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

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# Conclusion

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## Abstract

This chapter recapitulates the book's main points, and summarizes the main theoretical assumptions underlying Rohmer's early film criticism. Ultimately, those assumptions would decisively influence the younger critics who later established the *politique des auteurs*, as shown in Chabrol's and Rohmer's monograph on Alfred Hitchcock, customarily regarded as the *politique's* ripest fruit. Indeed, that book (also extensively tackled in this chapter) portrays Hitchcock's cinema as one that epitomizes (through the recurring 'transfer of guilt' theme running through most of his films) the *externality of consciousness* that Sartre never quite managed to properly theorize in his philosophy. In Rohmer's and Chabrol's eyes, Hitchcock's films thus stood for an utter negation of Sartre's all too literary approach, which they (and by extension the *politique des auteurs* overall) perceived as inadequate to account for cinema's specificities.

**Keywords:** Rohmer, Chabrol, Hitchcock, transfer, guilt, conclusion

By having a handful of young cinephiles gather around him, Eric Rohmer found himself at the head of an *école* (a 'school'), without really wanting it, much less trying to establish a well-defined ideological, aesthetic and/or critical movement or trend. Nevertheless, the half-unstated convergence of tastes and ideas that took place in the late 1940s and in the early 1950s among Chabrol, Godard, Rivette, Rohmer and Truffaut, mainly under the influence of the oldest among them, and that by drawing upon Pierre Kast's 1952 nickname can be called *école Schérer* (ÉS), decisively laid the foundations for the *politique des auteurs* (pda) to emerge later. A flash-forward to 1957 might help to clarify the extent to which the ÉS early phase was essential to the formation of the pda – although a fully fleshed-out portrayal of the latter will only be drawn in the follow-up book of the present research.

In the 1950s, the ÉS/pda only published one book-length monograph about a film director: Claude Chabrol's and Eric Rohmer's *Hitchcock: The*

*First Forty-Four Films*. One should not overlook the context surrounding that publication. In 1957, the pda was impressively gaining momentum, after Truffaut's much discussed 1954 pamphlet 'A Certain Tendency of French Cinema' afforded him and his friends significant public attention. Thus, to publish a monograph on a single, specific *auteur* at that time amounted to *making a statement*: it was a matter of choosing, shaping and consolidating their own identity and recognizability vis-a-vis the public eye. In other words, that monograph could not but be an undeclared *manifesto of the pda*. Accordingly, its subject matter could not be just any director: it could only be a director whose personal poetics strongly resonated with the innermost assumptions and premises of the pda. Not just an *auteur*, but somebody embodying like no other what a director should be in order to be an *auteur*.

André Bazin had no problem admitting that Hitchcock was *the* pda's tailor-made filmmaker.<sup>1</sup> He had been critical of both the pda and the English master for approximately the same reason:<sup>2</sup> both were guilty of shallow *formalism*,<sup>3</sup> of neglecting the 'what' (films' subject matter) for the sake of the 'how' (formal brilliance) – indeed an unforgivable sin for someone, like Bazin, who bestowed the utmost importance on the inseparability of *la forme* ('form') and *le fond* ('matter'). However, Bazin's charge should be taken with a grain of salt, as it is perhaps fairly inexact. The young Turks themselves often accused other directors of being shallow formalists.<sup>4</sup> And the main thesis of the Hitchcock book is precisely that the English master had achieved the most perfect coincidence between form and matter.

This Bazin-pda complex diatribe about formalism will not be disentangled in these pages. It appears, though, that their divergence ultimately came down to a different way of conceiving what 'matter' could stand for. It seems that, for Bazin, a film could legitimately deal with just any subject (social, historical, merely escapist, scientific – whatever), provided that it was matched with a suitable, appropriate form, whereas the pda tended to privilege those films and *auteurs* that were deemed compatible with, and found an appropriate

1 Bazin ('Livres de cinéma') made reference to this reciprocal affinity in his own review of the monograph by Chabrol and Rohmer.

