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4. The Art of Nature

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Abstract

This chapter investigates the consequences of Rohmer's conversion to Kant on the main tenets of his film theory. The concept of *appearance for appearance's sake*, which was already of primary importance before his conversion, underwent substantial revision thanks to the influence of Kantian notions of beauty, of nature, and, specifically, natural beauty (as outlined in the *Critique of Judgement*). Particular attention has been devoted to the intricacies of Kant's *unity of nature*, in that they string together three of Rohmer's key assumptions, namely that cinema is essentially an art of movement, that by the same token it is a narrative art, and that by pushing mechanism to the extreme cinema can attain freedom.

Keywords: Rohmer, Kant, appearance, nature, beauty, mechanism

4.1. To show and not to tell

How did this conversion change Rohmer's film criticism in actuality? How did it affect the *école Schérer* (éS) more generally? In order to attempt to answer these questions, it is probably best to start with what remained more or less the same.

Ever since 'Cinema, an Art of Space', Rohmer repeatedly insisted that cinema is on the side of ontology, and not on that of language; his 'return to Kant' (from and against the twentieth-century phenomenological strand of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, etc.) was undertaken precisely in order to maintain this premise.

By placing myself under the patronage of Kant from the very outset, I intended my approach to belong to the order of ontology, and not to that of language. And I don't think that the two can ever converge. In the first case, value (i.e. beauty) is the constant object of attention, in that it is an essential

attribute of the very nature of art. In the second case, the interest lies first and foremost in communication; and semiology, which is made to study its conditions, should in principle almost completely disregard such value.¹

From the outset, then, Rohmer subscribed to what Ian Aitken called the deeply Kant-inflected 'intuitionist modernist-realist paradigm,'² one of the two dominant traditions that dominated European film theory in the past century (the other being the 'post-Saussurian' one encompassing, among others, semiotics, structuralism and post-structuralism). Even as late as his 1983 interview with Jean Narboni, which accompanied the edited collection of his writings, while admitting that he had changed his mind about many things by then, Rohmer firmly maintained this stance.³ Moreover, the adoption of the Kantian framework enabled him to further tighten the correlation the critic never ceased to believe in, viz. that between the 'ontology vs. language' and the 'showing vs. telling' divides. In Rohmer's mind, the fact that 'the specificity of the cinematic screen is less about suggesting, as theorists used to think in the past, than it is about "showing"⁴ is inevitably linked to what has been named (already in Chapter one) 'manifestation' as opposed to 'expression'.

'Long live the cinema, which, attempting only to show, exempts us from the fraud of saying!';⁵ shortly thereafter, Godard affirmed that the goal of cinematographic *mise en scène* 'is not to express but to represent,'⁶ and Bazin

1 Rohmer, *De Mozart en Beethoven*, p. 52. Originally: 'Si je me suis placé, dès le début, sous le patronage de Kant, c'est pour bien marquer que ma démarche entend être de l'ordre de l'ontologie, et non du langage. Et, entre l'une et l'autre approche, je ne pense pas qu'il y ait de convergence possible. Dans la première, la valeur – la beauté –, étant attribut essentiel de l'être même de l'art, est le constant objet du propos. Dans la seconde, l'intérêt se porte avant tout chose sur la communication; et la sémiologie, faite pour étudier les modalités de celle-ci, devrait en principe faire de la valeur abstraction plus ou moins totale.'

2 Aitken, *European Film Theory and Cinema*. In fact, strong parallelisms can be drawn between most of the topics tackled in this chapter, or elsewhere in this book (manifestation vs. expression, the similarities and differences between artistic and natural beauties, the diffidence towards Sartre's conception of imagination as opposed to perception, and so on and so forth), and several parts of Alain's *Système des beaux arts*. However, as shown by Georges Canguilhem (in 'Réflexions sur la création artistique selon Alain'), the main inspiration behind most ideas in *Système des beaux arts*, even though Descartes, Plato and others play a considerable role in it, is unambiguously Kantian – which is yet another reason why our account focuses primarily on the German philosopher.

3 Rohmer, 'The Critical Years', pp. 10-11.

4 Rohmer, 'Queen Kelly'. Originally: 'Le propre de l'écran est moins de suggérer, comme pensaient les théoriciens d'alors, que de "donner à voir".'

5 Rohmer, 'Such Vanity is Painting', p. 49.

6 Godard, 'Strangers on a Train', p. 24.

was also well aware that, according to the *politique des auteurs* (pda), the cinema could not be reduced to that which it expressed.⁷ Anything supposed to express a pre-existing inner being, like Paul Newman's actors'-studio-like acting,⁸ or the long dialogues of an adaptation from Dostoyevsky boringly uttered by the actors in order to deliver the characters' psychology,⁹ is firmly condemned. The *ÉS/pda* abhorred those directors who envisaged the moving image as a means to convey something, be it a definite emotional effect or a pre-determined meaning ('the cinema is not a "spectacle" [...], it would still be sad for it to be reduced to a piece of "writing"¹⁰). It is no wonder that the *ÉS/pda* repeatedly lashed out at David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (1945), 'with its streams of tears and its amorously awkward couple-the least sensual and most sentimental film ever wept over.'¹¹ What was wrong in that film was that inner feelings were delicately suggested by actors' performances without being exhausted in the acting methods used to express them. Hence, they are 'sentimental' but not 'sensual': they are only alluded to, *pointed at* by the acting technicalities qua mere signs of feelings that remain in the mind of the characters, and that are artfully conveyed to the viewers in order to move them. Actors are mere mediators, from (imaginary, character's) mind to (actual, viewer's) mind, without any regard for the autonomous power of appearances – and the characters themselves are 'awkward' precisely because their passion remains only mental and is not lived to the fullest. By contrast, 'sensual' (although the original French text read *charnel*, 'carnal') feelings would be those which are nowhere but in their appearance;¹² put differently, those whose abstract definition does not exhaust the wealth of suggestions ensuing from their visual appearance. 'The idea springs from the sign and establishes it at the same time, just as an act affirms a tendency.'¹³ As usual, Godard put it more lyrically: 'If the idea is involved in the form, it becomes more incisive, but is also imprisoned like water in ice.'¹⁴ The sign ('that which

7 Bazin, 'How Could You Possibly Be a Hitchcocko-Hawksian?', p. 34.

8 Rohmer, 'Marqué par la haine'. Rohmer himself uses the word 'expressionism' to designate that style of acting.

9 Rohmer, 'Crime et châtement'.

10 Rohmer, 'The Art of Caricature: Tashlin', p. 151.

11 Truffaut, 'The Seven Year Itch', p. 160. One of the many examples of denigration against *Brief Encounter* is in Truffaut, 'Ma vie à moi', p. 59.

12 Again, this explains the *ÉS/pda*'s contempt for *ellipses*, that quintessentially literary device which conceals the appearance of phenomena in order to convey some meaning by forcing the reader/viewer to mentally represent what is missing.

13 Rohmer, 'Such Vanity is Painting', p. 49.

14 Godard, 'Strangers on a Train', p. 24.

indicates something in whose place it appears¹⁵) is not meant to communicate something to, or to have a definite effect on the viewer, but 'should respect the arabesque which underlines its effect.'¹⁶ In other words, it should be turned towards appearance for appearance's sake, rather than towards the intention to signify; towards the means rather than towards the ends.

The ideal *auteur* was not someone who had an idea and expressed it ('with Tashlin there is no starting point [the French original read: 'pas d'idée de départ', 'no starting idea'], and this is precisely his originality. Only the point of arrival matters'¹⁷), but someone in whose films 'the stroke surpasses the intentions of the hand drawing it.'¹⁸ What matters is not the outcome of an original intention, but something that is *found* along the way. Godard, for instance, praised G.W. Pabst for directing the actors by subtracting all that is useless from their gestures, instead of creating these gestures from scratch, out of sheer motionlessness.¹⁹ In other words, Pabst does not rely on some fixed, abstract intention preceding its physical realization,²⁰ but places his direction wholly within the moving flow of appearances: all that he does is to *pick* those appearances that are deemed as revealing, and to discard the others. 'It is completely clear, here, that the goal of the filmmaker is not so much a matter of expressing anything through images, but more a matter of leading us to a precise image he patiently sought with his hero.'²¹ Ingmar Bergman is another good case in point: in his films, his abstract, philosophical intentions and pretensions are exceeded by the glory of that which meaninglessly appears and just shines.

