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## Eric Rohmer's Film Theory (1948-1953)

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## 5. Ethics at the Heart of Aesthetics

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### Abstract

From Truffaut's 'A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema' (1954) to Rivette's 'On Abjection' (1961), the inseparability of ethics and aesthetics has been a key assumption of the *politique des auteurs* from the outset. This chapter aims to demonstrate that even before the *politique* existed, Eric Rohmer decisively laid the basis for the eventual affirmation of this inseparability. To this end, it traces the conceptual constellation (adumbrated in many of his film reviews) underlying Rohmer's view of cinematic ethics and aesthetics, including his reaction against Sartre's *mauvaise foi*, the notion of *solitude morale*, Kant's practical reason, and, finally, his conviction that cinema should draw inspiration from classical tragedy.

**Keywords:** Rohmer, ethics, moral, tragedy

### 5.1. On abjection: The Wages of Fear

Our account of how the *école Schéerer* (ÉS) conceived of ethics and freedom in relation to cinema should probably begin with a description of what Rohmer and his friends considered an exemplary token of moral abjection: *The Wages of Fear* (*Le salaire de la peur*, 1953) by Henri-Georges Clouzot.

The film is about a group of European men in a village in southern Mexico; for various reasons, all their lives are at an impasse, and they are all stuck there, unable to go anywhere else and put their lives together again. Suddenly, a huge load of nitroglycerin needs to be transported on two trucks to an oil field nearby. The lost men are hired for this extremely dangerous (given the terrible conditions of the roads in the area) task. They all accept the money, which would allow them to get on their feet again. Three of them die in the course of the perilous drive. Mario, the only one standing, after having hitherto outlived unspeakable dangers, and after having successfully delivered the load to the oil field, dies in the stupidest possible way, in a

sudden accident on his way back, on his now empty truck. A moment before, parallel editing showed him and Linda (the woman who was waiting for him back at the village), each dancing alone to the same tune (the 'Blue Danube'), one at his steering wheel, the other in a bar.

In his *Cahiers du Cinéma* (CC) review, Pierre Kast welcomed the film as a perfect dramatic machine. The initial situation is carefully outlined during an unusually long introductory part, followed by action proper, composed of a faultless concatenation of causes and effects wholly ensuing from the initial situation. Moreover, *The Wages of Fear* displays a wealth of powerful effects on the viewer: it is extremely rich in meticulously calculated suspense, and it painstakingly orchestrates the emotions the audience is expected to receive. Clearly, Kast here (implicitly) relies on the very traditional narrative/narration couple that was already recalled in Chapter one. The film, in the critic's view, is a perfect dramatic machine because it manages to integrate narrative and narration: even the final scene, disrupting the otherwise faultless texture of causes and effects with a bombastic, sudden and completely unmotivated emotional effect (the accident), *keeps narrative coherence intact*, because the patent absurdity of that accident is perfectly justified by the premises outlined in the long first part of *The Wages of Fear*, showing that the characters are fundamentally the prisoners of the situations wherein they are confined, and whereby they are determined and limited. Here, Sartre comes once again into play.

The expository method of *The Wages of Fear* corresponds as exactly as possible, in a cinematic context, to Sartre's views on the novel, or on the dramatic action. The characters are caught within their own worldly situation. Be it conscious or unconscious, their refusal to mind their own condition, their blindness, their naïve faith in their deceptive strengths, necessarily throw them into catastrophe.<sup>1</sup>

*The Wages of Fear* is 'a drama of failure, [...] a tragedy of the absurdity of blind undertakings. What is at stake is not vanity-in-itself, action-in-itself, but rather a failure that is strictly bound to a definite human context.'<sup>2</sup> For

1 Kast, 'Un grand film athée', pp. 52-53. Originally: 'La méthode d'exposition du *Salaire de la peur* est la correspondance exacte, au cinéma, des vues de Sartre sur le roman, ou l'action dramatique. Les personnages sont pris dans la nasse de leur situation dans le monde. Le refus conscient ou inconscient d'assumer leur condition, l'aveuglement, la croyance naïve en leur forces illusoire, les précipitent nécessairement à la catastrophe.'

2 Kast, 'Un grand film athée', p. 53. Originally: 'Un drame de l'échec, [...] une tragédie de l'absurdité des entreprises aveugles. Il ne s'agit pas de vanité-en-soi, de l'action-en-soi, mais

Sartre, human freedom is groundless, and man can only make sense of its groundlessness when it is rooted in a definite *situation*. Nevertheless, even within a situation, its groundlessness does not disappear: man is perpetually threatened by the absurdity of his own condition, i.e. by the groundlessness of his own freedom. The main characters of Clouzot's film refuse to acknowledge their belonging to the situation they belong to, and only try to blindly get away from it. As a result, they only bang against the absurdity of destiny, of human condition. The film, on the contrary, sticks to situation, to a strict deployment of causes and effects (which is why it is, in Kast's own words, a great atheist film). When Mario takes one corner too fast and plunges through the guardrail to his death in his empty truck, the story seemingly admits to a patent infringement of narrative coherence, but, in fact, it just confirms its initial premises: outside a definite situation, there can only be absurdity and groundlessness. It's the situation-oriented logic of the story against the 'escapist' logic of the character (who wishes to transcend and nihilate a situation by blinding himself to it and clinging to an abstract, airy-fairy hope of redemption): the former breaks down causality only to confirm its superiority over the latter. Such a move is obviously to be ascribed to 'narration' rather than to 'narrative' (as highlighted by the very deliberate use of parallel editing), but is also the ultimate confirmation that one supports the other: a gratuitous effect on the viewer compels the latter to acknowledge that 'this ending was inseparable from the exposition of the motives',<sup>3</sup> and delivers what the merely causal concatenation cannot. The same goes for the use of suspense throughout the film. Precisely because the characters are unambiguously presented as miserable, unpleasant, debased, totally prey to their own appetites and therefore entirely 'swallowed' by the cause-effect texture of narrative ('they don't have any free, immortal soul escaping their narrowly delimited condition'<sup>4</sup>) the viewer's involvement has to be conquered in some other non-strictly-narrative way, namely through suspense (narration, 'whatever effect, provided that it works'<sup>5</sup>).

Crucially, Kast takes great pains to circumscribe *a meaning* to the film. 'But the plenitude and the beauty of the film's form can be so immediately seen, and even its enemies would so easily admit that it's there, that at this

d'un échec étroitement lié à un contexte humain précis.'

3 *Ibid.* Originally: 'Cette fin était inséparable de l'exposé des motifs.'

4 Kast, 'Un grand film athée', p. 54. Originally: 'Ils n'ont pas une âme immortelle, libre et dispose, hors de leur condition, qui a été étroitement définie.'

5 *Ibid.* Originally: 'N'importe quel effet pourvu qu'il fonctionne.'

point it is worth jumping very quickly to the meaning of what is shown';<sup>6</sup> 'However, I think that the meaning of the film is far more important than its place in contemporary cinema';<sup>7</sup> 'In *The Wages of Fear*, Clouzot seemingly wants the audience to understand what, in his previous works, was only latent.'<sup>8</sup> It thus seems safe to argue that Clouzot's film is a 'perfect dramatic machine' in that narrative and narration, each at its own place, work together so that *the meaning* behind the narrative (roughly: outside a situation there is only absurdity and groundlessness) can emerge. Sometimes, the stability of cause-effect narrative texture recedes (the finale), sometimes narration does (the first hour almost entirely exposes the characters, almost without effects), but their cooperation and mutual support fosters the legibility of that meaning. It is the absolute triumph of causal determinism: even when narrative's cause-effect texture breaks down, it is for the sake of the overall meaning of the film, affirming that one cannot escape the situation whereby one is determined.

Another way to explain Kast's claim that *The Wages of Fear* 'corresponds as exactly as possible, in a cinematic context, to Sartre's views on the novel, or on the dramatic action,' is by referring to Sartre's conceptualization of *bad faith*. In order to introduce this concept, it is necessary to clarify what *facticity* and *transcendence* are. Transcendence is, as we have already seen, nihilation, freedom, the 'unhooking' from the causal texture, the reflection whereby the for-itself consciousness comes into being. Facticity is the residual contingency the for-itself consciousness remains attached to despite its nihilation: it is the umbilical cord connecting it to the pre-reflective realm of the in-itself, blindly submitted to causality-wise interactions. It is for-itself consciousness qua situated in the world and part of its being 'out there'; it is the 'first person' that the for-itself essentially is, regarded from its 'third person' side, as it were. Only groundlessness articulates facticity and transcendence together. Freedom can only be rooted in itself, that is, on a nothingness – hence a fundamental lack of articulation between facticity and transcendence that is always liable to degenerate into *bad faith*. For Sartre, freedom is essentially nihilation (which is groundless in that it is the groundlessness itself at the heart of being), that is, a sort

6 Kast, 'Un grand film athée', p. 52. Originally: 'Mais on voit si immédiatement la plénitude et la beauté de la forme du film, et ses ennemis mêmes vont la concéder si aisément, qu'il vaut peut-être mieux courir très vite jusqu'à la signification de ce qui est montré.'

7 Kast, 'Un grand film athée', p. 53. Originally: 'Je pense toutefois que la signification du film est bien plus importante que sa place dans le cinéma contemporaine.'

8 *Ibid.* Originally: 'Clouzot dans *Le Salaire de la peur* semble vouloir "faire comprendre" ce qui était latente dans son oeuvre passée.'

of 'unhooking' whereby a for-itself consciousness gets detached from all that causally determines it. 'Bad faith' lies in *disavowing* this process, by assuming either that one is nothing but a result of those causes, or that one has got absolutely nothing to do with them. 'Bad faith' is being stuck in either 'it's me and my arbitrarily self-positing freedom' and/or 'it's the causes having determined me'. The truth is, as it were, in the middle: the for-itself consciousness never *only* depends on those causes (because this view neglects the fundamental contribution of nihilation), nor can it *totally* prescind from them (because in fact one's freedom/nihilation lies precisely in the *positing* of the causes one leaves behind, and which would not exist and be discernible by themselves), but the problem is precisely that *nothing* lies *between* the former and the latter options. Sartre's point, however, is that although nothing *is* in between, something should be *made up*, and the only way to do so is by taking responsibility for one's 'situated' choices.

The double property of the human being [...] is at once a *facticity* and a *transcendence*. These two aspects of human reality are and ought to be capable of a valid coordination. But bad faith does not wish either to coordinate them nor to surmount them in a synthesis. Bad faith seeks to affirm their identity while preserving their differences. It must affirm facticity as being transcendence and transcendence as being facticity, in such a way that at the instant when a person apprehends the one, he can find himself abruptly faced with the other.<sup>9</sup>

Mario is 'punished' by the film precisely because of his bad faith: he tries to take an easy way out of his situation without facing it, while still keeping one foot in it (his love for Linda).

Rohmer, whose views on cinematic morality immeasurably contributed to shaping the *éS*'s vision, never talked about this film except for a few implicit allusions. The most overt among them will be dealt with later in this chapter. For the time being, it should be mentioned that in a 1953 imaginary dialogue with an unnamed interlocutor (most likely, Pierre Kast), his frustrations boiled over: 'I couldn't care less about these philosophies of behaviour, of failure, or of the absurd';<sup>10</sup> the legitimate suspicion that he might have been referring to (the various vulgarizations of) Sartrean Existentialism, *including Clouzot's film*, is confirmed by the sentence that immediately followed, pointing at the theoretical impasses of *The Transcendence of the*

9 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 56.

10 Rohmer, 'Of Three Films and a Certain School', p. 60.

*Ego and Being and Nothingness*: 'It's a curious contradiction, a conscience that we reduce to the level of an epiphenomenon, and, at the same time, whose claims to freedom we hail!'<sup>11</sup> In other words: if conscience (for-itself consciousness) is transcendence, where exactly does facticity end, and where does conscience begin? Rohmer seems to imply that the fact that Sartre never makes this clear severely undermines his argument. He appears not to accept that groundlessness can be a valid coordination between the two. Better still: even though he does not overtly say so, such a turn of phrase is tantamount to *an accusation of bad faith*. 'These philosophies of behaviour, of failure, of the absurd' fail, or perhaps refuse, to provide a valid coordination between facticity and transcendence, and so they are charged with distinguishing between them without doing anything to prevent them from merging into a confused identity. Sartre was well aware of the risk that the proper way to articulate facticity and transcendence might simply be nowhere to be found in his philosophical system: 'If bad faith is possible, it is because it is an immediate, permanent threat to every project of the human being; it is because consciousness conceals in its being a permanent risk of bad faith. The origin of this risk is the fact that the nature of consciousness simultaneously is to be what it is not and not to be what it is.'<sup>12</sup>

In fact, Kast's review easily foments this suspicion. On the one hand, it claims that *The Wages of Fear* 'corresponds as exactly as possible, in a cinematic context, to Sartre's views on the novel, or on the dramatic action'; on the other hand, it praises the film because it is *entirely deterministic* ('atheist'), even when it goes back on its otherwise faultless cause-effect texture. But for Sartre, determinism is one of the surest ways to bad faith: it is a way to blame it all on 'objective' causes, thereby calling oneself out.

Psychological determinism, before being a theoretical conception, is first an attitude of excuse, or if you prefer, the basis of all attitudes of excuse. It is reflective conduct with respect to anguish; it asserts that there are within us antagonistic forces whose type of existence is comparable to that of things. It attempts to fill the void which encircles us, to re-establish the links between past and present, between present and future. It provides us with a nature productive of our acts, and these very acts it

11 *Ibid.* Existentialism is openly attacked (or, more precisely, mocked and downsized) in Domarchi, 'La métamorphose', p. 48. 'Tant pis pour Gertrude Stein', Claude Chabrol's brazen derision against Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Gertrude Stein and all the rest of the Parisian literary scene of the 1930s may also be read as an oblique attack against Sartre.

12 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 70.

makes transcendent; it assigns to them a foundation in something other than themselves by endowing them with an inertia and externality eminently reassuring because they constitute a permanent game of excuses. Psychological determinism denies that transcendence of human reality which makes it emerge in anguish beyond its own essence. At the same time by reducing us to never being anything but what we are, it reintroduces in us the absolute positivity of being-in-itself and thereby reinstates us at the heart of being.<sup>13</sup>

It follows that not only Mario is in bad faith, but the film itself (the way Kast saw it) is in bad faith. Like all the other characters, Mario is in bad faith, in that he wants to escape a situation 'irresponsibly', without facing it (but still maintaining a connection with it, through Linda). The film contrasts this bad faith by embracing a determinism that is occasionally 'transcended' (when narration 'steps over' narrative with its effects) only to better enhance the original deterministic *parti pris*. In this way, though, *The Wages of Fear* ends up siding entirely with determinism, thus is *itself* in bad faith.

Arguably, Rohmer regarded this contradiction as less Kast's problem than an inherent problem of the existentialist approach as such. Existentialism was a very fashionable trend in those years, and Kast's review only confirms that Clouzot's film was to be ranked among the reverberations of this in popular culture. In Rohmer's eyes, the vulgarizations of that philosophical and aesthetic trend, such as that which led Kast to praise that film, were not simply misleading and mistaken, but rather an inevitable debasement depending on and encouraged by a flaw in the ultimately untenable perspective outlined in *Being and Nothingness*. According to Rohmer, the only way out of the deadlock such attempts to overcome phenomenology cannot but encounter is a return to the distant philosophical origin of phenomenology: the old, more clear-cut Kantian opposition between freedom and mechanistic determinism.

Kant was well aware (it is part of the point of his third antinomy) that the presupposition of a world totally determined by causes and effects will inevitably fall into contradiction, because it can only result in an infinite regression (an effect always has a cause, which, in turn, is caused by something else and so on and so forth, endlessly). His solution was to acknowledge that reason itself is fundamentally twofold: the same reason being caught in the untenable presupposition of the exclusiveness of causal connections is also (in its different use) the reason enabling an uncaused

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.



(free, noumenal) cause to exist. In this framework, God is just the abstract postulation splitting reason in two and thereby enabling it *not to be the exclusive self-cause of its own freedom while nonetheless being it*, in contrast with Sartre's facticity/transcendence dichotomy.<sup>14</sup> The Sartrean/Clouzotian/Kastian way out of the very same conundrum is the fact that 'nothing' can escape a situation and attain freedom, where 'nothing' here not only means 'not one single thing', but also 'for-itself consciousness' (which is literally a nothingness, and can exist only in a definite situation).

This also includes *the spectator's* for-itself consciousness. Such films as *The Wages of Fear* (more generally, the infamous French 'tradition of quality' despised by Truffaut: vaguely Existentialist films by established directors with intellectual ambitions) were reproached by Rohmer, as well as by the rest of his group, for *cynically* selling the audiences a secret, implicit feeling of being exempt and safe from the unpleasant, hopeless and wholly deterministic world they depicted on the screen, while still acknowledging it to be just like the ordinary, everyday world. Nothing can escape being bound to and determined by one's situation, except the consciousness of the viewer contemplating all that wretchedness from a safe and cynical distance. It is once again a matter of failing to coordinate facticity and transcendence: they put a horrible, mediocre, debased world in front of the viewer, so that the latter can secretly, cynically be reassured of his or her own superiority. For such a viewing subject, transcendence is nothing but the assumption of one's freedom, stemming from the nihilation from a world (that is, the world on the screen) that was nonetheless thought of as stuck in facticity. In other words, these films provided an image of the world qua total facticity (a world dominated by sheer appetite, by cause-effect mechanism, by petty personal interest), so that the viewer could think that: 1) there is no way out of facticity; and 2) I, the viewing subject, am safely removed from the world on the screen (which I nonetheless assume is just like my own), hence I have nihilated from it, hence I am free. This duplicity was possible by keeping a foot in both camps: on the one hand, narrative stuck to total deterministic facticity, on the other hand, in order not to lose the interest of the viewer despite the repulsiveness portrayed on the screen, narration bombarded the viewer's nerves with effects, thereby keeping him or her on a distinct, different level from narrative, emotionally *struck but uninvolved*.

14 It all comes down, once again, to the respective conceptions of self-reflexivity: as we have seen regarding *Stromboli*, God is nothing but the *external* principle enabling reason to fold up on itself in its practical use.

Indeed, Rohmer and his friends openly despised films and directors aiming to provoke a definite emotional effect in the viewer: 'Beware of all winks to the audience, of the sly quest for complicity, of all calls, even discreet, for pity.'<sup>15</sup> What about that other manipulator then, Alfred Hitchcock? Rohmer maintains that the director of *Vertigo* (1958), 'in a subject close to that of *Les Diaboliques* [Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1955], [...] is reluctant to play on our nerves.'<sup>16</sup> A dubious statement at best: how could one ever say that Hitchcock does not play with the emotions of the audience?<sup>17</sup> One of the things Rohmer liked most in *The Trouble with Harry* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1955) was that it instilled in the viewer *both* contempt *and* empathy toward the characters.<sup>18</sup> In front of that film, the viewer is compelled to acknowledge to be as petty and miserable as the characters (while Clouzot's adrenaline is there precisely to distract the viewer from this awareness). Hitchcock's manipulation of the audience was a way to *involve* the audience – or, more precisely, to make involvement inseparable from dis-involvement, and vice versa.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in *Rear Window*, the voyeur in front of the screen cannot help but identify *with* that other voyeur *on* the screen, Jeff, the main character, in front of his window. Facticity and transcendence are articulated so that the transcending/nihilating spectator is compelled to recognize herself *within* the facticity she should nihilate from. Such an attitude is, in Rohmer's view, *moral*: it un.masks freedom as dependent not on the groundless arbitrariness of the

15 Rohmer, 'The Classical Age of Cinema', p. 42.

16 Rohmer, 'Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*', p. 170.

17 In fact, the attempt to downsize Hitchcock's alleged sensationalist side has been from the very beginning part and parcel of the *éS*'s campaign to promote him as an *auteur*. Already in 1950, Jacques Rivette maintained that, contrary to the generally held view, Hitchcock was not a sensationalist director: his films never lost sight of the distinction between the essential and the spectacular, and never sacrificed the former for the sake of the latter. For instance, in the scene of *Under Capricorn* where a horse breaks a leg, the camera does not show the animal but the main characters looking at it, because the dramatic tension *between those two characters* is about to explode in the following scene. 'If the most outward details of the story, those whose macabre evidence imposes itself, are underlined by a brusquely heavy line, that's because Hitchcock indeed loves to get rid entirely of the spectacular side of a plot by way of excess; that is to say, by taking on the outrageousness of such details, he releases the viewers from the concern of having to deal with it themselves.' Originally: '[S]i les détails les plus extérieurs de l'anecdote, dont s'imposait la macabre évidence, sont soulignés d'un trait brusquement alourdi, c'est qu'Hitchcock aime en effet se débarrasser par l'excès de tout le côté spectaculaire d'un intrigue et, en assumant l'outrance de tels détails, décharger le spectateur du souci de s'en préoccuper lui-même'. Rivette, 'Under Capricorn', p. 4.

