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Baroque Visions: Eugène Green's *La Sapienza* (2014)

Even within the highly diverse landscape of French cinema, famous for its *auteur* tradition, the US-born French filmmaker Eugène Green is a singular figure. Green came to the cinema late, aged 53, after having made a name for himself as a stage director specializing in the revival of Baroque theatre techniques and declamation. With seven features to date, several shorts and a documentary on Basque culture and language, *Faire la parole* (2016), he has quickly established himself as a director who is both timely in his interrogations of identity, language and community and uncompromisingly original as regards his cinematic vision and style. In sharp opposition to what he calls ‘les bougeants’,¹ that is, the commercially-driven cinema made in Hollywood, Green has forged an idiosyncratic cinematic language in the tradition of Robert Bresson, Yasujiro Ozu and Michelangelo Antonioni, three directors he cites as influences.² Green’s work is often compared to Bresson’s; the latter’s influence is discernible in his pared-down aesthetic, characterized by a flattened performance style, deliberately un-expressive dialogues and a focused attention to minute gestures and movements as a means to reveal the characters’ inner

¹ Eugène Green, *Poétique du cinématographe* (Paris: Actes Sud, 2009), p. 72.

² See ‘Rencontre avec Eugène Green pour la sortie en DVD de “La Sapienza”’, *Potemkine*, 24 October 2015, <<http://www.potemkine.fr/Potemkine-dossier/Rencontre-avec-eugene-green-dvd-la-sapienza-24-octobre-2015/pa95m5dossier78.html>> [accessed 12 March 2020].

lives.³ Slow-paced, with a predilection for fixed-frame compositions and long takes, Green's films are easily recognizable by the stylized diction of the actors: contrary to spoken usage, he asks his cast to pronounce the final consonants of words in French (*faire la liaison*). Yet although, at first glance, his sparse, non-naturalistic style may give the impression of austerity, his work is often wryly humorous, coupling social satire with profound metaphysical issues.⁴ The director resists the visual artifice and psychological character portrayals of mainstream cinema. For him, the medium's vocation is above all to render visible what he calls 'la présence réelle': the inner energy that emanates from people, objects and materials.⁵

Green is also a playwright, novelist, and a prolific essayist. He is the author of, among other works, two essays on cinema, *Présences*, *Essai sur la nature du cinéma* and *Poétique du cinématographe*; a volume of poems centred around film, *Le Présent*

³ See for instance an interview with Laure Adler, where Green recalls that he discovered Bresson when he was 19, but did not see any of his films between the release of *L'Argent* (1983) and the making of his first film, *Toutes les nuits*, in 1999. He considers Bresson's influence to be a 'culture assimilée qui a eu le temps de s'intégrer' ('Eugène Green: "Robert Bresson est le cinéaste qui a eu la plus grande influence sur moi"', France Culture, 'Hors-Champ', 20 April 2016).

⁴ This deadpan humour, as well as his use of professional actors, differentiates him from Bresson, who worked mostly with non-professional actors, whom he called 'modèles'.

⁵ On his concept of 'présence réelle', see *Poétique du cinématographe*, pp. 48–52.

de la parole; and an incisive study of Baroque art, *La Parole baroque*.⁶ A polyvalent artist who excels in numerous domains, the director frequently draws on, references or incorporates other art forms in his filmic work. Both *Toutes les nuits* (2001) and *La Religieuse portugaise* (*The Portuguese Nun*, 2009) are inspired by literary texts; the former is loosely based on Gustave Flaubert's first version of *L'Education sentimentale*, the latter on the seventeenth-century epistolary fiction *Lettres de la religieuse portugaise* attributed to Gabriel de Guillerague. *Le Pont des arts* (*The Bridge of Arts*, 2004) and *La Sapienza* (2014) each centre around artist figures: a singer specialized in Baroque music and a modernist architect respectively. *Le Fils de Joseph* (2016) engages with paintings by Caravaggio, Philippe de Champaigne and Georges de La Tour, as well as Baroque music and poetry, as gateways for a sustained meditation on parenthood and filiation.⁷ In all of Green's work, cinema's sister arts are prominent as predecessors with whom the medium retains 'un rapport de

⁶ Eugène Green, *Présences, Essai sur la nature du cinéma* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003); *Le Présent de la parole*, précédé de *Les Lieux communs* (Paris: Melville, 2004) and *La Parole baroque* (Paris: Desclée de Brower, 2001).

