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6. After Modernity: Rohmer's Classicism and Universalism

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Abstract

From the outset of his career, Eric Rohmer made no secret of his preference for classicism, as far as both aesthetics in general and cinematic aesthetics in particular are concerned. One must hasten to add, however, that he never really conceived of “classic” and “modern” as two opposite concepts. Rather, he maintained that what is truly classic is also truly modern, because in either case genuine art is primarily about achieving a certain harmony with nature. What he exactly meant by this forms the main subject matter of this chapter, which also clarifies the degree to which Rohmer's aesthetics can be called “universalist” and “anti-evolutionist”, and why. In addition, Rohmer's views on the key notions of authorship and *mise en scene* are also summarily sketched.

Keywords: Rohmer, classic, modern, universalism, aesthetics

6.1. Beyond modern art

Rohmer's attachment to classical tragedy is a clear token of his overt classicism, which can hardly be accounted for as orthodox and one-dimensional. For him, ‘classicism’ and ‘modernity’ are not necessarily opposite. In order to clarify this issue, it is again useful to draw upon Kant, since the critic's classicism and his peculiar, idiosyncratic Kantism ultimately shed a decisive light on each other.

For one thing, Rohmer does not connect cinema and Kantian aesthetics in a straightforward way. Contrary to what the previous chapter(s) might have suggested, in spite of cinema's capability to attain artistic and natural beauty and to tackle freedom, it would be too simplistic to maintain that Rohmer regarded cinema simply as the perfect match to Kant's ideas on aesthetics. According to the critic, the influence of the German philosopher

on the history of aesthetics occurred primarily *behind cinema's back*: Kant's 'Copernican revolution' affected a phase of the history of aesthetics that was definitely prior to cinema. Rather, Rohmer seems to imply that cinema accomplishes those ideas by taking them *beyond* the aesthetics that came in Kant's immediate aftermath (that is, modern aesthetics broadly conceived). This again attests to the fact that Rohmer's appropriation of Kant is far from orthodox, and is rather driven by the urgency, at that point in time, to get rid of the Sartrean and phenomenological frame.

De Mozart en Beethoven, Rohmer's late treatise about music, relying extensively on Kant's philosophy, makes this assumption particularly apparent. Therein, he recapitulates an issue he had spilt a lot of ink over during his years as a film critic: the relationship between cinema and the other arts – particularly painting. Kant is again a major reference – but in relation to *modern painting*, rather than cinema.

The modern vision of art is born from Kant, although this was not part of Kant's original intentions. It refuses to consider the world as a thing in itself, and only contemplates the vision the artist has of it. In a painting by Cézanne, truth does not lie in its pseudo-conformity with the model; rather, it is to be found in the mark that witnessed the operation through which the painter perceived the model. [...] From the impressionists to Cézanne and the cubists, space qua form of perception becomes the real subject matter of painting. The subjective and the objective are reversed. Art and reality change roles. The Cezannian construction begets the reality of the painted object: the latter only exists insofar as it belongs to a whole regulated by strict laws, laws which are not a posteriori induced from our vision of the real, but which have an a priori control over such vision, laws originating from the very form of our sensibility. The painter gives us the opportunity to discover such laws through their very infringement, which the uninitiated mistakes for clumsiness.¹

1 Rohmer, *De Mozart en Beethoven*, pp. 98-99. Originally: 'La vision moderne de l'art est fille de Kant, même si Kant ne l'avait pas prévue. Elle refuse de considérer le monde comme une chose en soi, elle ne peint que la vision que l'artiste a de celui-ci. Ce qui fait la vérité d'un tableau de Cézanne, ce n'est pas une pseudo-adéquation au modèle, c'est la trace qu'il porte en lui de l'opération par laquelle le peintre le perçoit. [...] A partir des impressionnistes, jusqu'à Cézanne et au cubistes, l'espace, en tant que forme de notre perception, devient le véritable sujet de la peinture. Le subjectif et l'objectif s'inversent. Art et réalité échangent leurs rôles. La construction cézannienne est garante de la réalité de l'objet peint: il n'existe que parce qu'il s'inscrit dans un ensemble qui a ses lois strictes, lois non pas induites à posteriori de notre vision du réel, mais qui a priori commandent cette vision, lois de la forme même de notre sensibilité,

Modern painting shows the object qua filtered by the subject. Things in empirical reality (phenomena) can only appear by way of the subject's a priori forms of sensible intuition. According to Kant, these forms are themselves unattainable: they cannot be the object of a representation and reached 'in themselves,' so they can only be represented by distorting and infringing them in turn. This is precisely what modern art does: in the paintings by the impressionists, by Cézanne, by the Cubists and the like, things look unreal precisely because they are an inevitably non-transparent reproduction of the optical laws regulating the emergence of deceptively transparent appearances. In this way, viewers are made aware of the 'filters' whereby they ordinarily experience things.²

The above passage identifies the subject matter of modern painting in 'space qua form of perception.' This can help us understand why, after his conversion, Rohmer's writings started to depict cinema as an 'art of nature', noticeably more often than before, while the definition 'art of space' unquestionably dropped in frequency. This change all but confirms the impression that Rohmer regarded cinema, not as a token of the properly modern art that emerged in Kant's immediate aftermath, but as a medium that, on the one hand, perfectly lends itself to be read in a Kantian vein, and, on the other hand, posits the notion of it being a reproduction of the 'immediate mediation' regulating experience *beyond* the dichotomy opposing transparency to non-transparency. According to him, cinema is something more than, and different from, a necessarily imperfect reproduction of the a priori forms of sensible intuitions.

There is no need for cinema to take us beyond common perception, since it is through its faithful reproduction, in its maximal objectivity that cinema, as an autonomous art, attains Being. Paradoxically, art will be all the greater and the more authentic if there is pure and simple copy

et que le peintre nous apprend à découvrir en tant que telles par les entorses qu'il leur fait, et que le profane prend pour des maladresses.'

2 The selfsame argument is also sketched earlier in the same book (p. 22), in a passage referencing not only Kant (in an almost identical way), but also Nicolas Boileau and his verse 'Rien n'est beau que le vrai: le vrai seul est aimable' roughly meaning 'Nothing is beautiful but what is true: only what is true is lovable'. Rohmer quotes this verse fairly often (for instance in his 'Cette nuit-là'); here, he turns it upside down to paraphrase the 'Kantian' reversal of modern art: 'Nothing is true but what is beautiful'. He does the very same thing also in an essay that was already quoted a few times: 'The Taste of Beauty' (p. 75). However, in the English translation, this reference is nowhere to be found, as the translator preferred to render it by means of Keats's reversal 'truth is beauty//beauty is truth.' The same point, without any outspoken philosophical reference, is also elaborated in Rohmer, 'II. Le siècle des peintres.'

and not willingness to interpret. This role reversal between reality and artist, opposite to the role played by the modern painter, introduces in its own way a transcendental dimension to the work, if only for the very particular and brand new conscience it gives us of the form of Time.³

By *externalizing* what is normally carried out by our imagination (the synthesis of the manifold of appearance), as per our discussion of Astruc's article in Chapter two, cinema indeed gives us 'a brand new conscience' of 'the form of Time.' As we have seen, the necessity evoked by its irreversible unfolding urges understanding to regard it as an objective succession driven by causality, and in so doing it puts us in touch with 'the unity of nature' regulating our access to phenomena. Therein consists cinema's 'transcendental dimension': no longer the non-transparent reproduction of space qua form of perception, viz. of the optical laws regulating the emergence of deceptively transparent appearances, but a *transparent* rendering of *time* qua form of perception by way of its spatialization. Once again, this transparency is not to be meant as an actual access to, or faithful depiction of, the represented object, but an accomplished reproduction of the 'immediate mediation' whereby it appears.

Like painting, cinema reproduces the filters of consciousness. A painting, though, is compelled to look unlike our ordinary vision, and it makes us aware of our ordinary vision by departing from it. Its own aesthetic value can be easily said to depend on the specific way the painting differs from its 'model', from the way it is ordinarily seen. Conversely, in cinema, this reproduction of our subjective filters, along with the existence of any kind of aesthetic value in the sense sketched above, can now be *one with* our ordinary, 'transparent' perception. Modern art follows Kant's Copernican revolution,⁴ and reverses the subject and the object, art and nature; cinema comes full circle and reverses modern art's Kantian reversal. In modern art, the object of the work of art was the very way subjects perceived the objects

3 Rohmer, *De Mozart en Beethoven*, p. 103. Originally: 'Le cinéma n'a pas besoin de nous mener au-delà de la perception commune, puisque c'est par la reproduction fidèle de celle-ci, dans son "objectivité" maximale, qu'il accède à l'être, en tant qu'art autonome. Paradoxalement, l'art sera d'autant plus grand et plus authentique chez lui qu'il y aura copie pure et simple, et non volonté d'interprétation. Cette inversion du rôle de la réalité et de l'artiste, contraire de celle qu'opère le peintre moderne, peut introduire à sa façon dans l'oeuvre une dimension transcendante, ne serait-ce que par la conscience particulière et toute nouvelle qu'elle nous donne de la forme du Temps.'