Not that we read fresh nuances in the facial expressions, which are destined to corroborate or contradict the meaning of the words. The 'plus' that the proximity of the profiles of this forty-year-old man and

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*

17 Godard, *The Lieutenant Wore Skirts; Artists and Models*, p. 36.

18 Rohmer, 'Luis Buñuel: The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz', p. 147.

19 Godard, 'Le Trésor'.

20 Like, for instance, John Huston. 'Thus, his mind clouded by a certain literary myth, the most "intelligent" filmmaker believes that he has completed the essential part of his task once his script has been written: he needs only to find mouthpieces for his ideas. Of course he has experience and knows that the actors must move, and so they move, but only because they have to. In certain scenes of *Beat the Devil*, Jennifer Jones says her lines while doing stretching exercises: it is a clever idea, but nothing more.' Rohmer, 'Lesson of a failure', p. 111.

21 Rohmer, 'Les fraises sauvages'. Originally: 'Le but du cinéaste, là, c'est flagrant, n'est pas tant d'exprimer quoi que ce soit par des images que de nous conduire à une image précise, patiemment recherchée par lui-même et son héros.'

woman contributes – to which the cheated wife’s profile, surprising the couple, will be added – is not, I believe, in the realm of expression. These faces, smooth and clear as cameos, exert a charm that is essentially less dramatic than poetic: They distract us from the words more than they help us understand them, but the medal-like forms with which they haunt us are the means by which we can break through their fundamental opacity, the same opacity that, at the beginning of the film, the noise of the train was enough to dissipate, like a puff of smoke.²²

These close-ups seem to echo an earlier article by the same critic: ‘Isn’t there more in a troubled face than the emotion to which we would like to refer?’²³ Again: an image should not be the sign of something else, but appearance for appearance’s sake. ‘The appearance is the essence, and it draws upon itself the substance of an interior world, a world of which it is the incarnation, not the sign.’²⁴ A sign is inevitably (as per the quotation above) *opaque*, as the inside/outside relationship can only be loose and unstable (since the signifier/signified relationship can only be arbitrary and conventional). An ‘incarnation’ is even more opaque, because it does not say anything; at the same time, it knows no opacity, because it draws all of the inside to the outside, so that nothing is left within: no essence or intended meaning beyond what appears.

The main difference with the pre-conversion phase is that Rohmer is now much more inclined to emphasize *beauty* and *nature* than he was in, say, ‘Cinema, an Art of Space’ (where nature is simply absent and beauty is mentioned in passing no more than a couple of times). When he sets manifestation against expression, he does so out of conviction that cinema

22 Rohmer, ‘Ingmar Bergman’s *Dreams*’, pp. 166-167. See also Rohmer, ‘Avec le *Septième scéau*, Ingmar Bergman nous offre son *Faust*’. In *Det sjunde inseglet* (*The Seventh Seal*, 1957), says Rohmer, Bergman asks an abstract question about the meaning of life, death and time, but finds a thoroughly concrete answer, one that bears no relation to the question but all the more answers it: the mute, vivid manifestation of a ‘dark forest’ (‘forêt aux futaies sombres’) or of ‘foaming sea’ (‘mer écumante’). The abstractions of fiction and death are exceeded by the power of sheer appearances: ‘However heavily the director covers his characters’ features with make-up, he knows how to preserve their shivering flesh and the intensity of their gaze: better still, he makes us feel that such flesh is in turn a mask, and contrasts it with the skeleton in the same way as he contrasts life with death. By doing so, he invites us to experience their disturbing affinity.’ Originally: ‘Quelle que soit la couche de fard dont le metteur en scène recouvre les traits de ses personnages, il sait préserver le frémissement de leur chair et l’intensité de leur regards: mieux, nous faire sentir que cette chair est masque à son tour, accentuer au maximum le contraste entre elle et le squelette, entre la vie et la mort, tout en nous invitant à éprouver leur inquiétante affinité.’

23 Rohmer, ‘The Classical Age of Cinema’, p. 42.

24 *Ibid.*

is able to manifest beauty in a straightforward, Kantian sense, viz. to display *aesthetic ideas*. 'By an aesthetic idea I mean that representation of the imagination which evokes much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. concept, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never quite fully capture or render completely intelligible.'²⁵ Aesthetic ideas engender beauty insofar as they consist of a free play between imagination and understanding whereby (as we have seen in the last chapter) some kind of 'purposiveness without purpose' is created. It is a 'free' play because imagination synthesizes the manifold of appearances in such a way that understanding cannot provide any suitable concept for the result. Still, understanding is not ruled out: that representation of the imagination 'evokes much thought': if, on the one hand, no concept can match it, on the other hand that representation can *potentially* engender a number of concepts not unrelated to it, although none of them can be the actual, *ultimate* concept of it.

In a word, the aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination, allied with a given concept, with which, in the free employment of imagination, such a multiplicity of partial representations are bound up, that no expression indicating a definite concept can be found for it – one which on that account allows a concept to be supplemented in thought by much that is indefinable in words, and the feeling of which enlivens the cognitive faculties, and with language, as a mere thing of the letter, combines spirit.²⁶

When Rohmer and the *pda* referred to the coincidence between appearance and essence, 'essence' is none other than Kant's subjective purposiveness without purpose – which can correspond to a great variety of things: the quasi-cosmic 'order of the world'²⁷ suggested by *Journey to Italy*; the clockwork-perfect choreographic harmony of movements and lines in a Hollywood musical;²⁸ *Bitter Victory*'s (Nicholas Ray, 1957) 'Architectural, cosmic beauty' ('*beauté architecturale, cosmique*') due to its composition of a series of tightly interconnected parallelisms and correspondences ('Every situation is not only reconsidered according to its on-screen appearance, but also according to something more elevated, to this necessity characteristic

25 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, § 49, 314.

26 *Ibid.*, § 49, 316.

27 Rohmer, 'Land of Miracles', p. 207.

28 Rohmer, 'Ma soeur est du tonnerre'.

of the filmed work – whose presence I detected without completely feeling it. There is, for instance, a parallelism between the scene in which Brand hesitates to kill the sentry, and the moment when he lets the scorpion climb onto Leith's sock²⁹), and so on and so forth.

'Appearance for appearance's sake' should be read in a similar way. It stands for the coincidence between appearance and essence, viz. for a cinematic appearance displaying some kind of internal harmony and coherence (a 'purposiveness without purpose' grasped in this way by a subject), thereby manifesting an aesthetic idea that does not just express a concept (it is not a sign pointing at something else), but by its very appearing can *potentially* engender a wealth of concepts in the observer. 'Everything speaks, and yet nothing is encouraged to speak' ('Tout parle et pourtant rien n'est sollicité').³⁰ This is why it would make sense to say that the pda's metaphysics of essence and appearance ultimately comes down to a matter of inside and outside: the sign goes from the inside to outside, while appearance for appearance's sake is primarily the triumph of the outside, and consequently a virtual movement from the outside to the inside.

Doesn't a troubled face betray some interior emotion? Yes, it is a sign, but an arbitrary sign, as it denies the powers of falsity and greatly shrinks the limits of the invisible world to which it proudly refers. To go from each of our gestures to its implied intention is the equivalent of reducing all of thought to a few self-identical operations. The novelist will rightfully smile when presented with the neophyte's ambition to give this elementary algebra the name language. To go from the exterior to the interior, from behaviour to the soul, such is the condition of our art. But how wonderful that, far from tarnishing what it shows us, this necessary detour enhances it, and thus liberated, appearance itself is our guide.³¹

A sign presupposes an arbitrary connection between some inner being (some 'meaning') and some external placeholder (sign itself) whereby it is expressed. Appearance for appearance's sake designates a cinematic appearance rich enough in internal coherence (because its parts mutually interact

29 Rohmer, 'Seul film adulte à Venise: *Amère victoire*'. 'Toutes les situations sont repensées non seulement en fonction de leur expression sur l'écran, mais de quelque chose de plus élevé, de cette nécessité propre à l'oeuvre filmée dont je décelais la présence, sans la ressentir encore pleinement. Il y a, par exemple, un parallélisme entre la scène où Brand hésite à tuer la sentinelle, et celle où il laisse le scorpion grimper sur la chaussette de Leith.'

30 Rohmer, 'One Exciting Night'.

31 Rohmer, 'Such Vanity is Painting', pp. 50-51.

so that the ensuing whole is characterized, in the eyes of the intuiting subject, by a sense of internal necessity, of 'purposiveness without purpose') to provoke some attribution of meaning in the mind of the viewer.