18 Rohmer, 'Castigat ridendo...', p. 38.

19 To a large extent, this contradictory attitude matches what Richard Allen termed (in relation to Hitchcock) *metaskepticism*. Allen, 'Hitchcock, or the Pleasures of Metaskepticism', p. 227.

individual, but rather on an inherent conflict that is everybody's (including, of course, fictional characters as well as 'real people'). And this is why, according to him, Clouzot and Hitchcock are both manipulators, but each in an entirely different way. In the former case, the inherent impasse of the distinction between facticity and transcendence is *disavowed*, because the viewer qua nihilating subject (that is, transcendence) is pushed offscreen by Clouzot's manipulation (in that the viewer is unaffected by any form of empathy or identification toward the characters). In Hitchcock's case, the inherent impasse of the distinction between facticity and transcendence is *made overt*, in that empathy or identification toward the characters is part and parcel of Hitchcock's manipulation, thereby dragging a no-less-scornful viewer (transcendence) inside the screen (facticity). Thereby, the English master 'sends us back to ourselves and encourages to go deeply into the idea we have of ourselves.'<sup>20</sup> Hitchcock's cinema thus stands for the overcoming of bad faith (or of voyeurism, which amounts to the same thing); whoever is in bad faith cynically neglects to take into account the subject's original ('transcendental') involvement in the very production of the 'objectively repulsive' appearances he or she secretly rejoices to be removed from (in a Kantian vein, 'the categories or rules of the unifying activity of the mind are further conditions of the ability of the self to be actively related to what is given in sensation'<sup>21</sup>). In short, the subject in bad faith pretends to overlook that one is part and parcel of the ugly world one supposes to deplore from a distance.

Hence the critic's stern aversion to the *smugness toward negativity* which, in his view, infested his time. He often condemned the disillusioned cynicism, the nihilism, the lack of hope and belief, the cheap pessimism,<sup>22</sup> 'the affected disdain, the taste for facile parody, that too many intellectuals on both continents still consider to be the finest of fine art.'<sup>23</sup> He did not like films displaying self-awareness<sup>24</sup> and ironical contempt toward their subject matters, their characters and their situations (this is why he never liked,

20 Rohmer, 'La nef des fous', p. 37. Originally: '[Il] renvoie chacun à soi et l'amène à creuser l'idée qu'il se fait de lui-même.'

21 Henrich, *Between Kant and Hegel*, p. 42.

22 According to him, cheap pessimism was Ingmar Bergman's sole drawback, although he is ready to acknowledge that his world 'is not systematically sickening like that of Zola, Sartre and Céline' ('[il] n'est pas systématiquement nauséabond comme celui de Zola, de Sartre et de Céline'). Rohmer, 'Présentation d'Ingmar Bergman,' p. 8.

23 Rohmer, 'The Quintessence of the Genre: Cukor', p. 156.

24 See for instance Rohmer, 'La cité disparue'.

among others, Billy Wilder<sup>25</sup>). ‘We are tired of finding, in almost all the best films, a sort of humour by which the director, or even the scriptwriter, means to show that the topic treated is worthwhile because beneath the serial style or melodramatic appearance he can detect a hidden significance.’<sup>26</sup> Jean-Luc Godard had no qualms about despising ‘those mean spirits who are foolish enough to applaud the contemptible – whether in the work of Buñuel or Malaparte,’<sup>27</sup> and when he interviewed Rohmer about an amateur film he was shooting at that time, his older colleague declared ‘I shall be only too happy to deal with magnanimity and modesty instead of the hatred and disgust which our elders, alas, have grown accustomed to’;<sup>28</sup> four years later, he welcomed *Rebel without a Cause* as a film in which ‘the word “honour” [...] loses none of its pure, dazzling brilliance.’<sup>29</sup> More generally, as a film critic, he always tried to affirm that freedom, the positive and the beautiful *existed* and were still possible, in a world that he perceived as happy with the resigned contemplation of ugliness, negativity, absurdity and emptiness. ‘Innocence’ and ‘sincerity’ were regularly, tirelessly commended in the reviews by Rohmer and the others. Alain once exalted Chateaubriand for his commitment to a *critique des beautés* (‘criticism focusing on beauties’); Rohmer openly intended to do the same.<sup>30</sup>

According to Rohmer, films affected by smugness toward negativity (like *The Wages of Fear*) are immoral: they have no soul. What could this mean? As we have seen in a previous chapter, for Rohmer (following Astruc), cinema, as it were, detaches imagination from the understanding. Cinema, qua externalized imagination, performs the synthesis of the manifold of appearances relatively apart from the categories shaping sensibility brought along by whoever actually perceives the ensuing flow: simple viewers, as well as anybody organizing or shaping the images in any way, apply their sensible intuition, understanding and reason on a flow primarily determined by cinema’s mechanical, externalized imagination. Causality is one of those categories. Therefore, cinema is *by its own nature* inclined to highlight a certain discord between moving images (resulting from that synthesis) and causality, in that the mechanical determinism of the automatized synthesis

25 See for instance Rohmer, ‘Témoignage à charge’. Godard too loathed him, for the same reason: ‘Only he who takes comedy seriously deserves to succeed in it’. Godard, *The Lieutenant Wore Skirts; Artists and Models*, p. 35.

26 Rohmer, ‘The Romance is Gone’, p. 35.

27 Godard, ‘Strangers on a Train’, p. 24.

28 Godard, ‘Les petites filles modèles’, p. 31.

29 Rohmer, ‘Ajax or the Cid?’, p. 115.

30 Rohmer, ‘Les lecteurs des Cahiers et la Politique des auteurs’, p. 55.

of the manifold of appearances *clashes with* another, essentially different and displaced kind of mechanical determinism: the one represented by the cause-effect texture known as 'narrative'.<sup>31</sup> Thanks to this clash between two different kinds of determinism, which is tantamount to an *internal deflagration of mechanical determinism*, cinema can be said to bear a strong affinity with freedom (and ethics more generally). When Rohmer says that cinema is 'an art that, earlier lowered to the level of a serial story, now strives to find the best of its inspiration in the belief in the *soul*,<sup>32</sup> 'soul' essentially stands for this discord between imagination and understanding/reason, between the flow of images qua images and the same images qua mere support of an unfolding story.

No such discord can be found in *The Wages of Fear*. Therein, the flow of images synthesized by cinema's mechanical imagination and the cause-effect texture imposed by reason are *in perfect accord* with each other, because any possible discord between them is unflinchingly extinguished by a perfect dramatic machine neatly intertwining narrative and narration, so that the latter channels, as it were, anything that exceeds narrative back within the premises of narrative itself (as we have seen in the previous pages). By means of this interaction between narrative and narration, a *meaning* is successfully conveyed, namely that one cannot escape one's situation 'irresponsibly', without facing it (it has already been noticed that for Rohmer there could be hardly anything less cinematic than a film trying to express a predetermined meaning).

Thus, some kind of imbalance between narrative and narration seems the inescapable precondition for some 'soul' (so intended) to emerge. Alfred Hitchcock is once again an excellent case in point. Whilst no less a consummate manipulator than Clouzot, Hitchcock not only uses dramatic effects, but *renders them explicit and visible* within the film. Here is what Godard wrote about the cymbals scene in *The Man who Knew Too Much* (1957): 'The clash of cymbals has the affectation of a commonplace. The effect is crude, but would be even cruder if it tried to disguise itself, to sneak by without

31 This conception too is firmly rooted in Astruc. Raymond Bellour showed that as early as in the late 1940s, Astruc asserted that in novels the 'truth of beings' (Bellour, *Alexandre Astruc*, p. 53) must entertain an inherently ambivalent relationship with plot. Plot is there just as a pretext in order to let the inner truth of characters shine from within its folds (p. 36), but it is nonetheless *indispensable*. As Pouillon (quoted by Bellour) put it: 'Novel is a genre whose only interest resides in the disqualification of that which is essential to it' ('Le roman est un genre qui n'a d'intérêt que par la disqualification de ce qui lui est pourtant indispensable'), namely plot. Pouillon, *Temps et roman*, p. 265, quoted by Bellour in *Alexandre Astruc*, p. 43.

32 Rohmer, 'The American Renoir', p. 175.

drawing attention to itself. People say that Hitchcock lets the wires show too often. But because he shows them they are no longer wires. They are the pillars of a marvellous architecture design made to withstand our scrutiny.<sup>33</sup> ‘Wire’ here is a (poor) translation of *ficelle*, which in French also means ‘a cheap narrative/dramatic effect.’ Chabrol and Rohmer agreed: ‘Though neither one scorns to jangle our nerves, the very baldness of these effects purifies them, makes them more “fascinating” than really terrifying. At the highest point of the emotion in which they grip us they nevertheless permit us the distance necessary to the contemplation of great works of art.’<sup>34</sup> By drawing attention to themselves, they supplement their purposiveness (their being intended to strike the viewer) with a properly aesthetic (in Kantian terms) absence of purpose: his effects not only act upon the viewer, but are also offered for detached, disinterested contemplation. Rohmer too maintained that the very same scene (the cymbals scene in *The Man who Knew Too Much*) intertwined ironic detachment and emotional involvement: ‘There is a lot of irony in this showcase, an irony that does not prevent us to shake and be moved, between two smiles, by the tears and the premonitory shout of the heroine.’<sup>35</sup>

Hitchcock’s overuse of narration over narrative gives rise to an imbalance. Narration is no longer the efficient support of narrative: it *replaces* narrative, it offers itself as the veritable subject matter, the thing to be seen in place of the story. This imbalance, in Rohmer’s view, leaves plenty of space for soul to emerge.

## 5.2. Films with a soul

What, then, were the films ‘with a soul’? Rohmer is particularly attached to Roberto Rossellini’s *Europe ‘51* (1952), which he reviewed in *CC*, two months after ‘Un grand film athée’, the article by Pierre Kast on *The Wages of Fear* that repeatedly makes fun of ‘spiritualist film critics,’ among whom Rohmer and his young followers undoubtedly ranked. In this respect, ‘Génie du christianisme’ is to be read also as a retaliation. As Antoine de Baecque rightly pointed out,<sup>36</sup> there is little doubt that passages such as ‘The last

33 Godard, ‘*The Man Who Knew Too Much*’, p. 38.

34 Chabrol and Rohmer, *Hitchcock*, p. 103.

35 Rohmer, ‘Nouveauté Hollywoodiennes’, pp. 745-746. Originally: ‘Il y a dans cet étalage, beaucoup d’ironie, ironie qui ne nous empêche pas, entre deux sourires, de trembler et d’être touchés par les pleurs et le cri prémonitoire de l’héroïne.’

36 De Baecque, *Les Cahiers du Cinéma: histoire d’une revue*, p. 86.

films of Rossellini finally give us the opportunity to glimpse the limits of this pleasant atheism to which contemporary cinema generally owes its most admired works<sup>37</sup> are not-so-hidden-references to 'Un grand film athée', Kast's review of Clouzot's film (which in the meantime won the Grand Prix at 1953 Cannes Film Festival). Charlie Chaplin's *Limelight* (1952) and Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D* (1952) are also implicitly referenced towards the end of the article: like *The Wages of Fear*, they are accused of reducing even miracles to the sheer concatenation between causes and effects. 'Be an atheist, and it [the movie camera] will provide the spectacle of a world without God where there is no other law than the pure mechanism of cause and effect, a universe of cruelty, horror, banality, and mockery.'<sup>38</sup> But, according to Rohmer, Rossellini's film shows us, like Renoir's *The Golden Coach*, that mechanism is not all there is to it: 'She [the heroine] replaces the mechanism of a well-rehearsed gesture, the bestiality or poverty of good manners with, here [in *The Golden Coach*], innocence, there, the freedom of nature, the miracle of a transformed flesh: the soul shows itself, drowns the body in its light, shapes it into its own image, surrounds it by an aura of clarity which discolours, tarnishes everything in its passage.'<sup>39</sup>

Kast certainly had good reasons to label Rohmer 'a spiritualist'. However, his spiritualism deserves to be inspected more closely.

The work of Rossellini is so profoundly permeated with Christian symbolic that the most immediately sensible appearance lets itself being spontaneously divided into that which involves the flesh, and that which involves the spirit. I used the word 'symbol' for lack of a better one: such art is metaphorical like that of stained glasses and cathedrals, but, its incapacity to make explicit the relation between sign and idea, between the invisible and the visible, endows it with the extraordinary power of turning that which is only a premonition or fleeting impression into the intensity of an evidence. [...] The originality of Rossellini lies in having taken the

37 Rohmer, 'Génie du Christianisme', p. 46. Originally: 'Les derniers films de Rossellini nous permettent enfin d'entrevoir les limites de cet aimable athéisme auquel le cinéma contemporain doit en général ses oeuvres les plus admirés.'

38 *Ibid.*, p. 45. Originally: 'Soyez athée, elle [the movie camera] vous offrira le spectacle d'un monde sans Dieu où il n'est d'autre loi que le pur mécanisme de la cause et de l'effet, univers de cruauté, d'horreur, de banalité, de dérision.'

39 *Ibid.*, p. 44. Originally: 'A la mécanique du geste appris, à sa bestialité ou sa pauvreté de bon ton elle [the heroine] substitue, là [in *The Golden Coach*], l'innocence, la liberté de la nature, ici, le miracle d'une chair transfigurée: l'âme se montre au jour, noie le corps dans sa lumière, le forme à son image, le cerne d'un aura de clarté qui décolore, ternit tout à son approche.'

cues from this very vision (and indeed no staging work has ever been so deliberately objective, so roughly documentary), and has refused with such rigour to submit to that subtle (so they say) game which, through the interference of the effect and the intention (a more or less clever blend of what is shown and what is suggested) proudly gives us access to the mysteries of that inner life which in principle it denies.<sup>40</sup>

There is no such naïve spiritualism in a passage like the one above; images are not expected to be the seat of a magical transubstantiation of some unspecified spirit on the moving images. What is at stake is rather a kind of *negative* spiritualism: cinema's power to reveal the spirit through 'the intensity of appearance' is due to its *inability* to establish a relationship between sign and idea: cinema's *manifestation* of spirit does not lie in the visualization of some invisible entity or substance, but in the pure *denial of expression*. Rossellini is praised because he maintains the original paradox of Christianity: body and spirit are characterized by 'so tight a unity and, at the same time, so infinite a distance.'<sup>41</sup> Christian incarnation does not presuppose a preceding spirit that *then*, somehow, becomes incarnated in the flesh: its primary condition is the *utter abandonment* of spirit (God abandoning Jesus on the cross), so that all the flesh can manifest is *this very abandonment*, which, in turn, is something as spiritual as anything can ever be, because it shows the divinity of man, i.e. the divinity of what lacks divinity itself. As Godard put it, cinema is the 'most religious of arts, since it values man above the essence of things and reveals the soul within the body.'<sup>42</sup> The spiritual – in the broadest sense, i.e. to be also intended as 'meaning' – is the total absence of spirit (meaning) – *not* the *expression* of meaning (that is,

40 *Ibid.*, p. 45. Originally: 'L'oeuvre de Rossellini est si profondément imprégnée de la symbolique chrétienne que l'apparence la plus immédiatement sensible s'y laisse spontanément diviser en ce qui, en elle, participe à la chair et ce qui participe à l'esprit. J'ai employé le mot de symbole, n'en possédant pas d'autre: un tel art est métaphorique comme celui des vitraux et des cathédrales, mais, de son impuissance à expliciter le rapport du signe à l'idée, de l'invisible au visible, il tire cet extraordinaire pouvoir de donner l'intensité d'une évidence à ce qui n'est, d'ailleurs, que pressentiment, fugace impression. [...] L'originalité de Rossellini est d'être parti de cette vision même, et jamais travail de mise en scène ne fut plus délibérément objectif, plus grossièrement documentaire, ne refusa avec une telle rigueur de se plier à ce jeu, dit-on subtil, qui, par l'interférence de l'effet et de l'intention, un plus ou moins savant dosage de ce qu'on montre et de ce qu'on suggère se targue de nous faire accéder aux mystères d'une vie intérieure qu'en son principe il nie.'

41 *Ibid.*, 'Génie du Christianisme', p. 46. Originally: 'Une si étroite union et en même temps une si infinie distance.'

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



of Godard's 'essence of things'). Ingrid Bergman (here playing the heroine), says Rohmer, is not just made to look like an angel, but rather she is made to look like a beast as much as like an angel. 'It may be because, of all mimetic arts, it is the most rudimentary, the nearest to mechanical reproduction, that cinema is able to more closely detect the metaphysical essence of the man, or of the world':<sup>43</sup> once again, the key point is the 'divorce' between the imagination (mechanically providing the synthesis of the manifold of appearances) and the understanding (and ensuing reason), at the root of the detachments between visual presentation and narrative conceptualization, body and spirit, sign and idea, visible and invisible.<sup>44</sup> 'Effects' and 'intentions', conversely, attempt to stitch up these cracks.

Rossellini's overt clumsiness when it comes to effects and intentions, viz. more broadly narrative and dramaturgy, has been stressed by several commentators over the years. According to Rohmer, this is precisely why he is so brilliant. Rossellini's films reveal the soul insofar as he *refuses* to play Clouzot's game, to treat the viewer as the intended, indeterminate recipient of some emotional effect, to reduce his films to a depiction of deeds concatenated as causes and effects,<sup>45</sup> and interior life to something merely waiting to be *expressed*, and/or to be engulfed in a cause-effect chain ('psychological determinism'). In the long quotation above, the adjectives 'documentary' and 'objective' do not refer to any alleged capability to 'faithfully represent reality', but rather to the refusal of the aforementioned, causality-oriented shortcuts of fiction.<sup>46</sup> This refusal to entirely rely on causality sheds a

43 Rohmer, 'Génie du Christianisme', p. 45. Originally: 'C'est peut-être parce que, de tous les arts d'imitation, il est le plus rudimentaire, le plus proche de la reproduction mécanique que le cinéma est à même de cerner de plus près l'essence métaphysique de l'homme ou du monde.'

44 This is where Rohmer's Kantism most clearly moulds the *és/pda* in such a way as to easily lend itself to be regarded as a bridge toward Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of cinema. Melinda Szaloky (in 'Mutual Images: Reflections of Kant in Deleuze's Transcendental Cinema of Time') has demonstrated that Kant's clash between the imagination and the understanding (underpinning the German philosopher's aesthetics) lies at the very core of Deleuze's 'Time-image'. The latter was also foreshadowed, according to Szaloky, in the 'recollection-images' devised by Henri Bergson, a philosopher Deleuze deemed to be much closer to Kant than Bergson himself ever thought.

