacy; her existence is constantly 'for-the-others', under the others' scrutiny, even when they're not physically there – but most graphically, of course, when they are silently staring at her. This occurs in a number of scenes: when a group of women disapprovingly inspect her house from the outside in, through the door; when some older men perform a serenade in front of the window of the woman Karen was visiting that evening, when she is found flirting with the lighthouse keeper on the shore under the eyes of the scandalized villagers. It is not incorrect to use the very Sartrean word 'situation' to designate the oppressive prison Karen feels confined inside, as many commentators have highlighted the vividly *spatial* character of her confinement: not only the island itself, but also, for example, the intricate maze of the village roads, or the tiny little rooms of those fishermen's houses. Karen nervously moves and galumphs in these closed spaces, quickly developing the firm will to run away, i.e. to project her own freedom in the near future by nihilating that environment, and to free herself from the omnipresent gaze of the Other.

However, precisely when Karen is all alone on the volcano, finally freed from the pressures of the villagers (her Other), her 'fundamental project' fails

for good. We shall delve into the film's ending later on; for the time being, it is important to highlight the fact that, even before this final failure, Karen is faced with clear signals that her hopes for freedom are utterly in vain. In one scene, Karen stares at a little rabbit being strangled by a ferret, and she cries out in horror. In another very gruesome, very long (much longer than any kind of dramaturgical balance would ever allow) scene, Karen decides, out of mere curiosity, to attend the tuna fishing engaging her husband and all the men in the village: this experience leaves her emotionally devastated, because of the sheer, relentless brutality of the process.

And just as he makes things act, Rossellini considers his characters to be 'things' as well. Rossellini's art is one of the least apt to express interior life. The whimpering, the gasping, and the rattling with which Ingrid Bergman fills the walls and shores signify nothing more than the leaps of a small rabbit strangled by the carnivorous stone marten or of a tuna pierced by the fisherman's pike. They *are* her and, stripped of all mystery reveal only her interior emptiness.¹³

It is the triumph of exteriority against any interiority: Karen is nothing but the whimpering, the gasping and the rattling she lets out. Such gestures express nothing of her inner life: they only manifest a totally outward relation, namely the fact that she is as devoid of interiority as a rabbit or a tuna. Interiority, including the interiority still implied in the 'for-itself consciousness' qua self-reflexive consciousness (that is, Karen's 'fundamental project' of freedom), is not only a mere illusion engendered by an intersubjective play between completely external elements, but even completely absent. With the Other being everywhere and nowhere (Rossellini 'makes things act': *everything* is subjectified, hence nothing is), the subject is a mere object among other objects (his characters are things): here Rohmer indeed seems to step beyond Sartre's 'game of musical chairs' between the Self and the Other, resting upon the infinite reversal between subject and object.

3.3. Pulling phenomenology back to its Kantian roots

We are already beginning to see that *Stromboli* enabled Rohmer to formalize the detachment from the Sartrean conception of self-consciousness he had somehow been willing to depart from since 'Cinema, an Art of Space'.

13 Rohmer, 'Roberto Rossellini: *Stromboli*', p. 127.

Above all, it enabled him to find the appropriate theoretical framework for this refusal, namely *Kantian philosophy*, which he now more overtly embraces. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre repeatedly affirms that for-itself consciousness is a self-reflection of a strictly non-Kantian kind; more generally, Sartre tried to *rethink* Kant's transcendental turn with the help of phenomenology, while Rohmer, after his conversion, headed 'back to the original,' repudiating Sartre's own detachment. Indeed, for Sartre, the Kantians 'preoccupied with establishing the universal laws of subjectivity which are the same for all, never dealt with the question of *persons*. The subject is only the common essence of these persons.'¹⁴ Rohmer, vis-à-vis Rossellini's attempt to strip Karen of any humanity and individuality, found himself wanting to dispose of 'persons' and to get back to this 'common essence'; that is, to a duly emptied-out *subject* whose universality ensued from its very emptiness.

'Where Sartre departs radically from Kant is in his account of self-consciousness. For Sartre, the self-consciousness that accompanies every act of consciousness makes reference to an ideal self which both specifies some way in which one's life would have intrinsic value and indicates the inadequacies of one's present life, thereby "nihilating" it.'¹⁵ Likewise, Karen 'nihilates' her life in the village and deems it inadequate, thinking that her life has an intrinsic value. As shown in Chapter one, in *The Transcendence of the Ego* and in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre corrects, as it were, Cartesian cogito without ever getting rid of it. As a result of the way he articulates together positional and non-positional, in-itself and for-itself consciousnesses, he always maintains the possibility for consciousness to be reflected upon itself; while he holds that consciousness cannot be positively accessible to itself and fully self-transparent, he admits that consciousness is *negatively* accessible to itself thanks to nihilation (which is, in an unmistakably Heideggerian vein, essentially a temporalization). What he does *not* admit is a kind of consciousness intended as a purely logical function accompanying all representations but that cannot, in any way, be accessed by itself: Kant's transcendental ego.¹⁶ Kant's transcendental gesture consisted primarily of emptying out

14 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 225.

15 Baldwin, 'The Original Choice in Sartre and Kant', p. 33.

16 "The "percipi" referred us to a percipiens, the being of which has been revealed to us as consciousness. Thus we have attained the ontological foundation of knowledge, the first being to whom all other appearances appear, the absolute in relation to which every phenomenon is relative. This is no longer the subject in Kant's meaning of the term, but it is subjectivity itself, the immanence of self in self. Henceforth we have escaped idealism.' Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. lvii.

the subject of self-consciousness; he firmly distinguished the 'I think' (the purely formal unity of apperception/consciousness/experience, accompanying every representations of objects, as that which ensures their internal unity and consistency) from 'the thing which thinks' (the identity of the thinking substance, the 'person' that actually 'does the thinking'). The two are reciprocally inaccessible: the 'thing which thinks' cannot be one of the objects of the 'I think': 'This subject is cognized only through the thoughts that are its predicates, and apart from them we can never have the least concept of it.'¹⁷ In contrast with Sartre's consciousness, whose internal self-accessibility is negatively enabled by nihilation, Kant's is positively accessible *only qua external*. The 'I think' manages to provide a formal unity and coherence to the 'thing which thinks', thereby making it appear, precisely only when it is applied to *something else* outside of it.¹⁸ In Rohmer's own words, *Stromboli* shows no inner experience whatsoever on Karen's part: the only accurate keys to her interiority are *external*, viz. the rabbit and the tuna. As we have seen, for Heidegger, imagination is time qua self-affection; accordingly, for Sartre, the self is only negatively accessible to itself, viz. it is accessible to itself only as temporalization, because self-affection is nothing but time. For Astruc and Rohmer, cinema, qua externalization of (Heidegger's view of) Kant's imagination, comes full circle by pushing to its extreme the preponderance of imagination Heidegger himself had theorized, and returns to Kant: it posits the only possible resolution of self-affection (which imagination is) on the outside. Human imagination, articulating the human time of *Dasein*, finds itself on the outside in the externalized imagination of cinema, articulating a mechanical, non-human time. Time qua self-affection is only possible in space, as per Kant;¹⁹ thereby, imagination rejoins perception.

For Kant, the overall coherence that makes knowledge possible 'is an implication of the concept of the knower who is identical with himself.'²⁰

17 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A346. 'Now it is, indeed, very evident that what I must presuppose in order to cognize an object at all cannot itself be cognized as an object by me, and that the determining self (the thinking) is distinct from the determinable self (the thinking subject) as cognition is distinct from the object [cognized]. Nonetheless, nothing is more natural and tempting than the illusion of regarding the unity in the synthesis of thoughts as a perceived unity in the subject of these thoughts. One might call this illusion the subreption of the hypostatized self-consciousness (*apperceptionis substantiatae*)', A402.

18 Slavoj Žižek often insists on this point, for instance in his 'The Cartesian Subject without the Cartesian Theatre', pp. 33-36.

19 See especially § 24 of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, explicitly dealing with the relationship between the possibility to represent time and the possibility of self-reflection.

20 Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel*, p. 39.

This is why, in his account of the philosopher, Dieter Henrich insists that the analysis of self-consciousness is the most fundamental basis for Kant's entire system. In it, 'Kant starts from the Cartesian basis of all possible insight: it must be possible to know that any knowledge or experience I have is mine.'²¹ Hence, in this sense, self-consciousness is always there, whatever we think or experience. Then, Henrich goes on listing the three basic features of the self, implied in Kant's conception of self-consciousness, and which clearly depart from Descartes': its unity (the self 'is the same in all thoughts and is not defined in terms of the thoughts it has, which means that it is the unitarian subject of all the thoughts'²²), its activity,²³ its emptiness. As for the third aspect,

There is no particular thought that is already a thought analytically whenever I think that I think, except the thought of the thinking subject itself. When I think the thought 'I think', my thought implies nothing analytically but this 'I think'. In other words, the meaning of 'I think' does not imply any thought other than the thought of the 'I' as the subject of possible thoughts. For this reason, accordingly, there is no particular thought that is part of the definition of the thinker. Nevertheless, a relationship to a particular thought that is different from the thought 'I' is essential for this reflective thought itself. Although no particular thought is analytically implied in the thought of the thinker, it is analytically implied that there is always another thought when I am thinking 'I think'. It is always permissible for us to ask: 'What do you think?' It does not make sense to allow the question 'Do you think or not?' while at the same time disallowing the question 'What are you thinking?' There is always an 'internal accusative' in the 'I think', but its content is not an analytical implication of the meaning of the 'I think'. What I am thinking is something different from the structure 'I think' and is contingent in

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²² Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel*, p. 40.

²³ 'In order to think "I am thinking", I have to perform a certain operation that nowadays we call reflection, and this is the definition of an active relationship between the thinking subject and the particular thought in which the self thinks of itself as subject. Now, because the thought "I think" can potentially accompany every possible thought (that is the other evidence—it is always possible to think "I am thinking X"), the self has to have all thoughts in such a way that the active relationship of having them as mine can be built into their "being had" in general. The "being had" of a thought must be of such a kind that it can be built into its being had by me as mine. This feature, in turn, makes it at least plausible that this is true not only in the case of reflection—when the subject actively thinks about thinking a thought—but also in all thinking generally. The self fundamentally has the character of activity: it is an act.' *Ibid.*

relation to it. There is no determinate thought that is analytically implied in the thought 'I think'.