4 This connection is also made by Robert Pippin in his *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, p. 59.

unbeknownst to themselves, as it were; by reversing this reversal, cinema obviously does not return to the object per se, but rather highlights the subjective production of appearances *as an objective process*. This does not mean that the appearances thereby produced are 'true', but that cinema, by objectifying/spatializing time, produces appearances seemingly submitted to the same order and regularity characterizing the 'unity of nature' to which our everyday experience is necessarily ('objectively') bound.

Rohmer's point is that whereas the goal of modern art was to reproduce consciousness's filters making us see an object the way we ordinarily would, the task of cinema is to reproduce consciousness's filters making us see an object the way we ordinarily would *while* we see it the way we ordinarily do.⁵ In this way, cinema manages to be more Kantian than Kantian modern art itself. In the passage taking Cézanne as an example, the 'real subject matter of painting' is 'space qua form of perception.' In the case of cinema, though, the real subject matter is time itself, presented in a spatialized hence objectified form. Cinema is not 'objective' in the sense that it provides us with

5 This idea is best exemplified by Godard's and Rohmer's perplexity toward *Magirama* (1956), a film in which Abel Gance tried to revive polyvision (the horizontal juxtaposition of three screens, each showing different images), a technical arrangement he already employed in his *Napoleon* (1927). For all of their love for Gance, they could not but object that there was little point in employing polyvision in the mid-Fifties, because cinemascope already achieved the same outcome of polyvision (the enlargement of the range of vision) *with greater attention to ordinary vision*. In a Kantian vein, ordinary vision rests upon *synthesis*, while the juxtaposition of different images remains hopelessly analytical (one cannot watch all of the screens at the same time). 'While reducing in the extreme the role of montage, cinemascope can nonetheless obtain striking effects from close-ups, as shown in our example. It relies on succession and simultaneity all at once, and brings forth synthetically what Gance brought forth by way of analysis. Their ends are similar but their means differ. Contemporary filmmakers too love to flesh out the melodic lines of their works with thicker and thicker chords (here I draw on Gance's own metaphor). Instinctively, they have entered the age of "polyphony" without recourse to intricate devices. [...] It does seem that for Rossellini, Renoir, Ray and others, "the age of the exploded image" has already come. While still remaining "absolutely modern" [...], without departing from their chosen objectivity, they have found again the sense of symbol so cherished by silent cinema, and which the generation of the 1930s had almost completely lost.' Originally: 'Le cinémascope, qui réduit à l'extrême la part du montage, sait pourtant tirer, l'exemple nous le montre, des effets saisissants des gros plans d'insert. Il joue sur la succession et la simultanéité tout à la fois et produit synthétiquement ce que Gance produit par l'analyse. Les buts sont communs mais les moyens différent. Les metteurs en scènes d'aujourd'hui, aiment eux aussi à étoffer d'accords de plus en plus fournis (je reprends une métaphore de Gance) la ligne mélodique de leur oeuvre. D'instinct ils sont entrés, sans recours à un matériel compliqué, dans l'ère de la "polyphonie". [...] Il semble bien que pour Rossellini, Ray, Renoir, et d'autres encore, "l'âge de l'image éclatée" soit déjà venu. Tout en restant "absolument modernes" [...], sans se départir de leur objectivité de principe, ils ont retrouvé ce sens du symbole, cher au cinéma muet, et quasi perdu par la génération des années 30.' Rohmer, 'Magirama'; Godard, 'Future, Present, Past: *Magirama*'.

a faithful reproduction of things, but rather in the sense that it highlights the process whereby those things appear to us, *as an objective one*. When Rohmer says that 'what the painter or sculptor obtains only by cunning or violence, "expression", is an integral part of cinema's existence,'⁶ what he means is that cinema never reaches the object in itself, and that it never expunges 'expression' (the distortion produced by the limits and filters of consciousness). The difference, however, lies in the fact that this 'expression' is produced objectively, i.e. through time in its objectified form. Because of this objectification, what cinema attains is a faithful reproduction not of the things themselves standing in front of the lens, but rather of what is referred to in the passage above as 'common perception.' Painters and sculptors 'try to take us beyond common perception' in that they try to represent the a priori laws of our perception while still bound to time-qua-not-spatialized; in other words, through a subjective bias departing from 'common perception' (that is, 'only by cunning or violence'). Cinema, while no less 'violent' vis-a-vis the object as such, and thus still carrying on with modern art's critical agenda (consisting in giving a shape to our 'immediate mediation'), reverts to 'common perception' by regaining that which makes it common, i.e. time-qua-spatialized. As shown in Chapter two, the 'unity of nature' that this 'common perception' essentially stands for, rests upon a temporal irreversibility that nothing can provide as fittingly as cinema's externalization of the synthesis of the manifold of appearances (i.e. time spatialized/objectified). And while scholarship has abundantly demonstrated the affinity between Kantian aesthetics and such modern art movements as Cubism (see for instance Mark Cheetham's 'Kant and Cubism Revisited'), it should not be forgotten that the fact that *The Critique of Judgement* does not grant any precedence to non-representational art over representational art (including cinema, mimicking our common perception of things) has been demonstrated in an equally convincing way (see for instance Eva Schaper's 'Free and Dependent Beauty').

6.2. Classic = Modern

Howard Hawks, said Rohmer, 'does not need run after the modern, because he possesses modernity from the start.'⁷ According to the critic, the exact same thing applies to cinema as well: it does not need the Copernican revolution of modernity, because, as described above, it reverses the very

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

7 Rohmer, 'The Photogenics of Sports: The Olympics in Rome', p. 123.

reversal modernity rests upon. Indeed, the main target of his polemics was probably not Sartre per se, but more broadly a certain conception of modernity:⁸ 'By breaking off from nature, modern art degrades man, whereas it meant to elevate him.'⁹ Cinema should turn instead to classicism, if 'we call *classical* the periods when beauty in art and beauty in nature seemed to be one and the same.'¹⁰ A classical art is one in which artistic contribution serves the transparency of nature instead of sticking 'critically' out of it (or of 'nihilating' in a Sartrean vein). Like eighteenth-century artists, says Godard, the cinematic artist 'acknowledges nature as art's principal model.'¹¹ Again, we should beware: 'nature', for Rohmer, is meant in the Kantian way, viz. as the totality of appearances – which amounts to saying that a classical art is one in which artistic contribution serves to highlight appearances in accordance with the transcendental mediation informing all of such appearances. This is precisely what the 'immediate mediation' embodied by cinema seems particularly fit to deliver. The crucial point, one logically ensuing from our discussion about the relationship between 'Kantian' modern art and cinema, is that cinema qua classical art *follows* modern art instead of preceding it.

Therefore, it is not enough to claim that 'Rohmer has always claimed the need to understand modernity in the light of the classicism that preceded and enabled it':¹² rather, classicism is 'at the very forefront of modernity.'¹³ In Rohmer's own words: 'The classical age of cinema is not behind us, but ahead.'¹⁴ Cinema had to stick to classical virtues: elegance, efficacy, naturalness, sobriety, the capability to represent with a detached serenity the intricate, contradictory obscurities of human being; a sense of measure, of balance, of order, of unadorned simplicity.

This stubborn classicism might partly explain Rohmer's occasional, not fully convincing recourse to Plato; it would be easy to demonstrate that

8 The sparse notes (contained in his personal archives held at the library of the Cinémathèque Française, Paris, folder RIVETTE 86 – B19(215)) which Rivette penned after his interview with Roland Barthes (for issue 147 of the *CC*, September 1963), include a passage affirming that modernity started with Baudelaire, ended with surrealism, and was brushed off once and for all by Sartre.

9 Rohmer, 'Such Vanity is Painting', p. 53.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

11 Godard, 'Defense and Illustration of Classical Construction', p. 27.

12 Coureau, 'Petite anthologie de l'ontologie rohmérienne', p. 34. Originally: 'Depuis toujours, Rohmer affirme la nécessité de comprendre la modernité au regard du classicisme qui l'a précédée et rendue possible.'