45 Godard, 'Defense and Illustration of Classical Construction', p. 27: 'In fact, if the cinema were no more than the art of narration which some would make its proud boast, then instead of being bored, one would take pleasure in those interminable efforts which are concerned above all with exposing in meticulous detail the secret motivations of a murderer or a coquette.'

46 The critic would later write: 'It's not long since I praised *Stromboli* or *Europa '51* for their documentary aspects. But in its construction *Viaggio in Italia* is no closer to the documentary than it is to the melodrama or the fictional romance. Certainly no documentary camera could have recorded the experiences of this English couple in this way, or, more to the point, in this spirit. Bear in mind that even the most direct, least contrived scene is always inscribed in the

decisive light on what has been sketched in the previous paragraph. The manifestation of spirit through appearance *is nothing but appearance qua disjointed from causality while still entangled in it* (that is, from within a story). In short, appearance for appearance's sake, appearance as an end in itself and not as a means in a cause-effect chain – and not, of course, as a means to signify something. While Clouzot and his ilk subordinate appearance to effect, Rossellini (like Hitchcock, in the paradoxical example outlined above) does not. More concretely, this means that Rossellini, instead of putting together a solid dramatic structure, lets his heroine wander from a situation to a different, very loosely related situation, largely neglecting causal connections (the backbone of storytelling), and constantly, almost obsessively (and not unlike *Stromboli*, also starring Ingrid Bergman) gazing upon her and her instinctive, non-dramatized reactions, singularly out of tune but precisely thereby aptly giving shape to a deranged character.<sup>47</sup> Three years later, Rohmer would write:

Before Rossellini even the most inspired and original of film-makers would feel duty-bound to use the legacy of his precursors. He was familiar with all the ways that, by some kind of conditioned reflex, particular emotional reactions could be provoked in an audience – down to the smallest gesture or movement; and he would play on those reflexes, not try to break them. He would create art, a personal work, that is, but made out of a shared cinematic substance. For Rossellini this substance does not exist. His actors do not behave like the actors in other films, except in the sense that their gestures and attitudes are common to all human beings, but they urge us to look for something else behind this behaviour, something other than what our natural role as spectators would prompt us to recognize.<sup>48</sup>

convention of editing, continuity and selection, and that convention is denounced by the director with the same virulence as he displays in his attack on suspense. His direction of the actors is exact, imperious, and yet it is not at all “acted”. The story is loose, free, full of breaks, and yet nothing could be further from the amateur.’ Rohmer, ‘The Land of Miracles’, p. 206.

47 The critic writes something very similar with regards to Erich von Stroheim: ‘Instead of resorting to the ellipsis, to the symbol, to the editing effect, to this language we have unlearned and whose means often look rather basic, he just follows the heroes’ behavioural repertoire. Everything is on an equal level, there is no climax or anti-climax: this is why he fascinates us, and this is where our embarrassment comes from.’ Originally: ‘Au lieu de jouer sur l’ellipse, le symbole, l’effet de montage, ce langage que nous avons désappris et dont les moyens nous paraissent souvent rudimentaires, il se contente de suivre ses héros dans le menu de leur comportement. Tout est sur le même plan, il n’y a pas de temps faibles, ni de temps forts, c’est par cela qu’il nous fascine, c’est de là que naît notre gêne.’ Rohmer, ‘Queen Kelly’, p. 3.

48 Rohmer, ‘The Land of Miracles’, pp. 205-206.

When Rohmer says that the Italian director 'proposed to demonstrate the very existence of the soul by sheer force of what is being exposed to view, namely, the eyes, the attitude, this woman's physical being and her surroundings,<sup>49</sup> 'sheer force' is the key passage: the existence of the soul is proved by appearance's disjunction from the cause-effect texture; in other words, the revelation takes place *in the gaps*, in the fissures of the narrative texture, typically relying on causes and effects.<sup>50</sup> Rossellini *deepens* and *exploits* the gap between cinema's mechanical imagination (synthesizing the manifold of appearances) and the cause-effect texture provided by understanding and reason. Indeed, this excess over causality is to be conceived in the vein of the relationship between Kant's mechanical, efficient causes and final causes: the latter are only there at all *against the background* of the former. It is not a mere negation, but an internal deflagration of mechanical determinism, obtained by playing out the two mechanical determinisms (that of the mechanical production of moving images and that of storytelling) against each other. Freedom is entangled in the inevitable folds of an impossibly all-encompassing (technical/narrative) mechanism.

This placement of soul in the gaps of mechanism is even more outspoken in Rohmer's review of *Paris Does Strange Things*. In Renoir's film, characters only obey their animal instincts, that is, their 'pathological' (in the Kantian sense) drives. They only care about the satisfaction of their petty, personal needs, *therefore* they are nothing but mechanical puppets in the hands of nature. This 'therefore' (i.e. the identification between a mechanical puppet and the exclusive dependence on natural instincts) is clearly Kantian.<sup>51</sup> In mentioning the word *ape*, we evoke an animal, but also, at the same time, a puppet. Renoir is interested in both our most superficial crust and our

49 Rohmer, 'Génie du Christianisme', p. 45. Originally: '[Il] se proposait par la seule force de ce qu'il offre aux yeux, les regards, l'attitude, l'être physique de cette femme et de ceux qui l'entourent, de prouver l'existence de l'âme même.'

50 Years later, Rohmer reiterated that Rossellini's strength lies in this disjunction: 'Sometimes, when continuity is dissolved and there is disharmony between the dynamics of the image and the dynamics of the story, there are melodramatic moments in Rossellini's cinema. Such moments are not to be found in other Italian directors, like Fellini. In Fellini's cinema the two dynamics are always in accordance, but in my opinion Fellini goes less far' (my translation from Italian). Originally: 'A volte, quando c'è dissoluzione della continuità, disharmonia tra la dinamica dell'immagine e la dinamica della storia, ci sono in Rossellini dei momenti melodrammatici. Che non si trovano in altri italiani, come Fellini; in Fellini le due dinamiche restano sempre in accordo, ma a mio avviso Fellini va meno lontano [...]'. Eric Rohmer interviewed by Tassone, 'Incontro con Eric Rohmer', p. 20.

51 See for instance Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 128.

deepest attachments to the earth. The soul is not rejected but finds shelter *where it can* [my emphasis].<sup>52</sup> Factually, this means that Renoir's direction manages to emphasize that which departs from the mere interconnection of causes and effects (that is, the mere deployment of mechanism). 'In this case, the art must not be grasped in great chunks, but in its embellishments, which is why a second, even a third viewing is necessary. Little by little the puppets lose their mechanical gait, and we become sensitive to a thousand nuances in their acting that had at first escaped us and that explain the rather rough, angular dialogue.'<sup>53</sup> The soul is nothing but the nuances emerging in the gaps within the cause-effect 'mechanical' texture of the film.

'Only a religion that proclaims, according to its numerous dogmas, the existence of a "spiritual flesh" can be satisfied with the insufficiencies, the demanding nature of a mean of expression for which it is less difficult to prove the miracle than to explain the inexplicable.'<sup>54</sup> Rohmer does not say that cinema can prove miracles, but that miracles are proved by the impossibility of explaining what *can* be explained. In other words, there is *a hole at the heart of immanence*,<sup>55</sup> an inherent impasse, a structural impossibility to putting together a faultless cause-effect chain, which cinema can grasp precisely because of cinema's *insufficiencies*, that is, precisely because cinema can grasp nothing but appearance (or, more precisely, thanks to the internal deflagration of mechanical determinism caused by the divorce between the imagination and the understanding/reason). In this sense, transcendence is nothing but this hole at the heart of immanence: 'The refusal of immanence postulates a transcendence.'<sup>56</sup> Idealism is not set against materialism, but appears as its necessary completion.<sup>57</sup> The plot of *Europe 51*, in Rohmer's own words, revolves precisely around the

52 Rohmer, 'Paris Does Strange Things', p. 184.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

54 Rohmer, 'Génie du Christianisme', p. 46. Originally: 'Seule une religion qui proclame au nombre de ses dogmes l'existence d'une 'chair spirituelle' peut se satisfaire des insuffisances, des exigences d'un moyen d'expression pour lequel il est moins difficile de prouver le miracle que d'expliquer l'explicable.'

55 'What Rossellini strives to blow up, is first and foremost the visible unity of nature.' Originally: 'C'est l'unité visible de la nature que Rossellini s'applique avant tout à faire éclater'. Rohmer, 'Deux images de la solitude', p. 40.

56 Rohmer, 'Génie du Christianisme', p. 45. Originally: 'L'immanence refusée postule une transcendance.'

57 This point recurs in other articles by Rohmer. While reviewing Fridrikh Ermler's *Neokonchen-naya povest* (1955), he noticed that miracles and assertions of superiority of the moral over the physical abounded in Russian cinema's finest works, in spite of that cinema's mandatory materialist bias ('Notre miracle quotidien', p. 40); in a brief comment about Jean Renoir's *The Southerner*, he claimed that that film demonstrated that the alleged materialism of his *Boudu*

deadlock of immanence: human society is portrayed as self-contradictory, since it locks the heroine in a mental institution in the name of tolerance; against society's delusions of full (and in fact contradictory, inconsistent) self-determination, stands freedom qua 'divine' exception (embodied by the heroine).

Although the overall compatibility between Rohmer's Catholicism and Kant is debatable (which, of course, adds to his eclecticism), transcendence being postulated by the limits of immanence is a genuinely Kantian assumption; indeed, the German philosopher tirelessly insisted on the fact that, before turning to God, one had to actually reach those limits<sup>58</sup> (this is precisely the purpose of his metaphysical inquiries in his first *Critique*). At any rate, Rohmer's point here is less religious or philosophical and more *aesthetic*: he especially wants to argue that films cannot rely only (or primarily) on cause-effects chains (that is, on narrative) and on the effects on the viewer 'patching' that chain's inevitable inconsistencies (narration); rather, films should enhance these inconsistencies and emphasize what filters through them, i.e. appearance for appearance's sake, qua disjointed from causality (but still *within* causality, i.e. within a narrative context). The emergence of space (that is, appearance) is here strictly dependent on the flimsiness of time (that is, on the lack of a solid sequentiality). Or, as Simone Weil (whom Rossellini admitted was the major source of inspiration behind the heroine of *Europe 51*) herself put it: 'Grace fills empty spaces, but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it.'<sup>59</sup>

The case of Robert Bresson's *A Man Escaped* (*Un condamné à mort s'est échappé*, 1956) is only slightly different: it replaces dramaturgy with a different kind of temporal organization. Instead of following the regular dramatic curve, with its standard alternation of peaks and troughs, the action follows a daringly unvarying rhythm that completely prescind from dramaturgy (not to mention that the abrupt introduction of a new character at that particular point of the timeline, as Rohmer himself seems to imply, is a patent infringement of the way 'well-made plays' should be constructed). Actions are painstakingly concatenated according to cause-effect law, but this concatenation totally disregards the need to keep the

*Saved from Drowning* (*Boudu sauvé des eaux*, 1932) and *Paris Does Strange Things* was in fact not completely materialist ('The Southerner', p. 81).

58 When Keith Tester writes that Rohmer, both in his reviews and in his films, frequently focussed on 'the irruption of God in the everyday,' he neglects the Kantian caution Rohmer was well aware of and followed, and mistakes a final cause for a mechanical, efficient cause. Tester, *Eric Rohmer: Film as Theology*, p. 17.

59 Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 10.

viewer's attention alive through traditional dramatic tricks: it just follows its own course. 'Everything is physically explicable, but it is precisely for this reason, that is, because we follow in detail a series of difficulties, of obstacles that are overcome one after the other, that the word *miracle* can be uttered, as Bresson invites us to do.'<sup>60</sup> It can be said that whereas Rossellini played with the gap between the flow of synthesized appearances and the cause-effect narrative textures, Bresson organized them in the manner of an asymptote: the flow of synthesized appearances and the cause-effect narrative textures are a line and a curve infinitely approaching each other without ever touching. The reason why they never overlap is that Bresson's film, unlike Clouzot's, deliberately refuses to drag the viewer inside the cause-effect texture. Whereas Bresson's previous works overtly attempted to reveal the soul, *A Man Escaped* does not, but manages to reveal it *all the more*. Why? Because it is faithful to causes and effects until that which exceeds causes and effects is made visible: it is *the beauty itself* of the actions the hero accomplishes (the lengthy, careful preparations a convict undertakes in order to evade), and that can be regarded as ends in themselves in spite of their rigid causal concatenation, because *they are not meant to strike the viewer*. There is no need to break the cause-effect texture, because beauty/freedom/grace adds itself to it, qua the necessary counterpart of mechanism ('predestination is the surest guarantor of our freedom'<sup>61</sup>), springing from the latter's internal deflagration. The hole at the heart of immanence, the void at the core of mechanism, is already beauty/freedom/grace; one only needs to stick to the mechanism and to resist the temptation to 'patch up' that void by identifying it with the blank slot allocated to the viewer (as the indeterminate recipient of some emotional effect). This film is the triumph of mechanical determinism – but, by the same token, mechanical determinism loses its purposiveness along the way: 'And then, little by little, at the same time as boards work loose, as hooks curve, as ropes are braided, a new order of thought comes to replace the old one, in our spirit just as in that of the prisoner. The world of ends grafts itself onto the world of causes.'<sup>62</sup>

60 Rohmer, 'Le miracle des objets', p. 44. Originally: 'Tout est matériellement explicable, mais c'est précisément pour cela, parce que nous suivons dans le détail la série des difficultés, des obstacles tour à tour éludés qu'il nous est permis, ainsi que Bresson nous y invite, de prononcer le mot *miracle*.'

61 *Ibid.* Originally: 'La prédestination est le plus sur garant de notre liberté.'

62 Rohmer, 'Le miracle des objets', p. 43. Originally: 'Et alors, peu à peu, en même temps que se descellent les planches, se tordent les crochets, se tressent les cordes, un ordre nouveau de réflexion vient se substituer à l'ancien, dans notre esprit comme dans celui du prisonnier. Sur le monde des causes se greffe celui des fins.'

Approximately the same principle (the total, unconditioned endorsement of narrative causality as the key to finally overcome causality) applies to the most relentlessly causality-oriented cinema ever: Hollywood cinema, which Rohmer and his group admired like no other. In his review of *Bigger than Life* (1956), after stating in the first two paragraphs that it is no melodrama, no Sartre and no Faulkner, Rohmer goes on to explain why Nicholas Ray's is not a drama (that is, a narrative construction characterized by the immanence of causes and effects), but a tragedy (where a moment of transcendence is somehow envisaged – typically, in the guise of the irruption of fate, or of the Gods, in a human context). If, on the one hand, there is no fate and no *deus ex machina*, on the other hand the scene when the main character is about to kill his own child (a blatant reference to Abraham's sacrifice) enacts a *moral paradox* shattering the hitherto very regular and very logical concatenation of causes and effects. What had been looking all along like a deterministic explanation of a family man's madness (i.e. cortisone made him so) in fact concealed an inherent, original, underlying contradiction: cortisone did nothing but *enhance* a moral contradiction, which had been there from the outset. 'In this combat, which materialism seems to have won in advance, the soul is the victor, not so much because of the providential dizziness that holds back Avery's arm, as because of the particular air one breathes, from the very beginning right to the last shot, an air of the same quality, in that it is graceful without pathos, as the final images of *Ordet* (*The Word* [Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1955]) or *Europe 51*.<sup>63</sup> Soul (that is, freedom and grace) is thus nothing but *air*, and this air is 'the ever-so-precise attention to small things and the refusal to enjoy only their picturesque qualities, the glances that betray the concerns of love, rather than curiosity, fear, or any other sentiment, this strong sense of both man's earthly attachments and his freedom.'<sup>64</sup> It is the excess of appearance over narration's causality.<sup>65</sup>

This excess is none other than what Christian Keathley called the 'cinephilic moments': those filmic epiphanies occurring whenever a spectator spots

63 Rohmer, 'Nicholas Ray: *Bigger than Life*', p. 145.

64 *Ibid.* Another example of 'soul qua air' can be found in his 'Un nouveau visage de la pudeur'.

65 Siegfried Kracauer, another film theorist heavily influenced by Kant, developed a conception of cinema whereby 'plot is constantly interrupted by [fragmentary] images of *physical reality*' (my emphasis), rather than by an excess of appearance. Aitken, *European Film Theory and Cinema*, p. 177. This goes a long way towards accounting for the difference separating these otherwise fairly similar critics/theorists. Films matching Kracauer's hypothesis are 'composed of instants whose only *raison d'être* is their instantaneousness [and which] appear to be interlinked at random, without any logic or necessity.' Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 256. This more or less holds for Rohmer too, but for him it is more a matter of emergence of appearance rather than of physical reality.

something striking in the moving images, without that ‘something’ being ‘the main point’ of those images, viz. that which is intended to grab the spectator’s attention at that particular moment. On the contrary, as a rule, the object of ‘cinephiliac moments’ is something at the *margins* of the unfolding of the story, and of whatever is going on in the film. As Paul Willemen put it,

What is being looked for is a moment, or, given that a moment is too unitary, a dimension of a moment which triggers for the viewer either the realisation or the illusion of a realisation that what is being seen is in excess of what is being shown. Consequently you see something that is revelatory. It reveals an aspect or a dimension of a person, whether it’s the actor or the director, which is not choreographed for you to see. It is produced *en plus*, in excess or in addition, almost involuntarily. [...] Whether or not it’s voluntary doesn’t particularly matter. If you can systematise the production of these voluntary/involuntary moments, then you become a genius screen presence or a genius director (as in the directorial touches of a Lubitsch or Hitchcock).<sup>66</sup>

Nicholas Ray is, according to Rohmer, one of those genius directors. In his film, what is being seen is in excess of what is shown:

He is highly adept at the art of playing with the totality of the set, and although his frames are rather compact, he is able to avoid making them heavy. But he is still a painter, not only because he uses the power of colour well – which is more expressive than decorative (Barbara Rush’s orange-coloured dress, the violet of the bottle, the red of the child’s blouse, accentuated by a mostly beige harmony and by the skill of cameraman Joe McDonald) – but because by slightly slowing the pace or by accelerating it a bit too much, by inserting a pause that lasts perhaps not more than a fraction of a second, he is able to give the simplest gesture an eternal quality, thereby making it expressive as it is handsome. He is able to make his film’s most important shots: a woman filling a bathtub with a kettle or standing stiffly in her new dress, a child holding a football or digging through a pile of shirts, or again, kneeling on his bed, handing the football to his father who is entering the room.<sup>67</sup>

Crucially, the emerging of appearance (the bestowal of ‘an eternal quality’ to ‘the simplest gesture’) is here tied to temporal discontinuity (‘by slightly

66 Willemen, *Looks and Frictions*, p. 237.

67 Rohmer, ‘Nicholas Ray: *Bigger than Life*’, p. 143.



slowing the pace or...'). But even more crucially, the critic hastens to add: 'Outside their dramatic context, these gestures undoubtedly lose some of their expression and beauty, but to try to detach them is as senseless as separating the arabesque from a Raphael painting.'<sup>68</sup> As Willemen put it, 'it is no accident, indeed it is highly necessary, that cinephilia should operate particularly strongly in relation to a form of cinema that is perceived as being highly coded, highly commercial, formalised and ritualised. For it is only there that the moment of revelation or excess, a dimension other than what is being programmed, becomes noticeable.'<sup>69</sup> Appearance for appearance's sake thrives in the gaps of the cause-effect texture ('it is in arbitrary situations, or more specifically in situations dependent on a contingent fact, that such gestures find their moment to bloom'<sup>70</sup>), thus essentially *needs* that texture in the first place – just as much as freedom is not distinct from mechanism, but is only the other side of the same coin. What is needed is *either* the cause-effect linear chain *and* that which departs from it. 'The camera, like a microscope, detects a wide surface where we saw only a line':<sup>71</sup> an evocative sentence that nonetheless very clearly indicates that what keeps the camera (synthesizing the manifold of appearances) and the narration apart is the very fact that they stand for different faculties: imagination in one case (discovering the 'wide surface' of the visual flow it synthesizes), understanding/reason in the other (drawing the line of the unfolding story). This clash between two substantially different flows

68 *Ibid.*

69 Willemen, *Looks and Frictions*, p. 238.

70 Rohmer, 'Nicholas Ray: *Bigger than Life*', p. 144. An example taken from Godard's review of *The Wrong Man*: 'Through this camera movement he manages to express a purely physical trait: the contraction of the eyelids as Fonda closes them, the force with which they press on the eyeballs for a fraction of a second, creating in the sensory imagination a vertiginous kaleidoscope of abstractions which only an equally extravagant camera movement could evoke successfully. A film comprising only such notations would be nothing; but one in which they are thrown into the bargain – that film is everything. Since *Rear Window*, Hitchcock has deliberately multiplied this sort of "epidermic" effect, and if he relegates the plot thread to the background, he does so the better to reveal its palpable beauty by fits and starts.' Godard, '*The Wrong Man*', p. 51.