The cinema flashes a whole scene before our eyes, from which we are free to extract one of many possible significations. This is opposed to the other arts, which go from the abstract to the concrete and which, in making this quest for the concrete their goal, hide the fact that they aim not to imitate but to signify. Meaning in film is extracted from appearances, not from an imaginary world of which the appearances are only the sign.³²

An effective definition by Paul Willemen is particularly worth noting here:

[The discourse of revelation] takes many forms in relation to cinema. The whole argument around realism hinges on a discourse of revelation just as the whole *Cahiers du Cinéma* auteur polemic basically was a discourse of revelation, the revelation of the soul. Whether it was the soul of the viewer being projected onto the screen, the soul of the actress being revealed in Rossellini's *Stromboli* or the soul of Hitchcock being revealed in *I Confess*, there was always a discourse of revelation under it all in different modalities.³³

What matters is not *who* carries the attribution of meaning (the director? The viewer?), or *what* meaning exactly should be attributed, but *that* an appearance potentially rich in meaning is displayed. What matters is less the subjective acknowledgement of 'purposiveness without purpose', than the fact that that acknowledgement is objectively commanded by (transcendentally mediated, in the Kantian sense) appearances. The pda's 'discourse of revelation' was basically an emphasis on the power of cinema to show that the source of every possible meaning lies in outward appearance, qua non reducible to meaning (because stemming from a synthesis of the imagination that cannot properly match one definite concept of the understanding). The point was appearance as *potential* meaning ('manifestation'); its actualization ('expression') mattered little, and much less who exactly was to trigger it. The point was, in other words, the displacement of the subject's soul and inner thoughts *on the outside*, that is, the acknowledgement that they cannot help

³² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³³ Willemen, *Looks and Frictions*, p. 232.

but be the secondary, contingent appendixes of a more proper formulation that is always external, foreign and independent.

Jean-Luc Godard once wrote that 'artistic creation does not mean painting one's soul in things, but painting the soul of things.'³⁴ He went on to offer an example: 'In Jean Renoir's *Madame Bovary*, it is a precious moment when, as Emma and Leon come out of the church, we suddenly breathe the smell of stone, and with it the musty flavour of life in Rouen and Emma's disappointed dreams.'³⁵ Immediately thereafter, however, he specified his claim so as to unambiguously discard the idea that things *actually have* a soul, which they would somehow ooze once they are filmed. Rather, when cinema reaches its potential and displays 'appearance for appearance's sake', things are filmed in such a way as to *encourage* the *projection* of feelings on them.

Flaherty's genius, after all, is not so far removed from that of Hitchcock – Nanook hunting his prey is like a killer stalking his victims – and lies in identifying time with the desire which consumes it, guilt with suffering, fear and remorse with pleasure, and in making of space the tangible terrain of one's uneasiness. Art attracts us only by what it reveals of our most secret self.³⁶

Tellingly, five years later, Rohmer would make use of the same comparison between Robert Flaherty's *Nanook* (1922) and Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), a film notoriously revolving around a character projecting his secret desires on the scenes he watches from his window, thereby making external appearance the very seat of his hidden and unconfessed drives.³⁷

Moving images 'manifesting' instead of 'expressing' are moving images displaying aesthetic ideas. Therein, appearance for appearance's sake engenders a wealth of potential concepts in the viewer simply thanks to its beauty ('purposiveness without purpose'), rather than because a consciousness is virtually encompassed in it by means of nihilation/transcendence (as in the Murnau example from 'Cinema, an Art of Space'). *This* is the link between the 'showing vs. telling' opposition and 'ontology vs. language'. What cinema shows is not just ordinary, empirical appearances: through appearances it shows *Being*. However, there is nothing obscurely metaphysical about

34 Godard, 'What is Cinema?', p. 30.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

37 Chabrol and Rohmer, *Hitchcock*, p. 124.

this Being: it is just an image *standing for all that could potentially be said about that image*, rather than for a definite content actually expressed by that image.

4.2. Natural beauty

In Kant's system, 'aesthetic ideas' typically characterize works of art. However, the German philosopher also dwells on another kind of beauty: *natural beauty*.

Here, Kant's opposition between *mechanism* and *teleology* (or, according to some translations, *purposiveness*) must promptly be recalled.³⁸ Like man, nature has to be conceived in a twofold way.³⁹ On the one hand, it is a blind *mechanism*, and is only made of the interaction between causes and effects. On the other hand, it has to be conceived *teleologically*, i.e. in such a way that the distinction itself between causes and effects, ends and means, is no longer operative.

In so far as the causal connexion is thought merely by means of understanding it is a nexus constituting a series, namely of causes and effects, that is invariably progressive. The things that as effects presuppose others as their causes cannot themselves in turn be also causes of the latter. This causal connexion is termed that of efficient causes (*nexus effectivus*). On the other hand, however, we are also able to think a causal connexion according to a rational concept, that of ends, which, if regarded as a series, would involve regressive as well as progressive dependency. It would be one in which the thing that for the moment is designated effect deserves none the less, if we take the series regressively, to be called the cause of the thing of which it was said to be the effect. In the domain of practical matters, namely in art, we readily find examples of a nexus of this kind. Thus a house is certainly the cause of the money that is received as rent, but yet, conversely, the representation of this possible income was the cause of the building of the house. A causal nexus of this kind is termed that of final causes (*nexus finalis*).⁴⁰

38 Kant's critique of teleological judgement is recapitulated in a particularly literal way in the fifth instalment of Rohmer's *Le celluloïd et le marbre* series of articles: 'V. Architecture d'apocalypse', p. 24.

39 See, for instance, Zanetti, 'Teleology and the Freedom of the Self'.

40 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, § 65, 372.

A thing considered as a natural end (corresponding to what is generally called an *organism*) is a thing envisaged *as if* the concept of the global interactions of its parts had produced the parts themselves. The ‘as if’ here corresponds to Kant’s admonishment that this is not a constitutive principle, but a regulative principle (i.e. there can be no confusion about the global concept of the thing having *actually* produced its parts). In this respect, a thing considered as a natural end is both cause and effect of itself, it is its own end. Kant is also well aware that there is a strong analogy between nature thus conceived and *art* (works of art are also ends in themselves, displaying purposiveness without a purpose) – hence the well-known analogy between the artist and God, as those overseeing final causes in art and nature. The artist and God cause the mechanisms known as ‘work of art’ and ‘nature’, while being exempt from the mechanic kind of causality. Like a work of art, a natural object conceived of as a natural end (an end in itself), must be characterized by an idea of the whole driving all its parts, and causing them to coalesce into this whole.

But if a thing is a product of nature, and in this character is notwithstanding to contain intrinsically and in its inner possibility a relation to ends, in other words, is to be possible only as a natural end and independently of the causality of the concepts of external rational agents, then this second requisite is involved, namely, that the parts of the thing combine of themselves into the unity of a whole by being reciprocally cause and effect of their form. For this is the only way in which it is possible that the idea of the whole may conversely, or reciprocally, determine in its turn the form and combination of all the parts, not as cause – for that would make it an art-product – but as the ground for the cognition of the systematic unity of the form and combination of all the manifold contained in the given matter for the person judging it.⁴¹

The difference between nature and art is that the artist/Genius is like a watchmaker: it triggers a self-sufficient mechanism. Nature triggers *itself* instead (God is just the postulated ‘self-triggering’ entity). What art ‘suggests’ to our minds is an artist – a rational being – working from without. But nature, on the contrary, organizes itself, and does so in each species of its organized products – following a single pattern, certainly, as to general features, but nevertheless admitting deviations calculated to secure

41 *Ibid.*, § 65, 373.

self-preservation under particular circumstances.⁴² When an object is externally perceived by some observer as an end in itself, in that it appears as a self-sufficient organized whole, then it is a work of art, or a natural end. The two nonetheless remain distinct from one another, because only the former is perceived as being due to a definite, separate agency.

Rohmer is undoubtedly aware of 'this notion of order, in which philosophers saw the foundations themselves of Beauty: such order rests on uniformity rather than diversity, as nature teaches us'⁴³ – and as late as 2009, in an interview with Noël Herpe and Philippe Fauvel, Rohmer still defined the cinematic 'natural' in Kantian terms, namely as that which seems to be endowed with an existence of its own, rather than to have been created by a creator.⁴⁴

Indeed, his insistence on cinema's capacity to seize natural beauty could not be overestimated, and has been rightfully highlighted already by most commentators and film scholars. In fact, his writings seem to imply that whereas arts are normally confined to artistic beauty and its aesthetic ideas, leaving (as per Kant) natural beauty to nature alone, cinema has indifferently access to artistic *as well as* to natural beauty.