13 Schilling, *Eric Rohmer*, p. 76.

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

when he references the Greek philosopher in his writings about Hitchcock's *Rear Window*¹⁵ and *Vertigo*, what he is really getting at is a very Kantian argument regarding self-consciousness 'disguised as' Platonic.¹⁶ This disguise

15 Chabrol and Rohmer, *Hitchcock*, p. 122-128.

16 *Vertigo*, according to the critic, is about 'ideas, in the noble, platonic sense of the word' ('Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*', p. 172). Scottie, the hero, is 'in love not with a woman but with the idea of a woman' (*Ibid.*, p. 170). Moreover, *Vertigo*'s structure entirely revolves around *reminiscence*. For Plato, true knowledge is not empirical, but lies in the reminiscence of the innate ideas in ourselves. Accordingly, the more Scottie's quest for truth progresses, the more he is pushed back toward the past. The structure of the film constantly reconnects the present with the past. This reconnection is visually emphasized not only by the subtle play with vintage architecture (as more extensively pointed out by a different review of the same film: Rohmer, 'Sueurs froides'), but also by means of a particularly recurrent geometrical figure: the *spiral* (or, more precisely, the helix). 'Everything forms a circle, but the loop never closes, the revolution carries us ever deeper into reminiscence' (Rohmer, 'Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*', p. 172). Here is where the film, as well as Rohmer's review, seem to be at their most platonic, particularly if one considers that one of Plato's dialogues, *Meno*, intertwined reminiscence with geometry. Therein, Socrates convinces Meno that knowledge is innate, by drawing geometric figures on the ground and asking one of Meno's slaves a geometrical question, which he answers correctly despite his total ignorance of geometry (whose knowledge is innate in ourselves, and which should as such only be reminisced, rather than empirically apprehended). In fact, the specific figure Rohmer recurs to in his review (the spiral) radically undermines his platonic argument. As Peg Rawes rightly pointed out, *Meno* seems to imply that virtue is *shape*, and *shape* is *limit*. 'For Plato, limit is therefore equated with an identifiable boundary or end, which supports the notion of the geometric figure as a "bounded figure".' (Rawes, *Space, Geometry and Aesthetics*, p. 29). But the spiral is not a bounded figure: it is infinite. (Perhaps not incidentally, in Plato's *Theaetetus* dialogue, fragment 147d, the eponymous character recalls his teacher Theodorus's *failure* to draw in the sand a geometrical figure that remains unnamed, but that ultimately turns out to unambiguously be a spiral). A spiral ensues from the combination between a circle and a line, more precisely one in which the circle never closes, but rather forms a never ending loop. Therefore, in this case the reminiscence is infinite, and never attains a definite knowledge. Thereby, *Vertigo* as well as Rohmer's review ultimately fail to really match the platonic frame. If anything, the infinite regression of the spiral resembles the Self's impossible encounter with itself in self-reflection (that is, Kant's encounter of the self with itself only as appearance and never in itself); no wonder Rohmer says that *Vertigo* is a kind of parable of knowledge 'just like *Rear Window*' (Rohmer, 'Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*', p. 170), which he deemed as 'a reflexive, critical work in the Kantian sense of the word' (Chabrol and Rohmer, *Hitchcock*, p. 124), and which he openly compares to Plato's cavern in this article. Whereas geometric figures in Plato's *Meno* are a priori ideas that can be accessed by reminiscence, in Kant's system (whose position regarding geometry owes a lot to Plato's *Meno*, as argued by, among others, Peg Rawes in the first pages of her *Space, Geometry and Aesthetics*) they are the outcome of imagination's a priori productive activity. Spirals in *Vertigo* should *but cannot* embody platonic ideas and reminiscence; they are in fact a bridge stretching to Kant, to the impossibility to cognize space qua a priori form of intuition (strictly connected to the impossibility of full self-reflection) turning in the third Critique into the possibility of producing and acknowledging an *aesthetic* equivalent of the a priori contribution of imagination, by means of the 'free play' engendering (among other forms of purposiveness without purpose) geometric figures. This simultaneous possibility and impossibility of self-reflection should be thought of

is mainly a *rhetorical* rather than a theoretical move, insofar as it is meant to emphasize the fact that cinema is firmly rooted in classicism. Also, it is a way of stressing that to be faithful to Kant's philosophy means to take it *beyond* Kant, and to reconnect it to a classicism the philosopher had no reasons to embrace, but that many variously embraced in his wake (for instance, the artists and thinkers who proposed a sort of revival of classical tragedy, as mentioned in the last chapter).

Rohmer's anti-modern bias (according to which classicism and modernity are strictly homogeneous) soon extended to the rest of the *école Schérier* (és), and eventually to the *politique des auteurs* (pda) as well.¹⁷ Godard frequently asserted that cinema is 'classically romantic'¹⁸ and/or vice versa: Georges Franju (who 'seeks and finds classicism behind romanticism'¹⁹) is 'romantically classical.'²⁰ His definition that cinema is 'the expression of lofty sentiments'²¹ also sounds fairly anti-modern. Truffaut once said that, unlike Lautréamont and the surrealists, he found the encounter between an umbrella and a sewing-machine on a dissecting table far less moving than the encounter between two human gazes, or the sharp portrayal of the relationships between two flesh-and-blood characters.²²

Rohmer's invectives against academicism and against mannerist films posing as classical are particularly useful for describing the critic's idea of classicism. According to him, William Wyler's *Friendly Persuasion* (1956)

alongside Scottie's predicament. He cannot access his 'idea of a woman' (Madeleine is, one way or another, forever out of his reach), but at the same time he *can* and he *does*: when he tries to dress up her lover like Madeleine after Madeleine's supposed death, he suddenly realizes that she actually *is* Madeleine. This is precisely why Slavoj Žižek (*Organs without Bodies*, pp. 200-205) claimed that *Vertigo* is in fact an *anti-Platonist* film: the unattainable essence of ideas is revealed to be coincident with appearance. Similarly, as we shall see in the next chapter, the hero of *Rear Window* finds his own unattainable consciousness on the outside. It follows that, in spite of Rohmer's occasional outspoken Platonism, the claims that the critic belongs to 'a Platonist tradition' (Lellis, *Bertolt Brecht, Cahiers du Cinéma and Contemporary Film Theory*, pp. 16-17) are to be taken with a grain of salt. His writings on *Vertigo* and *Rear Window*, among others, show that he was interested in Plato only insofar as the Greek philosopher foreshadowed, in a somewhat different fashion, Kantian issues the critic tackled far more recurrently.

17 Conspicuous anti-modern undertones can be found, for instance, in 'L'église moderne', a rather improbable project by Rohmer and Truffaut for a film about a mountain village whose residents want to build a church to attract tourists. A 1953 extended plot synopsis of the film (which was never made) is kept in Truffaut's personal archives.

18 Godard, 'Bergmanorama', p. 76.

19 Godard, 'La tête contre les murs'(a), p. 130.

20 Godard, 'La tête contre les murs'(b), p. 148.

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

22 François Truffaut (unsigned), 'Une grande oeuvre: *El*, de Buñuel', p. 2.

is a compendium of all that is *not* classical but which pretends to be so. Its realism consists of indulging in cheap verisimilitude, in a vain attempt to reproduce everyday reality (for instance, Wyler shows the hero chasing a goose to add a 'real life flavour' to his film) and in sheer appearances poorly trying to mimic what ordinary vision looks like, for instance by abusing depth-of-field techniques. All this clearly contrasts with Rohmer's notion of 'appearance for appearance's sake,' which is not to be intended as a mere reproduction of reality, but as the capacity to *seize beauty* (purposiveness without purpose) in ordinary appearances. It also indulges in sentimentalism and shies away from the tragic – in other words, it waters down conflicts: when the hero goes to war, he is shown crying on an enemy's corpse. Each gesture, with no exception, belongs to a stiff, rigid cause-effect texture. 'Expression', as opposed to manifestation, is the rule: 'Each gesture, each look, corresponds to a precise feeling which is recorded in the dictionary of the cinematic language.'²³ So, the final verdict can only be as follows:

To go back to the ancients, as the young school indeed does, is only fine: what our author could be reproached for is rather to draw out of them nothing but what tradition has already drawn out, as opposed to getting hold of the treasures overlooked by their direct followers. So this could be the definition of academicism: to contemplate the ancients solely through the pile of scoriae the intermediary ages have accumulated between them and us. Griffith invented gestures. To follow his example requires inventing new ones, not to resume those he has already offered.²⁴

Rohmer's idea of classicism is as indeterminate as it is precise. Classic art is unambiguously art in accordance with nature, but *no form or formula* can be said to steadily stand for what this accordance is supposed to be. Precisely because the unity of nature is an a priori of our understanding, it cannot be pinned down reflexively in a steady, definitive way. Every artistic context

23 Rohmer, '*La loi du seigneur* propose la parfaite définition du pire académisme'. Originally: 'A chaque geste, chaque regard, correspond un sentiment précis inscrit au dictionnaire du langage cinématographique.'

24 *Ibid.* Originally: 'Il est bon de remonter aux anciens, comme le fait d'ailleurs la jeune école: ce qu'on peut reprocher à notre auteur est de ne continuer à tirer d'eux que ce que la tradition en a tiré, non d'y retourner puiser les richesses que les épigones immédiats avaient laissées échapper. Telle pourrait donc être bien la définition de l'académisme: ne contempler les anciens qu'à travers l'amas de scories que les âges intermédiaires ont accumulé entre eux et nous. Griffith inventait des gestes. Suivre son exemple, c'est en inventer d'autres, non reprendre ceux qu'il nous proposait.'

has to relate to nature somehow, but nothing can prescribe in advance the form enabling it to do so. In order to be classical, one cannot just rely on formulas invented in other allegedly classical contexts: one must come up with something original (i.e. related to one's own context and possibilities) in order to sort out some kind of viable accordance with nature.