71 Rohmer, 'Nicholas Ray: *Bigger than Life*', p. 145. When Rohmer wrote (in 'La dernière chasse') 'I wonder whether the reference that cinema makes us establish, that is, the reference to this very reality upon which fiction builds its foundation, is cinema's weakness, the chink in the armour, or rather its power, its originality. It would be tricky to decide. Let's provisionally say: both' ('Est-ce le point faible du cinéma, le défaut de sa cuirasse, ou sa force, son originalité, que cette référence qu'il nous amène à établir avec la réalité même sur laquelle la fiction établit ses assises. Il serait délicat de trancher. Répondons provisoirement: les deux'), he was referring precisely to this interplay between the story and visual appearances, the 'line' and the 'wide surface' needing one another.

engenders a sort of temporal inconsistency that appearance for appearance's sake fills up.

This mutual dependence between the disruption of the cause-effect texture and its intactness is openly tackled in Rohmer's review of *Journey to Italy* (*Viaggio in Italia*, 1954) by, again, Rossellini. 'Because they [*Journey to Italy* and Murnau's *Sunrise*] refuse to illuminate the mechanics of choice, both films safeguard its freedom all the better. Thus the soul is delivered up to its own resources, and finds no higher purpose than in the recognition of order in the world.'<sup>72</sup> Notoriously, the last scene of the film is a miracle reuniting a constantly quarrelling married couple of English tourists visiting southern Italy. The critic's definition of 'miracle' is the 'supreme disorder' on which order itself is founded. 'If the film succeeds – logically, you could say – through a miracle, it is because that miracle was in the order of things whose order, in the end, depends on a miracle.'<sup>73</sup> This paradox is mirrored, says Rohmer, by his own paradoxical viewing experience: the more he watched the film, the more he got distracted and thought about something else, but the more he thought about something else, the more he ultimately ended up thinking of the subject matter of the film, finding himself at the very core of it after whatever detour he would make.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, the word 'miracle' here ultimately seems to designate less some supernatural entity landing somehow on earth, than the mere fact that order is based on its own disruption. Of course, this includes *narrative* order. *Journey to Italy* is certainly not short of digressions, perhaps even more than *Europe 51* was: what the cause-effect narrative texture only laboriously tries to get at, appearance for appearance's sake is able to manifest immediately, by means of disrupting that texture in various ways; accordingly, the abrupt, fully external miracle taking place at the very end reunites the main characters, whereas in the rest of the film this same reunion failed to be accomplished by way of the regular unfolding of a psychological drama (itself frequently interrupted along the way by several visual epiphanies preparing the final, decisive one).

Not infrequently, for Rohmer 'miracles' are a straightforward matter of dramaturgy. Notoriously, in the last scene of Dreyer's *Ordet*, a character resurrects shortly after her death. In Rohmer's review (whose last paragraph references tragedy and the concept of sublime), that miracle is the logical and necessary outcome of the way the story is arranged. Dreyer adopts a

<sup>72</sup> Rohmer, 'Land of Miracles', p. 207.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Rohmer, 'Land of Miracles', pp. 206-207.

completely detached point of view: by means of his careful stylistic abstraction, he displays nothing but empty appearances, unencumbered by any manifestation of the spiritual.

Nothing invites us to penetrate consciences, there is no call for feelings: we see, we listen, and the predilection for continuity can only confirm this impression. But the mystery is perhaps even greater, because no door is being offered for it to be penetrated: one can only grasp appearance, while still knowing all along that it is nothing but appearance.<sup>75</sup>

As the film unfolds, this refusal to show any manifestation of the spiritual, while every character *talks* about it a lot, increasingly creates a strange tension in the viewer, one that only the final miracle can appease. During most of the film, the dramatic curve is totally flat, then, shortly before the end a handful of events (a man starts to cry, a little girl smiles and so on) suddenly and quickly start to build up a sort of emotional paroxysm, and then the final miracle happens. The miracle *had* to happen because, hitherto, everything had been so flat: a logic is thus being followed, a purely dramaturgic logic that works completely apart from the concatenation of causes and effects normally supposed to form a 'sound' plot (most notably, the final resurrection blatantly breaks with causal consistency). It is the exact opposite of Bresson's *A Man Escaped*, which displayed a faultless cause-effect texture while neglecting any deliberate dramaturgic effect on the viewer. In that case, the narrative/narration unbalance privileges the former over the latter, while *Ordet's* privileges the latter over the former.

Hitchcock's *The Wrong Man*, an unlikely tale based on a true story, is praised because it merges the ordinary and the extraordinary. The normal time of daily life and the discontinuous time of the miracle are brought together in a way that disregards the laws of dramaturgy: fractures in the narrative texture do not occur when they are supposed to occur to keep the viewer awake. The film displays a very flat, almost 'neorealist' time, until the miracle (a coincidence suddenly exculpating the hero from a false accusation of murder) happens, completely unprepared and dramatically unjustified. 'Real duration replaces the rigged duration of suspense. Like the prisoner, we

75 Rohmer, 'Une Alceste chrétienne', p. 26. Originally: 'Aucune invite à pénétrer dans les consciences, aucun appel au sentiment: nous voyons, nous écoutons, et le parti pris de continuité adopté ici n'est pas sans corroborer cette impression. Mais le mystère est peut-être plus grand, parce qu'on ne nous offre aucune porte pour y pénétrer: nous ne saisissons que l'apparence, tout en sachant que ce n'est qu'apparence.'

don't know what the next moment will bring forth. Everything can happen and this is why everything happens – even miracles.<sup>76</sup> Once again, this fusion between temporal continuity and discontinuity is matched by spatial revelation, that is, by the crucial visual leitmotif of the *wall*: the hero often finds himself hindered by walls (either actual walls, and virtual walls, i.e. the gazes of other people constantly staring and 'imprisoning' him). This leitmotif, explains Rohmer, is a simultaneous encapsulation of the whole point of the film without being a symbol, because it is but the graphic depiction of its underlying *conflict* (harmless individual vs. capricious, unjust society). Conflict being by definition dynamic and not static, it cannot be what a symbol points to. That image is not 'making a point': it is just illustrating *simultaneously* a conflict being develop throughout the film by drama.

More generally, even when no miracle was involved, Rohmer often tried to detect temporal structures interweaving time's various forms of continuity and discontinuity without complying with the usual constraints of dramaturgy. He noticed, for instance, that Renoir insisted on immobility (unmoving characters and fixed shots) only to build tension and justify thereby an eventual, sudden outburst of motion.<sup>77</sup> Rivette praised Mark Donskoy's *Childhood of Maxim Gorky* (*Detstvo Gorkogo*, 1938) because of its clash between biological time and dramaturgic time: 'In its design, the script manifests a complete disregard for the usual formulas of dramatic progression; separated, fragmentary episodes follow each other only according to the necessity of temporal deployment, with no concern whatsoever for their linkages; unity is ensured by nothing but the sheer permanence of characters, with their slow ageing process replacing "suspense".<sup>78</sup>

Another example of non-dramaturgic interconnection between continuity and discontinuity is Ingmar Bergman; more than once, Rohmer affirmed that his cinema revolved around a peculiar tension between the instant qua fleeting and the instant qua eternal<sup>79</sup> – or, as Jean-Luc Godard (whose reflections on the Swedish director largely follow his colleague's) put it:

76 Rohmer, 'Le faux coupable'. Originally: 'Au temps truqué du suspense se substitue la durée réelle. De même que le prisonnier, nous ne savons pas ce que l'instant suivant nous réserve. Tout peut arriver et c'est pourquoi tout, même le miracle, arrive.'

77 Rohmer, 'La robe bleue d'Harriet', p. 63.

78 Rivette, 'Les principaux films du rendez-vous de Biarritz'. Originally: 'La conception du scénario prouve un complet dédain des recettes habituelles de la progression dramatique; des épisodes séparés et fragmentaires se succèdent selon la seule nécessité de l'écoulement temporel, sans aucun souci des raccords; l'unité n'est assurée que par la permanence des personnages, leur lent vieillissement tient lieu de "suspense".'

79 See, for instance, Rohmer, 'Présentation d'Ingmar Bergman', p. 8.

Each of his films is born of the hero's reflection on the present moment, and deepens that reflection by a sort of dislocation of time – rather in the manner of Proust but more powerfully, as though Proust were multiplied by both Joyce and Rousseau – to become a vast, limitless meditation upon the instantaneous. An Ingmar Bergman film is, if you like, one twenty-fourth of a second metamorphosed and expanded over an hour and a half. It is the world between two blinks of the eyelids, the sadness between two heart-beats, the gaiety between two handclaps.<sup>80</sup>

The tension between the instant qua fleeting and the instant qua eternal is, according to the critic, nothing short of tragic: 'What is most original in his films is a feeling of time, a fascination with the past that is generally materialised through flashbacks. Everything ends up being perpetually restarted, but at the same time, that which happened once cannot be repeated: such is the tragic contradiction he traps us in.'<sup>81</sup>

Rohmer seems to believe that cinema is capable of seizing the tragic character of time as such.<sup>82</sup> *Nanook*, for instance, is 'not a tragedy of destiny,

80 Godard, 'Bergmanorama', p. 77. He also wrote: 'Bergman is the film-maker of the instant. His camera seeks only one thing: to seize the present moment at its most fugitive, and to delve deep into it so as to give it the quality of eternity. Hence the prime importance of the flashback, since the dramatic mainspring of each Bergman film is simply the hero's reflection on the moment and his situation at that moment.' Godard, 'Summer with Monika', p. 85.

81 Rohmer, 'Oeuvre truculente et blasée, *La nuit des forains* nous revèle le visage du plus grand cinéaste suédois Ingmar Bergman.' Originally: 'Ce qu'il y a de plus original chez lui, c'est un sentiment de temps, une fascination du passé, matérialisé en général par des flash-back. Tout est voué à un perpétuel recommencement, mais en même temps, ce qui a été une fois ne peut se reproduire: telle est la contradiction tragique dans laquelle il nous enferme.'

82 Of course, Rohmer was by no means the first to identify cinematic time with tragedy. A few decades before, film theorist and filmmaker Jean Epstein already called 'tragic' the intersection between stillness and movement, continuity and discontinuity. The definition of 'slow motion' (a method that Epstein greatly valued, and used in his films) according to Blaise Cendrars (one of Epstein's main sources of inspiration) 'pertains to the classic tragedy: the ambivalence of slow motion may be regarded as a remnant of the inner conflict experienced by characters who are subject to a set of passionate and duty-bound conflicts resulting in a geometry of double-binds. Likewise, the frozen dialectics of slow motion opposes the temptation of actual movement and the withholding of it. In that sense, slow motion is a tragedy of duration'. Cortade, 'The "Microscope of Time": Slow Motion in Jean Epstein's Writings', p. 168. However, Epstein's Bergsonian bias is fairly at odds with Rohmer's approach, which shows no trace of anything resembling *élan vital*, nor of any emphasis placed on duration in that philosopher's sense. On the other hand, existing English translation (Tom Milne's) prevents the reader from appreciating a few references to Bergson in Godard's film critical production. When he wrote ('*The Wrong Man*', p. 50) that 'once again Alfred Hitchcock proves that the cinema today is better fitted than either philosophy or novel to convey the basic data of consciousness', the original reads *les données immédiates de la conscience* ('the immediate data of consciousness'; my emphasis). However, this unambiguous

but of the dimension of time. [...] I will mention only the scene in which we see the Eskimo curled up in the corner of the frame, lying in wait for the flock of seals sleeping on the beach. [...] More than the pathos of action, it is the very mystery of time that creates our anxiety in this scene.<sup>83</sup> In other words, cinema is able to follow the flow of time, and wait for the seals along with the Eskimo, without any suspense-producing gimmick, until discontinuity comes along, that is, until action unexpectedly bursts in. Here, the 'tragedy of time' is, quite simply, the fact that one instant does not necessarily lead to a similar, immediately following one; that there is a substantial imbalance (one that dramaturgy is not able to set straight) between continuity and discontinuity. 'The particularity of cinematic time, precisely because it is not subordinated to the law of measure and harmony, is *to wrinkle*. Every instant is left alone, whereas the musical note only makes sense in relation to those coming before and after.'<sup>84</sup>

More generally, Rohmer seems to imply that the possibility of freedom (hence: ethics) comes into play in films when the continuous time created by cinema's mechanical imagination clashes somehow with the one narration brings along (thereby leading the mechanical determinism informing both to an impasse); or, which amounts to more or less the same thing, when that continuity is made to face a discontinuity that narration (by definition a systematic, deliberate alternation of continuity and discontinuity) leaves unregulated and disjointed. Freedom is that which springs from the ensuing fracture, and it can have a wealth of equivalent names: grace, the soul, appearance for appearance's sake and the like.

This, too, is to be read in opposition to ellipsis, that much-maligned literary device. The ellipsis, compelling the reader to 'fill in the gaps' left by the deliberate disruption of the ordered sequence of narrative events, stands for a discontinuity that is ultimately restricted to a subjective, contingent distortion of time: it is but a temporalization of the kind a for-itself consciousness brings forth, fostering the kind of mutual interaction between the temporalizations by the narrator, the reader, the characters, etc. taking place in what has already been mentioned (in Chapter one, by

reference to Bergson comes after a few paragraphs basically listing a series of fragments, of unrelated, privileged moments inside the film that mitigate the reference to Bergson by means of a far more Bachelardian reliance on the instant *qua* discontinuous.

83 Rohmer, 'Such Vanity is Painting', p. 46.

84 Rohmer, *De Mozart en Beethoven*, p. 103. Originally: 'Or, le propre du temps cinématographique, précisément parce qu'il n'est pas soumis à la loi de la mesure et de l'harmonie, est de grincer. Il laisse chaque instant livré à lui-même alors que la note musicale n'a de sens que par rapport à celle qui la précède et la suit.'

drawing particularly on *What is Literature?*) as the space opened up by the novel. Conversely, what Rohmer has in mind is discontinuity qua an *inherent* breakdown of continuity, a structural fault of mechanism, that continuous flow of causes and effects which cannot but look 'objective' to our eyes (the 'unity of nature'). Here again, we find Rohmer's conflation between 'showing' (as opposed to 'telling'), 'ontology' (as opposed to 'language'), 'space' (as opposed to 'time'): cinema should focus on those inconsistencies at the heart of Being, the space opening up in the breaches of temporal/causal sequences. By showing them (as opposed to patching together continuity and discontinuity the way the mutual interaction between narrative and narration ('telling') usually does), cinema can show the possibility itself of freedom.

Instead, perfect dramatic machines (like *The Wages of Fear*) leave no gap between the synthesis of the manifold of appearances ensured by cinema's mechanical imagination and the narrative attached to it: the former is completely subordinated to the latter. They leave no space for freedom/soul/etc., so they are fundamentally abject. Even worse: they are dramatic instead of being tragic, because they disregard the possibility for freedom to be grounded on its opposite.

### 5.3. Tragedy

If, on the one hand, freedom in films according to Rohmer is a basically *formal* property (in the sense outlined above), then, on the other hand, freedom is also one of cinema's privileged subject matters. The fight between freedom and necessity is, according to the critic, one of the most inherently cinematic topics ever; this is why cinema, by its own nature, is inclined to revive *ancient tragedy*, on which Rohmer indeed insisted a great deal.

The deep interest in American cinema shown first by *éS*, and then by the *politique des auteurs* (pda), originated from the belief that Hollywood was the contemporary embodiment of that immortal, universal model.<sup>85</sup> Rohmer often insisted upon the fact that 'every real tragedy always begins with an acceptance of the established order, as difficult as it shows the constraints to be.'<sup>86</sup> Hence, the frequently conservative undertones that can easily be found in his writings: 'If *Nana* is usually appreciated because

85 See, for instance: Rohmer, 'Livres de cinéma', CC, 37, p. 58; Rohmer, 'Quand se lève la lune'.

86 Rohmer, 'The American Renoir', p. 177.

we see a fifty-year old on all fours, or *The Crime of Monsieur Lange* (*Le crime de monsieur Lange*) because it is anticlerical, most of the pleasure I had in seeing *The Southerner* for a second time was in admiring a man who loves his wife and believes in God.<sup>87</sup> Or:

Since we all opt for order to a greater or lesser extent, let's have the honesty to acknowledge its relevance. I find it beautiful not to refuse to shake hands with a powerful man or with a judge. I admire Billy Mitchell, who replied to the journalists asking him what he thought of the army in the aftermath of the trial: 'It owes me nothing, I owe it everything'.<sup>88</sup>

In the same article (on Otto Preminger's 1955 *The Court-Martial of Billy Mitchell*), Rohmer touches upon another immediate corollary of the *époua*'s attachment to ancient tragedy: their belief that classical tragic values are *universal* – hence Hollywood's universality. "The conflict between the ways of genius and the demands of discipline, between individual clairvoyance and the inertia of institutional bodies has been an issue of all times and of all countries."<sup>89</sup> The critic frequently stated that cinema's vocation lies, above all, in providing the modern form whereby the very classical, universal conflict between will and destiny can find expression.

This is the strength of American cinema: it can even be out of ideas, except for some schemes it cannot give up, but in them, freedom remains intact, protecting it from the dangers of the thesis and compelling it to stick to man alone. That's why it's so exemplary. A filmmaker from some other nation would have made this story into a pretext to support the rights of actors, of women, of moral anti-conformism or whatever. Here, and in other similar stories, disgrace is a constant menace threatening anybody daring to violate established order. It is a myth, as they say, but a fertile one, because it allows us to penetrate the resources of human agency.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 175.

88 Rohmer, 'La souffrance de l'inventeur', p. 50. Originally: 'Puisque nous optons tous plus ou moins pour l'ordre, ayons l'honnêteté de reconnaître son bien-fondé. Je trouve beau qu'on ne refuse pas la main tendue, fut-ce celle d'un puissant ou d'un juge. J'admire Billy Mitchell répondant aux journalistes qui lui demandent, à l'issue du procès, ce qu'il pense de l'armée: "Elle ne me doit rien, je lui dois tout".'

89 Rohmer, 'La souffrance de l'inventeur', p. 49. Originally: 'Le conflit entre les chemins du génie et les exigences de la discipline, entre la clairvoyance individuelle et l'inertie des corps constitués est de tous les temps et de tous les pays.'