⁷ For a reading of the use of intermediality in *Le Fils de Joseph* see Marion Schmid, 'Filming and Feeling between the Arts: Pascale Breton, *Suite Armoricaïne* and Eugène Green, *Le Fils de Joseph*', in Kim Knowles and Marion Schmid, eds., *Cinematic Intermediality: Theory and Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), pp. 150–64. On Baroque influences and sensibilities in Green's films more widely see Blake Williams, 'Going for Baroque: The Films of Eugène Green', *Cinema Scope*, 60 (2014), 26–29.

reconnaissance et d'émulation',⁸ but also as a means to apprehend aspects of human existence that cannot be grasped in words alone.

Little known among Anglophone film specialists, and even less so by the wider public, Green's unusual, highly personal films urgently deserve greater recognition. While his entire œuvre awaits detailed critical appraisal, in what follows I shall focus on one of his most successful works to date, *La Sapienza*, which earned critical acclaim both in France and abroad.⁹ The film traces the inner journey of a despondent architect, Alexandre Schmidt (Fabrizio Rongione), who finds a new meaning in his life and practice thanks to one of the most innovative and enigmatic figures of Italian Baroque architecture, Francesco Borromini (1599–1667). Green has revealed in an interview that his idea of making a film about Borromini goes back to the 1970s, but insists that, in its final form, the project is 'no longer a historical film, it's about Borromini in relation to today's world.'¹⁰ Both an art-historical lesson in

⁸ *Poétique du cinématographe*, p. 41.

⁹ See two excellent articles in French on the film: Philippe Roger, 'Un cinéma de la présence: à propos de *La Sapienza* d'Eugène Green', *Jeune Cinéma*, 365 (2015), 14–20 and Guillaume Dulong, 'Vacances romaines. Sur *La Sapienza* d'Eugène Green', *Cinéma*, 27.2-3 (2017), 157–77. On Green's practice between the arts see also Fabien Gris, 'Eugène Green: un pont intempestif entre les arts', *Revue critique de fiction française contemporaine*, 7 (2013), 60–72.

¹⁰ Nick Pinkerton, 'Great Beauty: Eugène Green on *La Sapienza*', *Sight & Sound*, 5 May 2015, <<https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/interviews/great-beauty-eugene-green-la-sapienza>> [accessed 12 March 2020].

Baroque architecture and the story of a spiritual rebirth, the film celebrates the replenishing, healing powers of art. Crystallizing some of the artist's major thematic concerns, *La Sapienza* pursues in cinematic form the extensive research on Baroque art that Green first conducted in his theatrical practice and theoretical writing. My contention in this article is that, as a filmmaker who harnesses cinema's sister arts to make apprehensible the metaphysical aspects of human existence, Green invokes Baroque architecture as a means to elucidate questions that are central to his philosophical enquiry: the tension between rational and spiritual forms of experience, the invisible realm behind material appearances, and the mystery of sacrifice and salvation. I argue that the film, establishing a sustained dialogue between cinema and architecture, aligns the aesthetic philosophy of the filmmaker with that of the Baroque architect, making it a crucial manifesto work in Green's œuvre.¹¹ What is more, Green's creative engagement with Borromini in *La Sapienza* proposes a wider reflection on artistic influence, emulation and reimagination.

The Rational and the Spiritual

What is the relationship between architecture and human experience and how does architectural space impact upon forms of living and feeling? Underpinning the philosophical enquiry of *La Sapienza*, the question of architecture's role in our lived environment is posited from the outset through a jarring juxtaposition between the harmonious forms of the Baroque and what Eric Rohmer, who, like Green, was an outspoken critic of functionalist architecture, provocatively calls 'architecture de

¹¹ On the analogy between architect and filmmaker in *La Sapienza*, see also Dulong, 'Vacances romaines', pp. 169–75.