Film [...] uses techniques that are instruments of reproduction or, one might say, of knowledge. In a sense, it possesses the truth right from the beginning and aims to make beauty its supreme end. A beauty, then, and this is the essential point, that is not its own but that of nature. A beauty that it has the mission of discovering, and not of inventing, of capturing like a prey, of almost abstracting from things.⁴⁵

Jean Renoir, for instance, is praised because he knows that cinema 'is apt to capture the most wayward aspects of *nature*, those aspects that are least able to be reduced to the canons of aesthetics, its *freest* aspects.'⁴⁶

Cinema's strong bias towards natural beauty caused Rohmer to assume that since cinema is supposed to tackle nature and reveal its beauty, one of the main tasks of film criticism lies in highlighting the moments in a film when the beauty of nature appears, that is, those moments when

42 *Ibid.*, § 65, 374.

43 Rohmer, 'V. Architecture d'apocalypse', p. 28. Originally: 'Cette notion d'ordre dont les philosophes ont fait le fondement de celle du Beau: ordre reposant sur l'uniformité, et non sur la diversité, ainsi que la nature nous l'enseigne.'

44 Louguet (ed.), *Rohmer ou le jeu des variations*, p. 96.

45 Rohmer, 'The Taste of Beauty', p. 77.

46 Rohmer, 'Renoir's Youth', p. 190.

cinema's potential is best used. Consequently, his reviews are replete with commendations of empirical beauties,⁴⁷ of the 'statuesque' attractiveness of the actors,⁴⁸ of the charm of a train crossing a forest,⁴⁹ of landscapes,⁵⁰ of the elegance of a dancing scene,⁵¹ of the discrete appeal of a night walk on London's docks,⁵² of the power of a wild horse chase⁵³ or of an arrow being shot.⁵⁴ In short, he often expressed his enthusiasm for fleeting fragments of photogenic beauty, for the apparitions of things whose beauty (that is, whose 'purposiveness without purpose') did not seem to be due to some artful plastic creator, and thus appeared 'natural' (in the Kantian sense).

Hence, his writing style focuses heavily on *details*, like 'this moment [in Buñuel's *Death in the Garden*] in which Michèle Girardon gets her long hair stuck in the forest lianas, when ants devour a grazed boa'⁵⁵ – and one of the reasons why he loved Hitchcock's cinema is that its bombastic overall implausibility highlighted by contrast the refreshing verisimilitude of sparse, barely noticeable details.⁵⁶ In fact, attention to detail notoriously characterizes not only Rohmer, but more broadly classic cinephilia:⁵⁷ in a letter to Rohmer (7 January 1951), François Truffaut affirmed that 'cinema is the art of the little detail that does not call attention to itself'⁵⁸ – a definition he would repeat almost verbatim two years later, in one of his first reviews for the *Cahiers du Cinéma* (CC).⁵⁹ This love for detail is clearly to be read alongside their hate for ellipses: whereas the latter conceal things from

47 One particularly blatant example is his 'La robe bleue d'Harriett'.

48 Rohmer, 'Arrêt d'autobus'.

49 Rohmer, 'Le brigand bien-aimé'.

50 Rohmer, 'Comme une fleur des champs'.

51 Rohmer, 'La belle de Moscou'.

52 Rohmer, 'Indiscret'.

53 Rohmer, 'Car sauvage est le vent'.

54 Rohmer, 'Le jugement des flèches'.

55 Rohmer, 'La mort en ce jardin'. Originally: 'celui [in Buñuel's *Death in the Garden*] où Michele Girardon prend aux lianes ses longs cheveux, où des fourmis dévorent un boa écorché.'

56 'It is the very implausibility of that matter that bestows upon the details of the texture a hint of truth which, in Hitchcock, pleases me at all times. [...] Hitchcock's art throws us into the implausible, only to eventually hold us thanks to an attention to the "true fact" that is so meticulous that the least event gets tinged with a second and more exact truth.' Originally: 'C'est l'in vraisemblance même de la donnée qui donne aux détails de la facture cet accent de vérité qui, en Hitchcock, à tout moment me délecte. [...] L'art de Hitchcock est, nous jetant d'emblée dans l'in vraisemblable, de nous retenir ensuite par une attention si précise au "fait vrai" que le moindre événement se teinte d'une seconde et plus exacte vérité.' Rohmer, 'Le soupçon', p. 65.

57 See especially Christian Keathley's remarkable book-length study on this topic: *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees*.

58 Truffaut, *Letters*, p. 35.

59 Truffaut, 'Dead Line (Bas les masques)'.

view in order to better suggest a mental concept and trigger the reader's imagination, the former is an *excess of visibility* to which no definite concept is attached.

Needless to say, the crux of the matter is once again appearance for appearance's sake, and not at all some alleged capability to 'faithfully' reproduce empirical reality. Cinema's strong bias towards natural beauty has nothing to do with the reproduction of trees, rivers and landscapes 'the way they are'. 'We are tempted to look at the world with our everyday eyes, to keep the tree, the running water, the face distorted with happiness or anguish, to keep them as they are, in spite of us.'⁶⁰ The key here is 'in spite of us': natural beauty is such because it appears *sourceless*, as the product of an artful agency and at the same time of *nobody's* agency. Hence the importance of details: things lying at the margin of what is going on are more likely to seem unstaged⁶¹ (their being so or not is obviously beside the point).

Let us look into this argument in greater *detail*. As mentioned in the last chapter, cinema is *incompletely* oriented towards cognition and hence it has a strong aesthetic *potential*. 'Art does not reproduce reality, it *discovers* it, a bit like the scholar discovers his material. In both cases, these searches take us on roads far off the beaten path. That is why realism is not the enemy of style but, rather, is its best companion.'⁶² The difference between this view and, say, Rudolf Arnheim's (for whom the aesthetic potential of cinema rested precisely upon that which separated it from reality – flatness, lack of colour, etc.) is that, for Rohmer, the aesthetic potential ensuing from the fact that cinema is an imperfect simulacrum of cognition *still* has much to do with its closeness to our ordinary perception of empirical reality (more on this later), precisely because, in a subtly Kantian vein, our ordinary perception of empirical reality is *itself by definition incomplete*, as it can never attain the noumenal dimension, but can only cling to phenomena.⁶³ Rohmer is not implying that cinema automatically produces natural beauty. He just

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

61 In his *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes argued more or less the same thing about what he called the *punctum*; it is no surprise that Barthes' *punctum* plays a big part in Keathley's *Cinephilia and History*.

62 Rohmer, 'Faith and Mountains', p. 118.

63 This is to be read alongside the claim in Chapter 2, that cinema should stay clear of ellipses because in the cinema ellipses are everywhere: according to Rohmer, cinema reproduces man's ordinary vision, establishing a synthetic continuity whereby phenomena can appear – yet man's ordinary vision is *as such* faulty in the first place, in that it cannot but fail to take the noumenal dimension into account. The fact that omission (of the noumenal dimension) is the condition of possibility itself for *any* phenomena to emerge, heavily undermines the cinematic value of

says that cinema *can* exploit its being an imperfect simulacrum of cognition for the sake of aesthetics, *on the basis of* its closeness to human ordinary perception (which Rohmer never questions). 'It has often been said that the screen transfigures: on the contrary, I see the camera as a mechanical instrument able, at most, to bring out only the most sordid aspects of nature, that is, the flattest. Therefore the lyricism, whose dangers we might warn of elsewhere, appears here as the exclusive privilege of a few great works by those who are able to bring nature out of its shell.'⁶⁴ Some years later, Rohmer put the same idea in more recognizably Kantian terms:

This would probably be the case, if the art of film were, on the whole, a pure recording technique. However, it goes without saying that the genius of an artist must oversee this machine's simple power of reproduction – a power for which, however, he should always have constant respect. And it is such respect, this moral and Kantian quality, that will enable him to go beyond appearances through the reproduction of appearance alone, and to paradoxically find the thing in itself within the phenomenon.⁶⁵

'To find the thing in itself within the phenomenon' is an almost verbatim definition of Kant's beauty (and of Rohmer's 'appearance for appearance's sake').

As in the case of artistic beauty, it still takes a genius to put natural beauty on the screen. But the film director has the chance not only to be a genius (that is, to put together by means of the free play between imagination and understanding an object fully characterized by the internal coherence of its parts), but also to be *the missing genius*⁶⁶ implied in natural beauty

the ellipsis, a device which artfully selects *some* phenomena to be omitted so that other ones are imagined in the mind of the viewer.