Furthermore, this myth is reality, because, in this boring world, fate is bidden to table every day, like the Commander in *Don Juan*.<sup>90</sup>

Freedom can only exist in a context of constriction, both in everyday reality and in filmmaking practice.<sup>91</sup> As late as 1961, Rohmer compared and contrasted *Shadows* (John Cassavetes, 1959) with *La Pyramide Humaine* (Jean Rouch, 1961) by observing that the same theme (race) is approached as contingent in the former case, and as necessary in the latter. Because it relies on necessity, *La Pyramide humaine* attains the level of tragedy and, as such, is superior. '[The film's] tragedy rests, as does all true tragedy, not so much on the idea that the world might be good but that in fact we cannot really conceive of it other than the way it is.'<sup>92</sup>

This also explains why, when Rohmer faced the question 'Who is really the eponymous *Mr. Arkadin* of Orson Welles' 1955 film?', the answer he chose was 'less dependent on the director's personal obsessions'<sup>93</sup> than those most critics gave: Arkadin is 'the incarnation of destiny, a modern and omnipresent god, returning from the sky from which he seemed to come (his death is not shown, the plane crashes empty), a vulnerable god, a cruel, yet just god.'<sup>94</sup> In other words: what makes a filmmaker a true auteur is not that his films carry a personal poetics around, but the fact that they somehow (in a very broad sense) comply with the eternal values of tragedy (here: the struggle between men and gods).

So film, according to Rohmer as well as to the *és/pda*, in general had to be a celebration of freedom. To be a celebration of freedom, however, meant to show that freedom is based on a universal conflict between freedom and its opposite (necessity). No narrative form is more suited to showing this than

90 Rohmer, 'Jeanne Eagels'. Originally: 'Latout du cinéma américain, c'est peut-être qu'il n'a pas d'idées, sinon quelques schémas tout faits dont il ne peut sortir, mais à l'intérieur desquels la liberté reste entière. Cela le garde des dangers de la thèse, le force à s'attacher à l'homme seul et c'est pourquoi il est exemplaire. Un cinéaste d'une autre nation eût sans doute pris prétexte d'une telle histoire pour revendiquer les droits du comédien, de la femme, de l'anticonformisme moral, que sais-je! Ici, et dans les autres histoires semblables, le malheur est attaché, comme une punition imminente, à quiconque s'avise de violer l'ordre établi. C'est un "mythe", dit-on, mais c'est un mythe féconde puisqu'il nous permet d'entrer dans les ressorts de l'action humaine. Et, de plus, ce mythe est réalité, car, dans ce monde où l'on s'ennuie, le destin est, comme le Commandeur du *Don Juan*, convié tous les jours à la table.'

91 The same point, i.e. that only within the framework of solid aesthetic conventions cinema can give a shape to the eternal conflict between will and duty and thereby reinstate classical tragedy, is made in Rohmer, 'Faux coupables et faux innocents'.

92 Rohmer, 'The Taste of Beauty', p. 78.

93 Rohmer, 'A Twentieth Century Tale', p. 138.

94 *Ibid.*

classical tragedy, so cinema had to stick as much as it could to that ancient, universal model. Godard on Jean Renoir: 'Never has a film been so free as *Elena* [*Paris Does Strange Things*]. But deep down inside of things, freedom is necessity. And never, too, has a film been so logical.'<sup>95</sup> This also explains Rohmer's and the *ÉS/pda*'s insistence on contradiction. The freedom they exalted was primarily the freedom of the individual, but most of the time as a *broken* individual. Not an individual fully and freely expressing him or herself, but rather an individual struggling, torn by contradiction, *inherently split*. Not a self-identical individual owning a rounded, sound personality, but an individual *qua pushed to his or her own limits*, to the innermost core of his or her being – a core that feels foreign and alien to the individual in question. Jean-Luc Godard likes Max Ophuls's *Caught* (1949) because its main character 'is finally well and truly caught after confusing love with what she thought was love and falling into traps she herself had set.'<sup>96</sup> Otto Preminger is commended because his main characters all choose a moral path and stubbornly follow it *all the way*, no matter what, without fearing contradictions and conflicts with themselves<sup>97</sup> – not too unlike Joan Fontaine in Alfred Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941):

hair wild, face drawn, feeling that she might be happier and that it would be better to lose her husband than witness his inconstancies, resents feeling consideration and even love for him, resents feeling his arms hold her gently, offering him her mouth, exposing herself to danger without the secret desire to do so, wondering if she is loved enough. She prefers to grieve, to weep tears, to languish under offences, to consent to them, make an effort to yield her heart, be upset because she does so, weave an incalculable number of difficulties in the certainty of illuminating her doubts instead of living drearily with them.<sup>98</sup>

Speaking of suspicions and jealousy, *El* (1953) is the first film by Luis Buñuel that Truffaut likes, because, for the first time in his cinema, a madman is more moral than the 'normals'.<sup>99</sup>

95 Godard, '*Elena et les hommes*', p. 64.

96 Godard, '*Caught*'.

97 Rohmer, '*La souffrance de l'inventeur*', p. 48. Paul Gégauff, a personal friend of Rohmer's and (partly) of the other *ÉS/pda* critics, is portrayed by Luc Moullet (while reviewing a film whose script had been written by Gégauff) in the exact same fashion. Luc Moullet, '*Nocive et heureuse*'.

98 Godard, '*Strangers on a Train*', p. 25.

99 François Truffaut (unsigned), '*Une grande oeuvre: El de Buñuel*'.

One way or another, freedom is always caught in a contradiction. Indeed, the emphasis the *és/pda* puts on contradiction (inside the consciences of human beings as well as in societal rules they are expected to comply with) cannot be overstated. One of the greatest assets of *The Golden Coach* (*La Carrosse d'or*, 1952) by Jean Renoir ('whoever knows Renoir knows that he is not a man to be bothered by his own contradictions'<sup>100</sup>) is that in this film

it is not so much a question of denouncing the order as such – an easy and futile undertaking – as of revealing its necessary contradictions. If art is fundamentally moral, it is not because it reveals the path to abstract equality or liberty but because it glorifies the exception that is made possible only by the rule, and in a sense – as shocking as this idea may be – because it exalts the inequality of each person before destiny, or even salvation.<sup>101</sup>

The *és/pda*'s individualism exalts the individual – but only as the inevitable by-product of an inherently contradictory order. It is the necessary exception of a fundamentally incoherent rule, but *one wouldn't exist without the other*. Film (and art in general) is thus moral, insofar as it is capable of displaying contradiction. Accordingly, Rohmer rejects David Lean and applauds Nicholas Ray, because the latter enhances contradictions, whereas the former smooths them over.<sup>102</sup> He loathes Cecil B. De Mille because his adaptation of the Bible merely 'advertises God', that is, it shows off spectacular, powerful images that are also unfailingly shallow, but entirely ignores contradiction and conflict (thereby giving up the tragic).<sup>103</sup> But he praises Claude Chabrol's *Le beau Serge* (1958) because it is moral rather than moralizing;<sup>104</sup> what makes it so is the fact that the initial situation (the 'good' Parisian redeeming the 'bad', frustrated, country friend) is reversed as the film goes on (the latter becomes the redeemer, the former becomes the 'villain'), showing that contradiction does not belong to some idiosyncratically contradictory subject, but rather to the subject's (any subject's) situation *as such*, universally. Moreover, the *és/pda* frequently valued not only contradictory movie characters, but also *auteurs* whose aesthetics

100 Rohmer, 'The American Renoir', p. 178.

101 Rohmer, 'Of Three Films and a Certain School', pp. 64-65.

102 Rohmer, 'Le pont de la rivière Kwai'.

103 Rohmer, 'Les dix commandements'.

104 Rohmer, 'Le beau Serge'.

are marked by contradiction, such as Max Ophuls, who shows things by means of hiding them.<sup>105</sup>

Is all this truly Kantian? Not exactly. True, for Kant, freedom is always caught in an original conflict with nature (qua exclusively ruled by cause-effect mechanisms) corresponding to what the German philosopher called the third antimony of pure reason, an antinomy that is 'solved', as it were, by the *practical* use of reason. However, what the *és/pda* was really looking to was the area that emerged in the Kantian aftermath, and which sought to investigate the ambivalent relationships between freedom and necessity by 'dramatizing' this conflict. Thereby, 'necessity' could be embodied by nature as well as by destiny, the hostile order of society, etc. This loose but very fertile area is *the revival of ancient tragedy put forward by Goethe, Schelling, Schiller and the like*, all variously influenced by (and misinterpreting/re-appropriating) Kant. Faced with liberty and necessity, Goethe, Schelling, Schiller *et al.* provided various ways to intertwine these binary couples: 'Appropriations of tragedy around 1800 are efforts to grapple with the question of human freedom, a problem of central importance to post-Kantian thought. Idealist thinkers understand Greek tragedy to represent a distinctive form of human freedom, and to crystallize issues of agency and subjectivity that are central to their own philosophical enquiries.'<sup>106</sup>

Again, one of the main reasons behind this eclecticism is the fact that Rohmer wanted to go against Sartre and his existentialism (which, in turn, refused Kant), more than he wanted to fully and integrally embrace Kant's philosophy. By setting Kant, as well as the revival of ancient tragedy in his wake, against Sartre, Rohmer wanted to assert that freedom *is not groundless*: it indeed has a ground, as it is based on the conflict between it and its opposite (necessity). Such conflict begins within freedom itself, as the latter can only emerge against the background of universal reason. For Rohmer, in a Kantian vein, freedom is grounded in this *universal* conflict (which is why, for him, 'necessity' is an absolutely generic principle, and can have plenty of different faces: nature, society, etc.), as opposed to the

105 'Being aware of the indecency of "fabricating life", true artists resort to subterfuge; Ophuls's lies in masking that which he is showing to the point of concealing it from us. Hence the tulle and veils, the gates and fences [...] standing in the way between the action and the lens, between recreated life and us, who contemplate it with idleness.' Originally: 'Conscient de l'indécence qu'il y a à "fabriquer de la vie", l'artiste véritable recourt à des subterfuges; celui d'Ophuls est de masquer ce qu'il nous montre jusqu'au point de le dérober à notre vue. D'où ces tulles et ces voiles, ces grilles et grillages [...] qui s'interposent entre l'action et l'objectif, entre la vie recréé et nous qui oisivement la contemplons.' Truffaut, 'Lola au bûcher', pp. 28-29.

106 Billings, *Genealogy of the Tragic*, p. 6.

particularity of Sartrean *situation*. Moreover, because it is groundless and arbitrary, Sartre's freedom is bound to be perennially haunted by the ghost of its inherent impossibility: anguish. On the contrary, for Kant, freedom is actually possible precisely because it is a priori hindered by its opposite, by its inherent limits (in Sartre, only the freedom of *an Other* limits freedom instead).

It is worth repeating that we should by no means expect from the *és/pda* (not even from Rohmer) a strict adherence to the manifold contortions of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, or to his other books on ethics. After all, those who came in the Kantian aftermath, and whose stances on tragedy and classicism substantially informed Rohmer's approach, all explored the aesthetic horizons disclosed by Kantian philosophy by *betraying* it.

Though Kant is extremely circumspect about the possibilities his theory of aesthetic judgement opened, the subtlety and frequent ambiguity of the third Critique made it easy for his followers to breach some of the theoretical walls he had so carefully constructed. Sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, thinkers in the 1790s and in the 1800s enlarged the scope of Kant's vague notion of the philosophical significance of the beautiful into a philosophy of art, which could see artistic beauty as the instance of the rational and the divine within the sensible. It was Greek tragedy more than any other form that provided the ground and inspiration for this aesthetic turn in philosophy.<sup>107</sup>

This is why a high degree of flexibility is necessary in order to track down the influence exerted on Rohmer by Kant and those who came in his wake. References to Kantian ethics and ancient tragedy in the *és/pda* written production are, as a rule, little more than generic and commonsensical witticisms; for instance, the fact that good and evil *follow* the moral law and not vice versa (one of the main tenets of Kantian ethics) is a distant *but nonetheless present* echo, in such passages as:

Are we not right to salute a movie that dares to depart from the exigencies of life that make the beggar an accomplice of the very order that he denounces, and shows us that the answers are in us and only in us?<sup>108</sup>

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>108</sup> Truffaut, 'Stalag 17', p. 164.

Being virtuous or good does not consist in conforming to the moral rules of our society. One does not become bad by way of contravening such rules. Therefore, if the ethical demand is interior and thereby hard to analyse, then nothing is simple anymore.<sup>109</sup>

Commonsensual as they may sound, these passages are nonetheless quite unambiguously non-Sartrean. And while reading the following lines, taken from Rohmer's analysis of Nicholas Ray's *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) as a faithful adaptation of the basic structure of classical tragedy ('A tragic hero is always in some sense a warrior awoken from the intoxication of battle, suddenly perceiving that he is a god no longer'<sup>110</sup>), one cannot help but feel that the critic is obliquely lashing out at the existentialist legacy (Camus in particular):

The modern image of fate is no banal, stupid accident, like the one James Dean, the actor, died in at the height of his career. It is not the absurdity of chance, but of our condition or our will. It is the disproportion that exists between the measure of man – always a noble one – and the futility of the task that he often sets himself.<sup>111</sup>

In a similar vein, he elsewhere lamented that lately 'a vague sense of "failure" or of "absurdity" is generally offered as a substitute'<sup>112</sup> for the good old notion of 'destiny'. It can be argued, thus, that Rohmer reproached mid-century French literary milieu for not being up to its own premises. That is to say, he turned that milieu's own argument against itself, i.e. he countered Malraux's assertion (in his preface to the French edition of Faulkner's *Sanctuary*) that 'the novels of Faulkner are eruptions of Greek tragedy in the detective story' by claiming that nowadays Greek tragedy does not erupt in contemporary novels, but in those films who are more novelistic than the novel itself.

At the end of *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre announced his intention to write a treatise about ethics – which will never be published though (although some notebooks on the subject were posthumously released in 1983). The book of his that comes the closest to a treatise about

109 Chabrol, *Et pourtant, je tourne...*, p. 53. Originally: 'On n'est pas vertueux ou bon parce qu'on se conforme aux règlements de la morale de notre société. On n'est pas méchant parce qu'on contrevient à ces mêmes règlements. Dès lors, si l'exigence éthique est intérieure, donc difficilement analysable, plus rien n'est simple.'

110 Rohmer, 'Ajax or the Cid?', p. 114.

111 *Ibid.*, pp. 114-115.

112 Rohmer, 'Politics Against Destiny', p. 160.

ethics is *Saint Genet*, his biography of (and monograph on) Jean Genet. This habitual criminal who eventually turned to literature is the supremely moral writer, because it shows society (which likes to think of itself as moral) its own inherent immorality. He shows it that *everybody's* freedom is groundless.

He carries to an extreme the latent, masked solitude which is ours; he inflates our sophism until they burst; he magnifies our failures to the point of catastrophe; he exaggerates our dishonesty to the point of making it intolerable to us; he makes our guilt appear in broad daylight. Whatever the society that succeeds ours, his readers will continue to declare him wrong, since he opposes *all* society.<sup>113</sup>

Importantly, Sartre also points out that Genet's ethics is inseparable from his aesthetics, that is, from his having turned to *writing*, viz. a tool whereby he, by exposing his own freedom, can address another person (the reader) and make her more aware and more responsible of her own freedom.

Without mentioning Sartre, Rohmer once did write about Genet.<sup>114</sup> He compared it to Caryl Chessman, a death row inmate who was also a writer. He said he preferred by far the latter in spite of his lack of literary expertise, because he was able to lucidly tackle the conflict between will and destiny without the slightest literary sophistication; in other words, he was able to acknowledge and vividly, if somewhat roughly, express the *exemplary* (that is, universal) value of his experience. As for Genet, his biggest charm was also his main drawback: the *exceptional* character of his experience, the rarity his way of writing underlines so much, to the detriment of its exemplary value, thereby 'shrunk' to the limited size of his own singularity. This, in turn, undermines Genet's main asset, viz. that of making morality face its own inherent immorality: precisely because his experience is so singular, immorality loses its 'inherent' character with regards to morality, whereas Chassman managed to keep that conflict in a purer, non-literarily-individualized form. Genet's emphasis is on subjective freedom rather than on its underlying, objective conflict.

For Sartre/Genet, the inherent immorality of morality lies in freedom's groundlessness: the only universality here is the arbitrariness whereby freedom and subjectivity (the for-itself consciousness) are constituted, an arbitrariness which thus can only be communicated 'in a literary way,' from a for-itself consciousness (the writer's) to another for-itself consciousness (the reader's), in an intersubjective game of musical chairs not unlike that

113 Sartre, *Saint Genet*, 598.

114 Rohmer, 'I. Le bandit philosophe', pp. 36-37.

between the for-itself consciousness and the Other in *Being and Nothingness*. For the *éS/pda*, behind the inherent immorality of morality *and before the subject's freedom (or intersubjectivity, for that matter) comes into play at all*, there is, above all, the universal conflict between will and destiny, grounding the impossibility and at the same time the possibility of freedom. In this respect, man is contradictory even before being free, and he is free *precisely* because he is contradictory (that is, because he escapes causality).

At the beginning of his review of *East of Eden* (Elia Kazan, 1955), François Truffaut laments the absence of a cinematic Jean Genet, that is, of a filmmaker capable to celebrate absolute evil while also being totally abject in real life. However, in spite of his personal attachment to the writer,<sup>115</sup> it is hard to take these lines seriously. More likely, they must be read (like so many statements by him) as a paradox, because he says that for the lack of a cinematic Genet one must regretfully content oneself with... Renoir, Lang, Hitchcock, Ophuls, Ray, Rossellini, Hawks and Kazan (that is, the very peak of the art of cinema in his view), who either dream to kill without actually killing (as in the case of the first three) or make films about crime without committing it (the others). Hence, his 'regret' should rather be read as follows: *there is no place* for a Genet in the cinema. There is no place for someone who addresses morality and immorality from the excessively narrow point of view of *his own exclusive self*. Before the subject and its freedom, a more basic conflict substantiates morality. Accordingly, he favourably welcomed *East of Eden*, 'the first film to have ever presented a Baudelairean hero, fascinated by vice and honours, and standing for both "family-I-love-you" and "family-I-hate-you" at the same time.'<sup>116</sup> Not so incidentally perhaps, Baudelaire was famously the object of an eponymous, somewhat scathing and almost outrageous critical study by Sartre himself.

#### 5.4. Solitude morale

Sartre's 'game of musical chairs' between Self and Other, between the individual and society, each owning a subjective freedom and trying to objectify the other, can be discerned in other passages from *Saint Genet* – such as:

115 His biography confirms that between 1950 and 1964 they have been friends. De Baecque and Toubiana, *Truffaut: A Biography*, pp. 60-63.

116 Truffaut, 'Les haricots du mal', p. 40. Originally: 'Le premier film à nous présenter un héros baudelairien, fasciné par le vice et par les honneurs, qui famille je vous hais et famille je vous aime, en même temps.'



one is alone when one is right and wrong *at the same time*: when one declares right as subject – because one is conscious and lives and because one cannot and will not deny what one has willed – and when one declares oneself wrong as object because one cannot reject the objective condemnation of society.<sup>117</sup>

No less important is the allusion to *solitude*: the last ten pages of *Saint Genet* explain the concept of solitude (also showing up here and there in earlier chapters of the book) and its ethical relevance.

'Solitude' is a crucial concept for the *és/pda* as well, albeit one whose meaning is, in their case, distinctly non-Sartrean. To clarify this point, it is worth exploring John Hess's '*La politique des auteurs*: World view as aesthetics', one of the most significant and illuminating critical contributions on the *és/pda* that ever appeared.<sup>118</sup> It starts by attacking Andrew Sarris and his vulgarization of the *és/pda*, thanks to which auteurism penetrated American film culture. Sarris maintained that the *és/pda* critics supported those directors who were able to react against the heavy constraints of a highly impersonal production system (Hollywood) and to express a personal worldview, by means of attaching a personal visual style to whatever story and subject matter they came across. Hess, on the contrary, thinks that stories did matter to them.