2 See in particular Bazin, 'On the *politique des auteurs*' and 'How Could You Possibly Be a Hitchcocko-Hawksian?'.

3 Claude Chabrol ('Les petits sujets'), for instance, maintained that Hitchcock's command of cinematic form was so high that the subjects of his films were basically irrelevant: no matter how lousy and insignificant the subject of a film was, the English director was capable, according to the French critic, to turn it into a masterpiece exclusively thanks to the way he played with cinematic form.

4 For instance, Billy Wilder: Rohmer, 'Ariane'.

form for, the cloud of fairly unspoken ideological and aesthetic concerns that was sketched in the previous chapters, and that came into focus primarily in the early years when neither the *politique des auteurs* label, nor the 'A Certain Tendency of French Cinema' manifesto had appeared yet; that is to say, in the years of the *éS*. For these critics, 'formalism' came along only when a director abused formal brilliance for the sake of a subject unrelated to their 'cloud'.

In this respect, Hitchcock was indeed the epitome of a *pda auteur*. In order to understand why, we shall immediately introduce the central theme around which, according to Chabrol and Rohmer, the whole of Hitchcock's cinema revolves: the *transfer of guilt*. According to this very Catholic idea, the whole of humanity is marked by original sin, by an 'innate defect of the universe,'<sup>5</sup> 'the *interchangeable guilt* of all mankind.'<sup>6</sup> Guilt is *structurally* inside of man: man cannot help but be guilty. Precisely because guilt is inherent and inscribed in human condition as such, *guilt is not personal* ('it does not depend upon the evilness of the characters'<sup>7</sup>). This means that a person can be guilty for absolutely contingent, external reasons that have nothing to do with inner consciousness. Accordingly, guilt literally *floats on the surface*, being passed from one character to the other.

[*Blackmail* (1929)] focuses on the relationships among the characters. Victims and victimizers alternate from sequence to sequence: the victimizer becomes the victim, the victim the victimizer. In the same scene, sometimes in a single shot, the moral positions of the protagonists shift. Take, for example, the short scene between the blackmailer and the detective: the latter is on the right; then, when to save his fiancée the detective in turn suggests an ignoble bargain to the blackmailer, he places himself on the left of the frame. The position of the characters expresses their relationship. This touch is really 'pure Hitchcock.'<sup>8</sup>

Salvation (i.e. *freedom*) lies in the acknowledgement of the utter externality of morality, viz. in voluntarily assuming as one's own the moral unbalance (the guilt) one is bestowed upon from without and from the outside. In other words, it lies in taking responsibility for what one is *not* responsible for, not least by means of the utterly exterior rites known as *sacraments*, such as *confession*.<sup>9</sup>

5 Chabrol and Rohmer, *Hitchcock*, p. 74.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 149.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

9 This occurs, for instance, when Ingrid Bergman delivers her character's monologue in *Under Capricorn* (1949) (pp. 102-103), or in the ending of *The Paradine Case* (1947) (p. 89).

The turn of phrase 'to take responsibility for what one is not responsible for' may legitimately sound like a strange inversion of Sartre's 'ethics of responsibility'. Indeed, the moral dimension Chabrol and Rohmer want to highlight in Hitchcock's oeuvre is every bit anti-Sartrean. They counter the idea of freedom as groundless with the idea that the very ground of freedom is the original sin: freedom arises not when one assumes responsibility for one's own freedom, but when one deliberately assumes responsibility for a guilt *that is not one's own*. The criminal uncle of *Shadow of a Doubt* (1948), saying that 'the world is a foul sty' and charging the world 'with the responsibility he is unwilling to assume'<sup>10</sup> is literally in Sartrean *bad faith*; Rohmer's point, however, is that *his totally innocent young niece too is in bad faith* until she acknowledges her fascination for her evil uncle. In other words: to presume that one is innocent already means to be in bad faith: the only real way out of bad faith is to acknowledge the original sin. Only then, is the cynicism of, say, Clouzot's *The Wages of Fear* evaded; only by postulating a universal culpability does one feel involved in the evil world outside instead of feeling superior and detached from it.