6.3. An anti-evolutionist approach

This also explains why, in 1961, right when modernist new wave cinemas began to emerge all over the world, the critic juxtaposed and equalized the new films by Otto Preminger and Jean Rouch, the old *auteur* of classical Hollywood and the young modern filmmaker: what both directors shared was 'a common respect for nature.'²⁵ The centrality of nature (the totality of appearances, namely appearance 'as such', whatever appears according to transcendental mediation and is thus liable to carry along sourceless 'purposiveness without purpose') is transhistorical, and characterizes classical art as well as modern art. However, 'transhistorical' does not necessarily mean 'anti-historical'; if anything, Rohmer's idea that art is eternally bound to nature rather seems *anti-evolutionist*. 'This idea of a *before* and an *after*, of a unilinear evolution, seems questionable. Beethoven's last quartets are neither more nor less modern than Liszt's first, and Cézanne's *Bathers* is neither more nor less modern than the first Matisse.'²⁶ Since modern and classical art share the same goals (they differ only in their means), it is pointless to presuppose a classic era coming before a modern one, or a modern one coming after a classical one. There is no reason to presuppose *a progress*, a straight line progressing from the classical to the modern and beyond. 'To represent the evolution of the Beaux-Arts as a natural and continuous process, by only depicting it as a reflection, as a by-product, as the thermometer of a civilisation, as the fruits of a worldview and of a sensibility which is everyday different from the day before, would be tantamount to offending them, not to honour them.'²⁷ Rohmer's target here is a deterministic view of art, typical of certain Marxist traditions, according to which art is the mere outcome of underlying material processes. In

25 Rohmer, 'The Taste for Beauty', p. 79.

26 Rohmer, 'Of Three Films and a Certain School', p. 59.

27 Rohmer, 'II. Le siècle des peintres', p. 14. Originally: 'Ce n'est pas rendre hommage aux Beaux-Arts, mais bien leur faire injure que de figurer leur évolution comme un processus naturel et continue, de ne voir en eux qu'un reflet, un épiphénomène, le thermomètre d'une civilisation, le fruit d'une vision du monde, d'une sensibilité chaque jour différente de celle de la vieille.'

contrast with this view, the critic remains faithful to a Kantian conception of art qua strictly related to freedom, that is, to the possibility to flee from determinism. 'Art evolved by means of internal spasms, not by history.'²⁸

'Isou or Things as They Are (Views of the Avant-Garde)' is an interesting case in point. In this article, Rohmer shows that there is no contradiction in claiming that the CC judge films *sub specie aeternitatis* ('under the aspect of eternity')²⁹ while supporting *Treatise on Slobber and Eternity (Traité de bave et d'éternité)*, a 1951 ultra-radical avant-garde film by Isidore Isou aiming at the total disruption of past artistic traditions. The critic argued that Isou's iconoclast nihilism went far enough to dismiss *avant-garde itself*³⁰ along with its pretension to lead art to some kind of progress by way of the discontinuity avant-garde typically stands for. Isou was not looking for any kind of progress at all – just disruption. Nonetheless, Isou's intention to give up any kind of expression resulted in him having to cling to something to be put in the film, and this 'something' turned out to be some random shots of Paris: a piece of rough, unpolished, documentary-like urban footage which, according to Rohmer, emanated an intriguing sense of *presence*, whereby the charm of nature was ultimately (and surprisingly) reinstated.³¹

Rohmer's fleeting, short-lived encounter with Isou's Lettrism was not the only occasion when the path of classicism-oriented *és/pda* crossed that of some contemporary experimental trend. In her praiseworthy book on the relationship between the pda (as well as the cinematic New Wave it gave birth to) and the partly coeval *nouveau roman* ('new novel') literary movement,³² Dorota Ostrowska has demonstrated that they stood for two different ways of moving away from Sartrean/existentialist novelistic aesthetic, like two parallel lines that significantly intersected on a single,

28 Rohmer, 'Such Vanity is Painting', p. 53.

29 In the English version (Rohmer, 'The Taste of Beauty', p. 71), the translator leaves this meaning completely aside, and simply renders it with 'judging films for what they are.'

30 Rohmer had no interest in the avant-garde (of any kind); his younger 'disciples', even less so. Long before Truffaut voiced their contempt for the avant-garde first in the CC ('La couronne noire'), Godard violently attacked avant-garde filmmaker Kenneth Anger as early as 1950 ('Que viva Mexico!').

31 This transhistorical preponderance of nature is what separated Rohmer from another film theorist whose writings substantially elaborated upon Kant's 'natural beauty': Siegfried Kracauer. The latter thought that cinema was an occasion for human beings to restore a balanced relationship with nature after the advent of technological modernity considerably perturbed it. He thus conceived modernity as a clear-cut historical break (not least in the very way man related to nature) – precisely what Rohmer firmly denied.

32 Ostrowska, *Reading the French New Wave*. The present discussion particularly refers to pp. 1-57.

very important occasion: the release of Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959).³³ To cut a long story short, in a way *nouveau roman* moved forwards, whereas the *és/pda* and the New Wave moved backwards, or at least attempted to establish a significant continuity with earlier literary models (especially nineteenth-century ones) while the former embraced a (late) modernist, discontinuity-biased aesthetics. In a 1998 interview, Rohmer unsurprisingly confirmed that, in the *és* and *pda* era, he and his friends all loved Hugo, Balzac (who, in their opinion, ranked higher than Stendhal) and nineteenth-century English and American novels, while they were against Sartre's and Beckett's existentialism, as well as against *nouveau roman*.³⁴

While *nouveau roman* tried to put together, by means of writing, purer forms of spatiality and superficial visual appearance largely independent from any plot (privileging thereby writerly form as such over any traditionally narrative crystallization of time), the *és/pda* (and the subsequent New Wave) still relied a lot on the 'necessary evil' of narration, not unlike classical Hollywood itself: what they were after was not a static representation of space and the visual surface of phenomena per se as crystallized by means of literary form, but a spatiality stemming from a perennial conflictual embrace with time. The *és/pda* was as willing to 'go spatial' as the *nouveau roman* was, and shared more than a few aesthetic features with that trend (among others: a penchant for utter de-psychologization, deconstruction of genre conventions, and so on and so forth), but it also had little intention to give up the conflictual relationship space entertained with time (notably through narrative) as the foundation of space's preponderance itself.³⁵ Space is not made into an aesthetic form or object by writing techniques, but, as in the heyday of the traditional novel, depends at various levels on time's unfolding as the consciousness of the viewer/reader can perceive it. Far less experimental and formalist, more deliberately 'realist' than the *nouveau roman*, the *és/pda* always remained attached to the illusory presentation of

33 Then again, Godard (in 'Hiroshima, notre amour', a roundtable discussion with Domarchi, Doniol-Valcroze, Kast, Rivette and Rohmer, p. 9) took pains to make clear that Resnais's film was *better* than the novels Robbe-Grillet, Butor, Duras and other writers variously associated with *nouveau roman* were writing at that time.

34 Rohmer interviewed by Tassone, 'Incontro con Eric Rohmer', p. 21.

35 Godard's 'spatializing narration' (as David Bordwell put it) is a good case in point. In the last chapter of his *Narration in the Fiction Film* (pp. 311-334), Bordwell described Godard's cinema as essentially a stratification of horizontal elements, thereby implicitly siding him with *nouveau roman*. However, he also hastened to add that the cause-effect temporal series known as narrative was still very much there; this robust permanence of temporality, by contrast, definitely set Godard apart from that literary trend. As for the affinities and divergences between Godard and the *nouveau roman*, see also Labarthe, 'La chance d'être femme'.

ordinary spatial appearances to the viewer/reader's consciousness through regularly narrative cinematic time.³⁶ The only modernism it could ever conceive was *in classicism itself*; accordingly, cinema's 'medium specificity' could only be, paradoxically, that of being more novelistic than novel itself.