This conclusion is also implied by the consideration of what it means to assert that we are always able to know that a given thought is our thought. The thought 'I think' is necessarily the outcome of reflection. We have to have some particular thought first in order to be able to reflect on ourselves as thinking. One can always add to any thought the additional thought that it is my thought, but there can be no thought of this being mine without a particular thought that is not the thought of me as thinker. This means that the self is empty, in the sense that it has no thought of mere thought; and it is also empty in the further sense that it is necessarily related to something, it is not independent. There must be a thought of X in order to have the thought 'I', but X is not an implication of 'I'. Translated into Kant's epistemological language, this amounts to saying that nothing can be given in the cognizing subject, because if something were given in the subject, it would be analytically part of the thought 'I'. It has to be given to the subject, and that is entirely different. In some sense, the concept of 'given in the subject' is contradictory in meaning, but it can help to clarify the meaning of the concept 'given to the subject'. There must be something given to the subject; there is no subject unless something is given.²⁴

For Kant, the fact that 'no self is possible unless it exists in such a way that there is an original relationship between it and something that is not itself but can be given to it'²⁵ is precisely what Henrich calls 'the common root of the two trunks'²⁶ upon whose distinction Kant's system ultimately rests: sensibility and understanding. In the same page, Henrich adds that Heidegger was well aware of a common root uniting sensibility and understanding in Kant's system, but chose to neglect its inaccessibility (that is, the inaccessibility of the self in itself through self-reflection) and tried to positively outline that original connection in his *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*: thereby, he replaced the empty unity of the self with *Dasein*, with imagination qua temporalizing being-in-the-world.

Sartre too chose to neglect this inaccessibility: in this respect, he remained too Cartesian.

²⁴ Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel*, p. 41.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

If, impossibly, you were to 'enter' a consciousness, you would be picked up by a whirlwind and thrown back outside to where the tree is and all the dust, for consciousness has no 'inside'. It is merely the exterior of itself and it is absolute flight, this refusal to be substance, that constitute it as a consciousness. Imagine now a linked series of bursts that wrests us from ourselves, that do not even leave an 'ourselves' the time to form behind them, but rather hurl us out beyond them into the dry dust of the world, on to the rough earth, among things. Imagine we are thrown out in this way, abandoned by our very natures in an indifferent, hostile, resistant world. If you do so, you will have grasped the profound meaning of the discovery Husserl expresses in this famous phrase: 'All consciousness is consciousness of something'. [...] The philosophy of transcendence throws us out on to the high road, amid threats and under a blinding light. Being, says Heidegger, is being-in-the-world. This 'being-in' is to be understood in the sense of movement. To be is to burst forth into the world. It is to start out from a nothingness-of-world-and-consciousness and suddenly to burst-out-as-consciousness-in-the-world. If consciousness attempts to regain control of itself, to coincide, at long last, with itself, in a nice warm room with the shutters closed, it annihilates itself.²⁷

Clearly, Sartre's path to Husserlian phenomenology involves trading in Kant's *emptiness* of the self for Heidegger's *nothingness*. For all of Sartre's insistence that the latter is not a substance, and that it sanctions the triumph of exteriority over interiority just as much as the former does, it is hard to avoid the suspicion that in fact a remnant of some substantialized self remains, if only in the form of a mere agent of temporalization (as per Heidegger). For-itself consciousness is precisely this temporalizing nothingness, that only exists in the world rather than in itself.

Rohmer, for one, seems to have thought (particularly in the wake of *Stromboli*) that cinema is indeed close to Husserlian phenomenology, in that it 'hurls us out beyond a series of bursts into the dry dust of the world' and abandons us 'in an indifferent, hostile, resistant world,' like the Sicilian island Karen is trapped on. On the other hand, he also seems to have thought that, in order to do so, cinema should not pull Husserl forward toward

27 Sartre, 'Husserl's Phenomenology', pp. 43-44. This quotation lends itself particularly well to be juxtaposed to another one, on the status of consciousness in Faulkner's novels: 'Faulkner also elects to present his heroes from the outside, when their consciousness is complete, and then to show us, suddenly, the depths of their souls – when there is no longer anything there. Thus he gives the illusion that everything which impels them to act lies somewhere below the level of clear consciousness'. Sartre, 'American Novelists in French Eyes', p. 117.

Heidegger (and Sartre), but back towards Kant. He went so far as to affirm, later in his life, that, ultimately, Husserl never really added anything to Kant's revolution, which was the only true revolution in philosophy.²⁸ By siding with Kant and against Sartre, Rohmer opted for the radical impossibility (non-transparency) of consciousness's self-reflection, hence for the refusal of any 'interiority' to be acknowledged to consciousness. Regardless of the critic's actual faithfulness (or lack of it) to Kantian philosophy (which is beside the point), what should be stressed here is that Rohmer (implicitly) *referred to* Kant to endorse an utterly de-psychologized conception of self-consciousness, one in which self-consciousness is *nowhere but* in the purely formal 'I think' accompanying every apperception. Cinema, according to Rohmer, stands for *this* kind of self-consciousness: in cinema, there is no place for a novelistic, contingent, temporalizing, language-biased for-itself consciousness, because self-consciousness can be nowhere but in external perception.

28 Rohmer, *De Mozart en Beethoven*, pp. 76-79. In 'Of Taste and Colours', Rohmer described a striking shot from a Hitchcock film showing a cigarette in an egg yolk: what made the egg look 'real' was precisely the slightly *unreal* vividness of its yellow. 'There is a kind of intensity belonging to the raw image that we must respect. Photography's ability to show objects spontaneously is something very precious, and we should play on it. One emulsion may be more sensitive to the yellow of a flower than to that of a rug, and vice versa. It may establish a difference between the two colors that the naked eye could not appreciate, but that the eye will find later. Film, just like museums, teaches us to see' (p. 70). The screen makes us aware of the *filters* whereby things look real to us. By acknowledging the limits of knowledge one is able to overcome them and to better approach reality. This point cannot but recall Edmund Husserl's concept of *epoché* ('suspension'), viz. the 'bracketing' of one's judgements about reality, in relation to reality. It should also be stressed that in 'Of Taste and Colours', film is not expected to adhere to empirical reality: on the contrary, it 'teaches us to see' only because it *distorts* and is *unfaithful* to empirical reality (i.e., it is more sensitive to the chromatic properties of some objects and less sensitive to those of others). For this reason, I do not think that Malcolm Turvey's critique (*Doubting Vision*, pp. 73-74) of the 'revelationist' paradigm of another neo-Kantian film theorist (Siegfried Kracauer) applies to Rohmer. Despite all his emphasis on cinema's capability to reveal the essence of beings through appearance, Rohmer cannot be called a 'revelationist' film theorist at all. As per Turvey's definition, 'revelationist' film theorists regard cinema as capable to 'uncover features of reality invisible to human vision' (p. 3). Rohmer does not share this mistrust towards human sight, and does not think that the movie camera is capable to see things that human eyes cannot see – a 'privilege' he rather seems to accord to television cameras instead; see for instance his 'The Photogenics of Sports: The Olympics in Rome'. He just seems to imply that the way the camera approaches empirical reality can significantly match our ordinary vision of things – which certainly entails that there can be a fertile exchange between the two perspectives (as in the example above), but not that one of them is necessarily better placed vis-à-vis empirical reality than the other.

3.4. Ethics

More importantly, by choosing Kant, Rohmer chose a philosophical framework establishing a strong connection between the involvement of self-consciousness in perception and ethics. Pure reason's impossibility of direct self-reflection is 'redeemed' by a different, and ultimately possible kind of self-reflection: the *practical* use of reason, whereby the subject imposes morality upon itself. So, before going further, it is necessary to briefly recall the basic tenets of Kant's moral philosophy – especially because in the final sequence of *Stromboli* Karen, quite literally, embraces Kant's moral law.

Kantian ethics notoriously revolves around freedom. 'Freedom', in Kantian terms, means to be freed from the constraints of causality, to be released from the tight interconnection of causes and effects. Nature (the totality of appearances) is entirely regulated by causality. So is man, who experiences the world only as a set of phenomena (appearances), themselves organized in terms of cause-effect relationships. However, man is essentially twofold: on the one hand, man must be regarded as phenomenal; on the other hand, man is noumenal. It is a thing 'in itself' and not just an appearance. This means that, on the one hand, man is submitted to the constraints of mechanical determinism (i.e. man is ruled by cause-effect relationships), but, on the other hand, man is free from them. This led Kant to postulate the existence of 'special' causes lying outside of the phenomenal network of causes and effects: the immortal soul and God. They are the source of the noumenal, non-causal side of man. Human beings are thus not only subjected to their sensible character, according to which they are absorbed in a virtually infinite network of causes and effects; from the side of their intelligible character (qua ensured by the immortal soul and God), they determine themselves through freedom, they are their own cause and thus break with the supremacy of the cause-effect texture by choosing to act regardless of cause-effect relationships.²⁹ This is possible thanks to *reason* in its *practical* use, enabling human beings to be 'both legislators of and subject to the laws they obey,'³⁰ irrespective of their own 'pathological interests' (one's personal inclinations). For the German philosopher, there would be no free will, no moral autonomy at all, without the *universal* reason making them possible. Reason allows us to formulate *maxims*, the subjective principles of action one freely imposes on oneself. 'Freedom' can only lie in the self-imposition of maxims on oneself. Maxims can only emerge in compliance with the

29 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A538-542.

30 Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy*, p. 70.

purely formal principle known as *moral law*. Thanks to our reason, we use that formal principle to formulate maxims. If a maxim does not comply with that formal principle, it is simply not valid.

This is the most succinct formulation of the moral law: 'So act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle of a universal legislation.'³¹ Reason enables us to formulate ethically valid maxims (which we then choose to impose on ourselves to regulate our will and deeds), that is, maxims suiting not only us but, potentially, anybody else. In other words, moral law lets us play on both sides: the maxim lies in its patent, universally valid formulation without ceasing to be 'pathologically' my own; this duplicity (articulating a purely formal principle and its more 'substantial' source) is clearly rooted in the other Kantian split, that between a purely formal 'I think' and the 'thing which thinks'.

Without this formal 'stepping out' of oneself in order to self-impose law on oneself by embracing a universal reason, which is, nonetheless, in oneself in the first place (which Kant calls 'respect' throughout the third chapter – 'On the Incentives of Pure Practical Reason' – of his *Critique of Practical Reason*), 'the picture coming into focus looks more like a melancholy Dane ready to "leap" or an anguished, near-sighted Frenchman "condemned to be free" than the dutiful sage of Königsberg.'³² The real match is not, as for Sartre, between an individual (a for-itself consciousness) and the situation it stems from, but between an individual and reason, whereby self-legislation (the practical use of reason) is possible, and which is universal: it belongs to that individual as well as to anybody else.