l'apocalypse'.¹² Opening on an arresting long take of the shores of Lake Maggiore, where Borromini was born, the title credits showcase some of the architect's most idiosyncratic buildings in Rome, from the Palazzo Falconieri with its three-bay loggia adorned by Janus figures, via the severe, yet highly unorthodox facade of the Collegio di Propaganda Fide, to his last (unfinished) work, the church of Sant'Andrea delle Fratte, topped by a curiously shaped campanile. Daring and majestic, these works speak of the genius of an architect who boldly reinvented classical forms, and who, in the words of architecture specialist Jake Morrissey, 'wanted the parts of his buildings to mean something, to express emotions and ideas that are simultaneously universal and deeply personal'.¹³ Through a careful combination of crane and tracking shots, close ups and long shots, the camera work at the outset of *La Sapienza* gives visibility to the ornate forms and varied material textures of the buildings, weathered by time. Perfectly matched to the rhythm of the shots, the non-diegetic music, Monteverdi's *Magnificat*, imbues these first images with an elevated, spiritual atmosphere. As the production credits unravel on the architectural shots, a correspondence between the building blocks of the film and those of Borromini's architecture is established, introducing the wider analogy between Baroque architecture and filmmaking that will inform *La Sapienza*.

¹² Eric Rohmer, 'Architecture d'Apocalypse', in *Le Celluloïd et le marbre, suivi d'un entretien inédit avec Noël Herpe et Philippe Fauvel* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2010), pp. 69–80.

¹³ Jake Morrissey, *The Genius in the Design: Bernini, Borromini, and the Rivalry that Transformed Rome* (London: Duckworth, 2005), p. 178.

In stark contrast, the film's subsequent sequence plunges us into the nightmarish world of a functionalist-rationalist urbanism gone awry. Introduced by a left to right pan that inverts the right to left pan that opened the title sequence, a collage of shots from Paris's modern districts and its Boulevard Périphérique constructs a negative mirror image of the sumptuous seventeenth-century architecture we have just seen: soulless tower blocks, industrial buildings and high-traffic arterial roads have replaced Borromini's elegant palazzi and churches; Baroque ornamentation has been superseded by the stripped-down style of modernism; and cheap building materials tell of a more ephemeral approach to construction. Where graphic matches and symmetrical shot compositions conveyed a sense of harmony in the title sequence, here mismatched shots create a feeling of fragmentation and disorientation. In an ironic disjunction between word and image tracks, these opening shots of a chaotic urban sprawl are accompanied by the voice-over of a ceremony awarding Schmidt a prize for his lifelong contribution to architecture, followed by the architect's setting out of his materialist and secularist principles. Declarations such as 'j'ai construit des usines qui sont les cathédrales du monde moderne' identify the film's protagonist Alexandre Schmidt as an heir to Le Corbusier, whose rational functionalism, developed in the 1920s, profoundly altered the face of modern cities and their suburbs. Yet, crucially, Le Corbusier's fictional filmic disciple expresses a wish to tread new paths to ensure that architecture 'puisse continuer à assurer le bonheur des hommes'. The extent to which modern architecture ever fulfilled this promise of collective happiness is implicitly questioned by a vertical tracking along the monotonous façade of a residential Paris high-rise, the 1968 Tour Super Chapelle,

topped by a neon advertisement on its roof pronouncing 'Life's Good'. This ironic shot ends the architectural sequence.¹⁴

Both Alexandre and his tellingly named wife Aliénor (Christelle Prot), a sociologist working on disadvantaged communities, have become alienated in a functionalist, technocratic society that leaves little space for humanity's spiritual and affective needs. Aliénor's television interview regarding the difficulties of life on a suburban housing estate, which we see in an early sequence, is emblematic of her discomfort, yet also, to a certain extent, her complicity, with a rational worldview based on scientific method. Framed frontally against an industrial-style interior stacked with files, the sociologist provides a jargon-ridden analysis of the causes of social deprivation, intermittently interrupted by two journalists who 'translate' her language for the wider public. When the presenter sums up her findings in a caricatured soundbite, a lingering close-up on Aliénor's face captures her pained smile slowly morphing into an expression of distress. Mirroring the cold modernity they inhabit, even the couple's relationship has become merely functional. Geometrically ordered compositions of husband and wife dining in near silence in a chic restaurant or standing motionless side-by-side in their stylish apartment testify to their loss of emotional connection. Reminiscent of Bresson's denuded, minimally