64 Rohmer, 'The American Renoir', p. 177. '[The filmmaker's] difficulty is not, as we think, in creating a world of its own with mirrors – the tools at its disposal – but in managing simply to copy this natural beauty. But although it is true that the cinema manufactures nothing, it doesn't deliver things to us in a neat package either: it arouses this beauty, gives birth to it according to a *Socratic art* that constitutes the very basis of its method'. Rohmer, 'The Taste of Beauty', p. 77.

65 Rohmer, *De Mozart en Beethoven*, p. 109. Originally: 'Ainsi en serait-il, sans doute, si l'art du film n'était en tout et pour tout, que technique d'enregistrement pur. Mais il va de soi que le génie de l'artiste doit prendre en charge le simple pouvoir de reproduction de la machine qu'il manie – pouvoir à l'égard duquel il devra toutefois observer un respect constant. Et c'est ce respect, qualité morale, qualité kantienne, qui lui permettra d'aller au-delà de l'apparence par la reproduction de la seule apparence, de trouver paradoxalement la chose en soi au sein du phénomène.'

66 In an interview, Claude Chabrol jokingly remarked that if Rohmer could, he would shoot a film with no camera whatsoever; in other words, his ideal cinema is one in which the artist

(what is presented to human eyes as a 'natural end', that is, as an end in itself that does not come from any definite agency). Artistic beauty is by definition inclined towards natural beauty, because both are after the same purposiveness without purpose; cinema enhances this inclination, because moving images appear to us as strikingly close to our ordinary perception of empirical reality. This closeness has nothing to do with any alleged correspondence between the images and reality. 'The screen is not *reality*, but it is even less a *painting*; it must be approached from a different angle';⁶⁷ this 'angle' (necessarily different from that of artistic beauty and its aesthetic ideas, as 'the screen is not a painting') is Kant's natural beauty, because moving images appear to us *as if nobody created them*. To put it in 'pre-conversion' Sartrean terms: in cinema, the non-positional, reflective, for-itself consciousness (accompanying the positional consciousness – the filmic capture – of some definite object) *indeed* is nothing (or nobody's). As André Bazin maintained regarding photographic realism, 'the solution is not to be found in the result achieved but in the way of achieving it'.⁶⁸ thanks to the essentially automatic and mechanical process whereby moving images are produced, their unfolding *looks* 'unstaged', 'uncreated' and 'spontaneous' (regardless of any awareness, on the part of the viewer, that they were actually staged: what matters here is appearance and the illusion of reality it brings about). This is precisely what Kant's natural beauty is about: it materializes an aesthetic outcome, a self-sufficient organized whole, *minus the agency triggering final causality*. It is not only a purposiveness without purpose, but also a *seemingly sourceless* purposiveness without purpose. The watchmaker disappears, as it were, in the wheels of the watch.⁶⁹

The mechanical nature of the film medium, in other words, appears to answer the selfsame problem that motivated Kant's conception of the aesthetic, namely, the conundrum of finding a third term through

disappears completely (like Kant's God, the nowhere-to-be-found genius behind natural beauty). Stefano Francia di Celle, Enrico Ghezzi and Roberto Turigliatto (eds.), *L'œil du malin*, p. 84.

67 Rohmer, 'Of Tastes and Colors', p. 69.

68 Bazin, 'Ontology of the Photographic Image', p. 12.

69 This is precisely what happens to Pablo Picasso in *The Mystery of Picasso* (*Le mystère Picasso*, Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1956), a documentary showing him at work. The painter here is less the one who imposes an overall vision on its matter, than a simple part of a broader unity: the painting itself as it unfolds in time, through the different stages of its development. In this respect, the painter is, as it were, engulfed within the autonomous temporal unfolding of the painting. 'What counts for our painter, who is a god in his universe, but a god only after the creation, is that a certain line be faithful, but the points of inflection are not known in advance'. Rohmer, 'Skimming Picasso', p. 134.

which reason can ground itself in a meaningful (i.e. non-conceptual, non-tautological) manner. If, for Kant, fine art (mediated through the creative imagination of a genius) and aesthetic reflection (taste) pose the solution, would not a mechanical imagination and genius (that of the cinema) produce even more satisfactory results?⁷⁰

Once again, this is not limited to beautiful trees, beautiful mountains, beautiful rivers and the like: natural elements are clearly privileged objects of cinema's attention, but even something as artificial as a piece of classical Hollywood storytelling can be deemed as 'natural' in this Kantian sense, provided that this impression of sourcelessness that cinema is capable of producing is maintained. This 'missing genius' enabled by cinema (which 'cures the artist of his fatal narcissism'⁷¹) is someone who makes beauty on the screen possible, while still being able to *conceal* the contribution required to make it possible.

A slave of appearance, the filmmaker, taking the cue from what is real, can only suggest an endless profusion of latent metaphors. Still, this real should better be shown without tricks, or at least, since art cannot abstain from cheating to some degree, the filmmaker should be able to erase his presence, with all the modesty needed to make what he shows shine with all those natural fires.⁷²

Such a concealment is made possible by cinema's sourceless, mechanical imagination, showing us the way we experience things in ordinary, everyday reality, without cognitive purpose, and thus liable to a different purposiveness, in the guise of 'an endless profusion of latent metaphors.'

4.3. Immediate mediation

One can never insist too much that the strong bond between cinema and nature Rohmer has always maintained has nothing do with cinema's alleged capacity to 'faithfully reproduce reality'. Cinema does not ensure a 'faithful

70 Szaloky, 'Making New Sense of Film Theory Through Kant', p. 45.

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

72 Rohmer, 'Huston et Bresson', p. 117. Originally: 'Le cinéaste, esclave de l'apparence, ne peut que suggérer, à partir du vrai, un infini de métaphores latentes. Encore convient-il que ce vrai soit montré sans ruses, ou, du moins, puisque l'art ne peut se passer de quelque tricherie, que le cinéaste sache s'effacer avec la modestie requise pour faire briller ce qu'il montre de tous ces feux naturels.'

reproduction of nature', nor is it a 'natural reproduction' of any kind. The word 'nature', here, should be read in a Kantian vein. Nature, for Kant, is 'the sum of appearances insofar as, by virtue of an internal principle of causality, they are in thoroughgoing coherence.'⁷³ Nature is the overall coherence whereby appearances are produced; it stands for the fact that all that appears to us appears to be submitted to the mechanical laws of *cause and effect*. Thereby (and thanks to the necessary contribution of the understanding, factually guaranteeing this unity), appearances appear to us qua globally submitted to a substantial order and regularity. Godard: 'The natural order corresponds to that of the heart and mind.'⁷⁴

It can be argued that, by insisting so much on the strong bond between cinema and nature in his writings, Rohmer basically wanted to assert that an ordinary, average, shared way to perceive empirical reality in our everyday experience *exists*, and that cinema can reproduce it for aesthetic (as opposed to cognitive) purposes. In other words, cinema is in touch with nature not because it can faithfully reproduce empirical reality, but because it can reproduce the order and regularity whereby appearances are engendered and presented to our consciousness, and whereby we experience things in our everyday life; not because moving images can deliver the perfect reproduction of a stone in motion, but because it can show that, once that a stone is cast, it falls on the ground following the laws of gravity, after hitting one or more objects possibly standing in the way. This 'ordinary vision' (whose affinity with cinema Rohmer never questions: it is a sort of *axiom* he never feels the urge of demonstrating) is *everybody's* and hence *nobody's*, like cinema's mechanical sourcelessness whereby moving images can have access to natural beauty like no other art.

When one reads a passage like 'Such vanity is painting, which has given up telling the world to exist according to its laws. But the truth is that things are as they are, regardless of how we see them,'⁷⁵ one might be led to think that to Rohmer cinema's specificity lies in reproducing 'things as they are.' This is not the case though. Here is what the critic writes only a few lines ahead:

With the discovery of perspective, we realized the respective dimensions that objects registered on our retinas. We then learned that lines did not exist and that everything lay in the interplay of darkness and light, for

73 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B446.