Approximately the same point is made with regards to *Rear Window*. Everything that happens in the apartments on which Jeff spies from his own room 'happens as though they were the projections of the voyeur's thoughts – or desires; he will never be able to find in them more than he had put there, more than he hopes for or is waiting for.'<sup>11</sup> Courted by Lisa, a woman he is not interested in and who takes care of him in his own flat after an accident compelled him to temporarily use a wheelchair, he spies on the life of those who live in front of his apartment, but all that he finds there are refractions of his own solitude. 'Their solitude echoes that of the spinster resolutely seeking escape in fantasy, that of the childless couple, that of the young newlyweds submerged in the sexual passion of the first days of marriage.'<sup>12</sup>

Rohmer regards *Rear Window* as a critique of self-centred, egoistical solitude. It is easy to realize that this 'solitude' is really Sartre's for-itself consciousness, even if the critic does not mention it: Jeff, the voyeur spying on his neighbours, stands for a consciousness being reflected *both* in the external objects it is conscious of (at some point Jeff becomes aware that his spying has effects on the life 'out there') *and* in itself as separate, autonomous consciousness (Jeff invisibly sitting in his apartment). 'In short, each of

<sup>10</sup> Chabrol and Rohmer, *Hitchcock*, p. 73.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

the characters – protagonists or those playing a minor role – is enclosed not only in the cell of his apartment, but in the stubborn satisfaction of something which when seen externally, partially, and from afar can only appear ludicrous;<sup>13</sup> yet, ‘each of these people will drink the cup of his egoism down to the lees.’<sup>14</sup> Solitude is first posited, and then overcome and refuted – and so is for-itself consciousness, implicitly being proved untenable. For Rohmer and Chabrol, solitude is inseparable from the supposition of oneself as innocent – a supposition ‘in bad faith,’ as per Sartre. In contrast to this supposition, Jeff ends up feeling concerned and even guilty with regards to what he sees from an allegedly detached position, thereby confirming the truth of ‘original sin.’<sup>15</sup> This Jeff-neighbours correlation mirrors the one between Jeff and the spectator: ‘He waits, hoping that events will justify his deductions [that one of his neighbours has killed his wife]. We wait, hoping along with him. In a manner of speaking, the crime is desired by the man who expects to make of his discovery his supreme delectation, the very sense of his life. The crime is desired by us, the spectators, who fear nothing so much as seeing our hopes deceived.’<sup>16</sup> Both Jeff and the spectator not only see, but desire as they see. ‘We are constantly splitting ourselves in two while the protagonist of the film splits himself in two, constantly identifying with him while he is identifying with the man he is spying on.’<sup>17</sup> Hence, we are never innocent, because (like Charlie the niece in the other film) we are never really detached. *To presume oneself separate*<sup>18</sup> *already means to be guilty*: Rohmer seems to identify the emergence of for-itself consciousness itself (Sartre’s nihilation; Jeff’s isolation in his apartment) not only *inherently* in bad faith, but also coincident with the original sin (a coincidence Sartre would never condone), in that nihilation qua original phenomenon of consciousness disavows something by all means more original, namely the void of self-consciousness and its ensuing being nothing but something floating within external perception. Jeff ‘nihilates’ because he refuses to be nothing but the object of Lisa’s love (‘turning his back to the true sun, the photographer loses the ability to look Being in the face’<sup>19</sup>).

13 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

18 Balestrero’s fault in *The Wrong Man* lies precisely in a self-indulgent victimization whereby he pictures himself as the undeserving victim of an adverse fate (p. 149) – which is just another way of removing oneself from the picture rather than acknowledging one’s inclusion.