¹⁴ I am grateful to François Giraud and Marion Gaufroy for helping me to identify this building in Paris's 18th arrondissement. The 'Life's Good' of the neon advertisement is the tagline of LG Corporation, a South Korean electronics and telecommunications firm. The high rise's name, 'Tour Super Chappelle', ironically echoes the architect's comments on 'les cathédrales du monde moderne' earlier in the sequence.

expressive style, the understated performances Green solicits from his actors subtly impart the characters' interior struggles.¹⁵

Like several of Green's other features – notably *La Religieuse portugaise* and *Le Fils de Joseph* – the narrative of *La Sapienza* revolves around a conversion, a trope that the director considers as summing up the specificity of cinematic art, 'qui est de rendre apparent ce qui était caché'.¹⁶ An oxymoronic figure, the conversion opens up new possibilities for the character, 'apparemment à l'opposé de ce qu'il était, mais que néanmoins il portait en lui.'¹⁷ In Alexandre's life such an opportunity for change arises when, unwilling to compromise on an architectural commission, he travels to Italy with his wife to complete a book on Borromini. As in Roberto Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* (*Journey to Italy*, 1954) which subtly underpins Green's filmic narrative, the voyage south becomes an opportunity for the estranged husband and wife to rekindle their love and find new inspiration in art. But whereas, in Rossellini's

¹⁵ See Green's comment: 'Tout mouvement du corps doit être une expression de l'âme [...]. Il faut abolir le moindre geste commandé par l'intellect. En particulier, il faut se méfier des grimaces' (*Poétique du cinématographe*, p. 118). For Bresson's distinctive style and its relations to alternative film culture see Colin Burnett, *The Invention of Robert Bresson: The Auteur and his Market* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

¹⁶ *Poétique du cinématographe*, pp. 69–70. The director's belief in cinema's capacity to make apparent what remains hidden in everyday life is another noteworthy similarity with Bresson, as is his exploration of the themes of redemption, grace and divine presence.

¹⁷ *Poétique du cinématographe*, p. 69.

film, the English couple Alexander (George Sanders) and Katherine Joyce (Ingrid Bergman) rediscover the sensuousness of life through contact with the Neapolitan people, climate and landscape, here it is the husband and wife's encounter with a young brother and sister – the latter afflicted by a mysterious ailment – that triggers the spiritual regeneration of both couples.

If Alexandre and Aliénor are associated with the rational spirit of modernity, Goffredo (Ludovico Succio) and Lavinia (Arianna Nastro), by contrast, are a living embodiment of Renaissance humanism, as is made clear by their artistic pursuits and desire for knowledge, as well as the lovingly decorated spaces they have created for themselves. Where the Schmidts' minimalist home exudes an elegant *froideur*, Goffredo's room abounds with Renaissance prints, posters, postcards, books and – most importantly for an aspiring architect – his model for a new city constructed around a 'temple de toutes les religions'. Manifestly inspired by the painting *Ideal City* (c. 1475, anonymous), a reproduction of which frames one of the shots of the young man, the model reinvents the ideal Renaissance city for a secular society; its central temple summons the presence through light that is, for Goffredo, architecture's principal mission. Another famous Renaissance painting of an ideal city, *Architectural Veduta* (c. 1490, attributed to Francesco di Giorgio Martini), which forms the background of a later shot, reinforces the notion of architecture as an idealist endeavour, while also pointing to the dialogue between different art forms that was crucial to Renaissance thought and practice. The classical female portraits in Lavinia's room, strongly reminiscent of the young woman's elegant features, and her name, derived from Roman mythology, allude to the Renaissance's origins in the art and architecture of Antiquity, which it translated into a modern idiom. Born in the town of Stresa overlooking the Borromean islands – not far from Borromini's

birthplace Bissone – the brother and sister are geographically close to Borromini's origins. On an art historical level, they also recall the Baroque architect's Renaissance influences, notably Michelangelo, whose buildings we discover later in the film.¹⁸ Goffredo and Lavinia's connection to a cultural and artistic tradition that extends over several millennia introduces the notion of influence and reworking which, as we will see, is central to the film's enquiry into the relation between past and present.