74 Godard, 'What is Cinema?', p. 31.

75 Rohmer, 'Such Vanity is Painting', p. 44.

light itself was colour, and that even the simplest colour was merely the juxtaposition of several tones. Did our vision change? [...] If Raphael had not existed, we would have the right to call cubism folly or scribbling. *Guernica* does not detract from the *Belle jardinière*, or vice versa, but I don't think it too daring to say that one of these works has been, and always will be, more in conformity with our ordinary vision of object.⁷⁶

In a way, Rohmer is not saying anything different here from 'things are as they are, regardless of how we see them.' At the same time, he is highlighting *one* in particular among these 'things' being as they are, regardless of how we see them. This 'thing' is *the very way things appear to us*. We cannot help but seeing things in a certain way. So, before empirical reality comes into play at all, if 'reality' is to be meant as 'that which remains the same regardless of our intentions and biases,' the reality we must face is *our own vision*, qua always already conditioned by a priori schemes. This is an unmistakably Kantian point, although part of the argument ('that lines did not exist and that everything lay in the interplay of darkness and light, for light itself was colour, and that even the simplest colour was merely the juxtaposition of several tones') is unambiguously taken from Goethe's *Theory of Colours*. What the above passage clearly suggests is not only that man experiences things according to a certain ('transcendental', in Kant's words) mediation, but also that we are *objectively* bound to a mediation of a specific kind: that which makes us see things *according to a synthetic principle of unity*. Rohmer often insists on the *necessity* of that mediation: he only means that cinema's mediation is ruled by approximately the same kind of order and regularity (that of mechanical laws of causality) ruling our ordinary perceptions in everyday empirical reality.

Thus, cinema's transparency, the way Rohmer conceives it, has nothing to do with sheer immediacy ('in some indirect way, the camera will always proclaim its existence'⁷⁷), but with a sort of *immediate mediation*; as Melinda Szaloky put it, '[k]eeping in mind that the Kantian aesthetic strives to render transparent what is usually only mediated – including, and primarily, conceptual mediation itself – will help explain the fascination of a medium (film) that appears as an embodiment, as a mechanical re-enactment, of mediation itself.'⁷⁸ For Rohmer, 'nature' simply stands for this immediate mediation, for 'our ordinary vision of things.' This is apparent, for instance,

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

⁷⁷ Rohmer, 'Renoir's Youth', p. 189.

⁷⁸ Szaloky, 'Making New Sense of Film Theory Through Kant', p. 40.

when the critic writes that Murnau 'reveals the harmony of nature, its essential unity,'⁷⁹ and immediately after adds that cinema 'can still portray us *as we see ourselves*,'⁸⁰ thereby implying that the unity of nature does not concern the way nature is 'in itself,' but as *we* see it (that is, as necessarily unified by means of our understanding).

However, this formulation is still incomplete, and too easily lends itself to substantial misunderstandings. To say that cinema is strictly related to nature insofar as it embodies the immediate mediation whereby we normally experience phenomena in everyday reality, could possibly suggest the misleading idea that the point of Rohmer's analogy lies entirely in the relationship between cinema, reality and the way the latter ordinarily appear to us. This is not the case though, for such a view is ultimately not Kantian. It is not Kantian, because it takes into account only one limited part of the overall framework. In Kant's system, beauty and *freedom* go together. Cinema qua 'art of nature' means that cinema can stick to our ordinary vision of reality, i.e. (as per Kant), reality qua globally submitted *to the necessity of mechanical laws* (of causality). Yet, one should not overlook the fact that if cinema were nothing but the reproduction of mechanical laws of nature, Rohmer's view of cinema would not be Kantian at all. In Kant, mechanical necessity is *only the background for man to break it* (or, more precisely, for man to *be* its disruption). It follows that cinema's adherence to nature, viz. to our ordinary vision and to the necessity of mechanical laws of causality is *not the point* of cinema, but only the necessary background so that beauty and freedom can emerge. Beauty, as we have seen in the previous pages, emerges when the necessity of mechanical laws is 'twisted' into a purposiveness without purpose. As for freedom, it can only emerge *through narrative*, i.e. through a texture of causes and effects providing the occasion for its own disruption. An overtly traditionalist film critic, Rohmer declared that, for him, cinema was primarily *narrative* cinema. Rohmer never believed 'that documentaries are superior. Quite the contrary: I think, as did Bazin, that fiction has always been, and will be, cinema's preferred route and that the most beautiful documentaries, such as Flaherty's, are able to allow some – if not anecdotes – at least drama.'⁸¹ 'An art of nature' can only mean 'a narrative art', because 'nature' (in a Kantian vein) means 'our ordinary

79 Rohmer, 'Such Vanity is Painting', p. 52.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

81 Rohmer, 'Faith and Mountains', p. 116. In 'Hommes et loups', the critic rejects *The Wolves* (*Uomini e Lupi*), a 1956 fiction film by Giuseppe de Santis, because (unlike Flaherty) it fails to fluidly integrate 'pure' documentary footage (of wolf hunt) with drama, thus making it look fake even if the footage is real and unstaged.

vision of things qua submitted to the mechanical laws of causality,' and narrative is just the best way to have causality unfurled so that freedom can break through it. 'What does the storyline matter, one will say! I am not at all convinced but I am persuaded, to the contrary, that the libretto is as important as the music, here as in Mozart's operas.'⁸² Already in the *Gazette du cinéma* years, Godard was adamant that 'One sees that, contrary to current belief, there cannot be good direction without a good script,'⁸³ while Rivette more subtly identified cinema with narrative *insofar as* the latter makes its own negation possible: 'Cinema is a dramatic art: therein, universe is organised according to clashing forces; all is duel and conflict; probably, though, it finds an accomplishment in its own negation, that is, in contemplation.'⁸⁴

4.4. Movement and narrative

This point is crucial and so it is worth exploring it further. For one thing, Rohmer makes it very clear that cinema can come significantly close to ordinary perception precisely because images *move*.

I have now arrived at the paradox that a means of mechanical reproduction like photography is generally excluded from art, not because it can only reproduce, but precisely because it distorts even more than a pencil or a paintbrush does. In a family album's snapshot, what is left of a face but an unexpected grimace that is not the real face? By freezing what is mobile, the film betrays everything, right down to resemblances.⁸⁵

The importance of movement in Rohmer's conception of cinema cannot be overestimated. For him, it is indeed the primary element of cinema, around which everything revolves. It is movement that enables cinema to engender beauty out of a necessarily imperfect reproduction of nature. 'Where is the art, one might say, if nature appears as is? But in film, everything is in a state of becoming. A face matters little until it relaxes or wrinkles following its internal rhythm. Leaves matter little, until they create beauty by rustling.

82 Rohmer, 'The Quintessence of the Genre: Cukor', p. 154.

83 Godard, '*No Sad Songs For Me*', p. 21.

84 Rivette, 'Les malheurs d'Orphée', pp. 1-2. Originally: 'Le cinéma est art dramatique: l'univers s'y organise suivant des forces qui s'affrontent; tout y est duel est conflit; mais sans doute trouve-t-il son accomplissement dans sa propre négation: dans la contemplation.'

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

Film works with movement, the only domain in which it must abstract and reconstruct.⁸⁶

This last sentence, crucially, attests to the fact that Rohmer's emphasis on movement did not depend on an alleged correspondence between cinematic motion and some actual empirical motion the camera would realistically seize 'out there'. Cinema *abstracts* motion and *reconstructs* it. A self-proclaimed Aristotelian, who often insisted on his reliance on the teachings of the Greek philosopher, Rohmer could not ignore that his turn of phrase closely echoed *mimesis* the very way Aristotle defined it in his *Poetics*: whilst nature rests upon an immanent movement whereby its potential is smoothly actualized through time, storytelling (that is, tragedy) is the imitation of nature whereby men *abstract* the original immanence of movement in nature and *reconstruct* a fictional movement by means of a narrative concatenation of causes and effects.

But before tackling what Rohmer regards as cinema's inherent narrativity, it is worth expending a few words on his unquestionable awareness that *even regardless of narrative*, cinema does not reproduce movement 'the way it is', but abstracts and reconstructs it. Rohmer never forgets that the movement we see onscreen is only illusory; his writings are not short of references to this basic feature of cinematic movement, for instance when he praised Frank Tashlin because of the way he interweaves stillness with movement.