19 Chabrol and Rohmer, *Hitchcock*, p. 126.

Rohmer seems to imply that Sartre's perspective is unable to account for the need to overcome the basic impasse of his ontology by acknowledging the utter externality of consciousness, its total lack of any autonomous substance identifiable by means of self-reflection (not even that of the 'fundamental project'). And although Rohmer does not really explain why *Rear Window* should be 'a reflexive, critical work in the Kantian sense of the word,'<sup>20</sup> he probably meant that, for him, that film corroborated the idea that self-consciousness can only be found in apperception, specifically, in the 'I think' accompanying every apperception. This film shows that a subject cannot really pursue nihilation, because he finds himself, his own desire, his own gaze, always already out there in the visual field. In (at least) this respect, Rohmer's reading curiously resonates with the one by Miran Božovič,<sup>21</sup> who (in the wake of Jacques Lacan) interpreted the film as a subversion of Sartre's 'game of musical chair' between Self and Other.

In *Huis Clos*, guilt *does not circulate*. 'Guilt', in that play, was none other than each character's 'fundamental project', the particular temporalization his or her for-itself consciousness had consisted of during the character's lifetime. Because of their 'projects', and more precisely of the incapability of those people to responsibly cope with them (in short: because of their 'bad faith'), they have all been condemned to stay in that room forever. True enough, here too the consciousness of each character is external: it cannot be accessed through self-reflection, but only emerges thanks to the intersubjective play with the other characters; it is not in the way each character sees himself or herself, but in the way he or she is regarded by the others. However, the whole point of the play is that each character remains prisoner of his or her own guilt *through* the others: all the others' consciousnesses do is to nail down each consciousness to its definite guilt. Each subject is entirely defined by intersubjectivity, *but that's it*, there can be nothing else than the endless reversal between subject and object, self and other. Hence, everyone in *Huis Clos* is stuck in his or her own 'solitude', as Rohmer put it in his piece on *Rear Window*, *because* of intersubjectivity the way Sartre conceives it. In contrast therewith, Hitchcock conceives guilt in *formal* terms. That is to say, he endows guilt with a visual vividness whereby it is palpably distinguished from the intersubjective level of mere interaction among characters. He makes it an object (or, at least, a visually discernible 'something') so that it can circulate among characters without being confused with their subjectivities. In *Rear Window*, the cigarette

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>21</sup> Božovič, 'The Man behind its Own Retina'.

glowing in the total darkness of the murderer's room,<sup>22</sup> suggesting his lurking presence as the unseen smoker, *is* Jeff's consciousness out there in Jeff's own visual field:<sup>23</sup> it confronts him with the fact that 1) Jeff himself, like the smoking murderer, keeps himself hidden from view, and 2) the murderer's desire (that of killing his wife) is also his own (that of getting rid of Lisa). Jeff's consciousness is defined by something external, but not by some intersubjective determination: *no subject* gets in touch with Jeff in this regard. Actually, later in the film, the murderer does 'return his gaze', effectively qualifying as Jeff's 'Other' in the Sartrean sense: he bursts into Jeff's room, asks him 'what do you want from me?', grabs a camera and takes a picture of Jeff. By this very gesture, though, Sartre's 'game of musical chairs' is refuted: the camera's flash produces a huge red stain in the visual field which cannot but strike the eye as *the purely formal correlative of the cigarette previously glowing in the dark*. As such, it confirms that guilt circulates in a purely visual way. Moreover, after a scuffle, the murderer dangles Jeff out of his window by his feet: in other words, Jeff becomes an object in his own visual field. Thereby, the infernal solitude of *Huis Clos* is broken. Jeff finds himself involved in the visual field he only used to contemplate from a detached position.