In *Stromboli*, the maxim comes at the very end of the film. It is thus worth describing the final sequence in more detail. Three phases can be distinguished:

1. Karen walks on the volcano slope. In stark contrast with the rest of the film (where she had been constantly under somebody's gaze), nobody is watching her, but the camera. Its presence can be distinctly 'felt' because of the great variety of angles it chooses in order to quite lengthily shoot the woman. Occasional shot-countershots show Karen watch the crater or other pieces of landscape.
2. As night falls, an exhausted Karen decides to stop and lie on her back. This time, a shot-countershot between Karen and the stars in the sky is accompanied by Karen's voice invoking God. Clearly then, God (who never manifests himself in any discernible way in the film) is, in this

³¹ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, § 7.

³² Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy*, p. 71.

case, nothing but *the embodiment of the previous absence of gazes*, an absence that was all the more flagrant because, in the rest of the film, Karen is constantly observed.

3. The next morning, she reconciles with nature all around ('What a mystery! What a beauty!') and expresses two perfectly contradictory intentions: running away or going back to the village. The film does not show us her decision. The only thing she seems to be sure about is that she will look after her baby, no matter what, with the help of God.

Her decision to look after the baby is clearly the maxim Karen chooses to adopt. The freedom she chooses is the Kantian one, as opposed to the Sartrean one, consisting of 'nihilitating' from her environment to pursue a self-chosen project. The fact that the film ends with an abrupt narrative mutilation (it does not reveal which way Karen chooses, whether she is heading back to the village or to the ship taking her somewhere else) is a way of repudiating temporalization as such, and with it the idea of a project in the Sartrean sense.³³ Having encountered the clash between (her own) freedom and nature (the third antinomy in the *Critique of Pure Reason*) on the volcano, Karen finds God: she lies on her back, looks at the sky and realizes that she has, exactly as Kant put it, the 'starred sky above her' and the godly 'moral law within her.' Indeed, the next morning, she encounters the antinomy of practical reason (which Kant openly acknowledges as running parallel to the *Pure's* third³⁴): the one between 'the desire for happiness' as 'the motivating cause for maxims of virtue' (to run away from the island)

33 Six years later, in a review of Rossellini's *Angst* (1956), François Truffaut harks back to *Stromboli's* indifference towards the imperatives of storytelling: 'Rossellini's films do not tell stories with images but paint characters who vary on contact with certain geographical, social, spiritual, or political realities. A plot, in the novelistic sense of the term, consisting of a classical dramatic construction, with a beginning, a centre and an ending, would bother the author of *Paisà* and shock his acute awareness of the reality of things and beings. Rossellini, when interrogated, cannot tell if at the end of *Stromboli*, Ingrid Bergman goes back down to the village, dies or runs away, and yet that is precisely what matters to the audience who leaves the theatre, unsatisfied'. Originally: 'Les films de Rossellini ne racontent pas des histoires en images mais peignent des caractères qui se modifient au contact de certaines réalités géographiques, sociales, spirituelles, ou politiques. Une intrigue au sens romanesque du mot comportant une construction dramatique classique, avec un début, un centre et un final heurte l'auteur de *Paisa* et choque son sens aigu de la réalité des êtres et des choses. Rossellini, lorsqu'on le questionne, ne peut dire si à la fin de *Stromboli*, Ingrid Bergman redescend au village, meurt ou s'enfuit, et cependant c'est tout ce qui importe au public qui quitte la salle, insatisfait.' Truffaut, 'La peur', p. 5. Interestingly, this passage interweaves a frustrated temporalization with an eminently spatial *mise en scène* (characters don't develop by means of narrative progression, but by getting in touch with a series of – geographical, social spiritual, political – environments).

34 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 145.

and 'the maxim of virtue' as 'the efficient cause of happiness'³⁵ (to go back to the village). The antinomy is solved by submitting to a self-legislated maxim that is also universally valid: by resolving to look after the baby no matter what, Karen effaces the very distinction between her 'selfish' longing for happiness and duty for duty's sake. The film ends abruptly, without showing the outcome of the adoption of the maxim, precisely because, in a Kantian vein, the solution lies in the adoption of the maxim itself, regardless of the outcome.

Moreover, 'God', here, is clearly only a postulated one, like in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. The actual, substantial presence of God cannot be discerned in any way in the film, not even indirectly, not even in this final sequence. When the heroine 'sees' God (by looking at the starry sky), the latter is only the embodiment of the absence of gazes hitherto experienced on the slope of the volcano. Put differently, by showing Karen's deep unease on the volcano, the film hints at the fact that man is both at odds with, but fully enveloped by nature (accordingly, the camera variously shows Karen as part of nature, and as subjectively gazing at it through the camera). Man perceives nature, and himself within it, in a phenomenal way; that is, qua submitted to mechanical laws – but, Karen's bewilderment shows that man is also *not* part of nature, that there is a noumenal part that cannot be shown, but remains to be accounted for. This fundamental imbalance between man and nature cannot be resolved within nature alone – hence the need for morality to restore the balance. In this final sequence, God is *nothing but* the non-narrative (*viz.* causal only in a non-direct way) bridge between the scene showing Karen lost in nature and the one showing her reconciliation thanks to morality. Mirroring Kant, it is the empty postulation that *stabilizes* the man/nature imbalance shown in the previous scene, thereby preparing the way for the otherwise unprepared and outrageously sudden reconciliation thanks to morality in the next one.

In this regard, Rohmer wrote that 'He [God] pardons at the moment when man, turning himself into an administrator of justice, makes insensitivity a rule.'³⁶ In Kant, God is nothing but a by-product of man's self-legislation, a formal 'stepping out' of oneself in order to self-impose law on oneself by embracing a universal reason that is nonetheless in oneself in the first place. In *Stromboli*, God is the pretext whereby Karen looks upon herself from the outside. Thanks to a shot-countershot with nobody in particular, Karen takes upon herself the 'cumbersome' absence of gazes having characterized the

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Rohmer, 'Roberto Rossellini: *Stromboli*', p. 124.

previous sequences; thereby, she gets a grip, 'makes insensitivity a rule' (in that she overcomes her hypersensitivity in the previous scene) and 'turns into an administrator of justice' (in that she prepares the 'moral turn' of the next scene) by acknowledging herself as pure externality (that is, as somebody who cannot escape the gaze of the Other, even when nobody is around). If ever there was an image that stood for Astruc's *caméra-stylo* qua unspoken impossibility of translating Descartes' *Discourse on Method* ('I think therefore I am') into cinema if not as a Kantian critique thereof (as was mentioned in Chapter two), it is this shot-countershot, enacting Karen's self-reflection in purely external terms, and by way of 'a Kantian' God overcoming the deadlock of impossible self-reflection by shifting its ground to ethics.

Moreover, Rohmer's quotation (God pardoning 'at the moment when man, turning himself into an administrator of justice, makes insensitivity a rule') is not the only nod to Kantian morality in his text: most notably, 'respect' (which was mentioned in passing a few paragraphs ago) is overtly alluded to: cinema, 'in the process of one of its more questionable procedures, "realism", suddenly begins, as if in spite of itself, to rediscover the meaning of the virtue of *respect*, which was formerly the symbol of art.'³⁷

Kant's notorious description of the *sublime* addresses the very same issue. The contemplation of various manifestations of the might of nature (including 'volcanoes in all their violence of destruction'³⁸) from a safe position not only reminds us of how little and powerless we are in comparison, but also suggests us that there is something even mightier than that: our own moral law. 'What we encounter here is the basic paradox of the Kantian autonomy: I am a free and autonomous subject, delivered from the constraints of my pathological nature, precisely and only insofar as my feeling of self-esteem is crushed down by the humiliating pressure of the moral Law.'³⁹ This is precisely what Karen undergoes while ascending the volcano, overpowered by both nature and the moral law splitting her in two. Rohmer's article not only affirms that 'perhaps of all the arts, film is the only one today that [...] still leaves room for the aesthetic category of the *sublime*, elsewhere discarded because of an excusable sense of modesty,⁴⁰ but also insists on the heroine's humiliation (the fundamental purpose of the whole sublime experience) almost to the point of morbidity:

37 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

38 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, B. § 28, 261.

39 Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, p. 47.

40 Rohmer, 'Roberto Rossellini: *Stromboli*', pp. 124-126.

Like a trapped animal, the heroine spares us none of her lamentable struggles. We contemplate her with disgust, never sympathy. This weak creature seemed just the type to touch us. Yet, the most disinterested movements, the feelings of disgust and the delicacies of the fragile, protected woman, are nothing here but the mark of a sordid appetite for comfortable life and only persuade us all the more of her fundamental abjection.⁴¹

3.5. God?

Morbidity aside, the point of the above passage (and of a number of others in Rohmer's review) is that *Stromboli* represents *the triumph of exteriority over interiority*. Whereas 'Cinema, an Art of Space' still conceded that the body had some centrality in the exploration of space (as shown in the Keaton and Murnau examples), in 'Roberto Rossellini: *Stromboli*' the victory of space over the body is *total*: 'The set will automatically form the actors' movements: the room with thick walls, the narrow courtyard, the steep or sheer slopes. They tell us of an obsession with a closed world, a world that confines into an always narrower matrix the large graceful body of the imprudent woman who wanted to remake it to her liking.'⁴² Man is nothing but the prey of space. In this respect, it is not surprising that on the front page of the very same issue of *La Gazette du cinéma* (more on this later) in which *Stromboli*'s review first appeared (November 1950), one could read under the banner headline 'Fonction du regard' a few paragraphs taken from Paul Valéry's diaries, ending with the equation 'L'espace = être autre que soi' ('space = to be somebody other than who one is').

The crucial paradox is that the most open space shown by the film is also the most constricted, i.e. the one in which Karen feels most confined and trapped: the slope of the volcano. Thus, the final victory of outwardness is ultimately due to the fact that, in the end, *the inside and the outside switch places*. There, in the open air next to the crater, Karen feels imprisoned because she is constantly observed, with no Other in sight. The eye of the movie camera constantly stares at her, and scrupulously follows her everywhere.

This directorial choice seems quite deliberate. In his biography of the Italian director, Tag Gallagher reported a declaration Rossellini allegedly made to a writer friend, Raoul Maria de Angelis:

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 126.