'Plus proche[s] de la connaissance intuitive et de la connaissance spirituelle',¹⁹ the two adolescents interrogate the older couple's rigidified belief systems, refreshing them with their youthful idealism and their capacity to both question and listen. In turn, the two adults gradually take on the roles of mentors, or even substitute parents, and share their knowledge and experience with the brother and sister. When Aliénor decides to stay in Stresa with the ailing Lavinia, suggesting that Goffredo join her husband on his architectural trip on the trail of Borromini in her stead, the two couples reconfigure, each opening itself to a rich experiment in intergenerational learning and transmission, outside the confines of the traditional family. In a comment on the film, Green explicitly likens this learning through mutual exchange to the illumination through art afforded by the architecture of Borromini:

[L]e rapport pédagogique n'est pas à sens unique. Si les adultes ont des connaissances et une expérience qu'ils transmettent aux adolescents, ceux-ci ont des intuitions naturelles, qui n'ont pas été émoussées par la vie sociale et l'usure, et qui servent à

¹⁸ On this influence see Anthony Blunt, *Borromini* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1979), p. 51.

¹⁹ 'Rencontre avec Eugène Green'.

rajeunir et à ouvrir la pensée de leurs aînés. Cette pédagogie, qui reprend le schéma platonicien, est une autre façon, comme le modèle architectural borrominien, de faire rentrer l'esprit et la lumière dans la vie des gens.²⁰

Making Visible: The Baroque Oxymoron

The tension between the rational and the spiritual, introduced through the opposition between idealist and functionalist architecture at the beginning of *La Sapienza*, finds its most sustained expression in the famous rivalry between the two masters of Baroque architecture, Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) and Borromini, which constitutes one of the film's main narrative threads.²¹ Often working alongside each other, sometimes engaged in the same project, Bernini and Borromini profoundly transformed Rome in the course of the seventeenth century. Yet, while each left an important artistic legacy, their personalities and destinies could not have been more different. The son of an established artist, the charismatic, self-confident Bernini enjoyed fame, prosperity and a steady flow of prestigious commissions until his death at the age of 82. Favoured by popes and cardinals, who enlisted his talents as a sculptor and architect for their most ambitious projects, he became Italy's foremost artist in the Baroque era. Starting out as a simple stonemason, by contrast, Borromini gave Rome some of its most ingenious churches and palaces. However, the tormented architect, who was morose and quarrelsome by nature, lost favour with his patrons in

²⁰ 'Martine de Clermont-Tonnerre et Alessandro Borrelli présentent *La Sapienza*, un film d'Eugène Green', <<http://www.bodegafilms.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/lasapienza-dp.pdf>> [accessed 12 March 2020].

²¹ On this rivalry, see Morrissey, *The Genius in the Design*, passim.

the later stages of his career. Prone to a deep melancholy and embittered by the ever-growing success of his rival, he ended his life aged 67 by falling on his sword.

Vilified by his contemporaries as ‘the great anarchist of architecture’,²² the ‘difficult genius’, as he was known in his lifetime, is today considered the greater of the two architects. ‘One looks at Bernini’s buildings with the eyes, one feels Borromini with the whole body’, writes art historian Anthony Blunt.²³ For the architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz, ‘Borromini made space itself become a living event, expressing the situation of man in the world.’²⁴

Upon their arrival in Rome, Alexandre and Goffredo visit two iconic churches, built within decades of each other and only a short walk apart, that epitomize the two rivals’ contrasting architectural styles and vision: Borromini’s San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane and Bernini’s Sant’Andrea al Quirinale. During their visit to the former – Borromini’s first independent commission and one of his most imaginative constructions – an establishing shot captures Alexandre and Goffredo’s upward gaze, before we see a horizontal pan along the entablature. A fixed camera shot of the coffered ceiling of the cupola, a vertical pan along the octagonal cloister into the sky, and an exterior shot of the church’s concave-convex façade highlight the extremely complex forms of Borromini’s design. The voice-over spoken by Alexandre offers a detailed art historical commentary on the illusion of movement generated by ‘the perfect form’ of the ellipsis and the ingenious facade, insisting on the latter’s

²² Blunt, *Borromini*, p. 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁴ Christian Norberg-Schulz, *History of World Architecture: Baroque Architecture* (Milano: Electa, 2003), p. 122.