Auteur criticism was, in fact, a very complicated way of saying something very simple. These critics wanted to see their own perception of the world on the screen: the individual is trapped in *solitude morale* and can escape from it—transcend it—if he or she come to see their condition and then extend themselves to others and to God. Whenever the auteur critics saw this tale on the screen, they called its creator an auteur.<sup>119</sup>

In other words, the *és/pda* critics thought that there was only one story worth being brought up on the screen. Of course, it is not just 'one single story', but a *pattern* that can inform countless stories: *solitude morale* ('moral solitude'). Stories of this kind generally feature a man or a woman being trapped in his or her own particularities, peculiarities and idiosyncrasies:

117 Sartre, *Saint Genet*, p. 592.

118 Hess, '*La politique des auteurs*'. This is the first half of a two-part essay. Its follow-up ('*La politique des auteurs* 2, Truffaut's manifesto') is far less relevant to our purpose, and will thus not be considered. All subsequent references are taken from the online version of the article, available here: <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JCofolder/auturism1.html>.

119 Hess, '*La politique des auteurs*'.

‘This tale begins with a man or a woman, the social animal, trapped in a state of *solitude morale* because he or she is neither in touch with his or her lowest human depths, nor with other people, nor with the spiritual dimension of life.’ Alfred Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train* (1951), Roberto Rossellini’s *Europe 51* (1952), Nicholas Ray’s *Johnny Guitar* (1954) (three films among those most valued by the *ÉS/pda*), all begin with a solitary figure, whose utter isolation is also underlined visually. ‘As the tale develops, we find that under extreme, even violent circumstances, the hero is forced to discover his most base and humiliating aspects; he has reached the point at which his relationship to other people and ultimately to God becomes clear to him and to the audience as well.’ This occurs in all three films (in *Johnny Guitar*, for instance, the main character faces his own penchant for violence and transcends it by engaging with his former lover Vienna), and somewhat graphically in *Stromboli*, as has already been analysed in a previous chapter. In short, what these critics were after was ‘a narrative movement from *solitude morale*, to self-revelation, and, finally, to salvation either in terms of contact with others (*Johnny Guitar*) or in terms of contact with the divine (*Europe 51*).’

Any in-depth exploration of the hundreds of articles authored by these critics would easily confirm that *solitude morale* was indeed frequently mentioned in their writings. Most notably, as suggested by the release dates of the three aforementioned films, it was definitely more recurrent in the *ÉS* years than in the *pda* ones – although there is no doubt that even in its maturest phase the *pda* bore substantial traces of the *solitude morale* approach. These critics wanted to see films that followed the moral torments of an individual that cannot help but be played against the community;<sup>120</sup>

120 Michel Dorsday elaborates lengthily on this topic in his ‘Situation de l’Amérique’. As for Hess (who does not distinguish between *ÉS* and *pda*), he explains the *ÉS/pda*’s bias towards individualism in historical terms. The scholar claims that the *ÉS/pda* originated from the young but very fertile tradition in film criticism that existed in France in the years immediately prior to and immediately after the end of World War II. This tradition (whose main exponent was André Bazin, future editor-in-chief of the *CC*) was obviously deeply marked by the devastations of the war and by the subsequent need for reconstruction. Accordingly, Bazin, Astruc, Leenhardt and the others practised a socially-oriented kind of film criticism, which due to the heavy influence of (among others) Sartrean existentialism and Mounier’s *personnalisme* greatly valued the freedom of the individual, but only qua situated in a definite social context. They were not interested in the free individual per se, but in the individual qua free agent well inserted within a community, reacting to it and handling ‘responsibly’ one’s freedom for the sake of the others (which also explains, according to Hess, why Bazin was so fond of visual techniques emphasizing the organic relationship between the person and the environment, like the long take or the depth of field). Conversely, the next generation, i.e. that of the *ÉS/pda*, felt the effect of the political climate of the late 1940s, when France’s reactionary turn abruptly headed off

the solitude they show 'belongs to the exceptional being, or someone that circumstances made into one, the solitude of a genius, not of an outcast or a failure';<sup>121</sup> in Ray's films 'salvation is a private affair,' as 'the real struggle takes place in only one.'<sup>122</sup> In *Stalag 17* by Billy Wilder (1953), 'an apologia of individualism,' Sefton, the main character, '*is alone because he wants to be alone*,' he is very intelligent but refuses to be the leader of the prisoners (the film is set in an Austrian war camp during World War II), and 'escapes to get away from the companions whom he despises rather than from a regime he has come to terms with and guards he's been able to bend to his needs. Sefton needs those whom he despises to despise him in turn. If he remains, he will be a hero—a role he rejects no matter what the cost. Having lost his moral solitude, he hastens to regain it by becoming an escapee, with all the risk that entails.' It is important that Truffaut also makes clear that 'the depravity of the group versus the individual's moral solitude' is 'a *large* theme [*le grand sujet de l'époque*]'<sup>123</sup> (my emphasis): his is not the only review gathering together the *pda's* favourite *auteurs* on the basis of a *thematic* connection. The *és/pda* attachment to the *solitude morale* pattern is most likely due to the fact that they regarded it as the modern variation of the old dilemma of ancient tragedy: freedom vs. necessity. In an article that Hess also quotes,<sup>124</sup> Rivette stated that directors as different as Hitchcock, Renoir and Rossellini shared the same set of basic *themes*: sacrifice, renunciation, abandonment.<sup>125</sup> What he had in mind, though, is clearly *solitude morale*, as in the immediately preceding

post-war hopes of renovation. As a result, they still focussed on individual freedom, but the underlying conception of the individual was altogether different: their individual was *isolated*, deprived of significant bonds with surrounding social environment. Their individualism was thus much more apolitical, if not downright conservative. Hess is quite right when he points out that the *és/pda* broke away from the existentialist/personalist framework of the former critics. He fails, however, to satisfyingly outline the contours of their rejection of Sartre, leaving them vague.

121 Rohmer, 'Of Three Films and a Certain School', p. 61.

122 Rivette, 'On imagination'.

123 Truffaut, '*Stalag 17*', pp. 163-164. Decisively, Truffaut openly affirms that he *never* liked any of Wilder's films before – and the reason why he likes *Stalag 17* is because Wilder has finally come up with a cleverly individualistic tale. This confirms the suspicion that the *és/pda* is less about praising every film by a random list of beloved filmmakers than it is about praising those works which conform to a certain *specific* idea of cinema.

124 Here is a few other reviews that mention *solitude morale* and that Hess does not quote (the list could go on and on): Truffaut, 'De A Jusqu'au Z'; Truffaut, '*Rear Window*'; Truffaut, 'La fureur de vivre'; Rohmer, 'Deux images de la solitude'.

125 Elsewhere, he similarly points out that a common thread strings together several films by Murnau, Rossellini, Renoir, Hitchcock, Griffith, Ophuls and a few others, namely an 'abstract bend [...] guiding the steps of the heroes from town to solitude' ('[une] courbe abstraite [...] qui dirige de la ville à la solitude les pas des héros'). Rivette, 'La masque', p. 50.

paragraph he wrote (about Hitchcock's *I, Confess*, 1953): 'Never before had a story with so many wrung hearts, with such total dependence, been so closely confused with the experience of solitude, which suffocates the human being at the very moment when it acknowledges the evidence of its ties.'<sup>126</sup> Here, as in Hess's formulation, *solitude morale* consists of the discovery of others and/or God the very moment one's solitude is taken to the extreme. Nicholas Ray is another apt case in point. 'All his films tell the same story: the violent man who wants to renounce violence and his relationship with a morally stronger woman. Ray's constant hero, the bully, is a weak man-child, when he is not simply a child. He is wrapped in moral solitude, always hunted, sometimes lynched.'<sup>127</sup> To claim that, for these critics, not only 'all Ray's films', but *all the films worthy of consideration* told the story of *solitude morale* would be an overstatement (one not unlike Godard's slogan 'the cinema is Nicholas Ray'<sup>128</sup>), but only slightly so. The *auteur* cherished by the *éS/pda* was not necessarily someone who expressed by means of a personal style whatever vision he happened to carry, nor was he just any director reiterating film after film whatever 'same story' happened to constitute his 'personal poetics', but if somebody proved capable of convincingly grappling with *that one single pattern* (the *solitude morale*), so reminiscent of the binary deadlock of ancient tragedy, then, in all likelihood, he would have been granted the *auteur* status as a matter of course. Maybe not every single *auteur* told the story of *solitude morale*, and not every single director tackling that subject matter automatically became an *auteur* – but it certainly helped a lot.

In order to understand what *solitude morale* really was about, one needs to consider the formal dimension as well. What follows is Hess's definition of what Godard (and by extension the *éS/pda*) meant by *mise en scène*.

Godard's definition of *mise en scene*, admittedly a loose one, suggests three areas of inquiry. First, there is the demand that film represent and not express. Second, Godard emphasizes the genius of the director and posits an 'inseparability' of director and camera. Third, and most important, Godard centers on the 'movement of the actor within the frame.' Thus *mise en scene*, for Godard, consisted of the way of presenting the material, the relation of the artist to the material, and the functioning of the actor.<sup>129</sup>

126 Rivette, 'L'art de la fugue', p. 49. Originally: 'Jamais trame d'âmes plus serrée, plus totale dépendance n'avaient été aussi étroitement confondues avec l'expérience de la solitude, qui étouffe l'être au moment même où il constate l'évidence de ses liens.'

127 Truffaut, 'Johnny Guitar', p. 141.

128 Godard, 'Bitter Victory', p. 64.

129 Hess, 'La politique des auteurs'.

This definition is frankly unsatisfying. Unlike Hess's very useful concept of *solitude morale*, this tripartition does not really stand the test of a thorough exploration of the *ÉS/pda's* hundreds of writings: by carefully analysing these articles, one easily finds that too many nuances of the extremely elusive concept of *mise en scène* are left out. However, what indeed should be retained from it is a shared, implicit principle underlying all three entries: *a peculiar reversal between the inside and the outside*. 'The demand that film represent and not express' clearly rests upon the manifestation/expression divide previously outlined; the 'inseparability of director and camera' suggests that there should be no 'authorial intentions' but in the manifest content of the images; the 'movement of the actor within the frame' points to the fact that 'the director must examine the appearance in order to penetrate to the essence, the inner life.'<sup>130</sup> More generally, 'the auteur critics posited a direct connection between the human body and *la vie intérieure* (inner moral and spiritual life). What one sees on the movie screen is the external manifestations, the presentation, of the interior life.'<sup>131</sup> The important word here is 'direct': the connection is immediate, there is no 'inside' being expressed *through* the 'outside', or through literary techniques. This is why Rohmer praised *Bitter Victory* (1957): its director 'was here less trying to suggest through rhetorical devices the heroes' thoughts than he was to find within the image itself the lyrical transcription of an inner turmoil.'<sup>132</sup> Cinema, 'descriptive in essence, only excels through the expression of a very inner tragedy, that is to say, of our inability to give away our dearest thoughts.'<sup>133</sup> Only *outward appearance* can deliver the innermost core of our thought. Rohmer exalted Kenji Mizoguchi's *Chikamatsu monogatari* (*The Crucified Lovers*, 1954) because it showed the characters' feelings thanks to a dusty mountainous path, or a boat floating on lake waters.<sup>134</sup> And although he disliked Vincente Minnelli's *Tea and Sympathy* (1956), he did appreciate the few moments that focused less on the teenage hero's psychological awkwardness than on the downright bodily manifestations thereof (for instance when he clumsily attempts to dance with a much more experienced

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Rohmer, 'Seul film adulte à Venise: *Amère victoire*'. Originally: '[Il] a cherché, ici, moins à suggérer par quelque procédé rhétorique les pensées de ses héros, qu'à trouver, dans l'image, la transcription lyrique d'un tourment intérieur.'

<sup>133</sup> Rohmer, 'La robe bleue d'Harriett', p. 63. Originally: 'Par essence descriptif, [il] n'excelle que dans l'expression d'un tragique tout intérieur, je veux dire de notre inaptitude à livrer le plus cher de nos pensées.'

<sup>134</sup> Rohmer, 'Les amants crucifiés'.

bartender).<sup>135</sup> ‘The cinema will excel in portraying sentiments only as long as they come from the incessant connections with things, and [...] – *these sentiments being things themselves* – they will become nothing more than the movement or the mimicry that they impose on us at each instant’<sup>136</sup> (my emphasis).

We can now reformulate the pattern of *solitude morale* with more accuracy. A man or a woman is trapped in her own particularities, and is thereby isolated. A path of self-discovery through her own contradictions begins; she is pushed to the limits of her own personality, until she is compelled to face her own self *qua foreign*. The revelation that she is an alien to herself coincides with the reversal between the inside and the outside: the innermost core of her being proves to be *external* (that is, it is immediately revealed on outward appearance) as much as the others and/or God prove to be inside her. When the hero of *Strangers on a Train* finally resolves to kill, his looks *manifest* this intention rather than *expressing* it, because the appearance of that intention on the outside *clashes with* whatever characterization the character had hitherto been given. At that moment, the hero is, as it were, beyond his own limits, and his looks manifest this ‘beyond’: ‘The signifier and the signified are here set so high [...] that in the exploits of this criminal, Hitchcock’s art cannot but show us the promethean image of his murderous little hand, his terror in face of the unbearable brilliance of the fire it steals.’<sup>137</sup>

Gestures such as that by the hero of *Strangers on a Train* do not ‘express’ interior life: they only manifest an opacity which is *as mysterious as* interior life – therein lies their coincidence between the inside and the outside. ‘The transparency of gesture comes from an initial opacity, suggesting the mystery of interior life that three centuries of novelistic investigation have still left us unable to penetrate.’<sup>138</sup> The legibility of the outside depends on the utter, complete impenetrability of the inside; it is not a sign of what lies within interiority once its mystery has been penetrated. Again, one only needs to look at *Stromboli* to find a neat depiction of this pattern: in her hour of utmost despair, when the clash between her and the others has reached the point of no return, Karin is reduced to her most exterior manifestations; devoid of any inner life, she *is* like the rabbit and the tuna. *Solitude morale* is not just the tale of an individualist soul going through the hardships of isolation: it is also and inseparably the tale of the reversal between the

135 Rohmer, ‘Thé et sympathie’.

136 Rohmer, ‘Such Vanity is Painting’, p. 46.

137 Godard, ‘Strangers on a Train’, p. 24.

138 Rohmer, ‘The American Renoir’, p. 181.

inside and the outside. Renoir's 1946 *Diary of a Chambermaid* not only 'depicts the kinds of feelings we like to bury in the depths of our soul – not just feelings of repressed humiliation, but even the distaste or weariness we feel toward ourselves,' but also 'depicts them [...] limpidly':<sup>139</sup> there are no 'depths of soul' any longer, because their outward, 'limpid' objectification is all there is. This is shown, in the same film, particularly by 'the savage clash between the robust servant and the consumptive master, that show us, in a flash, a world of secrets that until then had only been glimpsed.'<sup>140</sup>

This reversal between inside and outside, alluded to in many passages in the writings by the *és/pda* (for instance: 'But the cinema will always call for this enclosed, dark place where the spectator withdraws and concentrates: an inner art, therein everything gathers and condenses together; before long, the screen seems to be standing at the very centre of the mind; on it, I contemplate the universe in the innermost part of myself'<sup>141</sup>), can be found in documentaries as well. One of them is *Stars at Noon (Les Etoiles de midi, 1959)* by Marcel Ichac, a mountaineering film which 'introduces the modern notions of continuity and duration.'<sup>142</sup>

In this battle between man and gravity, the obstacle that seems the most difficult to overcome is not space but *time*, that is, the long and tedious repetition of each movement, the bearer of a more subtle vertigo than that caused by heights. Little by little, through the intervention of time, we perceive the futility, the vanity, and at the same time the true glory of the undertaking, the rare pleasure it brings. Thanks to time, we enter these men's souls, and the suspense, which is physical in the beginning, becomes psychological and moral in the end. In devoting itself to painting a rare passion, this film allows us to touch the common foundation of all passions.<sup>143</sup>

Here, Rohmer seems to imply that cinema can access 'the common foundation of all passions,' that is, *time as such* according to Kant himself. The 'form of inner sense, i.e. of the intuiting we do of ourselves and of our inner state'<sup>144</sup>

139 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

140 *Ibid.*, p. 181.

141 Rivette, 'Les malheurs d'Orphée', p. 2. Originally: 'Mais toujours le cinéma réclamera ce lieu clos et obscur où le spectateur se replie sur soi-même et se concentre: art intérieur, tout s'y rassemble et s'y condense; l'écran semble bientôt s'être dressé au centre même de l'esprit; j'y contemple l'univers au plus secret de moi-même.'

142 Rohmer, 'Faith and Mountains: *Les Etoiles de midi*', p. 119.

143 *Ibid.*

144 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A33.

(Kant's definition of time) is of course not accessed in itself (a possibility Kant firmly denied), but becomes outward and spatialized; thereby, passions become something external, the inside becomes the outside (and in turn, the outside – the spatialized depiction of passions – *moves* us, affecting the viewer in the inside). In the passage above, this process is straightforwardly called *moral*.

Direction of actors, arguably an unjustly overlooked means to put together *mise en scène* the way the *és/pda* meant it,<sup>145</sup> is obviously of paramount importance when it comes to this reversal between the inside and the outside. It was particularly important when, rather than expressing some psychological content, it manifested *contradictions*: no definite meaning, but a dynamic tension between possible meanings. 'The hesitation of both brother and sister, between the temptations of semi-prostitution and the call of a love affair and of a vocation (portrayed with no less plausible coldness), is depicted with such precision, such accuracy of detail [...].'<sup>146</sup> Here, Rohmer is talking about René Clément, a filmmaker he usually does not like, but who in this particular film (*Barrage contre le Pacifique*, 1957) at least aptly directs his actors. The critic unhesitatingly calls *moral* his capacity to manifest contradiction through the players' way of acting. Elsewhere, he defines *mise en scène* as the art 'of refining characters which in the script appear to be rather rough'; in other words, it is the art of visually emphasizing the characters' contradiction, 'the very definition of tragedy, in accordance with Aristotle's norms.'<sup>147</sup> Along the same lines, according to Godard 'Murnau's *Faust* also revealed this incessant change in which the actor transcends his powers, taxes his senses, falls prey to a torrent of emotions in which extravagance yields to calm, jealousy becomes aversion, ambition becomes failure, and pleasure, remorse.'<sup>148</sup> What is at stake in all these cases is not the expression of a definite feeling, but the manifestation of a grey area

145 Jacques Rivette, for instance, maintains that 'one of the subtlest kinds [of genius][...] is to be able to bestow it on one's young girls'. Originally: 'Une des formes [de génie] les plus subtiles [...] est d'en savoir donner à ses jeunes filles'. Here Rivette is referring to Boris Barnet, whom he considers a genius also because he can transmit his genius to his young actresses. Rivette, 'Un nouveau visage de la pudeur', p. 50.

146 Rohmer, 'Barrage contre le pacifique'. Originally: 'La peinture des hésitations de ce frère et de cette soeur entre les tentations d'une semi-prostitution et l'appel d'un amour et d'une vocation regardés avec une non moins vraisemblable froideur, est menée avec une telle précision, une telle justesse de détail [...].'

147 Eric Rohmer, 'Livres de cinéma', *CC*, 62, p. 57. Originally: '[...] de nuancer des caractères, souvent frustes sur le script'; 'La définition même de la tragédie conformément aux normes d'Aristote.'

148 Godard, 'Strangers on a Train', p. 25.



beyond definition, and in between (often opposite) feelings: ultimately, these feelings cannot be determined *but* by their outward concretion as such.