I'd use the camera to follow a character obsessively: contemporary anguish derives precisely from this inability to escape the lens' implacable eye. [...] [I]n letting the character go wherever he wants, there's a risk of seeing him disappear around the first corner[.] [...] He has to be followed, his movements and lines have to be controlled, he has to be reduced to impotency; otherwise we run into trouble. The camera inserts itself between the character's destiny and the plot's necessity, determining a new fatalness.⁴³

These words are from early 1944, but already perfectly describe what Karen is to undergo in *Stromboli* some years later. The new fatalness is: 'you can't escape the omnipresent camera eye.' That is to say: no matter how hard one tries to re-objectify the objectifying Other in the Sartrean Self-Other game of musical chairs, there is no respite from the gaze of this other non-Sartrean (because it cannot be subjectivized nor objectified) 'Other'. One is always looked at by a gaze that objectifies the subject, but that cannot be objectified in return, because it is not the gaze of some subject, not even an imaginary one. 'The Other's look confers spatiality upon me. To apprehend oneself as looked-at is to apprehend oneself as a spatializing-spatialized';⁴⁴ Karen apprehends herself as looked-at and hence as spatialized, *but not as spatializing* because there is no Other to return the gaze to, no Other that can be spatialized. Are we allowed to call this other 'Other' 'God'? Yes, but only in the Kantian sense, i.e. as a postulation whose necessity originates from our inherent impossibility to make sense of nature in a straight, non-contradictory way. As we have seen a few paragraphs ago, Karen's suffering on the volcano illustrates precisely the fact that man is at odds with nature while being encompassed in it, and the eye constantly gazing upon her suggests that God is, as it were, 'already there', waiting for someone to acknowledge him (which Karen does, in the next scene), but virtually already there all the same, because the imbalance between man and nature 'calls for' an Other (of a non-Sartrean kind) to stabilize their relationship by making morality possible. This is Karen's 'character's destiny': she finds salvation only when she accepts being constantly looked at, i.e. when she acknowledges God, which can be regarded here as Kant's moral law, splitting the subject by determining who the subject is. The baby she carries is the maxim she chooses ('with the help of God,' as she herself puts it). After her failure to ground her freedom, in a Sartrean vein, on a groundless choice

43 Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini*, p. 108.

44 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 262.

by her own consciousness, and on a Sartrean game of musical chairs with the Sartrean Other (the villagers), Karen realizes that freedom can only be attained by submitting to the one and only Other – God qua guarantor of Kantian moral law. As per Rossellini's quotation, the camera embodies not only Karen's destiny of always being looked at, but also plot's necessity: here, the camera work, making the viewer feel that Karen is constantly gazed at, literally replaces narrative continuity, because the only answer the customary question 'what happens next?' can get at this point of the storyline is 'nothing, but a woman walking and been constantly gazed by the camera eye.'

Rohmer enthusiastically commends Rossellini's ability to stick to none other than sheer appearances. Thereby, he escapes the deadlock of literature: that of having to choose a definite point of view supposed to stand for a specific, personal consciousness. In *Stromboli*, 'a kind of tragic horror fixes our gaze and imposes a view of the world that is neither that of man, in that it excludes compassion, nor that of God, in that it still inspires terror.'⁴⁵ Rossellini's camera is neither involved, nor detached. It is neither human, nor inhuman; neither with, nor without the heroine it constantly stares at. More to the point, we should read this passage alongside Rohmer's remark on Hawks as well as Godard's on *Man of the West*, reported towards the end of Chapter one. Therein, the critics implied that one of the possible virtues of cinema lied in eschewing the false alternative novels normally have to cope with, between the point of view of the characters and that of the impersonal narrator. In other words, cinema is not obliged to choose an individuated consciousness to stick to, and can do without it. This is what Rossellini does: he finds an answer to the question that obsessed Rohmer at the end of the Forties, namely 'how can cinema *not* be literary? How can it *show* instead of *telling*, in a non-literary way?' He finds a way to stick to appearance for appearance's sake, with no temporalizing, novelistic for-itself consciousness (hence without any literary gimmicks as well) filtering it. Sheer appearances unfold through 'their own' time, by a seemingly internal logic (if only the logic of mere succession), not through the contingent time of some definite consciousness organizing them (neither that of a character, nor that of some impersonal narrator).

Stromboli is the story of a sinner who receives God's grace. Rossellini does not show the odyssey of a conversion, with the hesitation, remorse, hopes, and slow and continual victories over oneself. God's majesty shines here

45 Rohmer, 'Roberto Rossellini: *Stromboli*', p. 127.

with such a hard and terrible brilliancy that no human conscience could bear even the dullest reflection of it. This grand Catholic film solemnly unravels its exterior pomp and shows nothing of interior life, except what we are left to imagine of the hideous motives of a soul sensitive to the call of the world.⁴⁶

Here, God seems to be a synonym for a radical *emptying out of consciousness* (which, as we have seen, is tantamount to a return to Kant's transcendental turn 'against' Sartre's for-itself consciousness). *Stromboli* is one of those 'works that, without rhetoric, simply by the evidence of what we are shown, proclaim more loudly man's misery without God.'⁴⁷ It proclaims that individuated consciousnesses are nothing, while God *qua external appearance* is everything.

What are we to make of this strange notion of God 'qua external appearance'? As we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, Sartre's 'game of musical chairs' between Self and Other strictly corresponds to for-itself consciousness's self-reflection, that is, to its split into a reflecting and a reflected consciousness. By replacing this 'game of musical chairs' (initially taking place in the village) with an encounter with God (on the volcano), *Stromboli* on the one hand *turns down* any possibility for for-itself consciousness's self-reflection, and on the other hand *enables* the ineradicable split between the purely formal 'I think' and the 'thing which thinks' to be 'redeemed' thanks to the self-imposition of the maxim by means of the purely formal moral law. The free self-imposition of the maxim thanks to practical reason is nothing but the flip side of the impossibility of cognitive self-reflection; God is precisely the merely postulated 'uncomfortable third' which, by adding itself to the two sides that are forever apart because of the impossibility of *cognitive* self-reflection, makes the *ethical* self-imposition of freedom (that is, of the maxim) possible. It is that which enables the distinction between moral self-imposition and self-reflection; it is that thanks to which moral self-imposition overcomes self-reflection and its inherent impossibility. Karen is not a subject bestowing duty to itself, but a subject bestowing duty to itself *through God qua nothing but the 'guardian' of the noumenal, the placeholder of the divine irreducibility of the transcendental ego*. It is such on both levels: the one in which self-consciousness is nowhere but in the purely formal 'I think' accompanying every apperception, as well as the one in which the impossibility of consciousness's self-reflection other

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

than in perception is redeemed by freedom, that is, by the self-imposition of the maxim. *Stromboli* shows 'God's majesty' inseparably in the morality it enables *and* in the self-sufficiency of whatever is perceived: Rohmer implies that 'the evidence of what we are shown' ('appearance for appearance's sake') attests to the fact that self-consciousness is nowhere but in perception itself, due to the formal 'I think' accompanying every perception, it being understood that, as we have seen some pages ago, God is the 'guarantor' of this very 'formalness' displaced at the ethical level.

Arguably, Rohmer saw in *Stromboli* the ultimate *anti-Huis Clos*. *Huis Clos* (*No Exit*) is the name of a 1944 theatrical play by Sartre about three dead people in hell. Hell, in his view, has nothing to do with flames and torture: it simply consists of a well-furnished room where the three characters are locked for eternity. None of them is able to cope with the respective individual guilt that entailed that punishment: accordingly, many commentators have rightly pointed out that all these characters represent the inherent impossibility of self-consciousness argued in *Being and Nothingness*. However, their guilt remains: each of them has been condemned to stay there forever because of his or her fundamental project, i.e. the self-grounded temporalizing free choice shaping one's life. Each of them is unable to take responsibility for one's own fundamental project (an incapability Sartre called 'bad faith'), and since he or she cannot master his or her respective fundamental project, the latter dominates him or her completely, in a puppet-like fashion. They all do have a (for-itself, temporalizing) consciousness, but they cannot access it through self-reflection: they can only reach it *through other people*. Hence, because each of them is unable to openly assume one's project, they end up repeating forever and ever the same game of musical chairs between self and other, reiterating over and over the same schemes of mutual interaction, so that their endless intersubjective play keeps endowing each of them with an identity of sorts. As we have seen, during most of *Stromboli* Karen too engages in a similar game of musical chairs with the villagers – but then she steps out of that imprisonment within the gazes of other people, by way of a somewhat paradoxical escape. Whereas the three characters in *Huis Clos* were at least animated by their own respective fundamental project (that is, by their own original freedom), Karen's fundamental project (to go away, to attain freedom) ultimately dies: on the slope of the volcano, Karen's consciousness is reduced to literally nothing, not even a temporalizing, free project. She is just a thing among other things, a piece of space in space. And whereas each character in *Huis Clos* was marked by an individual project (a free 'original sin') qua temporalizing consciousness that could not be accessed through

self-reflection but that could only come to the fore through each other's gaze, Karen turns an open-air absence of human gazes (which turned out to be *more* oppressive and claustrophobic than the room of *Huis Clos*, as the camera never left her alone) into an *absent* gaze (God's) enabling her to step out of herself and to face the total void of her own consciousness in order to *impose* freedom on it (as opposed to the characters in *Huis Clos*, condemned to act out the freedom they originally chose without coming to terms with their own original choice).

In accordance with this conception of God as standing for the 'emptying out' of the transcendental ego, it appears that Rohmer's review seems to *designate God as the ideal of the 'art of space' itself*. It is the ideal of total outwardness, of non-linguistic, immediate coincidence between appearance and any 'beyond', any 'meaning' that one would normally locate outside of it, enabled by the fact that the only self-consciousness that can ever be admitted is that which accompanies every apperception. Conversely, Sartre's 'for-itself consciousness' remains uncinematic, and wholly within *theatre*, viz. it can only correspond to characters expressing their 'fundamental project' through time and the short circuit of intersubjectivity, coherently contained within an enclosed theatrical scene wherein a ultimately regular dramaturgy unfolds.

The poetic beauty of *Stromboli* borrows none of the pomp of the verb or the metaphor and thus does not fear an abuse of their power. The idea and the symbol are so indistinguishable that we no longer question the artifice of the person who united them for us. God's grandeur springs not from the mouths that speak of him but from the actual presence of the volcano, the lava, the waves, and the Italian shore.⁴⁸

In this passage, so clearly contrasting 'expression' with 'manifestation' (ultimately making the latter coincident with God itself), the reference to *beauty* is crucial. *Being and Nothingness* conceives God as an impossibly accomplished coincidence between being-in-itself and being-for-itself; a total, unbroken, 'un-nihilated' immanence of being and consciousness.⁴⁹ Sartre cannot admit to such coincidence, so he cannot admit to any God. Much like God, beauty is for Sartre a kind of utopian reconciliation of the original separation (that is, the original transcendence and nihilation) between (for-itself) consciousness and Being.