*Rear Window* could thus be seen as a systematic, downright rebuttal of *Huis Clos*. The latter stages an intersubjective triumph of solitude for the sake of a lone voyeur secretly reassured of his or her solitude by way of that spectacle of intersubjectivity, watched while sitting among the audience, in front of the stage. *Rear Window*, based on a no less theatrical spatial arrangement (the apartments in front of Jeff's window are, rather graphically, so many 'stages') breaks this spell *by showing the spectator himself* (Jeff) finding himself *involved* in the intersubjective triumph of solitude he sees. As he is confronted with the fact that his own guilt (his unconfessed desire to get rid of Lisa) is also somebody else's, and thus that guilt/self-consciousness is something circulating externally, he accomplishes that which the characters of *Huis Clos* were never capable of doing: to assume

22 In 'Les choses sérieuses', his review of the same film (upon which the *Rear Window* chapter of the 1957 monograph co-written with Rohmer would extensively draw), Claude Chabrol singles out the sequence of the dog's death (with the glowing cigarette of the murderer from behind the window) as the one connecting together the inherent impossibility of innocence and the theme of solitude. He also argues that Hitchcock himself indirectly suggested that that was the key scene of the entire film, as it was the one and only moment when the camera left both Jeff and his room.

23 This idea, and more generally the whole of this paragraph, is heavily indebted to Božovič's 'The Man Behind Its Own Retina'.

that one's self-consciousness is *effectively* nothing (as opposed to engaging with others only to reassure the self, that is, the 'fundamental project' whose disavowal amounts to bad faith), viz. nothing but an object in somebody else's visual field. The latter is precisely the reason why he finally gives in to Lisa's love for him. Jeff overcomes his guilt, i.e. the 'bad faith' of his unconfessed desire to get rid of her, by acknowledging that this desire is not his own, but circulates externally.<sup>24</sup> Thereby, nothing remains of his self-consciousness *but* a mere appearance in the eyes of somebody else (Lisa).

Ultimately, Hitchcock is an *auteur* because he shows that, against the residual 'Cartesian' substantiality of reflexive for-itself consciousness, *consciousness is wholly outside*. The transfer of guilt is the perpetual transmigration of consciousness taking place entirely over the surface: what men carry along inside themselves is completely beside the point. This aspect is distinctly echoed in Rohmer's recurrent refrain that cinema reveals 'not the troubled zones of the libido, but the broad daylight of consciousness,'<sup>25</sup> seemingly implying that (on the screen at least) there are no 'depths of the unconscious' belonging to subjects, beyond that which is manifested on the surface. Years before his monograph, Rohmer already described the way emotion circulated, as it were, from one face to the other in *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), and added that depth, in his works, was precisely to be found in such surface effects.<sup>26</sup> The scene of the death of Mr. Memory in *The 39 Steps* (1935) provides a very precise illustration of the *intimate foreignness* of consciousness, almost a cutting parody of intimacy: 'Here, in fact, Hitchcock shows us the mechanism of confession and how it works. Burdened with a bothersome and tormenting knowledge (it is absurd and ridiculous: an incomprehensible physics formula), Mr. Memory, after having recited it as though he were vomiting it up, dies saying, "I'm glad it's off my mind".'<sup>27</sup> A likewise externality is suggested by

24 Tellingly, one of the films by the English master that Rohmer and Chabrol like the least is *Lifeboat* (1943), one that, like *Huis Clos*, is almost exclusively set in an enclosed space (a lifeboat). But although the moral implications developed by Hitchcock in his film retain (not unlike *Huis Clos*) 'an overly literary aspect', placing 'insufficient faith in the innate power of cinema' (that is, in appearance for appearance's sake) (Chabrol and Rohmer, *Hitchcock*, p. 78), the two critics ultimately appreciate his efforts, because through one of the characters (the German, 'the catalyst of the reaction', p. 77) the guilts of every other character gathered on the lifeboat end up being graphically externalized and problematically transcended and redeemed. The German is, in other words, the externalization of everyone's guilts, whereas there is nothing of the sort in *Huis Clos*. In the latter, guilt is individual *and* intersubjective, in *Lifeboat* it is collective *and* objective, insofar as it is embodied by a definite entity whose individuation transcends the level of a merely intersubjective designation.