As early as 1953, Rohmer openly disagreed with Conrad's definition 'Art's goal is to make you see', because 'if the novelist's sole concern were to approach the outside of an object with words and to remain outside the object, I would unquestionably prefer the least film to the best of novels, if only because, saving me from the boredom of description, it brings me into the whirlwind of action which the most beautiful prose slows down or freezes.'³⁷ Of course, the critic could not have had *nouveau roman* in mind when he wrote these words, simply because, at that time, it had not yet been born. Nevertheless, this passage made a distinct attack on *nouveau roman* ahead of the latter's own time. That literary trend, Rohmer would say, wrongly omitted time, whereas the *és/pda* was more sensitive 'to the verb rather than to the adjective, to intention and movement more than to sensation and state.'³⁸ That is to say, the *és/pda* thought that the predominance of 'showing' (space) over 'telling' (time) could only exist *against the background of the latter*, and not by ruling it out. Accordingly, the rest of the article tries to describe the way these two dimensions go together in the works by Howard Hawks and Robert Louis Stevenson

36 In 1963, Jean-Louis Comolli slated a book about cinema by Jean Cayrol (who belonged, to at least some extents, to the *nouveau roman* circle) and Claude Durand. 'Why yet again this obsession with the image, which they turn into the principle and the value of cinema? The image does not make the film, nor its structure, it is not even its primary element. But it is well known that writers are fascinated by it (see for instance Robbe-Grillet), so much so that they forget that cinema is more a movement of ideas than it is a movement of images, and that what can be perceived can only be the movement of the real, even within the framework of fiction'. Originally: 'Pourquoi encore cette obsession de l'image, dont ils font le principe et le prix du cinéma? L'image ne fait pas le film, ni sa structure, elle n'est pas même son élément premier. Mais on sait que les écrivains sont fascinés par elle (cf. Robbe-Grillet), au point d'oublier que le cinéma est plus un mouvement d'idées qu'un mouvement d'images, et que le sensible ne peut être, même au sein d'une fiction, que mouvement du réel.' Comolli, 'Livres de cinéma', p. 29.

37 Rohmer, 'Howard Hawks, *The Big Sky*', p. 129.

38 *Ibid.* In 1966, Rohmer made a documentary, *Le Celluloid et le marbre*, named after a series of articles he published during the course of 1955 to advocate cinema qua ultra-classical art. The film of the same name appears instead as a kind of dialectical overcoming of the opposition 'pda vs. *nouveau roman*' (modernism qua classicism vs. late literary modernism), in that he filmed in a 'realist' way the ordinary appearances of *nouveau roman* writers themselves as they explained their ideas on literature in front of the camera. By *showing* artists and theorists variously *telling* the camera the predominance of *showing* over *telling*, the mimetic and representational features of cinema reconciled, as it were, with the formalist and experimentalist ones of *nouveau roman*.

(Hawks's literary equivalent, in the critic's opinion). Characters in their films and books are revealed by the irruption of an action which is *at the same time* unexpected (thereby falling under the 'showing' category, since it is essentially a non-temporal, unprepared 'apparition' out of the blue, breaking with causal determinism) and carefully hitherto prepared by the gradual character development in time ('telling'). In a way that ostensibly recalls what was named 'the reversal between inside and outside' in the previous chapter, the sudden intrusion of discontinuity ends up appearing nonetheless justified by all the previous preparation, by the tight cause-effect texture sustaining it.

6.4. Universalism

As a rule, classicism and pretensions of universality typically gravitate towards one another. What is deemed as 'classical' is often also reputed to be universally valid in some way or another. This is very much the case with Rohmer too, who never concealed his *western-centric universalist bias*. He never had any qualms about maintaining that cinema belonged to western civilization because its technical and aesthetic properties (i.e. the fact that it externalized ordinary human vision, so to speak) made it the embodiment of the quintessentially western and Euro-centric ideal of universal natural beauty. The beauty shown by cinema (a definite outcome of the west) is a universal beauty. This seemingly problematic view³⁹ needs to be thought of alongside Kant's *universality of taste*: aesthetic judgements are universally valid (an object judged as beautiful is universally liable to be experienced as pleasurable), but no beautiful object can be said to be beautiful just because it complies with a definite concept pinning down its beauty in a prescriptive way. Rohmer's universality, like Kant's, is *empty*.

This issue is worth inspecting in greater detail. For one thing, it is impossible to bind Rohmer's universality to a definite geographical area, historical phase or social environment.⁴⁰ Formerly, it was Ancient Greece

39 Rohmer's conservative leaning has already been pointed out by several scholars; see for instance De Baecque and Herpe, *Eric Rohmer*, pp. 82-86.

40 The *éS/pda* complete lack of cultural barriers should be regarded precisely in this light. It would be a mistake to think that broader, 'Gramscian' claims regarding the dignity and importance of popular culture in the face of more highbrow works underpin the fact that a simple film artisan with no (explicit) conceptual pretensions like Howard Hawks could be considered an *auteur*, or Truffaut's deep appreciation to b-movies (openly stated in two articles included in the volume by Wheeler Winston Dixon *The Early Film Criticism of François Truffaut*, 'La neige

that had a solid grasp on universal beauty, particularly thanks to tragedies, which tackled the eternal conflict between freedom and necessity. A few centuries later (roughly from seventeenth to nineteenth century), it was France's turn:⁴¹ 'Let's leave Aeschylus' soul free to wander worldwide and incarnate itself in thousands of unexpected aspects, and leave the twentieth century Hellenes free to learn from Maupassant.⁴² In the 1950s, it was the United States: Americans were the 'Greeks' of the twentieth century because at that moment in history their civilization was ripe enough for a classicism to emerge. Therefore, the universality of classical Hollywood,⁴³ tackling universal themes (typically, the conflict between will and destiny) by relying first and foremost on the plenitude and self-sufficiency of ordinary appearances (Rohmer's idea of universal beauty), was due to an historical contingency, and it had little to do with nationality per se or other related factors. 'What we like in the cinema from the New Continent is its universal reach, not the herds of its folklore.'⁴⁴ Godard echoes him: 'Might not the astonishing success of German directors in Hollywood be explained – for the benefit of our sociological critics – by the strongly international character which enabled the quest for universality in these mystics to expand freely?'⁴⁵

This is why Rohmer often set Hollywood's universality against 'le cinéma des petites nations' ('the cinema of small nations'), minor national cinemas without a strong industrial base (ultimately, nearly every single national

n'est pas sale' and 'De A Jusqu'au Z'). All that was simply not on their agenda. Rather, those bias were due to a much more traditional belief in the universality of beauty: precisely because beauty is universal, there is no reason why it shouldn't extend (if need be) to lowbrow, purely commercial works. Of course, here one could object that this contravenes Kant's imperative that beauty should be *disinterested* and without purpose; on the other hand, for the *éS/pda* the properly aesthetic absence of purpose does not overlap with the lack of commercial ambitions: as we have seen in the previous chapter, someone like Hitchcock could be purely commercial and attaining purposiveness without purpose, while someone like Clouzot drowned his films in purposiveness (in deliberate effects) while having highbrow ambitions.

41 Rohmer, 'Rediscovering America', pp. 88-89. More generally, the whole article revolves around the issue being discussed in this paragraph.

42 Rohmer, 'Stella'. Originally: 'Laissons l'âme d'Eschyle vagabonder à travers le monde et s'incarner dans mille aspects inattendus et les Hellènes du XXème siècle s'instruire dans Maupassant.'

43 Bazin, Doniol-Valcroze, Kast, Leenhardt, Rivette, Rohmer, 'Six Characters in Search of auteurs: a Discussion about the French Cinema', p. 35.

44 Rohmer, 'Rira bien...'. Originally: 'Ce que nous aimons dans le cinéma du Nouveau Continent, c'est sa portée universelle, non les hardes de son folklore.'

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

cinema but the United States⁴⁶).⁴⁷ 'What I generally like about American films, even genre films, is that they depict relations that the cinemas from different nations unjustly disregard: for instance that between power and law, or, as in the present case, the issue of authority.'⁴⁸ While Hollywood cinema tackled universal subjects (thereby bringing the viewer 'back in time 2500 years' ('2500 ans en arrière'), to Ancient Greece), reaching a global audience, the 'cinema of small nations' contented itself with occupying the slots allotted to 'national' or 'authorial' specificities in film festivals (incidentally, the *ÉS/pda* critics were generally fairly reluctant festival-goers). The problem with this kind of cinema was that it relied too much on 'these findings, ideas or inventions attesting of the presence of a personal style,'⁴⁹ and focused too much on specificities and individual differences, indulging in elaborated framings and peculiar, idiosyncratic styles, neglecting what really mattered, viz. universal themes and universal beauty.⁵⁰ A film from Greece, the 'former Hollywood' of ancient times that was now nothing but a 'small nation' creating a 'small nation cinema,' provided Rohmer with the opportunity to express his point more straightforwardly than usual: 'His characters lack of a certain dimension, that of an internal contradiction, which we find nevertheless in the most colourless hero of the most commercial western. Yet it is a Greek, if I am not mistaken, that taught us first that drama characters cannot be neither entirely guilty, nor entirely innocent.'⁵¹ In other words, by focusing too much on the *particular* beauty of its own peculiarities, that film missed the universality of contradiction as such. It can thus be argued that an 'author cinema' was already in place (most notably in film festivals) when the *pda* put forward its 'policy', and *they did not like it*: they appreciated incomparably more Hollywood cinema, the

46 British cinema in particular was regularly, violently attacked by all the *pda* critics. See for instance: Rohmer, 'Ma vie commence en Malaisie'.

47 The rest of them basically agreed, as I argued in 'The Politics and Aesthetics of the *politique des auteurs*'.

48 Rohmer, 'Wichita'. Originally: 'Ce que j'aime en général, dans les films américains, fussent-ils de série, c'est qu'ils peignent des rapports que le cinéma des autres nations dédaignent injustement: celui par exemple de la force et du droit et, dans le cas qui nous concerne, le problème de l'autorité.'