48 Rohmer, 'Roberto Rossellini: *Stromboli*', p. 126.

49 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 90.

This perpetually indicated but impossible fusion of essence and existence [...] is what we call *beauty*. Beauty therefore represents an ideal state of the world, correlative with an ideal realization of the for-itself; in this realization the essence and the existence of things are revealed as identity to a being who, in this very revelation, would be merged with himself in the absolute unity of the in-itself. This is precisely because the beautiful is not only a transcendent synthesis to be effected but because it can be realized only in and through a totalization of ourselves. This is precisely why we desire the beautiful and why we apprehend the universe as lacking the beautiful to the extent that we ourselves apprehend ourselves as a lack. But the beautiful is no more a potentiality of things than the in-itself-for-itself is a peculiar possibility of the for-itself. It haunts the world as an unrealizable. To the extent that man realizes the beautiful in the world, he realizes it in the imaginary mode. This means that in the aesthetic intuition, I apprehend an imaginary object across an imaginary realization of myself as a totality in-itself and for-itself. Ordinarily the beautiful, like value, is not thematically made explicit as a value-out-of-reach-of-the-world. It is implicitly apprehended on things as an absence; it is revealed implicitly across the *imperfection* of the world.⁵⁰

This idea should be considered alongside Sartre's view of imagination, *qua* thoroughly distinguished from perception: beauty is *negatively* present in perceived reality, as an unrealizable possibility that imagination can nonetheless try to make real in the imaginary mode by nihilating from perceived reality. However, Rohmer's conviction that cinema reveals the actual possibility of beauty in and of the world refers to a properly Kantian beauty, which restores a substantial convergence between perception and imagination. How comes?

According to Kant, beauty comes from the *free play* of the faculties (imagination and understanding). While intuition, imagination, understanding, etc. are normally engaged in cognition (i.e. in attaching a definite concept to that which ensues from the synthesis of the manifold of appearances), in the aesthetic experience imagination and understanding are engaged in a free play, i.e. they process the data of perception in such a way that no definite concept can be attached (as for instance in the metaphor 'The sun arose, as out of virtue rises peace'). Thereby, a subjective *purposiveness without purpose* emerges (i.e. one that does not have the purpose of cognition): such is, in a nutshell, Kantian beauty. The beautiful object of aesthetic contemplation

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 194-195.

presents itself so that its parts appears, to a certain subject, to have no other end but their own wholeness. This object is 'an end in itself' because the imagination synthesizes the manifold of appearances so that they do not coalesce into a steady concept (thereby qualifying as an object of cognition), but into something whose only purpose is, precisely, their holding together. To acknowledge beauty means to acknowledge the presence of the free play of one's faculties in an external, beautiful object.

Because of the role the imagination and understanding play in our ordinary perception, the possibility of their free play (that is, of beauty) is always at hand. Particularly in the case of cinema, where imagination and understanding are *physically disjointed*, and thus far less inclined to engage in cognition than they are in their free play. Cinema's mechanical imagination synthesizes the manifold of appearances so that they do not coalesce into a definite concept, because it does so, as it were, separate from understanding; the flow of appearances thereby produced is thus there not for cognition, but *just for appearance's sake*: it is an end in itself. The void opened up by the cinematic simulacrum of the transcendental synthesis of imagination by simulating cognition without cognizing anything, can only be filled by a different use of the understanding: a quintessentially aesthetic free play providing a unity (an internal coherence among the parts) that is not cognition-oriented, but engenders a 'purposiveness without purpose.' Cinema reproduces the transcendental process at the heart of cognition, but subtracts the cognitive purpose; thereby, the possibility to add *a different* (aesthetic) purposiveness (better still: to play with their necessarily being an end in itself, because they cannot have any other) comes into being. 'The beauty of a construction site or an empty lot comes from the angle through which we are forced to discover it. Yet the beauty is still that of an empty lot. The work is beautiful not because it demonstrates that one can create beauty with ugliness but because what we considered ugly is actually beautiful.'⁵¹ An empty lot is not beautiful because our imagination can nihilate from it and realize in an imaginary mode the potential of beauty that lies in the parking lot without ever being liable to come true. Rather, the moment we perceive an empty lot, we activate faculties that can always (potentially) turn into a mode of free play, thereby making the object at issue an end in itself (beauty).

Ultimately, Rohmer wants to eschew the Sartrean/Heideggerian rift between consciousness and Being, according to which only *negativity* (nihilation, nothingness and the like) can mediate between the two. Rohmer

51 Rohmer, 'Such Vanity is Painting', p. 45.

returns to Kant precisely to affirm a *positive* link between them: if, on the one hand, Kant firmly separates thought from Being, on the other hand he acknowledges that *beauty* shows the possibility of a reconciliation between them. Beauty is, according to Rohmer's Kantism, the very proof that man's consciousness (which cinema replicates, by externalizing imagination) is in touch with Being/nature/world (he never really distinguished among them), because it finds its own purposiveness outside itself.⁵²

American literature today, whose influence on post-war Italian filmmakers we know, is one of the most brilliant illustrations of the Nietzschean myth of the 'death of God'. Each being, each event, is clad only in the charm of its pure existence. What is must be, in a world in which all hierarchy of religious or moral values is deliberately cast off. We can imagine the temptation of a philosophy that seems exactly suited to the filmmaker's purpose. Giving in to this temptation would mean failing to recognize that the portrayal of the small, true fact – 'realism' – is the requirement of an art whose very existence is paradoxical, but poetry, song, its end.⁵³

The last sentence suggests precisely that cinematic appearances, being produced as if they were cognition-oriented (thanks to cinema's mechanical imagination, etc.), can only stop short of cognition ('an art whose very existence is paradoxical'), but can be used for appearance's sake ('but poetry, song, its end'). More generally, this passage tellingly intersects the possibility of God and the possibility of beauty ('poetry'), whereas the American literature that Sartre cherishes so much celebrates the death of God and the impossibility of beauty. That is to say, it sticks to sheer appearances, but only as a mere art of 'brute fact', never giving up a certain clash between it and the temporalizing, subjective for-itself consciousness that experiences it. It neglects beauty, and celebrates instead the radical rift between

52 Another way for consciousness to find human 'purposiveness without purpose' in the outer world is to spot geometric figures as part and parcel of cinematic beauty. This explains why Rohmer's film writing was affected by a certain geometrical bias, for instance when he spotted triangles in Anthony Mann's *mise en scène* ('Le roi des montagnes'), when he identified the curve as the privileged form in Frank Tashlin's films ('The Art of Caricature: Tashlin', p. 148), or when he qualified Renoir's cinema to be as perfect as a circle in that it refused to be squared off ('La carrosse d'or', p. 84) – not to mention that Claude Chabrol (who never concealed how deeply affected he had been by Rohmer's writings) wrote in his autobiography that in his view a film's *mise en scène* can (or should), in principle, be summarized by a virtually underlying geometric figure (Chabrol, *Et pourtant, je tourne...*, pp. 195-196).

53 Rohmer, 'Roberto Rossellini: *Stromboli*', p. 126.

consciousness and Being. Cinema, by contrast, bridges that rift by showing the actual possibility of beauty.

Much the same thing applies to *freedom*. For Sartre, 'the best way to conceive of the fundamental project of human reality is to say that man is the being whose project is to be God';⁵⁴ man's fundamental project is the inherently impossible attempt of the for-itself consciousness to regain an in-itself it has originally detached ('nihilated') from. It is freedom's impossible dream of being entirely self-founded, instead of being founded in the nihilation of something *else*. Crucially, as we have seen, Kant *does* admit to this possibility. For him, the possibility of God and the possibility of freedom are strictly interconnected: God is what has to be postulated so that human will can escape mechanical cause-effect determinism and posit itself as its own cause. In this way, the rift between consciousness and Being Sartre maintains is replaced by human will qua, according to Kant's perspective, the very bridge between phenomenon and noumenon.

Ultimately, in 'Roberto Rossellini: *Stromboli*', 'God' is primarily that which Kant postulated as the actual condition for beauty and freedom to exist. By insisting on God in this review, Rohmer basically wanted to affirm the possibility of beauty and freedom, and hence of a positive connection between consciousness and Being, as opposed to Heideggerian/Sartrean negativity. Importantly, the possibility for beauty and freedom on cinema screens rests, according to this perspective, upon the 'divorce' between the faculties (imagination and understanding) cinema enacts by externalizing imagination: the case of beauty has already been outlined a few paragraphs ago, while that of freedom will be clarified in the next chapters.

When the critic declared, in a 1983 interview, that 'there's no difference in his films [Howard Hawks's] between being and appearing. It's not being and nothingness, either. It's being opposed to being',⁵⁵ he was actually summarizing a short note about the American director he wrote twenty years before,⁵⁶ in which he stated that Hawks was a director of being, because he was able to show not only nature, but also the action of man qua part of nature. But, then, why 'being opposed to being'? Because in the same note, Rohmer also made clear that man's alienation from (in his words, a 'non-communication' with) nature was not due to a lack of being, but to a *surplus* of being – which made Hawks's cinema absolutely optimistic and simultaneously absolutely pessimistic. 'Being opposed to being' thus referred

54 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 566.

55 Rohmer, 'The Critical Years', p. 10.

56 Rohmer, 'Red River'.

to the fact that, in Kantian terms, man is part and parcel of nature and, at the same time, free of its constraints. As Jan Völker put it, in his study of Kant's third *Critique* (*Ästhetik Der Lebendigkeit*), 'This is Kant's solution to the question of spirit. The spirit is the human faculty of negating the order of nature, and therein lies the paradoxical nature of the human being. It is its nature to negate nature.'⁵⁷ Or, as this beautifully Kantian formulation states: 'The monads which constitute his [Hawks's] world – from the plane to the thunderstorm, from the monkey to the scientist, from eternal Adam to eternal Eve – are not meant to give up their isolation, just as the leaf and the branch will never cease to be neighbours.'⁵⁸ Nature (the necessary proximity between the leaf and the branch) encompasses its own disruption (freedom, i.e. the 'monads' isolated from nature); in other words, 'being opposed to being'.