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

26 Rohmer, 'Le soupçon', p. 65.

27 Chabrol and Rohmer, *Hitchcock*, p. 43.

the way Hitchcock uses subjective shots in *The Wrong Man*: 'Though we see things with Balestrero's own eyes (when the handcuffs are put on and there is a suggestion of his shoulder, or when he dare not look at the prisoners alongside him and sees only a row of feet on the floor of the black maria), the protagonist remains outside us, *just as he is outside himself*'<sup>28</sup> (my emphasis). Importantly, Rohmer stresses the necessity, in *I, Confess*, that *sacrifice itself is sacrificed*: the sin of the main character, a priest,

is not that he has been a man before becoming a man of God, but, on the contrary, to have given way to the intimidation, the blackmail, of wanting to redeem by heroic and paradoxical conduct what need no longer be redeemed: to give way to the temptation of martyrdom. We find ourselves confronted not only with an allegory of the Fall but with a tragic situation worthy of that adjective and having as its mainspring, as in the novels of Georges Bernanos, the traps of sacrifice and sainthood.<sup>29</sup>

Heroism and martyrdom here are nothing but useless expedients whereby consciousness tries to acquire a consistency, a greatness and a substantiality it just cannot have, because it is only a thing floating on the outside.

Hitchcock's mastery lies precisely in his capability to display this transfer by completely visual means, and to visualize morality as a completely external (hence visual) matter circulating between the subjects. In *Strangers on a Train*, for instance, this is achieved by carefully organizing the recurrence of two visual motives: the straight line shuttling back and forth, and the circle. In *I, Confess*

Glances are actually what Hitchcock uses all through the film as the basic threads of his web, the conducting canals through which the overflow of consciences is drained: the look of the inspector (Karl Malden), who watches the meeting between the priest and the wife of the counsellor with a single eye, the other being hidden by the head of his interlocutor; the look in the courtroom of Keller's wife, who is already on the verge of confession; Father Michael's look during the questioning, the trial, and in the final scene [...] In this story, in which the lips of the hero are voluntarily sealed, only these looks give us access to the mysteries of his thought. They are the most worthy and faithful messengers of the soul.<sup>30</sup>

28 *Ibid.*, p. 151.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 116.

30 *Ibid.*

By virtue of Hitchcock's visual inventiveness, 'an entire moral universe has been elaborated [...]. In Hitchcock's work form does not embellish content, it creates it.'<sup>31</sup> In other words, Hitchcock is an *auteur* because he aptly uses form to materialize its matter – not just *any* matter, but a *moral* matter. This moral matter touches upon *freedom* (or, in appropriately religious terms, *salvation*), and could be summarized as follows. Consciousness is wholly on the outside and has nothing to do with man's inner feelings and introspection; morality is thus not a matter of human intentions and deliberate actions, but is determined by superficial contingencies at an external level. To say that man is always guilty because of original sin, means to say that morality is affected by a structural, inescapable imbalance due to the fact that it is ruled by pure contingencies on which man has very little control; all man has to do is to embrace his 'guilt', i.e. the unbalanced contingency he's been allocated in spite of himself. It follows that freedom is not groundless, but is actually grounded on both this inescapable, structural condition (the 'original sin') and on the redeeming recognition of it. This moral matter is conveyed by Hitchcock by means of an appropriate form, i.e. by depicting the externality of consciousness and its external fluctuations (the 'transfer of guilt') in an appropriately *purely visual* way, by relying on abstract graphic inventions with a strong emphasis on surfaces and an equally strong neglect toward any kind of depth.