Haroun Tazieff's *The Devil's Blast* (*Les rendez-vous du diable*, 1959) is, according to the review Godard dedicated to it, a fascinating borderline case of *solitude morale*, one putting 'into practice Lenin's famous maxim as codified by Gorky: ethics are the aesthetic of the future.'<sup>149</sup> Its director had himself filmed while walking very dangerously close to the edge of a volcano; that scene alone, Godard says, 'would suffice to make *Les rendez-vous du diable* a remarkable film [the original article in French reads: *le plus beau film du monde* ('the best film in the world')]. For two reasons. One refers to Tazieff himself, the other to the cinema itself.'<sup>150</sup> The first reason is that Tazieff pushes himself to his limits:

An absurd and fine endeavour inasmuch as it determinedly resists analysis: as absurd and fine as the silence of Rimbaud, absurd and fine as the death of Drieu la Rochelle, absurd and fine as the voyage of Abel, who came on foot from Oslo to Paris to show Cauchy the formula for resolving quintic equations, only Cauchy refused to receive him, and Abel returned to Norway where he spent the rest of his life proving that it was impossible to resolve quintic equations by formula.<sup>151</sup>

All these 'gloriously contradictory' occurrences are so many epitomes of *solitude morale*, and although *Les rendez-vous du diable* is only a documentary, it is still the tale of an individual possessed by a private obsession, namely that of defying the limits imposed by nature. This obsession is pushed to its limits: Tazieff risks his own life to film volcanoes. It is thus no impersonal 'documentary on extreme situations' like the much-despised *Lost Continent*<sup>152</sup> (*Continente Perduto*, Enrico Gras, Giorgio Moser and Leonardo Bonzi, 1955), but well and truly a *solitude morale* tale, and precisely like all *solitude morale* tales, this individualist obsession has to make it to the outside and be reduced to outward appearance, to the mere surface of images. The inside/outside reversal has to take place – and this is the 'second reason' Godard mentions.

By filming himself risking death from streams of lava, Tazieff proves the cinema – if I may so put it – by the simple fact that without the film, the adventure would be of no interest, since no one but Tazieff would

149 Godard, 'Les rendez-vous du diable', p. 125.

150 *Ibid.*

151 *Ibid.*

152 *Ibid.*, p. 126.

know it had happened in this way. What is remarkable, therefore, is this overweening desire to record, this fierce purpose which Tazieff shares with a Cartier-Bresson or the Sucksdorff of *The Great Adventure*, this deep inner need which forces them to try, against all odds, to authenticate fiction through the reality of the photographic image.<sup>153</sup>

Of course, this is not a matter of merely 'documenting heroism,' but rather of a tight interconnection between reality and fiction. This means, in short, that the outside world is supposed to display on its visible surface *by itself* the very stuff fiction 'in the mind of men' is made of: Tazieff shows us 'the underwater eruption of the Azores volcano with its wealth of forms so awesome that only Tintoretto could have dared paint it,' as well as 'a river of lava writhing in a boiling mass of purple and gold, colours which only Eisenstein dared use in the banquet scene of *Ivan the Terrible*.'<sup>154</sup> In this way, the reconciliation between *solitude morale* individual (here: Tazieff) and the others and/or God is not even needed, because what is truly important, pace Hess, is not that reconciliation per se, but the 'vertiginous moment' of reversal between the inside and the outside (a reversal whose importance was, after all, recognized by Hess himself). Neither the others, nor God really need to be around.

### 5.5. The vertiginous moment: The reversal between inside and outside

Here, we touch on a particularly important point. Hess's claim that in the end the *solitude morale* character reconciles with God and the others might be the weakest part of his argument. There is indeed a reconciliation in most cases, but it is one of a different kind. One of the reasons why *solitude morale* pattern is to be conceived as the modern version of ancient tragedy is that the 'illumination on the screen of a privileged moment when all barriers to the expression of long forgotten or repressed feelings came down' that Hess calls 'the vertiginous moment' is in fact somewhat similar to Aristotle's *catharsis*: the powerful release of passions whereby the audience was faced, through fiction, with freedom's inherent dead-ends (this very awareness created in turn the possibility for freedom to be actually exerted *off stage*, within the community, in civic everyday life). 'Catharsis', in the *solitude*

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126-127.

*morale* pattern, is the moment when the self is discovered as foreign: it is the vertiginous moment of the reversal between inside and outside. It is the moment when the hero(ine) and/or the audience finds his/her self fully disclosed in external appearance. Freedom rejoins necessity in that it finds itself *spatialized*. It is also worth noting that *solitude morale*'s decisive 'vertiginous moment', the reversal between outside and inside, is precisely the opposite of a temporalization, as it occurs (definitely not unlike catharsis classically conceived) all at once, simultaneously and discontinuously (and not, say, by carefully interweaving the psychological causalities and determinism originating one's attitude and behaviour). These critics were not interested in the conventional psychological inner workings so typical of the usual stage play or novel; they were in search of a special moment,<sup>155</sup> particularly the moment when the character and/or the actor seemingly loses control and is revealed through his or her outward manifestations without expressing anything definite. Ingrid Bergman (Karen) on the volcano is once again an excellent case in point, as are, say, the sudden outbursts characterizing Nicholas Ray's heroes, the priest under stress in *I, Confess*, the subtly naturalistic acting of so many performers directed by Jean Renoir, and so on and so forth.

This is why neither the others, nor God were needed in *Les rendez-vous du diable*: the visual depiction of the conflict between will (Tazieff's) and destiny (nature) is already its own cathartic conciliation. And it is again Godard who offered another particularly suitable example, in a ciné-club note about Fritz Lang's *The Return of Frank James* (1940). After having outlined its narrative in a way that closely matches the *solitude morale* pattern, i.e. the contemporary version of ancient tragedy's deadlock ('Most of Lang's scripts are built in the same way: chance forces a character to leave his individualistic shell and become a tragic hero, in that he "forces the hand" of an abruptly imposed fate'<sup>156</sup>), he goes on to make clear that ultimately the tragic must be made visible on the very surface of the images:

One image alone could define the aesthetics of Fritz Lang: a policeman targets a bandit and is ready to kill him; to better emphasise the inexorable aspect of such scene, Lang installed a front sight on the gun, like

<sup>155</sup> Hess, '*La politique des auteurs*'.

<sup>156</sup> Godard, '*Le retour de Frank James*', p. 92. Originally: 'Tous les scénarios de Lang sont construits de la même façon: le hasard force un personnage à sortir de sa coquille d'individualiste et à devenir un héros tragique dans la mesure où il "force la main" au destin qui lui est brusquement imposé.'

those from high precision weapons; then, the spectator instantly feels that the policeman *cannot* miss his shot and that the runaway needs to *mathematically* die.<sup>157</sup>

The fact that the image is viewed through a gun sight does not really 'say' or 'express' anything: it just *anticipates* something that is about to happen. It is not a matter of some meaning being expressed, but rather of time being compressed. Fate lies in this contraction (it is the timeless dimension of destiny entering the temporal dimension of men). Appearance for appearance's sake is the quintessence of the entanglement between freedom and necessity that tragedy is fundamentally about: the inside becomes the outside, time becomes space. According to Rohmer, in Murnau's films, tragic conflict appears through the relationship between the characters and their environment: natural elements in *Tabu* (1931) and *Sunrise* (1927), architectural infrastructures in *Tartuffe* (1925) and *The Last Laugh* (*Der Letzte Mann*, 1924); in *Faust*, it is mainly conveyed thanks to the dichotomies (inside/outside, high/low and others) shaping the directions of gestures and the spaces wherein they are inscribed.<sup>158</sup> Crucially, as has already been noted about *The Wrong Man* earlier in this chapter, all this points to no definite content being expressed, but at a *conflict* being manifested spatially. In Hitchcock's *Under Capricorn* (1949), *I Confess* and *The Wrong Man*, 'man is not the driving element. It is not fate, either, in the meaning that the Greeks gave it, but, rather, the very shapes that the formal entities space and time acquire.'<sup>159</sup>

Indeed, in the *és/pda's* (and especially Rohmer's) view, time and space not only manifest the tragic, but *replace* it. In films, the tragic takes shape in purely spatial and temporal forms, to such an extent that the narrative forms and structures of ancient, classical tragedy *are not necessarily needed* – which is also why ancient tragedy can be now smoothly transformed into the formally fairly different *solitude morale* pattern. As far as narrative is concerned, Anthony Mann's *The Last Frontier* (1956) is not a tragedy: it is novelistic, lyrical and Shakespearian. Nature is not part of the tragic

157 *Ibid.* Originally: 'Une image pourrait à elle seule définir l'esthétique de Fritz Lang: un policier ajuste un bandit qui s'enfuit et va le tuer; pour mieux faire sentir l'aspect inexorable de la scène, Lang fit installer sur le fusil un viseur à lunette comme en ont les armes de grande précision; le spectateur sent alors immédiatement que le policier *ne peut pas* manquer son coup et que le fuyard doit *mathématiquement* mourir.'

158 This is the main thesis of Rohmer's monograph *L'organisation de l'espace dans le Faust de Murnau*.

159 Rohmer, 'Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*', p. 169.

conflict, but a mere accompaniment to a drama that 'does not spring from the conflict of two wills, each led by its own logic, but rather from two, or many, ways of being, each of which embodying, so to speak, a monologue being delivered for lack of finding a common language.'<sup>160</sup> However, tragic conflict is not simply ruled out: necessity (tragedy's backbone, as it were) takes shape through the 'mathematical', 'algebraic' and 'geometric' character of Mann's *mise en scène*, which Rohmer analyses in detail<sup>161</sup> by retracing the lines being drawn within the frames by the actors' movements and by the dynamical use of landscape, as well as outside the frames thanks to sound. The resulting geometric figures (in this case, a triangle) embody necessity, thereby retrieving tragedy<sup>162</sup> in a different fashion; as George Lellis once put it, Rohmerian cinematic metaphysics 'converts geometry to morality.'<sup>163</sup>

A good case in point here is Marcel Carné, a director almost unanimously despised by the *ÉS/pda*; Michel Dorsday, for instance, frontally opposed pseudo-tragic Carné and Orson Welles' *Othello* (1952),<sup>164</sup> saying that the solitude of Carné's tragic characters is only social, while Welles' solitude is portrayed in ways that unmistakably recall *solitude morale*. Rohmer admired him in the late Thirties and in the early Forties, but did not like his subsequent films; at any rate, he also said that Carné never really featured among his favourites.<sup>165</sup> It is easy to realize that his most celebrated films rely heavily on the tragic. *Daybreak* (*Le jour se lève*, 1939), for instance, is very classically constructed following the traditional structure of ancient tragedy, and neatly revolves around the conflict between necessity and freedom. However, Carné's tragic is essentially *theatrical*, as shown by the rigid dramatic structure and by the way its over-written dialogues are uttered. Rohmer once said that it is not enough to transpose *Romeo and Juliet* to another historical era and another place to satisfyingly adapt it for the screen;<sup>166</sup> similarly, it is not enough to transpose ancient tragedy to twentieth century's Aubervilliers and to keep its textual and dramatic features intact

160 Rohmer, 'Le roi des montagnes', p. 38. Originally: '[II] ne naît pas du conflit de deux volontés, chacune entraînée par sa propre logique, mais plutôt, de deux, ou plusieurs, manières d'être, aimant de soliloquer faute de trouver un commun langage.'

161 Rohmer, 'Le roi des montagnes', p. 39.

162 Rohmer does not use this exact word here, but the way he describes the film recalls many other occurrences where he does employ that term.

163 Lellis, *Bertolt Brecht, Cahiers du Cinéma and Contemporary Film Theory*, p. 17.

164 Dorsday, 'Othello ou la solitude de notre temps'.

165 Rohmer, 'Le temps des reprises'; see also Rohmer, 'The Critical Years', pp. 13-14.

166 Rohmer, 'Ciel sans étoiles', p. 5.

without providing a *spatial*, non-theatrical (that is, not centred around the main character<sup>167</sup>) equivalent of the tragic.

It thus appears that, in a way, *solitude morale* brings together the two aspects of cinematic freedom hitherto accounted for: the formal one as well as the thematic one (tragedy). Most of all, it seems to be the confutation of the anguish haunting Sartre's freedom: *first*, the hero suffers an isolation deriving from the arbitrariness of his self-chosen singularities, but *then* the hero gets to the very bottom of them and finds out that his freedom is in fact grounded on its opposite. This is the moment of 'cathartic' reconciliation; at this point, the hero's freedom is definitively no longer liable to be read in Sartrean terms, and starts to faintly look like Kant's moral autonomy. Of course, this does not mean that these films overtly suggested in any recognizable way that, as per Kant, universal reason is the very condition of free will, and that the latter can only be formulated in accordance with the moral law. It just means that the hero's self-imposed freedom loses the groundlessness it seemed to be affected by in the beginning, and is reconciled with its *inherent* limitations. In very generic, but nonetheless actual terms, the inside is reconciled with the outside as it acknowledges itself *qua external* and fully coincident with appearances. As the mechanical determinism of the temporal unfolding of the cause-effect texture known as narrative is perturbed in some way and thereby approaches tragedy (the latter being typically characterized by the traumatic irruption of fate or Gods in the regular deployment of meaningful, oriented and concatenated human action), appearance for appearance's sake fills up these temporal fissures: in these cathartic moments, time is made into space, the inside becomes the outside. Once again, this catharsis has to do with Kant's critique of Descartes (and, by anticipation, Sartre): it is the liberating revelation that there is no self accessible in itself through self-reflection, but only in outward apperception itself (it is the purely formal 'I think' accompanying every apperception). As the inside and the outside switch places, the viewer himself feels *involved* in the outward appearance before him.<sup>168</sup>

167 In a long and detailed analytical piece ('Le décor est un acteur'), André Bazin demonstrated that *Daybreak* contained a lot of interaction between the hero and the objects surrounding him (a wardrobe, a glass and so on and so forth); however, the same piece also made clear that everything revolved around the hero, who always remained the firm pivot of the film's spatial organization. Elsewhere, Bazin himself said that theatrical space is essentially centripetal; therefore we must conclude that *Daybreak* was in effect theatrical.

168 In his anti-Bergsonian *Intuition of the Instant*, Gaston Bachelard claims that the reality of time does not lie in duration (as Bergson maintained), but in the instant disrupting it; continuity is not the primary law of time, because it is itself ruled, regulated and determined by discontinuity, time's

Not infrequently, Rohmer tended to associate 'appearance for appearance's sake' with morality and with the involvement of the viewer in what was to be seen. In other words, beauty was regarded as an antidote to the smugness toward negativity, to the cynicism and to the resignation to alienation allegedly characterizing French 'tradition of quality' films, indulgently depicting moral and/or physical ugliness so as to make the viewer feel smarter. As we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, he deemed *The Trouble with Harry* as the opposite of Clouzot's cynicism; in the same review, this very feature was directly connected with the visual beauty of the film's landscapes.

*The Criminal Life of Archibaldo De La Cruz* (*Ensayo de un crimen*, 1955) is the first film by Luis Buñuel that Rohmer really likes: he claims it to be his first film where the director does not despise his characters. Crucially, Rohmer pairs the fact that Buñuel is here 'the lovable accomplice of his lovable hero'<sup>169</sup> with the film's pictorial merits.

This modern set, with its unctuous blacks and whites, its baroque knick-knacks, its sophisticated dresses, and magnificent undergrowth in its final scene, counts for a great deal in the fascination, with which the display of imaginary or real, sumptuous and scintillating murders attracts us, like a jeweller's window display. After all, who cares about the symbol's significance? What we see satisfies a hunger that is essentially too delicate to be unhealthy. Therein, I believe, lies the true moral of the fable.<sup>170</sup>

fundamental feature. Or, as Godard (who once mentioned 'the late Gaston Bachelard' in his *L'eau vive*, p. 80) put it, by means of a turn of phrase owing a lot to Bachelard's lyrical assertiveness, 'space is the impulse of a desire, and time its effort towards accomplishment' (*Strangers on a Train*, p. 25): temporal continuity is nothing but the development of a direction imposed by discontinuity. To be sure, this is not exactly (to put it mildly) a Rohmerian/Kantian conception, but it is nonetheless striking that the discontinuity of the instant in time (as time's foundation itself) is matched with *solitude* throughout Bachelard's treatise. What follows can be read in the very first paragraph: 'The instant is already solitude [...] It is solitude in its barest metaphysical value. Yet, an even more poignant solitude confirms the tragic solitude of the instant: through a sort of creative violence, time limited to the instant isolates us not only from others but even from ourselves, since it breaks with our most cherished past'. And in the last paragraph of a later essay ('Poetic Instant and Metaphysical Instant') included in the appendix of the same volume, it is claimed that '*all morality is instantaneous*. The categorical imperative of morality has nothing to do with duration. It does not retain any sensory cause; it anticipates no consequence'. This convergence between (tragic) solitude, morality, temporal discontinuity, inner conflict, the disruption of causal sequentiality and (last but not least) Kant's categorical imperative itself intriguingly resonates with *solitude morale*'s reliance on temporal/causal discontinuity, as the only real foundation of the reversal between the inside and the outside, the catharsis of the individual at odds with the others, and with himself.

169 Rohmer, 'Luis Buñuel: The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz', p. 148.

170 *Ibid.*

What the critic is getting at, is an intriguing parallelism between the *graciousness* of visual appearances and the paradoxical *innocence* of a character who is innocent ('a purer heart than he himself knows'<sup>171</sup>) as much as he is disturbed and potentially criminal: he is a mannequin-loving, wannabe woman-killer whose victims always end up being murdered by somebody else instead. Indeed, the innermost core of his being is outside his grasp: he never gives vent to his homicidal tendencies, because they are always carried out by others, so ultimately he remains guiltless. It's again a *solitude morale*-like reversal between inside and outside: his *vie intérieure* is radically made external *without being expressed* (it is not he who murders the victims), and therein the hero finds a kind of catharsis. The graciousness of visual appearance is there precisely to highlight this externality of the hero's innermost being, thanks to which he is fundamentally innocent, and is therefore not liable to be despised by the film.<sup>172</sup> Just as pretty visual appearances are a superficial outwardness pointing to nothing 'inner' whatsoever (they are there just for the sake of it), the hero's innermost being is *only* on the outside, and emphatically so. Moreover, in Rohmerian terms, to regain beauty also means to regain its essential requisite, viz. *movement*, which Buñuel's over-static cinema had always hitherto neglected. In one sequence, a mannequin melting in a potter's kiln suddenly seems to be moving: 'Just as Buñuel frees the hero, the mannequin frees the author from his immobility complex.'<sup>173</sup> What frees the hero is the fact that his vices are carried out by others; what frees Buñuel is the fact that his immobility complex is externalized in a mannequin – which then starts to move.

Sometimes, Rohmer goes as far as to identify *literature as such* (and, by extension, screenplay-driven films) with cynicism and with smugness toward negativity, simply because it cannot count on appearance for appearance's sake. The critic once contrasted Alfred Hitchcock's *I, Confess*, Jean Renoir's *The Golden Coach* and Roberto Rossellini's *Europe 51* on one side with Charlie Chaplin's *Limelight*, Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D* and John Huston's *The African Queen* on the opposite one (all six films were released in France between 1952

171 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

172 Here is another turn of phrase from the early Jean-Luc Godard ('*Zvenigora – Mitchourine*') associating visual beauty with the negation of cynical detachment: 'Those instinct reproaching this film for its facility should indeed be called low, since they are those of despair, and cannot see any longer that the young girls entrusting the red of their lips to those flags are adorned with the same colours of life itself'. Originally: 'Il faut bien nommer bas les instincts qui reprochent à ce film sa facilité, puisqu'ils sont ceux du désespoir et ne voient pas que les jeunes filles qui confient le rouge de leurs lèvres à leurs drapeaux sont parées des couleurs mêmes de la vie.'