3.6. Echoes of the conversion

It is high time to draw some conclusions. As we have seen in the previous chapters, towards the end of the 1940s, Rohmer was led towards cinema by a typically literary agenda: that of asserting the superiority of showing over telling. Following Sartre, he thought that this aesthetic inclination had to be grounded in ontology – only to find that Sartre's ontology, as well as his ensuing literary theory, could only lead to an impasse, in that they regarded consciousness as a nothingness. On the other hand, they tended to reify and substantialize that nothingness (as it still remained a temporalizing agency). Because Sartre maintained that self-consciousness can be located both in the apperception of empirical reality and in a relatively and conditionally separate for-itself consciousness, the ensuing novelistic aesthetic commended novelistic styles and practices focussing on sheer empirical appearances, while never giving up the relevance of a temporalizing (for-itself) consciousness organizing and shaping them. Rohmer seems to imply that consciousness, the way this novelistic aesthetic saw it, *is not nothing enough*, whereas cinema has already demonstrated that it can do without that contingent, temporalizing, 'novelistic' for-itself consciousness

57 Quoted by Gertrude Koch in her 'Films as Experiment in Animation: Are Films Experiments on Human Beings?', p. 142.

58 Rohmer, 'Red River', p. 39. 'Les monades qui constituent son univers – de l'avion à l'orage, du singe au savant, de l'éternel Adam à l'Eve éternelle – n'ont pas plus à sortir de leur isolement que la feuille, sur la branche, à être sa voisine.'

(hence without any literary tricks and gimmicks). It is an 'art of space', i.e. an art in which the flow of time found itself immediately spatialized instead of being filtered by a temporalizing consciousness. Rohmer never demonstrated this assumption, which he basically regarded as self-evident, and which nonetheless clearly begged the question: 'how can cinema embody *no individuated consciousness*, a "nothing" of consciousness, without reifying, substantializing and personalizing that nothing the way the novel generally does?' What Rohmer lacked at that point was a suitable theoretical/philosophical framework capable of answering that question. It would be found only in 1950, with *Stromboli*, and it would be Kant. Not necessarily an orthodox view of Kant, but more likely one that Rohmer partly tailor-made for the sake of his no-longer-Sartrean aesthetics of cinema.

It is important to clarify that one should not look for cast-iron theoretical consistency in Rohmer's writings. Rohmer primarily believed, in the wake of Sartre's perspective, that cinema is characterized by some kind of coincidence between consciousness and perception – a coincidence that had already been hinted at by contemporary American literature, highly valued by Sartre and other French intellectuals of that time. Less and less inclined to agree, after 'Cinema, an Art of Space', that the twentieth-century phenomenological legacy (Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, etc.) could account for a *cinematic* coincidence between consciousness and perception, he ultimately turned to Kant to find a proper theoretical background for it. Put differently: Rohmer never questioned *that* cinema stood for a substantial coincidence between consciousness and perception, but at some point he realized that he had to turn to Kant (as opposed to twentieth-century phenomenological legacy) in order to find out *what* this coincidence is supposed to mean.

Stromboli enacted the quintessentially Kantian match: that between a self-consciousness, which can be emphatically nowhere but in apperception itself (thus entailing the triumph of *showing*, viz. of exteriority over interiority), and the 'redemption' of the very impossibility of cognitive self-reflection by means of the self-imposition (through practical reason) known as *freedom*. Thereby, Rohmer found in Kant the ontological framework he could not find in Sartre: he found a suitable, proper foundation for his conception of appearance for appearance's sake in *the tight interrelation between the impossibility of cognitive self-reflection, ethics and beauty*. That film persuaded Rohmer that cinema's 'lack of consciousness' (viz. the fact that it embodied the utter absence of self-consciousness apart from the 'I think' accompanying the apperception) distinguishing it from the novel is tenable only when it is accompanied by ethics (i.e. by the 'reformulation' of the very impossibility of self-reflection by means of practical reason)

and beauty (for very similar reasons). What makes cinema 'more novelistic than the novel itself' and that which accomplishes the novel's vocation to *show* is that therein self-consciousness is *indeed* nothing ('appearance for appearance's sake') – but then it must resurface in a diffracted way through freedom and beauty. Therefore, cinema *must* tackle freedom and beauty, much as in Kant's three-fold *Critiques* system experience and knowledge bear a complex, but doubtlessly very tight relationship with ethics and aesthetics.

Rohmer's two pieces about Alfred Hitchcock's *The Rope* (1948) are somewhat indicative in this respect. In 1950, before his conversion, he wrote a very long and rather confused treatise trying to infer from that film (famously entirely made of a single-take) a general theory of cinema, one in which visual continuity had the lion's share. Such an attempt, however, rather blatantly failed: 'Etude technique de *La Corde*' does not really succeed in positing a single coherent and rounded argument. When he wrote again on the same film in 1957, in his monograph on the English/American director, he tackled both Hitchcock's technical *tour de force* and the *moral* implications of the plot.

More generally, throughout the 1950s, the *école Schérer* (és) as well as the *politique des auteurs* (pda) strongly insisted on the inseparability between ethics and aesthetics. 'Aesthetic criteria are linked to moral criteria; there are successful films and failures, but there are also noble films and abject ones. There is an artistic morality, which has nothing to do with current morality, but which exists.'⁵⁹ Some years after he wrote that 'the beauty of a film goes beyond eyes and ears. Because art is always a matter of *moral* beauty as soon as it becomes worthy of the man who chose it,'⁶⁰ Rivette went as far as to say that the inseparability between ethics and aesthetics is the 'fundamental question at the heart of cinematic creation.'⁶¹ Film directors, whom many consider *auteurs* (and whom the és/pda critics themselves deeply admired), like King Vidor and Raoul Walsh, do not belong in the és/pda's pantheon, since they lack a moral point of view towards man.⁶²

59 Truffaut, 'Le règne du cochon de payant est terminé', p. 5. Translation taken from Eugene P. Walz, *François Truffaut: A Guide for References and Resources*, p. 219.

60 Rivette, 'Les malheurs d'Orphée', pp. 1-2. Originally: 'La beauté d'un film dépasse les yeux et les oreilles. Car c'est toujours d'une beauté *morale* qu'un art relève dès qu'il devient digne de l'homme qui l'a choisi.'

61 Originally: 'question fondamentale au coeur de la création cinématographique.' In the same article ('A la cinémathèque tous les soirs l'âge d'or allemand'), Rivette also maintains that this inseparability made German Expressionism one of the most crucial cinematic trends ever, one that directly influenced the best directors of Hollywood's classical era.

62 See Demonsablon, 'L'image de la folie', pp. 51-52.

In 'Cinema, an Art of Space', Rohmer identified consciousness still in a fairly Heideggerian/Sartrean fashion: consciousness is 'embedded' within appearance; appearance reveals Being by means of a consciousness nihilating from Being and thereby proving faithful to the nothingness of Being. The new answer (less straightforwardly Kantian than ensuing from a rather personal appropriation of the German philosopher) to the question 'where is the place for consciousness?' would sound more or less as follows: *consciousness is nothing but a by-product of a struggle taking place outside of consciousness, namely the struggle between nature and morality, the cause-effect mechanical necessity characterizing appearances the way they appear to us, versus freedom.* The 'Kantian' revelation, which Rohmer fully endorses 'against' Sartre, is that consciousness is by all means on the outside, and not inside ourselves, yet this outside happens to be *at the intersection between nature and freedom/morality.*

That is to say, if we follow Rohmer's argument closely, we must conclude that, for him, if consciousness cannot be reflexively located 'in ourselves', then it has to be located in the battlefield where nature and freedom/morality *as such* face each other – a battlefield that is *nowhere in particular*, or, more precisely, that cannot be individuated in a definite consciousness. In *Stromboli*, the battle does not take place in Karen's consciousness: in the final sequence, Karen is literally a powerless little thing, adrift amidst the battle between nature and God (that is, morality) – a battle that is simultaneously abstract and placeless as well as totally concrete and situated. In this respect, Rohmer ostensibly departs from Kant (who still maintained a localizability of sorts for consciousness), in that this 'de-centrement' is one of the not-so-rare implications of his original rejection of phenomenology that, even more than rejoining Kant *per se*, are not without recalling Deleuze's later 'eccentric' appropriation of Kant (minus his Bergsonism) instead. Indeed, Kant could not take into account an 'externalized imagination' such as that which characterizes cinema according to Astruc's 'Dialectique et cinéma': thereby, cinema engenders a temporalization that departs from the contingency of Heideggerian/Sartrean consciousnesses thanks to the mechanical necessity and irreversibility of its unfolding *outside of* human consciousness, which makes it particularly suitable for accommodating a battle between the rule (Kantian nature: the totality of appearances qua submitted to the mechanical laws of cause-and-effect) and its exception (freedom/morality) whose seat is *not* inside man. Rather, the latter's consciousness can only get sucked in that battle from without, as it were, instead of hosting it.

Ever since the cinema attained the dignity of an art, I see only one great theme that it proposed to develop: the opposition of two orders

– one natural, the other human; one material, the other spiritual; one mechanical, the other free; one of the appetite, the other of heroism or grace – a classical opposition, but one that our art is privileged to be able to translate so well that the intermediary of the sign is replaced by immediate evidence.⁶³

In this passage, which clearly outlines what the 'battlefield' is that defines cinema, Kantian dualism is paired with the expression/manifestation divide: only appearance for appearance's sake (as opposed to the linguistic sign) can account for the noumenal realm of freedom, that is, to the realm that breaks away with the rule of causality in that it is the realm of that which is its own cause, an end in itself.

'Appearance for appearance's sake' is, as we have seen, that which makes cinema more novelistic than the novel itself, viz. that which sets cinema free from its original proximity to the novel. On the other hand, this still begs the question of whether this apparent 'liberation' from the narrow horizon of the novel is, in fact, still essentially literary. In other words, this Kantian overcoming of Heideggerian/Sartrean novelistic aesthetics may be a dream that the novel is unable to make real, but still *the novel's* dream nonetheless: when push comes to shove, this Rohmerian conception of cinema boils down to the realization of the novelistic dream of showing instead of telling, supplemented by a suitable ontological framework (and this too was something the Sartre-inflected literary theory of his day attempted to provide contemporary novel with). Moreover, one should not forget that in the interview (with Jean Narboni) opening this chapter, Rohmer admitted that, to a certain degree, Sartre's influence even reached as far as his first films (shot in the 1960s), so he was fully aware that that 'literary' perspective still informed his thoughts on cinema well into the 1950s. An in-depth investigation in Rohmer's hundreds of articles and reviews seems to confirm this suspicion: indeed, a heavy literary bias affects his film criticism. He never (not even after his conversion) stopped looking at films with the eye of a literary critic. He always paid more attention than his alleged 'purely cinematic' *parti pris* would have allowed, to plot verisimilitude, to the *peinture de milieu* (the accurate, uncliché depiction of a certain social or human environment), to the distance from which the narrator tells the story, to tonal coherence – in short: to a 'realism' to be conceived in unmistakably, ultra-traditional literary terms.⁶⁴

63 Rohmer, 'Of Three Films and a Certain School', p. 64.

64 Dozens of reviews could be put forward as so many examples; among them, 'Pic nic'; 'Les feux du music-hall'; 'Mitsou'; 'Blanches colombes et vilains messieurs'.