49 Rohmer, 'Soldats inconnus'. Originally: 'Ces trouvailles, idées ou inventions qui témoignent de la présence d'un style personnel.'

50 Rohmer, 'La maison de l'ange'.

51 Rohmer, 'La fille en noir'. Originally: 'Il manque une dimension à ses personnages, celle d'une contradiction interne, que nous découvrons pourtant dans le plus falot héros du plus commercial western. C'est pourtant un Grec, si je ne me trompe, qui nous enseigne le premier que les personnages de drame ne sauraient être "ni tout à fait coupables, ni tout à fait innocents".'

constraints of industrial standardization, its impersonality, and its aesthetic universality. Only against that background the authentic originality of an *auteur* could emerge, as if mirroring in the very filmmaking process the same old conflict: will versus necessity. Therein lied the paradox: the more 'cinemas from small nations' wanted to look 'different,' the more they looked like each other,⁵² while only the uniformity of classical Hollywood could enable true singularity (the *auteurs*') to emerge. Freedom could only be grounded on the conflict between it and its opposite, and not on the simple 'expression of individuality.'

One might legitimately ask, then, what filmmakers from non-western 'small nations' should do. Should they simply quit making films? Should they just imitate Hollywood cinema instead? Although some of Rohmer's writings⁵³ seem to suggest the latter solution, the answer is more nuanced. Japanese cinema, although not exactly a cinematic 'small nation' due to its massive film production system,⁵⁴ is a good case in point. Rohmer affirms that most Japanese films are burdened by their own aesthetic traditions: the acting style they display owes too much to nationally-rooted acting conventions (like for instance those of kabuki theatre). What Japanese films should do, according to him, is to give up these nationally-rooted conventions to embrace the western-centric universal beauty of cinema. The crucial point here is that *he does not say that they should imitate western conventions*. All they should do instead is to discard theirs, without embracing new ones in particular. It can thus be argued that 'universal beauty (whose utmost manifestation is cinema) qua a specific outcome of the west' does not mean that there is a series of western aesthetic norms that every national cinema in the world should comply with. It means that in order to attain cinematic beauty proper, films should rid themselves of *any* (western ones included) aesthetic conventions belonging to a definite national context. But what remains when a film is stripped of conventions? What remains, in Rohmer's view, is *the self-sufficient power of appearances unfolding in space and time as such*. The only reason why this *concept-less* universal beauty (the beauty of reality as 'transcendentally' perceived by the human being) is 'western' is because it has been conceptualized for the first time by Kant (even though Rohmer does not name Kant overtly, everything suggests he implies so), among others by drawing upon earlier western aesthetic reflections, such as Plato's – but this does not mean that it consists of specifically western

52 *Ibid.*

53 Rohmer, '*Aparajito* est une brillante exception qui prélude au renouveau du cinéma indien'.

54 Rohmer, 'Universalité du génie', p. 46.

features, nor that non-western national cinemas have no access to it. They do, provided that they give up everything specifically belonging to a definite context⁵⁵ – something western aesthetic tradition is automatically more inclined to do thanks to the incalculable influence exerted by Kantian aesthetics – without necessarily embracing something western beside this ‘renunciation’ as such. It is a kind of universality that can only be *negatively* pinned down, and not positively defined: it does not consist in a definite tradition, but in the withdrawal from *whatever* tradition. ‘All roads lead to abstraction.’⁵⁶ The pda praised Kenji Mizoguchi because he rid his films of specifically Japanese acting conventions, and relied instead on pure *staging*, on spatially organizing the moving frames and the movements of the actors in them. Indeed, Mizoguchi’s cinema is one of the most celebrated illustrations of the art of staging as the *universal language of cinema*.⁵⁷ Conversely, Akira Kurosawa is rejected by all the pda critics because he only tried to imitate *narrative* western conventions.

Kurosawa’s *Rashomon* (1950) is briefly mentioned in ‘La revanche de l’occident’ (‘The Revenge of the West’), an article in which Rohmer condemns painter Paul Gauguin’s exoticism as a false and flawed attempt to be faithful to a different civilization – an attempt that fails to negate the western perspective it allegedly negates, in a way that is not unlike western audiences’ ‘exotic’ love for a western-oriented director like Kurosawa. Conversely, in the early Thirties, F.W. Murnau went to Tahiti to shoot his *Tabu* (1931) ‘as a conqueror and a messenger of our own civilization.’⁵⁸ However, we should be careful not to charge Rohmer with colonialist tendencies too hastily. On the one hand, he says ‘I do not know any other work from this century bearing more deeply the sign of the spirit of the West,’⁵⁹ because of the extraordinarily accomplished encounter between pictorial sensibility and natural beauty being displayed in that film. On the other hand, the article makes clear that ‘to bear the sign of the West’ ultimately means *to dissolve* it, to let any recognizably western feature (for instance, conventional pictorial/figurative codes) disappear into a purely visual harmony, viz. one devoid of formal codes recognizably falling under ‘western art heritage.’ In a Kantian vein, the triumph of western artistic beauty can only lie in its dissolution into natural beauty, that is, in the disappearance of the watchmaker in the wheels of the watch. The article ends

55 As argued, for instance, in Rohmer, ‘Livres de cinéma’, CC, 60 (June 1956).

56 Rohmer, ‘Les amants crucifiés’, p. 5. Originally: ‘Toutes les routes mènent à l’abstraction.’

57 Besides the aforementioned ‘Universalité du génie’ and ‘Les amants crucifiés’, see also his ‘Les contes de la lune vague’ and Jacques Rivette’s ‘Mizoguchi vu d’ici’.

58 Rohmer, ‘La revanche de l’occident’, p. 47. My translation.

59 *Ibid.* My translation.

with a motto by Goethe: 'Everything perfect in its kind has to transcend its own kind, it must become something different and incomparable.'⁶⁰ Rather than falling into the temptations of Gauguin-like exoticism, and espousing the perspective of the non-western other just to better secretly keep one's original western bias intact, art should stick to the western perspective until it transcends it, thereby reaching the *sourcelessness* of natural beauty and vanishing into a kind of (universal) *nobody's perspective*. This applies equally to non-western and western art. One can only attain universal beauty in the western sense if one gives up any substantial reliance on recognizably particular (national, geographical, cultural, historical, formal, etc.) features – western or eastern alike. *Tabu* is not the triumph of western art in spite of its being thoroughly Polynesian, but *because* of it. Its universality lies in its being so western that it is ultimately non-western.

6.5. Authorship and *mise en scène*

These attempts to conciliate a universalist preference for classicism with historical contextualization are reminiscent of similar efforts undertaken in the Kantian aftermath, when such thinkers as Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe tried to articulate the imperishable greatness of antiquity and the specificities of modernity. What should also not be forgotten whenever one tackles the decisive question 'who, or what, is an *auteur* according to Rohmer?' is that that selfsame intellectual milieu (and most notably Herder and Goethe themselves) conceived a Genius primarily as somebody capable of bridging the gulf between the eternal brilliance of classicity and the historical peculiarities of modernity.

With this in mind, one can finally attempt to pin down Rohmer's seminal *auteurism*. To begin with, it must be pointed out that the critic himself never really tried to come up with a definite answer to the question 'who, or what, is an *auteur*?'⁶¹ He made it clear, though, that an *auteur* is a film director who is well-versed in the art of *mise en scène*. Of course, this still

60 Rohmer, 'La revanche de l'occident', p. 48. My translation.

61 In his *Looks and Frictions*, Paul Willemen repeatedly pointed out that, their differences notwithstanding, *és/pda's* reticence as regards a possibly steady definition of *mise en scene* was not without recalling the similar reticence by the film theorists of the 1920s to define what *photogénie* was. The link between the two is obviously appearance for appearance's sake – although, as we saw in Chapter one, Rohmer regarded cinema's increasingly realist features as a technical and historical rift irretrievably separating one from the other.

begs the question, what is *mise en scène*?⁶² Rohmer never provided a clear answer. Still, in a broader, generic sense, his writings seem to imply that *mise en scène* is nothing but the art of appearance for appearance's sake, viz. the art capable to twist mechanism into beauty and freedom. And ever since the eponymous 1948 article, *mise en scène* has never ceased to be, for him, the art of *space*.

This 'art of space' is emphatically not to be confused with plastic expression. 'Cinema, an Art of Space'⁶³ already insisted somewhat on this distinction, which was repeated countless times from then on.⁶⁴ The *ÉS/pda* largely shared this aversion; André Bazin himself was well aware that 'his criteria [the criteria of *pda*'s formalism] are very different from those of traditional formalism, which were above all plastic.'⁶⁵ The moving image is not 'a pleasing painting, composed according to the strict laws of plasticity and whose skilful equilibrium we only reluctantly allow ourselves to destroy,'⁶⁶ because, above all, it has to *move*. Laws of pictorial and sculptural composition (far more valued by Ricciotto Canudo, Louis Delluc, Germaine Dulac, Jean Epstein and other French film critics and theorists from the 1920s⁶⁷) are of little

62 Countless different answers have been given to this question in the past few decades. For a rich overview of many of them, see Martin, *Mise en Scène and Film Style*, or Kessler, *Mise en scène*.