173 Rohmer, 'Luis Buñuel: The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz', p. 148.



and 1953). The latter were charged with indulgence in cynicism, sordidness, cheap pessimism and so on and so forth; the first three 'are *cinema*, the highest form of the art, whereas the three that I have contrasted with them are only good films by screen writers.'<sup>174</sup> Chaplin, De Sica and Huston are too literary, as they rely too much on screenplays. That is to say, they rely too much on a balanced, well-structured interplay (like *The Wages of Fear's*) between narrative and narration qua fundamentally separate dimensions. In this way, they take from literature precisely what cinema should leave behind if it really wants to be more novelistic than the novel itself. For them, the story is one thing, the point of view on it (and/or the effects the viewer is expected to receive, and more generally everything that pertains to the level of narration) is quite another; the screenplay tends to interweave them qua entities which originally are essentially distinct. This very detachment, for the *és/pda*, is morally problematic, as it implies a cynical distance separating consciousness (the creator's and the viewer's alike) from its object, whereas appearance for appearance's sake (and most notably the cathartic reversals between inside and outside in *solitude morale* films) entails its involvement.

François Truffaut has extensively elaborated upon this moral/aesthetic point, not only (and most famously) in his 'A Certain Tendency of French Cinema', but even before then, in the very first review he published in the *CC*: 'Les extrêmes me touchent' ('Extremes meet (me)'). In it, he contrasted French cinema with American cinema. While the former is 'three hundred linking shots end to end, one hundred ten times a year,'<sup>175</sup> the latter is based on *action*: 'There is not a shot in this film that isn't necessary to its dramatic progression.'<sup>176</sup> What makes Hollywood great is that in its films narration *virtually disappears behind the need to support the flow of narrative*: it is, so to speak, the vanishing agent thanks to which the story flows. It is that which gives the action its consistency and its pace; as such, the *shooting* is the phase when it is most decisively expected to intervene and deliver. On the contrary, French cinema relies too much on screenplays, i.e. on a predetermined, harmonic interweaving between narration and narrative qua separate dimensions. Because the screenplay is primary, the shooting is either a lazy visualization of the screenplay, unconcerned with bringing action into focus ('everything happens to the right and to the left, *off* the screen'),<sup>177</sup> thus abusing linking shots, or an exacerbation of the divide

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

175 Truffaut, 'Extremes meet (me)', p. 13.

176 *Ibid.*

177 *Ibid.*

structurally underpinning screenplays as such (at least the way the *és/pda* saw them), that is, the divide between narrative and narration, thus abusing ‘rare angles, unusual lighting, cleverly centred [shots]’<sup>178</sup> arbitrarily added to the story. Crucially, in Truffaut’s view, this aesthetic drawback entails *cynicism*, the audience’s malevolent detachment from films: he maintains that ‘twenty years of fake great subjects’<sup>179</sup> filled with literary pretensions ‘have created this blasé public, whose sensibilities and judgement alike are alienated by the base and despicable “fear of being duped”.’<sup>180</sup> This fake, literary, screenplay-dependent cinema, so Truffaut implies, simply has the wrong attitude: that of originally conceiving narrative and narration as separate, so that they can be artfully intertwined a posteriori, by a screenwriter and/or a director who thinks of his own contribution and point of view as distinct from (and generally superior to) the narrative matter to be grappled with, and is willing to let it be known by stamping on the images his personal vision (for instance: Clouzot’s pessimism as regards one’s chances to escape a destiny that fully inheres one’s original situation). This cynical detachment on the part of the creator(s) entails in turn a similar one on the part of the spectator: the latter is kept back, confined in one’s own separate consciousness, removed from whatever unfolds on the screen, looking in contempt at it (and secretly enjoying an alleged superiority). True action-based cinema, on the contrary, *involves*.

In Godard’s first ever published review (of *House of strangers*, 1949), Joseph Mankiewicz (a notoriously literary director, in more than one sense) is described as the cinematic equivalent of writer Alberto Moravia – only better. ‘Unlike Moravia’s characters, for whom success is always sealed by deception, Mankiewicz’s characters are ambitious people who, through deception, end up by succeeding, and lovers who through divorce end up by marrying.’<sup>181</sup> For instance,

Richard Conte comes to Susan Hayward’s apartment and asks her to go out. She refuses, and Conte is just settling down when Susan makes up her mind to go out. The repetition in failure engenders success, and the happy end seems like an inner concomitant of misfortune. Mankiewicz’s marital chronicles offer romantic perspectives which are the exact reverse of Moravia’s. But their characters reveal the same lack of ‘grip on life’, and one

178 *Ibid.*

179 *Ibid.*

180 Truffaut, ‘Extremes meet (me)’, pp. 13–14.

181 Godard, ‘Joseph Mankiewicz’, p. 14.

has the same sense of 'expected surprise' (Colette Audry). Whereas with Moravia the success of the work depends on the failure of the characters, with Mankiewicz like acts on like, and the final success of the hero is attended by that of the film.<sup>182</sup>

What comes to the fore through such a wildly far-fetched reading are Godard's unspoken premises, i.e. his 'Rohmerian' belief that cinema, qua more novelistic than the novel itself, is capable to overcome literature's inherent attachment to negativity and pessimism. 'Moravia' here stands for 'literature as such', and Mankiewicz for 'cinema as such'. Literature is, as it were, inherently negative in that it is bound to a 'Sartrean' imagination, viz. one that is distinguished from perception and stems from a nihilation from the world: it rests upon a self-reflexive consciousness whose reflexivity lies (à la Sartre) *either* in its perception of phenomena *and* in itself qua substantially autonomous and separated reflective consciousness (the unconscious-in-itself consciousness I have of a chair, is in some measure at the same time a reflected-for-itself consciousness of my consciousness of the chair). This inherent separateness of (literary, reflective, narration-shaping, Sartrean, 'for-itself') consciousness, finding its purpose only in transcending its subject matter (through the nihilating power of imagination) entails literature's emphasis on failure (as in the characters' 'lack of grip on life' in Godard's review): the success of Moravia's work depends on the failure of the characters. Crucially, the above passage does not imply that cinema is optimistic and literature is pessimistic, but that cinema *doubles* literary pessimism<sup>183</sup> ('The repetition in failure engenders success'): cinema completely gives in to mechanism, but precisely in so doing it induces an internal deflagration of mechanism enabling freedom. No contingent, reflective consciousness (neither the hero's nor the writer/director's, nor the viewer's, etc.) but within the mechanical, necessary, objective, causal unfolding of *action* itself; no narration supplementing narrative from without; no consciousness nihilation nor transcendence (on the part of the hero nor on that of the writer/director shaping the film) in sight: 'Like acts on like, and the final success of the hero is attended by that of the film.' Elsewhere, he made approximately the same point:

It seems, moreover, that the crisis in contemporary literature over the last twenty-five years has caused the cinema to answer for errors which are the

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>183</sup> Such an argument can legitimately recall the one by Bazin mentioned in Chapter two: continuity editing gets rid of ellipses by making them omnipresent.

responsibility of literature. Our period writes so badly that it is amazed by such polished speeches as those of American cinema (sober elegance and facile execution often discourage praise); confusing imagination with heart, it becomes irritated and refuses to acknowledge moral qualities which cannot but be present.<sup>184</sup>

Rohmer and the others seemed to maintain that for literary modernism in all its forms, and even more generally for all the forms of literature having abandoned its original realist vocation (in the traditional nineteenth century sense, which also clearly formed the backbone of narrative cinema in the following one), 'objectivity' could only mean to indulge in disillusionment, to say that the world is irredeemably bad, ugly and alienated from an irretrievably separated consciousness. For the cinema, on the contrary, 'objectivity' lies in the 'transcendental' acknowledgement that the subject directly takes part in the production of appearances (the opposite of cynical detachment), and in affirming the possibility for beauty and freedom *within* and *despite* the absolute triumph of mechanism cinema itself cannot but stand for, as the simulacrum of the unity of nature producing appearances whose order and regularity is that of mechanical laws. After comparing *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953) with Anita Loos's original novel, Rohmer concludes that "Everything is for the best in the best of the worlds", writes Lorelei to wrap up her diary. As readers, we had laughed, but now, as spectators, we are ready to agree.<sup>185</sup>

No wonder, then, that the *és/pda* valued purely action-based Hollywood cinema far more than most of self-conscious, intellectual, European cinema. As early as 1950, Jacques Rivette unambiguously spelled out the group's preference for the huge machinery of Hollywood, the reign of automatism, over European cinema, charged with 'piling up intentions, preciousities and effects.'<sup>186</sup> Self-consciousness does not consist in watching the world from a distance on the basis of a (Sartrean) self-reflexivity guaranteeing a residual, 'Cartesian' autonomy and substantiality to a consciousness that nonetheless accompanies every perception, but rather, in a Kantian vein, in *nothing but* the void 'I think' of the understanding accompanying our apperceptions and unifying them (and which emphatically *cannot*, in any

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

185 Rohmer, 'Le meilleur des mondes', p. 45. Originally: "Tout est pour le mieux dans le meilleur des mondes", écrit Lorelei avant de refermer son journal. Lecteurs nous avons souri, spectateurs nous sommes prêts à lui accorder raison.'

186 Rivette, 'Les principaux films du rendez-vous de Biarritz', p. 3. Originally: '[...] accumuler les intentions, les recherches et les effets.'

way, meet itself, namely the 'thing which thinks', in reflection and be its own object), in a coherent, necessary, causal succession that is ultimately to be identified with *cinematic action*. Accordingly, they praised the efficacy and elegance of Hollywood filmmakers, who 'have more confidence in the power of what they show us than the angle they choose to show it from.'<sup>187</sup> This point is at once metaphysical, moral and aesthetic. Godard wanted the hero of his *Contempt (Le mépris, 1963)* to pass 'from book [a novel by, again, Moravia] to screen, [...] from false adventure to real, from Antonioni inertia to Laramiesque dignity';<sup>188</sup> in other words, from the literary self-awareness of a European director to the sense of action of a Hollywood one (Anthony Mann, the director of *The Man from Laramie, 1955*), from being an inert eye statically watching action from a distance, to an eye fully taking part in the unfolding of action without concealing its involvement in it ('dignity').

Sartre was fully aware that his commendation of contemporary American literature intellectualized something whose value lied first and foremost precisely in its lack of intellectual ballast.

We collected these tools but we lack the naïveté of their creators. We thought about them, we took them apart and put them together again, we theorized about them, and we attempted to absorb them into our great traditions of the novel. We have treated consciously and intellectually what was the fruit of a talented and unconscious spontaneity. [...] Soon the first French novels written during the occupation will appear in the United States. We shall give back to you these techniques which you have lent us. We shall return them digested, intellectualized, less effective, and less brutal – consciously adapted to French taste.<sup>189</sup>

Everything suggests that Rohmer and his *école* deemed this situation as an impasse: by intellectualizing contemporary American literature, Sartre and the others risked to crush under an overabundance of self-consciousness precisely its main asset, namely the fact that it could materialize self-consciousness qua nothingness. Perhaps that asset was just never there in the first place, due to those novels' unquestioned reliance on techniques. More to the point, however, Rohmer seems to have read this impasse as a symptom of the fact that Sartre's philosophical and aesthetic system was not really capable to think reflexive self-consciousness qua nothingness. For this,

<sup>187</sup> Rohmer, 'Rediscovering America', p. 89.

<sup>188</sup> Godard, *Le mépris*, p. 200.

<sup>189</sup> Sartre, 'American Novelists in French Eyes', p. 118.

one had to turn to Kant, as well as to cinema. The latter, so Rohmer seems to imply, could indeed break out of the impasse outlined in the above quotation, viz. out of a typically literary over-encumbrance of self-consciousness.

Over the years, many scholars have argued that for the *és/pda* 'authorship' was in fact a synonym of 'responsibility' in a straightforwardly Sartrean sense.<sup>190</sup> However, this is ultimately not the case. It is tempting to see the auteur/filmmaker as somebody who struggles for freedom from within an impersonal system (Hollywood), and whose personal view emerging film after film can be seen as the 'fundamental project' making its way through time. But, as will be shown in more detail in the follow-up book of the present research, the *és/pda* did not at all regard Hollywood as a hostile environment to nihilate from: their conception of it was downright positive. Hollywood had to be *endorsed*, not fought against. Their beloved auteurs were not those who were able to break away from Hollywood's constraints and gradually attained freedom: they were those who were able to find freedom *in* constraints, in the submission to a superior order. They were *integrated*, and not willing to express some 'personal poetics'. The latter was just a non-deliberate outcome of that submission; freedom, a mere by-product of necessity. Therefore, the *és/pda* was not really a cinematic offshoot of Sartre's perspective, but emerged by *detaching* from it, and by embracing a far more traditionalist view of aesthetic creation.

To conclude, it is important to stress that the *auteurs* cherished by the *és/pda* were not those directors who expressed whatever personal poetics they pleased by means of some personal style. In their view, cinema had *one* privileged theme, a very broad, generic theme that *auteurs* should demonstrate to be able to grapple with. This theme is *freedom*; their conception had little to do with Sartre's conception of freedom, and way more with the universal conflict between will and destiny. This conflict, echoed in several crucial parts of Kant's practical philosophy, was once at the core of ancient tragedy (which not incidentally knew a regain of interest in the Kantian aftermath), and now informed the contemporary version of ancient tragedy: *solitude morale*. *Solitude morale* is a narrative pattern in which a character self-imposes freedom upon herself, thereby entering into conflict with herself and with the world, until she undergoes a peculiar, catharsis-like reversal between the inside and outside, whereby the innermost core of her being finds itself externalized. When this reversal takes place, two basic

190 See, for instance Ray, *How a Film Theory Got Lost and Other Mysteries in Cultural Studies*, p. 89.

conditions are matched: the emergence of appearance for appearance's sake and the disruption of the cause-effect (narrative) texture. In other words: temporal sequentiality breaks down, and spatiality comes through. Naturally, there are potentially infinite ways to match these two conditions, so there are potentially infinite ways for characters, films and *auteurs* to comply with *solitude morale*. *Auteurs* are those who know how 'to draw somebody's gestures and behaviour as well as to define a character and to mark its specificity by means of one and only one stroke':<sup>191</sup> in other words, how to achieve the coincidence between the inside and the outside ('to draw somebody's gestures and behaviour [...] by means of one and only one stroke') and at the same time to diligently comply with narrative needs ('to define a character') while departing from it in a personal way ('to mark its specificity'). True authorship is characterized by the inseparability of these three aspects.

What should not be missed here is that the freedom of the character, the freedom of the auteur and the freedom of the viewer are loosely but actually interconnected; the point is less 'whose freedom is at stake' than 'what connects and variously enables all three.' The answer is *the inherent inconsistency of mechanistic determinism*, its internal deflagration, engendered by the clash between narrative and cinema's mechanical imagination. The inevitable fissures of the cause-effect texture caused by this clash between two elements ultimately belonging to different faculties *are* freedom (the character's and/or the *auteur's* and/or the viewer's). Once again, Sartre is irretrievably far away: consciousness here is not a Sartrean for-itself consciousness whose freedom emerges *along with its specific individuation*, but rather a mere, indefinite by-product of the overall, always ongoing, non-locatable fight between mechanical necessity and freedom.

In the wake of Heidegger, who twisted Kant to his own purposes by emphasizing the coincidence between time and self-affection as such, for Sartre freedom coincides with one's fundamental project, which cannot be accessed in itself through consciousness's self-reflection, but still has some determinable consistency, insofar as it is essentially a temporalization, and emerges through the intersubjective play between the self and the other. In this respect, consciousness is external for Sartre as well; suffice it to mention once again the characters of *Huis Clos*, who are all unable to self-reflexively cope with the fundamental project that individually dominates each one of them, and that can only be determined by way of the mutual interplay

191 Rohmer, 'Les vikings'. Originally: '[...] du même trait dessiner un geste et un caractère, cerner le personnage et imprimer leur marque propre.'

among them all. Yet, for Rohmer it is external in a different sense, chiefly because 'his' Kant disowns the twentieth-century phenomenological Kant of the Husserlian-Heideggerian-Sartrean legacy. For him, the impossibility of a directly self-reflexive self-consciousness does not lead to regarding consciousness in terms of time (Heidegger's *Dasein*; Sartre's view of freedom qua fundamental project qua for-itself consciousness), but rather to the primacy of space: by returning to Kant in a somewhat eccentric, arguably pre-Deleuzian but in many ways still coherently Kantian fashion, Rohmer seemingly (if implicitly) links the impossibility of a directly self-reflexive self-consciousness with the acknowledgement that consciousness is nowhere to be self-reflexively found but in the 'I think' accompanying perception. Therefore, the kind of freedom cinema could be after according to Rohmer had no longer nothing to do with a fundamental project consisting in a temporalization only coming to the fore through the interplay with other fundamental projects; rather, freedom, like self-consciousness itself, could not but be located *out there*, in space, in external appearance, nestled in the objects of perception and ultimately irreducible to any intersubjective dynamics, let alone to a determinism of whatever kind. In other words, it can be argued that for Rohmer cinema, by pushing Kant's perspective and that of the Kantian aftermath itself to their extremes, brings forth yet another outcome of the old, ever ongoing conflict between freedom and necessity: my self-consciousness, hence my freedom, is nothing but an object out there, in external appearance. As such, it is not even really mine.

Let us have another look at Paul Willemen's particularly insightful remark, already referenced in the previous chapter:

[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.<sup>192</sup>

Willemen is very careful *not* to distinguish between the viewer's soul, the *auteur's* and the character's, because the *és/pda's* confusion is every bit as intentional. What really matters is that *the soul is outside, not whose soul*

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



*it is supposed to be.* The *éS/pda* celebrated *the possibility of freedom*, not *somebody's* freedom in particular. Earlier in this chapter, the following passage was quoted:

Before Rossellini even the most inspired and original of film-makers would feel duty-bound to use the legacy of his precursors. He was familiar with all the ways that, by some kind of conditioned reflex, particular emotional reactions could be provoked in an audience – down to the smallest gesture or movement; and he would play on those reflexes, not try to break them. He would create art, a personal work, that is, but made out of a shared cinematic substance. For Rossellini this substance does not exist. His actors do not behave like the actors in other films, except in the sense that their gestures and attitudes are common to all human beings, but they urge us to look for something else behind this behaviour, something other than what our natural role as spectators would prompt us to recognize.<sup>193</sup>

The key here is 'they urge us to look for something else.' Appearance for appearance's sake is to be conceived as a kind of black hole of indeterminacy (a pure outcome of cinema's mechanical, externalized imagination unable to fall under any definite concept of the understanding/reason) swallowing the author, the character and the viewer alike. Because he or she is *compelled* to determine a posteriori a matter that does not stem from any definite determination, the viewer is virtually involved in it from the outset. The pure possibility of freedom, stemming from the internal deflagration of mechanical determinism and being given as appearance for appearance's sake, involves the viewer as well as the character and the author. No definite ownership is needed for the possibility of freedom to be there: what matters is just the fact that it is there.

*Involvement* is indeed a crucial issue in Rohmer's (and the *éS/pda's*) ethics. The *éS/pda* makes a point of showing that freedom and beauty are still possible, in spite of an allegedly widespread attitude (an attitude that for various reasons these critics are led to deem as quintessentially *literary*) of smugness toward negativity, of cynical resignation in the face of a grim world entirely dominated by causes and effects (that is, by petty personal – 'pathological', in Kant's word – interest). Therefore, cinematic morality also has to do with the involvement of the spectator *in* the action being deployed (as opposed to the cynical, detached attitude of contemplation of some moral of physical opprobrious from a safe distance).

193 Rohmer, 'The Land of Miracles', pp. 205-206.

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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.