Moreover, in many cases, Rohmer felt the same kind of embarrassment most typically felt by literary critics when faced with particularly uninteresting films: he had little to no idea what to say about them. It might look like a particularly brutal and ungenerous thing to say, but indeed in a great deal of reviews the critic is found beating about the bush,⁶⁵ and saying specious, not-so-pertinent things just to fill up an otherwise clueless piece of writing. The author himself even half-admitted it, when he said that when a film is particularly devoid of charms, he liked to deliberately neglect the film in question, and focus instead on what it *should have been*, on what are the implicit, possibly as-yet-unknown rules of cinema it should have complied with.⁶⁶ This goes a long way towards accounting for the fact that Rohmer is in many respects a literary critic that turned film theorist every now and then in order to better appease literary expectations ('cinema as more novelistic than novel itself') that films were only occasionally capable to satisfy.

All biographical sources agree that Chabrol, Godard, Rivette, Rohmer and Truffaut got to know each other between 1949 and 1950. As said earlier, it occurred mainly in the *Ciné-Club Quartier Latin* run by Rohmer and Frédéric Froeschel. However, it should be added that *La Gazette du cinéma*, a movie magazine also run by Rohmer, which issued 'Roberto Rossellini: *Stromboli*' on the front page of its fifth and last number (November 1950), was no less important for the coming together of the *és*.⁶⁷

This short-lived publication only lasted five issues, spanning from May to November 1950, but can be said to have marked the transition between the pre- and post-conversion eras.⁶⁸ On the one hand, its second issue (June 1950) included the republication of a 1931 article by Jean-Paul Sartre ('Le cinéma n'est pas une mauvaise école'); on the other hand, in October 1950, Godard wrote there that Sartre's novels were 'third-rate literature.'⁶⁹

65 For instance, throughout the first part of 'The Art of Caricature: Tashlin'.

66 For instance, in 'Vincent Van Gogh', or in 'Ces voyous d'hommes'.

67 It might be worth stressing that their group was never official, never proclaimed or formed as such. It was just an unofficial, informal convergence among a handful of like-minded cinephiles.

68 De Baecque, *Les Cahiers du Cinéma: histoire d'une revue*, pp. 44-49.

69 Godard, 'Works of Calder and L'Histoire d'Agnès', p. 19. Godard was never particularly tender with Sartre in the 1950s: the *Godard on Godard (GoG)* collection confirms that whenever he mentioned the writer and philosopher in that decade, he did so rather scathingly – or neutrally at best. In 1960, a long article by Luc Moullet ('Jean-Luc Godard') that can legitimately be reputed the first serious and extensive study on Godard ever published, ends with a brief but violent attack against Sartre, whose theatrical pieces are said to be characterized by the refusal of what exists and by a morose intellectualism, as opposed to the livelier universe of comics and of Godard's films. Far more often than not, Rohmer expressed his rejection of Sartre more 'diplomatically', although he was occasionally surprisingly sarcastic: 'The author of *Nausea* is

Truffaut, on the contrary, liked them,⁷⁰ but he never even opened Sartre's books on philosophy (which he admitted to not understanding).⁷¹

It is extremely telling that Godard started off 'Defense and Illustration of Classical Construction', a 1952 essay he published in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* (CC), by distancing himself from Sartre.

One remembers the vehemence with which Jean-Paul Sartre once attacked François Mauriac: the author of *Anges Noirs*, he said, was incapable of endowing his heroes with the liberty with which our lives are adorned, the sudden desire to alter a given course, and in a monstrous parody made them hesitate only in order to ape the magnificence of God. But what vanity, too, to insist at all costs on crediting language with a certain metaphysical quality, when it could only raise to the level of the sublime in very specific circumstances.⁷²

Against Sartre (whom he deemed as mistaken as Mauriac), here Godard is retorting that in the artistic pursuit of freedom, language should not be overestimated; most of the rest of the article argues (if somewhat obscurely) that appearance for appearance's sake is much fitter for that purpose instead. In the closing paragraph, he laments 'the error of critics in falling under the influence of contemporary philosophy,' that is, 'in stripping classical psychology of that part of it which the cinema could make use of, render explicit, by not reducing man to "the succession of appearances by which

no more gifted for cinema than he is for pop songs – and about ten years ago, as you may know, Juliette Greco [...]'. Originally: 'L'auteur de la *Nausée* n'est pas plus doué pour le cinéma que pour la chansonnette, car vous souvenez peut-être qu'il y a quelque dix ans, Juliette Greco [...]'. Rohmer, 'Faux coupables et faux innocents', p. 763.

70 In 1951, on 12 November, he wrote his friend Robert Lachenay 'You would greatly benefit from reading Sartre and you would often recognize yourself in those writings of his in which he extols rationality, unemotional intelligence, the triumph of the will, the permanent responsibility of man towards his actions, etc.' Truffaut, *Letters*, p. 68. Still, this looks far from being enough to label Truffaut 'a Sartrean' in any serious way. Despite Steven Lipkin's efforts to downsize it (Lipkin, *The film criticism of François Truffaut*, pp. 141-142, p. 219 and pp. 236-237), thereby trying to portray Truffaut as a young Sartrean, the critic's absolute political and social disengagement is a gulf irretrievably separating the two; in this respect, Truffaut is much closer to the 'hussars', the sternly anti-Sartrean, right-wing, postwar French writers advocating literature for literature's sake, as far as it can be from political engagement. Not incidentally, it is one of the hussars (Jacques Laurent) who hired Truffaut as a film critic for his *Arts* weekly magazine, in 1954. See also Grosoli, 'The Politics and Aesthetics of the *politique des auteurs*'.

71 De Baecque and Guigue (eds.), *Le dictionnaire Truffaut*, pp. 351-352.

72 Godard, 'Defense and Illustration of Classical Construction', p. 26.

he is manifest" (Jean-Paul Sartre)⁷³ – in other words, by attesting to the fact that appearance for appearance's sake is the highroad to the noumenal (free) side of man.

Both Godard and Rivette consistently contributed to the *Gazette*;⁷⁴ their articles show very clearly the strong influence of the older friend and colleague. Rivette, for instance, employed in that publication spiritualistic undertones that are much harder to find in his later *CC* articles.⁷⁵ More to the point, his first two articles extensively draw inspiration from Rohmer's 'Cinema, an Art of Space' and 'The Romance Is Gone'. Only the second one ('The Southerner'⁷⁶) was published in the *Gazette*, while 'Nous ne sommes plus innocents' ('We Are Not Innocent Anymore'⁷⁷) appeared in the *Bulletin intérieur du Ciné-club du Quartier Latin* (the internal bulletin of the Ciné-Club run by Rohmer) in January 1950.

The latter draws a distinction ('synthesis' vs. 'analysis') that ostensibly follows the one Rohmer drew between ontology and language. In short, 'synthetic' filmmaking consists of the deployment of appearances according to an internal logic of their own, in 'appearance for appearance's sake' manifesting nothing beyond the appearances through which everything is manifested, while 'analytic' filmmaking neglects the autonomous power of appearances and articulates them in such a way that they are made into conventional signs, into inert material to be used to express a point through linguistic and rhetorical abstractions. Importantly, Rivette also adds that the former is eminently spatial, while the latter, parcelling out filmic space, is temporal.

The great error, then, seems to be the error of an everyday language, indifferent to its object, that of having a 'grammar' valid to any and all narratives, instead of a necessary style, a style needed by the narrative—indeed, gradually created by it in the course of its expression. [...] 'Content', in its natural effort to express itself, becomes form and language: the living organism is not formless [...], the fact of passing into

73 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

74 Truffaut did not, but Eugene P. Walz, in his *François Truffaut: A Guide for References and Resources*, pp. 161-162, lists three notes Truffaut wrote for the *Bulletin intérieur du Ciné-club du Quartier Latin* (the internal bulletin of the Ciné-Club run by Rohmer) in 1950.

75 It may suffice to mention his references to the dualism between flesh and spirit in his 'Under Capricorn' and 'Les malheurs d'Orphée'.

76 Rivette, 'The Southerner', p. 2.

77 Rivette, 'Nous ne sommes plus innocents' (<http://sensesofcinema.com/2011/feature-articles/we-are-not-innocent-anymore/>).

being, into appearance, shapes it automatically—at least, if no ‘regret’, no prejudice, no complex, no (paralyzing) stench of the ancient rhetoric throws off the game.

‘Synthetic’ filmmaking (what has been called ‘manifestation’ in Rohmer’s case) consists of a dynamic unity between form and content: as the latter unfolds, it displays its own form. Like in ‘appearance for appearance’s sake’, as the content comes into view a ‘nothingness’ beyond itself is revealed, a nothingness that nonetheless shapes and qualifies the content; this nothingness is *form*, which is thus ultimately inseparable from its related content. Conversely, ‘analytic’ filmmaking (what has been called ‘expression’ in Rohmer’s case) breaks this unity and separates form from content: the former is basically a language that expresses the latter. Rohmer’s 1954 statement that ‘[with cinema in general, and with cinemascope in particular] no longer will we speak of framing or lighting; instead, we will talk about landscapes and light’⁷⁸ could be fittingly translated in Rivettian terms with ‘with cinema in general and with cinemascope in particular, no longer will we regard cinema analytically, but synthetically’: whilst ‘framing’ and ‘lighting’ still presuppose a separation between the thing to be shown and the expressive means whereby it gets shown, ‘landscapes’ and ‘light’ imply their inseparability.

One more thing that should not be overlooked is the subtly strategic value of that word choice, in the context of Rohmer’s anti-Sartrean polemics. Sartre praised Faulkner, Dos Passos, Caldwell *et al.* precisely because of the primacy of synthesis over analysis in their books.