Crucially, all this was very clear already in the *Gazette du cinéma* days. In 1950, while reviewing *Under Capricorn*, Jacques Rivette already sketched a particularly perverse transfer of guilt, and insisted on the utter exteriority of Hitchcock's direction: 'The camera follows the characters as they move, but most of the time it refuses to penetrate and interfere in their inner lives.'<sup>32</sup> A sort of a pre-New Wave apogee of the pda after which all of the critics of that circle would gradually leave film criticism to start focus on filmmaking, Rohmer's and Chabrol's 1957 monograph brought to maturity premises that were laid out already in the late forties; as such, it is probably the most shining demonstration that the pda was deeply rooted in the early elaborations of the *ÉS*.<sup>33</sup>

All of the above explains why Hitchcock was a kind of quintessential *auteur* in the eyes of Rohmer, the perfect filmmaker to devote a monograph to.<sup>34</sup>

31 *Ibid.*, p. 152.

32 Rivette, 'Under Capricorn', p. 4. Originally: 'La caméra se soumet aux personnages dans leurs déplacements, mais se refuse le plus souvent à pénétrer et intervenir dans leur vie intérieure.'

33 For an appreciably detailed historical account of the *ÉS*/pda's endorsements of Hitchcock as an *auteur*, see Vest, 'The Emergence Of an Auteur: Hitchcock and French Film Criticism, 1950-1954'.

34 Tellingly, in 'Cinema, an Art of Space' (p. 28), Hitchcock's 'brilliant style' was reputed to be 'sometimes combined with an insufficiently rigorous concept of the relationship between

Very few directors matched Rohmer's ideas about cinema as closely as Hitchcock did. Since the very beginning of his activity as a film critic, Rohmer tried to theorize cinema as a kind of 'hyper-novel' capable to realize better than any novel could (at least in principle) the vocation of modern literature 'to show and not to tell'. Rohmer soon realized that what made cinema 'more novelistic than novels themselves', the fulfilment of literature's dream of utter impersonality, was its 'mechanical' absence of consciousness elsewhere than in perception itself. However, he also soon realized that Sartre's ontology, as well as his ensuing novelistic aesthetics, were ultimately unfit to accommodate such a tight convergence between perception and consciousness, in that they still admitted of a sort of conditioned, negative accessibility, upon self-reflection, to an individuated for-itself consciousness, temporally arranging phenomena according to a contingent, subjective bias (like an individuated narrator/reader/character/etc.). Sartre's perspective had to be discarded, because it ultimately succumbed to the same 'original sin' that in Rohmer's view infected Husserl's phenomenological strand since its own inception (thereby rendering it incapable to account for cinema), namely the attempt to 'integrate' Kantian philosophy by supplying to it (thanks to Descartes) a further notion of subjectivity it supposedly lacked. Kant, the primal source of that strand, was precisely the philosopher that eventually provided Rohmer with a theoretical framework that would more fittingly suit what cinema seemed to embody so well: external perception as the only accessible seat of consciousness, which cannot access itself through self-reflection. Hitchcock was the director who more than any other was able to sing this externality of consciousness, this foreignness to the subject itself, by insisting on the 'transfer of guilt'. Hitchcock's emphasis on visual appearance appeased either aesthetic and ethical needs: on the one hand, it proved that cinema could do without the burden of literature and could rely on appearance for appearance's sake; on the other hand, it showed that the eternal fight between freedom and necessity did not take place inside the heart and consciousness of man, but outside, in terms of appearances, on the surface; consciousness only had to accept and endorse this foreign, external necessity (in Hitchcock's catholic terms: to assume one's inevitable sins, for which one is not responsible for) in order to attain freedom (that is, salvation, by overcoming those sins).