63 'Cinema an Art of Space' started with the elucidation that the sense of space is 'not to be confused with a pictorial sense or a simple visual sensibility' (p. 19). The 'plastic expression' (p. 20) has *nothing* to do with cinema's spatial bias. The 'art of space' is not (or not necessarily) a matter of organizing shapes and volumes in an eye-pleasing way. 'From our point of view, the most valid films are not those with the most beautiful pictures, and the collaboration of a genius cameraman cannot ensure that a film will depict an original view of the world' (p. 22). It is no accident that the piece ends with Rossellini's *Paisan* (*Paisà*, 1946), whose 'richness in spatial expression – one very different from the distortions of the plastic arts' (p. 28) depends on having invented methods that 'are much less apparent than they were twenty years ago' (p. 28). 'Cinema, an Art of Space' also mentions Sergei Eisenstein, a director who is easily liable to suspicions of 'plastic expression', but who cannot really be charged with such an accusation because he, as a rule, bands together time (that is, movement) and space. 'We should emphasize that the vanishing of lines along one or two dominant directions, the swelling of diagonals, always takes place *in the direction of movement* and organizes the principal planes along which the surfaces slide into the shot. In this way the shot is constantly saved from aestheticism' (p. 24). The risk of plastic expression for plastic expression's sake is avoided because a system of vectors is not just spatially represented, but gradually given life *on the basis of time* (that is, movement).

64 See, for instance (among others): 'The Art of Caricature: Tashlin', p. 151; Rohmer, 'Renoir's Youth', p. 188; Rohmer, 'Hommes et loups'; Rohmer, 'Sans famille'.

65 Excerpt from a letter by Bazin to Georges Sadoul quoted in De Baecque, *La Cinéphilie*, p. 184. Originally: 'Ses critères [the criteria of *ÉS/pda*'s formalism] sont très différents de ceux du formalisme traditionnel qui étaient surtout plastiques.'

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

67 This was rightly pointed out by, among others, René Prédal in his *La critique de cinéma*, p. 98.

use in cinema, because they limit and thwart the unfolding of movement, unquestionably cinema's primary element.⁶⁸ This is why Vincente Minnelli, a director whose films are replete with plastic preciousities, is usually snubbed by Rohmer and by the *ÉS/pda* in general (whereas other *CC* critics, like Jean Domarchi, regarded him as an outstanding *auteur*).⁶⁹ Several other directors are condemned because their films are too often static; among them, Luis Buñuel ('Luis Buñuel: The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz'). Moreover, in the issue (#31, January 1954) of the *CC* dedicated for the most part to the then-new invention of cinemascope,⁷⁰ Rohmer and the others unsurprisingly insisted somewhat on the spatial possibilities granted by the new technique, which could make it much easier for filmmakers to create a sense of spatial continuity; however, this continuity was not pursued just for the sake of it, but also to allow actors (and the camera itself) to *move more freely*.⁷¹ The importance of cinemascope, in other words, did not lie in the framing, much less in its plastic potential, but rather in the fact that it facilitated motion within the frame.

The art of space, the art of 'manifestation' as opposed to 'expression', is that which conveys whatever should be conveyed in a film through space. In Andrzej Wajda's *Kanal* (1957), 'the one and only great "idea" of such film is a spatial and concrete fact, and it is because the symbol is never made explicit that it conserves its power. This subterranean and nauseous labyrinth, this sort of Styx, doesn't need words to prove its eloquence.'⁷² The underground tunnels trapping the characters are a perfect metaphor of human condition without ever needing to be a metaphor and to say something in the first

68 This point was also stated in Rohmer, 'Such Vanity is Painting', p. 49.

69 See, for instance: Domarchi, 'Monsieur Vincente'; Rohmer, 'Thé et sympathie'; Rohmer, 'Gigi'; Domarchi, 'Juste un rêve'.

70 In addition to that issue (partially translated in Jim Hillier's *Cahiers du Cinéma. The 1950s*), a similar emphasis on the *kinetic* virtues of cinemascope can be found in Rohmer, 'La croisée des destins'; Rohmer, 'Le temps d'aimer, le temps de mourir'; Truffaut, 'Les nègres de la rue blanche'. Jim Hillier ('Introduction') fittingly compared the *CC* special issue on cinemascope with the similar one by British movie magazine *Sight and Sound*: the latter particularly focused on the plastic drawbacks of that technique, whereas the criteria used by the former to assess it had nothing to do with the plastic dimension proper.

71 By contrast, *Thérèse Etienne* (Denys de la Patellière, 1958) was condemned because it used Cinemascope in the wrong way, i.e. in order to put together fixed, generally static shots instead of letting the actors move more freely; in this case then, plastic expression and the representation of a static space were wrongly preferred to the dynamic construction of a space through time and movement. Rohmer, 'Thérèse Etienne'.

72 Rohmer, 'Kanal'. Originally: 'La grande, la seule "idée" de ce film est une donnée spatiale, concrète et c'est parce que le symbole n'est jamais explicité qu'il conserve sa force. Ce labyrinthe souterrain et nauséabond, cette manière de Styx, n'a nul besoin du verbe pour corroborer son éloquence.'

place. The same goes for the final forward travelling shot wrapping up the film and showing the Vistula river from behind the bars the characters cannot trespass. No trace of the idea beside the *exclusively* spatial means it is conveyed by.

Similarly, Rohmer praised those films where environment and landscape directly take part in the unfolding of the drama; in a western picture, he appreciated 'this fugitive driven back to the river by a herd of horses which kept the killers under cover, or the one hiding with his mount behind a block of rocks, this duel with rifles on the crest of a hill, and this piton which they disintegrated with gun shots so as to break the enemy's back.'⁷³ In another western, the hero is trying to catch some bandits hiding in a cave. After having reached the top of the cave, he sets fire on one of the two sides of the cave; then, by taking advantage of the ensuing smoke, he goes in the opposite direction and waits for the bandits (intrigued by the smoke) to come out so that he can shoot them on their backs. This finding 'is well worth this refined spotlight effect, or that clever crane movement.'⁷⁴

Indeed, Rohmer radically distinguished *mise en scène* from technical preciosity and style.⁷⁵ Unlike the latter, *mise en scène* is *unobtrusive*, and as a rule *conceals* its presence. It is not a matter of fade-outs, ellipses and rapid countershots, but of a certain sense of space and place.⁷⁶ In the film from which the latest example was taken, 'the happiest inventions aren't particularly due to framing but more to gesture and positioning; in fact, the ones of the latter kind are given prominence almost without us realizing, by means of an uncommon expertise in framing, whereby the decor is always fully "there", familiar, well-oriented.'⁷⁷ In short, the framing shows us all we need to see, so that we always have an adequate grasp of what is going on, but with no emphasis at all on compositional virtuosity. Frame composition and movements therein should be carefully pre-determined, but *invisibly* so, without graphic redundancy, in order to deliver an unobtrusive

73 Rohmer, 'La fureur des hommes'. Originally: 'Ce fugitif acculé à la rivière par une horde de chevaux à l'abri desquels se dissimulent les tueurs, ou bien se cachant avec sa monture derrière un bloc de rochers, ce duel au fusil sur la crête de la colline et ce piton désagrégé à coups de feu pour fracasser les reins de l'adversaire.'

74 Rohmer, 'Du sang dans le désert'. Originally: '[Il] vaut bien tel effet raffiné de projecteur, tel savant mouvement de grue.'