Instead of presenting it [movement] at a single stretch, however, he presents it as a passage from one immobile state to another, thus restoring, in an entirely modern way, the discontinuous nature that it had when silent films were young. This discontinuity is perhaps secretly due – as it is not directly perceived by the spectator – to the film's undergoing twenty-four pauses per second.⁸⁷

Rohmer is perfectly aware that 'it is false to compare the camera with a perfect recording box,' because splitting each second into 24 frames is already a major distortion, so 'the secret of the art of the great choreographers and dancers of the screen may be that they instinctively perceive the discontinuous nature of cinematic reproduction and always instinctively bend the norms of their movements in accordance with it.'⁸⁸ Moreover, while in 1954 the critic had been taken aback by the fact that somebody considered

86 Rohmer, 'Reflections on Colour', p. 40.

87 Rohmer, 'The Art of Caricature: Tashlin', p. 151.

88 Rohmer, 'The Quintessence of the Genre: Cukor', p. 153.

animation cinema as one of cinema's most specific outcomes,⁸⁹ in 1958 he finally agreed with CC film critic André Martin (arguably the 'somebody' he was thinking of four years earlier) that 'the cinema of live action is an animation cinema without knowing it.'⁹⁰ The movement we see on the screen is not the reproduction of the movement we can see in empirical reality: it is a movement *the camera* makes up.

It follows that the importance of movement to Rohmer had little to do with a naïve belief in the exactness of cinematic reproduction. Rather, his point is once again Kantian. The 'unity of nature' is ensured by the understanding applying its categories to phenomena (thereby unifying them under a single broad kind of coherence). Causality is one of these categories. Thus, understanding arranges phenomena so that they are presented to us as ideally unfolding according to a necessary, objective succession following the laws of cause and effect. Through this necessary, objective succession, a continuous change is deployed: 'all change is possible only through a continuous action of the causality.'⁹¹ *Motion* is that by which change from A to B occurs in a continuous way.

We have seen in a previous chapter that cinema's externalized imagination synthesizes the manifold of appearance, thereby predisposing a series (of shots, scenes, etc.) to be unfolded through the irreversible time of the projection. Once this series is projected, understanding, in the wake of that temporal irreversibility, arranges it into a necessary, objective succession following the laws of causality. This applies not only to the phenomena being shown in the images in general, but also and in particular to *motion*: exactly in the same fashion, cinema's externalized imagination synthesizes a succession of frames so that the understanding, upon projection, can acknowledge them as a single flow and take them for actual motion. In other words, cinema's externalized imagination synthesizes the manifold of appearance, predisposing a succession to be unfolded in irreversible time (as well as an illusory movement) upon projection, so as to trigger the understanding into bestowing an objective, necessary succession following the laws of causality, as well as into acknowledging actual motion out of the illusory one brought forth by the succession of frames – in short, into bestowing to the succession synthesized by cinema's externalized imagination the *unity of nature* (along with the unity of consciousness/experience/apperception), viz. the order and regularity whereby appearances normally

89 Rohmer, 'Livres de cinéma: *L'amour du cinéma* de Claude Mauriac', p. 57.

90 Rohmer, 'The Quintessence of the Genre: Cukor', p. 154.

91 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B254.

appear to us, that is, qua globally submitted to mechanical laws of causality, which cannot but be deployed *through movement*. 'A face doesn't look right if one doesn't feel all of space weigh on each wrinkle. What would a burst of laughter or anxious twitching signify if they did not find their visible echo in the universe?'⁹² By bestowing the movement animating a burst of laughter on the screen, understanding finds in it 'all of space', 'a visible echo in the universe', because that bestowal is the bestowal of the unity of nature, viz. of the general coherence underlying the way things normally appear to us.

It follows that Rohmer's emphasis on movement is to be thought of alongside his conviction that cinema is primarily narrative: both are part of the same Kantian knot that ties together movement,⁹³ necessary and objective succession, continuous change and causality, i.e. all that falls under the kind of order and regularity (the unity of nature) that understanding is normally bound to bestow upon phenomena, *particularly* when pushed to do so by cinema's externalized imagination, synthesizing the manifold of appearance in such a way as to greatly foster the understanding's customary bestowal of this order and regularity (that is, of movement, necessary and objective succession, continuous change, causality, and so on). The problem with photography, in the above quotation, is not that it does not 'copy' movement as it can be seen in empirical reality, but that it is not enough to push the understanding to do what it usually does, namely to confer the unity of nature (and all that ensues) to the images.

Heidegger asked the following:

Kant says that 'transcendental appearance', to which traditional metaphysics owes its possibility, is necessary. Must not this transcendental untruth be positively established in its original unity with transcendental truth on the basis of the intrinsic essence of the finitude in *Dasein*? Does not the dis-essence [*Unwesen*] of this appearance pertain to the essence of finitude?⁹⁴

According to Rohmer, cinema is a resounding 'no' to this question. It indeed embodies a 'transcendental appearance' (a 'transcendental untruth'), but its necessity has nothing to do with the human, contingent, 'novelistic'

92 Rohmer, 'Such Vanity is Painting', p. 49.

93 Phrasings such as 'Stability and perpetual movement are just violations of nature. The most realistic art is naively unaware of them' ('Such Vanity is Painting', p. 46) quite closely echo Kant's own ideas on motion, including early ones, like those outlined in his 1758 *New Theory of Motion and Rest*.

94 Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, p. 254.

temporalization of *Dasein*. On the contrary, the necessity behind (human and cinematic) transcendental appearance is still the old Kantian one: mechanism. Cinema's externalized imagination synthesizes the manifold of appearances so that an irreversible (thereby *not contingent*) order is created; thanks to this irreversibility, the understanding unifies the images (not least by bestowing movement) in accordance with the unity of nature, viz. by deeming that succession as necessary, and by endowing them with reciprocal, necessary connections according to the mechanical laws of causality.

To a certain degree, Rohmer follows the German philosopher also in respect of the latter's emphasis on the continuity of change: if cinema is the art of nature, then it must be the art of mechanical, necessary, causal connections, then it must be the art of movement, then it must be the art of continuity, in that change from A to B through movement occurs in a continuous way between A and B. As pointed out earlier, it is not difficult to figure out why he rejected ellipsis: a strictly temporal, narrative device of a quintessentially literary kind, it enacts a disruption in the story's timeline so as to trigger the reader/viewer's imagination – the latter to be intended 'à la Sartre', that is, aside from perception. Conversely, he aligns cinema with continuity, in that (as we saw in Chapter two) cinematic continuity marks the *omnipresence* of ellipses and of their own automatic bridging thanks to the irreversible time of projection. Thereby, perception and imagination regain their original, 'Kantian' connection – and not only because viewers perceive cinema's 'externalized imagination' at work. In front of the screen, the viewers' imagination bridges the gaps at every moment perception is operative, and not just when it is called to do so aside from perception by a discernible disruption in the timeline of a story. If one accepts the Kantian framework, then the same thing applies at the other end of the Rohmerian analogy between cinema and ordinary perception, in that according to that framework man's ordinary vision is deemed to be *inherently* elliptical: the synthetic principle of unity brought forth by the imagination and enabling perception cannot but leave the noumenal dimension aside in the first place. The noumenal dimension is nothing but the gaps rendering the texture of Being inherently inconsistent; imagination is precisely that which 'sacrifices' and gives up these gaps *by filling them in* at every moment in which perception is operative in order for reality to be intelligible at all. Hence Rohmer's analogy: perception can only work by letting imagination carry out a synthesis which cannot but leave the noumenal unaccounted for.

As a result, in contrast with literature intended as a time-based kind of storytelling essentially relying on indirect allusion and subjective temporal manipulation (typically, ellipses), for him cinema was a space-based kind of

storytelling primarily relying on continuity, viz. on a continuous spatialization of and over time. As late as 1959, for instance, he complained about the excessive cutting in Henry Hathaway's *From Hell to Texas* (1958), allegedly breaking the spell of continuity in a film whose charm over the spectator was chiefly due to the exact, integral rendering of the settings.⁹⁵

However, we must be careful not to misunderstand this continuity bias. An observant Kantian, Rohmer is well aware of the distinction between *descriptive* and *prescriptive*. He maintains that cinema is de facto to be identified with continuity, but this does not mean that continuity should be pursued at all costs. He never argues that a filmmaker should, say, use editing as little as possible and opt instead for as many long takes as he can – and when he does argue this, like in his early effort about *The Rope* mentioned in the previous chapter, he is unconvincing. 'It is [...]'⁹⁶ spatial continuity that matters most to me. Certain poor bits of sequential cutting break it up while some of the most fragmented cuts can still preserve it. I am not aware that montage effects are henceforth to be condemned.⁹⁷ Since causal connections and movement are posited by understanding, continuity as well is the task of understanding; it follows that it does not matter whether spatial continuity is formally created in the filmic space by means of unedited long takes or not. What matters is that, one way or another, understanding posits that continuity. It should be noted that Rohmer distinguished editing from not only continuity, but also *discontinuity*: a camera movement, a gaze, a gesture or even a word can engender a discontinuity in the cinematic flow much more than an editing cut.⁹⁸ Clearly, he conceives continuity in purely virtual terms (only the spectator's understanding delivers it), not in technical/formal ones. Classical cinema's 'continuity editing', for instance, puts together a virtual continuity to be considered by all means as continuity, according to the critic.