In other words, Hitchcock's emphasis on externality, on the lack of internal substance of a completely externalized consciousness, perfectly

content and expression'; only after his conversion Rohmer would change his mind about the director's 'formalism'.

suiting Rohmer's position, according to which cinema had to get rid of the novelistic, reflective, Sartrean, contingent, temporalizing consciousness, i.e. the nothingness adding itself to the definite, 'positional' consciousness of objects, and to embrace appearance for appearance's sake (to manifest, and not to express). What exactly 'appearance for appearance's sake' meant, Rohmer found out only after he returned to Kant *against* Sartre, viz. to a view of consciousness qua purely formal (transcendental) and utterly inaccessible to self-reflection: the only effective self-reflection could take place in apperception itself, as its coherence and unity could only be ensured precisely by the 'I think', the unity of consciousness accompanying every apperception. In short, appearance for appearance's sake began to mean 'our ordinary vision of things' in terms of Kant's 'unity of nature', i.e. on the one hand mechanism (the order and regularity of appearances, appearing to us according to mechanical laws of causal, objective succession), and on the other hand beauty and freedom, as mechanism's flip sides. An *auteur* was precisely someone who was able to cope with the triumph of exteriority over interiority 'appearance for appearance's sake' stood for, entailing a relationship between consciousness and Being that was no longer mediated by negativity and separateness (as per Sartre's Heideggerian perspective), but by the substantial involvement of consciousness in the immediate production of appearances, to such an extent that no individuated consciousness had to be discernible apart from appearances. Rohmer seems to have thought that the necessary, irreversible, spatialized temporal succession put together by cinema's externalized imagination broke with Sartrean/Heideggerian, novelistic, contingent, human, temporalizing consciousness, to engender instead a sort of inhuman, purely cinematic, *inherently narrative* (dialectical, as per Astruc's definition) logic providing the background against which beauty and freedom could emerge by way of contrast, thanks to the reversal between the inside and the outside typically crowning the *solitude morale* tales, the contemporary version of that timeless representation of the struggle between freedom and necessity that is ancient tragedy.

Rohmer never spelled out these ideas explicitly, but his texts clearly imply them as the background driving the choices, the assessments, the preferences and the arguments contained in his written production as a film critic. Moreover, these assumptions, along with the critic's ambiguous classicism and universalism, ended up profoundly influencing the younger cinephiles and critics who in the late 1940s and in the early 1950s began to be associated with him – the so-called *és*. All of them basically regarded films as 'hyper-novels' capable to fulfil literature's dream of 'Flaubertian' impersonality, its promise to give up customary, individuated literary consciousness, viz.

to reach the longed-for coincidence between consciousness and perception. Although they were all (except perhaps Rivette) far less theoretically and philosophically aware than Rohmer, the way they looked at films was profoundly affected by the ethical and aesthetic corollaries of Rohmer's idea that the phenomenological framework (Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and the like) could not really fit cinema's overcoming of the novelistic horizon, i.e. cinema's capability to embody a consciousness that is nowhere but within perception itself, and that the only fitting framework for that could be Kant's, qua the distant origin of phenomenology. For them, films mirrored human consciousness/perception, which is to say, in Kantian terms, that they followed the unity of nature (the overall, causality-oriented coherence whereby things appear to us), which is to say in turn that they revolved around the deployment of *cinematic (narrative) action* qua the mechanical background for freedom and beauty to emerge by departing from it.

As years went by, Rohmer's influence became less cumbersome, and Chabrol, Godard, Rivette and Truffaut started to develop more personal approaches. As the follow-up book of the present research will outline in more detail, Rivette's Hegelianism would soon start to adjoin and complement Rohmer's Kantism, and the ensuing tension between the two would significantly affect François Truffaut's film criticism. More generally, the forthcoming volume will make clear that the pda consisted primarily of the advocacy of a *specific* notion of cinematic subjectivity. However, without a proper grasp of the background this book has attempted to elucidate, viz. the shared, mostly implicit, 'Rohmerian' one characterizing the *és*, it would be impossible to correctly pin down the contours of the specific notion of cinematic subjectivity advocated by the pda, as the latter largely ensued from that original background.

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## Abbreviations

CC = *Cahiers du Cinéma*

és = *école Schérer*

pda = *politique des auteurs*