75 See, for instance Rohmer, 'Castigat ridendo...', p. 38.

76 Rohmer, 'Loin de Griffith', p. 43.

77 Rohmer, 'Du sang dans le désert'. Originally: 'Les plus heureuses inventions ne sont pas tant de cadrage que de geste et de position: celle-ci, il est vrai, mises en évidence, mais presque à notre insu, par une science rare du cadre, grâce à laquelle le décor nous est toujours bien présent, familier, orienté.'

articulation of the temporal sequence of deeds forming the action, through the articulation of spatial elements (the cave, the smoke and so on). Yet, one should be careful not to understand the word 'spatial' too narrowly. 'Space' here means, very broadly, 'anything endowed with an extension taking place within moving images.' The direction of actors is thus by no means ruled out – on the contrary, this 'invisible' craft, displaying no figurative brilliance, is undoubtedly among the *mise en scène* tools the *és/pda* paid most attention to.⁷⁸

Accordingly, the *auteur* is not at all required to boastfully affirm his presence in the images; more often than not, the opposite is true, and he is more appreciated when he is invisible, barely detectable in the texture of the film. 'It may even be from the meagreness of their inventiveness that people like Bresson or Rossellini draw the rigour and novelty of their style.'⁷⁹ Rohmer even wrote that the best way to be a film *auteur* lies in 'vanishing behind the characters' ('s'effacer derrière ses personnages').⁸⁰

In other words, Rohmer contrasted the properly modern idea of authorship as 'self-expression', with one that was most fully fleshed out in the Kantian aftermath, viz. one whose self-proclaimed modernity lied in the re-establishment of the eternal values of classicity (sobriety, harmonious restraint and so on and so forth) by different, more up-to-date means – that is to say, by *cinematic* means, by appearance for appearance's sake. In December 1959, in the middle of the explosion of the New Wave, when several new directors debuted behind the camera to (so the story goes) 'express their personality', he went against the grain:

During its existence, cinema has been able to maintain a definite objectivity, owing to its own powers and also its limitations. The conquest of subjectivity, if it cannot be condemned in advance, may represent only a kind of suicidal victory. For here, film can do nothing less than conform to the models provided by the other arts, arts that are better equipped in this regard. Even if cinema manages to beat them in this area, will it avoid being contaminated by the illness that today plagues almost all of them? We should therefore praise Renoir for declaring war, in his interviews and conferences, on *subjectivity*, just as he did on those of *psychology*.⁸¹

78 See, for instance Rohmer, 'The Quintessence of the Genre: Cukor', p. 156; Rohmer, 'Politics against Destiny', pp. 162-163; Rohmer, 'Révélation suédoise'.

79 Rohmer, 'Isou or Things as They Are', p. 57.

80 Rohmer, 'Crime et châtement', p. 3.

81 Rohmer, 'Renoir's Youth', pp. 191-192.

This topic is crucial, and will be dealt with in greater detail in the follow-up book of the present research. For now, it is important to stress that the *auteur's* self-effacement is not so far from what has previously been called 'the missing genius of natural beauty.' By concealing his presence, the self-effacing *auteur* makes it easier for the sourcelessness of moving images (that is, of their 'purposiveness without purpose') to emerge. In other words, the filmmaker should effectively give up the intention to drift from ordinary perception through interpretation, and be instead devoted to putting together moving images seemingly untouched by human intervention while concealing therein artistic contribution nonetheless; the filmmaker is expected to somehow instil some purposiveness without purpose in it – and *seemingly invisibly so*. 'This awareness of what is limitless, or, if you prefer, of the infinite, can be found in the cinema in the feeling of absolute autonomy of nature, which however, on the other hand, we dominate by the power we are given to get straight to the heart of appearances – not the least paradox of this art where the refusal to produce art is elevated to first and leading principle.'⁸² This is precisely what makes Nicholas Ray a 'colourist' rather than a mere 'plastic artist'.⁸³ Conversely, Vincent Minnelli's film about Van Gogh (*Lust for Life*, 1956) misunderstands the relationship between cinema and the genius, because it chooses to faithfully visualize his paintings in a *tableau vivant* fashion instead of emphasizing the *fundamental discord* between the properly plastic eye of the artist and the eye of the movie camera.⁸⁴

This is what the young, somewhat Rohmerian Jacques Rivette has to say about Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1949), a disappointing film from a director he had hugely admired:

What does the literary hack look for on the screen, if not the imposition of the expression of a 'personal worldview'? Such presumptuousness, however, is likely to carry along the seeds of its own retribution. The expression of this view, however striking and personal it may be, could only be effective in compliance with laws it would be dangerous to deny:

82 Rohmer, *De Mozart en Beethoven*, pp. 109-110. Originally: 'Cette conscience de l'illimité, ou, si l'on veut, de l'infini, nous la retrouvons, au cinéma, dans le sentiment de l'autonomie absolue de la nature, que pourtant, d'une autre manière, nous dominons par le pouvoir qui nous est impartit de tailler dans le vif des apparences: ce qui n'est pas le moindre paradoxe de cet art où le refus de faire de l'art est érigé en premier principe directeur.'

83 Rohmer, 'Ajax or the Cid?', p. 112.

84 Rohmer, 'Vincent Van Gogh', p. 4. Traces of a productive discord between the all too aware eye of the filmmaker and the passive, inert resistance of nature can be found in 'La mort en ce jardin', his review of Luis Buñuel's *Death in the Garden* (*La mort en ce jardin*, 1956).

one has to risk invisibility. Filmmakers must know how to respect what they shoot, and to submit to their subject matters; they cannot just play with them. The demiurge who is slave of his own creation cannot glance flippantly over it without danger; may he refuse to adopt the point of view of Sirius; may he refuse then any presumptuous affirmation of the I, and may he practice humility in front of this universe that fails to belong to him and slips off his hands to gravitate freely. [...] Never had true personality had a greater chance to come to the fore than in impersonality; you have to lose yourself in order to find yourself in a purer fashion, like some imitate in order to ascertain their uniqueness. 'He who wants to save his soul shall lose it'; he who wants to prove to oneself denies himself; he who wants to affirm himself conceals himself.⁸⁵

Moreover, Rohmer overtly referenced Kant's 'final ends' (summarized in one of the previous chapters) and the Kantian analogy between the artist and God. Here is how he replied to film critic Barthélemy Amengual, one of the first to accuse the pda of neglecting the contributions of other film professionals (the editor, the cinematographer and so on and so forth) and of wrongly glorifying the film director alone, as the exclusive responsible of film's aesthetic achievement: 'The world of aesthetic creation is a world of final causes, led by an autocratic will. Isn't the idea of God qua Watchmaker, of a demiurge, borrowed from art?'⁸⁶ The *auteur* is not the direct, genesis-like source of what is valuable in a film. The stones of a building, says Rohmer in the same text, are not produced by its architect. Rather, the *auteur* is a mere name standing (at one and the same time) for the freedom of the subject, for the disregard of cause-effect mechanics (that is, of efficient causes),

85 Rivette, 'Les malheurs d'Orphée', pp. 1-2. Originally: 'Que prétend le littéraire à l'écran, sinon nous imposer l'expression d'une "vision personnelle" du monde? Tant d'outrecuidance risque fort de porter en elle-même les germes de son châtement. L'expression même de cette vision, si attachante et personnelle soit-elle, ne saurait être efficace qu'au sein de lois qu'il serait assez dangereux de nier: on s'expose à l'invisibilité. Le cinéaste doit savoir respecter ce qu'il filme, et se soumettre à son objet; le jeu est interdit. Le demiurge esclave de sa création, ne saurait sans périls la survoler négligemment; qu'il se refuse à prendre sur elle le point de vue de Sirius; qu'il refuse ainsi toute affirmation outrecuidante du moi, et s'exerce à l'humilité, devant cet univers qui cesse de lui appartenir et s'échappe de ses mains pour graviter librement. [...] Jamais la véritable personnalité n'eût plus de chance de se faire jour que dans l'impersonnalité; et, comme certain copie pour se prouver original, perds-toi toi-même aussi pour te retrouver plus pur. "Qui veut sauver son âme la perd"; qui veut se prouver se dénie; s'affirmer, se dissimule.'

86 Rohmer, 'Les lecteurs des Cahiers et la Politique des auteurs', p. 55. Originally: 'L'univers de la création esthétique est un monde de causes finales, régi par une volonté autocratique. L'idée d'un Dieu horloger, d'un demiurge n'est-elle pas empruntée à l'art?'

and for a global vision underlying the film(s) (its final cause): a vision that cannot be reduced to the interaction between the single parts of the film(s), but on which their proper aesthetic functioning is nonetheless based. In this sense, film is an organism whose global concept exceeds the sum of its parts, and the *auteur* stands for this global concept. 'Even if he doesn't change a single comma in the script, the "director" of the film is still a little bit its author, if only because of the discretionary power he exerts over the enterprise as a whole.'⁸⁷

It can be argued that in the *és* years, largely under the impulsion of Rohmer's classicism-oriented and universalist approach, authorial self-effacement indeed played a big role in these critics' conception of authorship – even though the latter had not yet become the main argument presented in their aesthetic policy. As the years went by, the *pda* would increasingly emphasize the affirmation of authorial personalities; nevertheless, as will be shown in the forthcoming second part of the present study, the *pda* *never gave up the idea that a strongly dialectical relationship existed between personality and impersonality*. For the *és* as well as the *pda*, authorial personality and impersonality are two sides of the same coin, and should be thought of together. To some extent, the *és* tended to side more with impersonality while the *pda* more with personality, but ultimately they were both after a very similar aesthetic ideal, and in either case the opposite counterpart was never very far. Which is one more reason to believe that the *pda* can be fully understood only alongside the indispensable preparatory phase when the same critics formed an informal group that once Pierre Kast named *és*.

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87 Rohmer, 'Le bourgeois gentilhomme'. Originally: 'Même s'il ne change pas une virgule du scénario, le "réalisateur" du film est tout un petit peu son auteur, ne serait-ce que par le pouvoir discrétionnaire qu'il exerce sur l'ensemble de l'entreprise.'

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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.