In sum, Rohmer's 'continuity bias' is thus a sort of 'Kantian Conditioned Reflex' never really turning into a prescription, a formula to create cinematic works the way they should allegedly be made. The critic simply acknowledges that cinema's original, essential vocation is continuity (as opposed to the discontinuity of ellipses, that quintessentially temporal and literary device), and filmmakers should stick to it as much as they can; yet, he never felt the

95 Rohmer, 'La fureur des hommes'.

96 Liz Heron, the translator of this article, adds here a 'their' that is not to be found in the original text.

97 Rohmer, 'The Cardinal Virtues of Cinemascope', p. 281.

98 See, for instance, Rohmer, 'Livres de cinéma', CC, 59 (May 1956), p. 54.

need to lay down (or theorize) any steadfast laws prescribing how to achieve this. Rather, his 'continuity bias' should be read alongside his *narrative* bias. If cinema is the art of nature, then it must be the art of mechanical, necessary, causal connections, then it must be the art of (continuous) movement, *then it must be primarily a narrative art*. This bias originates from Astruc too. 'Cinéma et dialectique', the companion piece of 'Dialectique et cinéma', extends the equivalence of the other article (cinema = movement = dialectic) to narrative: cinema synthesizes an orderly, oriented succession creating connections that tend to automatically have the character of necessity, simply because movement presents them as following an irrefutable succession; cinema is thus inherently narrative, because its movement cannot but engender a system of connections. 'A film is an argument. It is so, because it is a tale, and because every tale is a demonstration. The movement whereby it is animated gives it its meaning. Because it belongs to the framework of time, it ipso facto belongs to the framework of dialectics.'⁹⁹ Narrative is the deployment of a thick texture of causes and effects; since causality is one of the categories of the understanding, and since cinema is an external embodiment of imagination, producing a synthesis that nevertheless only the joint action of sensibility and understanding (that is, only through somebody's consciousness experiencing it) can enable, the overlapping between narrative (a system of causes and effects) and the flow of images resulting from the synthesis of the manifold of appearances can only be all too smooth.¹⁰⁰

99 Originally: 'Un film est un raisonnement. Il l'est parce qu'il est un récit, et que tout récit est une démonstration. Le mouvement qui l'anime lui donne sa signification. Rentrant dans le cadre du temps, il rentre du même coup dans ceux de la dialectique'. Astruc, 'Cinéma et dialectique', p. 340.

100 In his *Film and Phenomenology*, Allan Casebier devised a Husserlian theory of film, according to which film is, as it were, inherently narrative, although it is perfectly possible that non-narrative films exist. His argument can be sketchily summarized as follows. For Husserl, when we perceive an object we also acknowledge that our perception does not coincide with the perceived object, and by the same token we imply that there is a part of the object that is beyond our reach, and that can be approached though by means of the piecemeal assembly of the different parts of the object. Casebier argues that cinematic fiction works in a similar way: once we recognize something in a film as part of a larger narrative, we immediately imply the existence of a piece of fiction to be regarded as an actual object in its own terms, viz. as something to be gradually *discovered* by the spectator as the latter replaces expectations on 'what's next' with whatever actually happens on the screen. In this way, the spectator apprehends cinematic fiction like regular objects of perception, i.e. as something external and apart ('transcendent'); if, on the one hand, it is grasped only by stitching together cues that follow one another in time, on the other hand the stitchery itself *is driven by the way the object (that is, that particular piece of fiction) is shaped in the first place*. If one were to bring this phenomenological theory of film back to Husserl's Kantian sources, the outcome would not be too removed from Rohmer's conception

However, it is also natural that *a substantial contrast* between narrative and the flow of images emerges, between images qua images and images qua the mere support of an unfolding story, precisely because they belong to faculties (imagination and understanding) which in the ordinary course of transcendental aesthetics work together, but which in the case of cinema are peculiarly disjointed. This discord will play a major role in the next chapter.

4.5. Mechanism as the background for freedom

While summarizing what has been said so far, it is useful to enlarge the frame. The answer to the question 'what changed after Rohmer's conversion?' should morph into 'what is the Copernican revolution Rohmer brought about, and how did it influence the *éS* (and by extension the *pda*)?'

Rohmer posited a substantial affinity between cinema and the unity of nature, viz. our ordinary vision of things in everyday empirical reality. This does not only and exclusively mean that moving images on the screen 'look like empirical reality'. Rohmer, quite outspokenly, believed so (despite never bothering to prove it), but this is only part of his point, and arguably not at all the most relevant one. His point is chiefly *formal*. The reason why cinema is so capable of matching the unity of nature is that its images, thanks to the interaction between its photographic basis and the synthesis of motion (in which cinema's externalized imagination plays indeed a crucial role by predisposing an immobile sequence that only the understanding, as a consequence of the actual screening, can recognize as a flow), offer a simulacrum of *the overall coherence whereby phenomena appear to us*, that is, qua submitted to the mechanical laws of causality and to the ensuing necessary, objective successive connections. Hence the importance of movement and narrative, both qualifying what cinema is primarily about.

In short, Rohmer associated cinema with Kant's *mechanism*. But this must also mean that he also associated it with the two flip sides of mechanism:

of cinematic narrative, imposing on the viewer the inherent necessity of its unfolding. All the more so if we consider that Casebier contrasted his own realist theory with what he called the 'idealist/nominalist' framework, encompassing among others Jean-Louis Baudry, Noël Burch, David Bordwell and most other film scholars in general. According to that framework, says Casebier, a film is not an object, but a system of *signs*, viz. a text whose construction is not given once and for all but rather something whose consistency, meaning etc. must be at every moment negotiated with the spectator receiving it. Casebier's divide between object-driven and sign-driven conceptions of the way films work is clearly in accordance with Rohmer's, between 'ontology' and 'language'.

beauty and freedom. Otherwise, his perspective would simply not be Kantian. To associate cinema with mechanism, with the objective (for understanding) unfolding of causal connections, can be seen as the Copernican revolution having given birth to the *éS/pda*, because it freed cinema of the Sartrean bias envisaging it as basically a visual novel. What was particularly important was the detachment of cinema from the novelistic primacy of the reflective (for-itself), contingent, temporalizing consciousness. Following Rohmer and the crucial 'Dialectique et cinéma' article, cinema was now thought to depend on a temporal succession (of frames, shots, scenes, etc.) which, even before understanding could form an objective succession based on necessary, mechanical casual relationships, bore an a priori character of necessity thanks to the mechanical irreversibility produced by cinema's externalized imagination. Put differently, cinema was now ascribed to a temporalization marked by necessity, rather than by the contingency of for-itself consciousness; this amounted to saying that films followed a deceptive ('dialectical', as per Astruc's definition) temporal logic *of their own*, that was *not* the contingent, arbitrary temporalization of human consciousness. One had to follow that autonomous, mechanical, 'inhuman' temporal logic (which can simply be called the logic of narrative *action*) as it unfolded through the film, until its inevitable inconsistencies emerged. Thereby, precisely at those moments, *freedom* also emerged. Freedom was now a necessary accident of mechanism – not the groundless condemnation of a for-itself consciousness 'condemned to be free'.

It can thus be argued that, according to Rohmer, cinema's externalized imagination, along with the detachment between the imagination and the understanding that it entails, is indeed the key to what he seemingly regards as cinema's inherent Kantism. That detachment makes cinema incomparably suited to delivering *both* beauty *and* freedom through moving images, beauty famously being for Kant an indirect symbol of morality (which the philosopher always links with freedom as moral autonomy). This is because beauty appears when imagination and understanding engage in a *free play* – a possibility that cinema, which relies precisely on their radical disjointedness, can only enhance. Again, 'free play' here means that understanding is unable to apply causality to that which is presented by the imagination; hence, it is essentially a matter of eschewing causality, viz. of freedom in the most genuine moral sense (and crucially, this 'collapse of mechanism' too is due to a selfsame detachment between the imagination and understanding). So, when the sensual beauty Rohmer so often insists upon graces the screen, it is causality that has fallen apart somehow – it is a straightforward matter of freedom as well, viz. a matter of morality.

Thus, ethics and aesthetics, as per Kant, turn out to be inseparable. This is why our account must now promptly grapple with the *ethical* side of Rohmer's film criticism and aesthetics.

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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.