The intellectual analysis which, for more than a century, had been the accepted method of developing character in fiction was no longer anything but an old mechanism badly adapted to the needs of the time. It was opposed to a psychology of synthesis which taught us that a psychological fact is an indivisible whole. It could not be used to depict a group of facts which present themselves as the ephemeral or permanent unity of a great number of perceptions. [...] The heroes of Hemingway and Caldwell never explain themselves – do not allow themselves to be dissected. They act only. [...] [E]ach of their spontaneous reactions is complete, what it would be in real life – something that lives and that does not contemplate itself. We learned from Hemingway to depict, without commentaries, without explanations, without moral judgements, the actions of our characters.

78 Rohmer, ‘The Cardinal Virtues of Cinemascope’, p. 281.

The reader understands them because he sees them born and formed in a situation which has been made understandable to him. They live because they spurt suddenly as from a deep well. To analyze them would be to kill them.⁷⁹

By appropriating the synthesis/analysis dichotomy, Rivette shifts its meaning: for him, 'analysis' designates not just intellectual analysis, but *every* technique contriving a temporal articulation meant to express something. Hence, literary techniques were, to him, analytical. By means of this shift, Rivette implied (exactly like Rohmer in his review of Magny's treatise, in Chapter one, and even though he does not really spell this out) that American contemporary novels, clearly making large use of those essentially literary techniques, were still stuck in that 'temporal/linguistic/analytical bias' that only cinema could truly, 'synthetically' overcome, in that it can rely on a fully spatial deployment of time, freeing it from the need of techniques. By reinventing the very divide brandished by Sartre to promote American contemporary literature, Rivette, in contrast with Sartre, indirectly ranges the novelistic as such (thus including contemporary American novelists themselves) under the 'analysis' variety. According to his own revised categorization, only what is more novelistic than the novel itself (i.e. cinema) can be synthetic.

Tellingly, this implicitly 'anti-Sartrean' nuance is accompanied in the same article by traces of Kantian 'critical' approach, and of German idealism coming in its aftermath.

The universe commands this gaze [the gaze of the creator], and yet the gaze itself both imposes and creates this universe; the universe of the creator is but the manifestation, the concrete efflorescence of his gaze and mode of appearing — of this gaze that is nothing other than the appearance of a universe. [...] Universe and gaze, one and the other are the same and only reality: reality only exists through the gaze we direct at it, and the gaze, conversely, depends entirely on its relationship to reality. Indissociable reality, where appearance and appearing are confused, where vision can seem to create matter (Renoir's travelling shots), and matter can seem implicated in vision—without anteriority, or causal relation. One sole and selfsame reality with two faces, confused and fused in the created work.

79 Sartre, 'American Novelists in French Eyes', p. 117.

As for Rivette's review of Jean Renoir's 1945 *The Southerner*, it is little more than a thorough application of the principles outlined in 'Nous ne sommes plus innocents', on that film in particular.⁸⁰

In the fourth issue of the *Gazette* (October 1950), Rivette violently distanced himself from the staff of the *Objectif 49* festival, whose second and last edition (organized, among others, by the future co-founders of the CC Jacques Doniol-Valcroze and André Bazin) had taken place in Biarritz one month before. Rivette's article⁸¹ was the implicit sign that a small group was born (the *ÉS*), and that its members thought of themselves as quite apart from the rest of the conspicuously Sartre-inflected cinephilia milieu of the day. More or less in the same weeks (September-October 1950), the *Ciné-Club Quartier Latin* underwent some troubles with justice because Rohmer and the others organized a screening of Nazi propaganda film *Jud Süß* (Veit Harlan, 1940), which predictably stirred up a massive controversy, as the war was still too close in time.⁸² Such 'political eccentricities' were as far as they could be from the leftist political engagement of Sartrean existentialism. As was mentioned already at the end of our Introduction, one year before, Rohmer was kicked out of *Les Temps modernes*, Sartre's own monthly organ, for having written a sentence that could be read as reactionary,⁸³ namely that '[s]ince it is agreed to swear only by History,

80 'In Renoir's films, the camera often seems to be the creator of the universe – and isn't it because the camera tightly embraces the unfolding, the perpetual spouting of the universe, and submits itself to it? And for a long time now, this selfsame concern for a perfect capture has pushed Renoir to grasp the real in its totality as well as the coexistence of its phenomena, to refuse to undo the knot of actions and reactions, so as to seize it globally; all this implies an increasingly advanced realism of space.' Originally: 'Si, chez Renoir, la caméra semble souvent créatrice de l'univers, n'est-ce pas parce-qu'elle en épouse étroitement le déroulement, le jaillissement perpétuel, et s'y *soumet*? Et ce même souci de parfaite captation incite depuis longtemps Renoir à appréhender le réel dans sa totalité et la coexistence de ses phénomènes, à se refuser à dénouer le noeud d'actions et réactions, pour le saisir globalement et implique un réalisme de l'espace toujours plus poussé.' To shoot things 'synthetically' means to seize them 'in a global way', to insist on their coexistence. Accordingly, Renoir's film highlights that which wraps things together: *space*. His direction focuses on spaces: 'The nakedness, the rigour of natural settings, and the leitmotif of those scanty wooden boards, forming the peristyle of that domestic temple where everybody sits next to each other; lying at the intersection between the house and the fields, they knot the setting together.' Originally: 'La nudité, la rigueur des décors naturels, et le leit-motiv de ces quelques marches de bois, péristyle de ce temple domestique où l'on vient s'asseoir côte à côte; à l'intersection de la maison et des champs, elles sont le noeud du décor.' Rivette, 'The Southerner', p. 2.

81 Rivette, 'Bilan pour Biarritz'.

82 De Baecque and Herpe, *Eric Rohmer*, p. 60.

83 Rohmer recounted this anecdote in 'The Critical Years', p. 32.

let's say that at a certain period of the evolution of the arts, the values of conservation should perhaps take over those of revolution or progress.'⁸⁴

As far as one can tell from his texts, Godard immediately backed Rohmer's return to Kant and to his philosophical aftermath. After having employed, for no apparent reason, the German word *Aufklärung* instead of the French *Lumières* (or the English *Enlightenment*) in one of his last contributions⁸⁵ for the *Gazette du cinéma*, in the very issue where Rohmer's review of *Stromboli* was published, Godard called the first article he wrote for the CC 'Suprématie du sujet' ('Supremacy of the subject'). In it, he constantly played with the ambivalence of the French term *sujet*, which can mean 'subject matter' as well as 'the subject' in the philosophical sense. A review of *Strangers on a Train* (1951), 'Suprématie du sujet' repeatedly compared Hitchcock ('The most German of transatlantic directors'⁸⁶) to intellectual figures who variously grappled with Kantian legacy, like Kleist and Goethe.

More generally, it can be argued that the 'transcendental turn' embraced by Rohmer *contra* Sartre came at a particularly delicate moment, when the *ÉS* was still in the process of coming together as a group. As a result, it very deeply affected that still malleable clique in the short as well as in the long run. This sort of 'big bang' decisively contributed to the shaping of the shared assumptions informing the *ÉS*. Thereby, it laid the foundations for the *pda* to emerge years later, since the *pda*'s view of authorship (as will be shown in the follow-up book of the present study) was rooted in a conception of subjectivity deeply relying on Kant and on that part of German philosophy which came in its wake.

After Rossellini's film, Rohmer's aesthetics of cinema reached, to borrow an image from André Bazin, an 'equilibrium profile', and will remain consistent and steady until the end of his career as a film critic, without ever undergoing any significant change. This is why the next chapters do not shy away from using articles he wrote during the later *pda* phase (1954-1960) to illustrate the main assumptions underlying the *ÉS*'s film criticism in earlier years: because the *ÉS* was undoubtedly Rohmer-centric, and because Rohmer's film criticism and its underpinning premises remained in essence the same throughout the 1950s, no serious methodological problem arises if some texts Rohmer wrote in the late 1950s are used here to account for the general leaning of the *ÉS*.

84 Rohmer, 'Le Festival du film maudit', p. 765.

85 Godard, 'The Great Mac Ginty'.

86 Godard, 'Strangers on a Train', p. 24. Actually, he once said the exact same thing about Fritz Lang, in an article that has not been included in the English collection *GoG*, but does appear in the original French version: Godard, 'Le retour de Frank James', p. 92.

The previous pages have hopefully shown that Rohmer was probably not a very orthodox Kantian: his appropriation of the German philosopher was, to some extent, fairly loose and nonchalant, and looked less like a thorough application of Kant's teaching and more like a will to endorse what Sartre had discarded. Moreover, according to the biography by Antoine De Baecque and Noël Herpe, Rohmer closely read Kant only in the late Eighties,⁸⁷ which implies that in the Forties and Fifties his knowledge of his works was mainly indirect, and probably derived for the most part from Alain.

At any rate, Rohmer's attitude towards film criticism, theory and aesthetics was indeed singularly systematic. Even if he retracted his own past dogmatism more than once in the later decades of his life,⁸⁸ in 1996 he would still structure an entire book around Kant's critiques: his *De Mozart en Beethoven* is split in two sections, one of which reads Mozart as the embodiment of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, while the other reads Beethoven as that of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.⁸⁹ Of course, to have a square, systematic way of thinking about films does not necessarily mean to be interested in putting together a systematic theory of film (which he never did). He was rather diffident towards theoretical systems, when it came to film: 'Nothing goes out of fashion as quickly as systems. Ideas come and go, but images remain.'⁹⁰ One thing is sure: Rohmer firmly believed that cinema was the crowning moment of a solidly traditional, centuries-old conception of art.

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87 De Baecque and Herpe, *Eric Rohmer*, p. 386.

88 'Le celluloid et le marbre', his 5-instalments series of articles that he published in the CC during the course of 1955, and that strove to put together an aesthetic system to be based on a set of comparisons between cinema and the other arts, was disowned some years after its publication (Rohmer, 'The Critical Years', p. 1); in 2001, he distanced himself from the views on Cinemascope he had expressed in the 1950s (Rohmer, 'Le large et le haut').

89 Rohmer, *De Mozart en Beethoven*, especially pp. 295-298.

90 Rohmer, 'Livres de cinéma', CC, 74 (August-September 1957), p. 57. Originally: 'Rien ne se démode plus vite que les systèmes. Les idées passent et les images restent.'

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Abbreviations

CC = *Cahiers du Cinéma*

éS = *école Schérer*

GoG = Tom Milne (ed. and trans.), *Godard on Godard*. London and New York: Da Capo, 1972.

pda = *politique des auteurs*

ToB = Jean Narboni and Eric Rohmer (eds.), *The Taste of Beauty*, trans. by Carol Volk. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