revelation not of the church's structure, 'but of a space in constant flux, the truth of which is hidden'.²⁵ In the absence of a shot showing the two men in dialogue, the voice, with its read-out tone, seems to hail from the book on Borromini that Alexandre is preparing, rather than from an embodied conversation. Both the vertical thrust of the camera work and the voice-over commentary contrast Borromini's intimate, deeply spiritual edifice with the sumptuously decorated church of his rival, a building Morrissey describes as 'a brilliant piece of theater'.²⁶ In Sant'Andrea all Quirinale – Bernini's favourite work – the camera pans from the gilded cupola and marble-framed altar painting to the two characters in a downward movement that, contrary to the ascending one of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, puts the spectator, rather than the divine, at the centre of the architectural space.²⁷ In Bernini's design, Alexandre points out, each being is assigned its place: from the terrestrial space, to the angels in their universe, and, finally, God, 'contained within a circle, without any element that takes us inside'. The two rival architects, he explains further, represent two facets of the Baroque: 'Borromini is the mystical baroque, offering, to he who enters, a personal experience; Bernini is the rational baroque, respectful of power, of hierarchies and rules.'

²⁵ The film is bilingual French and Italian. I have kept the French dialogue in the original and have used English subtitles for the Italian dialogue.

²⁶ *The Genius in the Design*, p. 244.

²⁷ For a reading of Green's visualisation of 'la morphogenèse de la matière s'élevant vers le spirituel' in San Carlo and the 'élan descendant' of the camerawork in Sant'Andrea all Quirinale, see also Dulong, pp. 168–69.

To fully understand the implications of this opposition for Green's philosophical project in *La Sapienza*, we need to turn to his essay *La Parole baroque*, the importance of which is self-reflexively signalled in a scene some 16 minutes into the film where we see Aliénor borrowing precisely this book from her local library. It is the source of many of the architectural comments made by Alexandre in the film. Summing up Green's extensive research on the Baroque, *La Parole baroque* traces the spirit of the Baroque era across different artistic practices, from theatre to music, architecture and the visual arts. At the heart of the Baroque worldview, the author argues, lies a fundamental contradiction, which he terms 'oxymore tragique' or 'oxymore baroque'.²⁸ While elaborating a model of the universe that excludes God, he contends, 'l'homme baroque [...] travaille aussi activement pour rendre apparent le Dieu caché, et donc aussi pour démontrer la fausseté de ce modèle'.²⁹ If, for Green, theatre is the site *par excellence* of the Baroque oxymoron, he also locates the trope in architecture, where it finds two diametrically opposed responses in the works of Bernini and Borromini. The former, confining spirituality to the world of illusion in his dramatically staged interiors, affirms the reality of our earthly world. The architecture of Borromini, on the contrary, 'proclame l'irréalité de ce monde, et fait deviner, comme au théâtre, une présence invisible'.³⁰ Where, in Bernini's architecture, the illusion of a hidden reality is always integrated into the material

²⁸ See *La Parole baroque*, 'L'oxymore tragique', pp. 18–22.

²⁹ *La Parole baroque*, p. 20.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

world ‘comme un élément agréable et décoratif’, Borromini ‘faisait de l’oxymore tragique la substance même de sa pensée architecturale’.³¹

In the filmic diegesis, these opposed modes of conceiving architectural space are mapped onto the successful Alexandre, who declares ‘I am Bernini’, and his highly gifted but emotionally unstable associate François, who, like Borromini, committed suicide. Aliénor’s confession to Lavinia that her husband’s jealousy and humiliation of François was in part responsible for his associate’s death introduces an analogy between the fictional pair and the two life-long rivals Bernini and Borromini. On an aesthetic and philosophical level, the mystical Borromini is also likened to Green himself, who declares in a 2015 interview, ‘[m]oi je me sens plus proche, évidemment, de Borromini’.³² It is important to note that the making visible of an ‘invisible presence’ that *La Parole baroque* attributes to Borromini’s architecture is strikingly similar to the director’s own philosophy of the cinematograph, whose prime vocation he postulates as ‘la connaissance de ce qui est caché dans le visible’.³³ What is more, in *Poétique du cinéma* Green traces a direct line from the Baroque oxymoron to the cinema:

³¹ *La Parole baroque*, pp. 208–9. On the contrasts between Bernini and Borromini, but equally their commonality, in particular as regards their ‘sens de la transcendance’ and ‘intuition du sacré’, see also Yves Bonnefoy, *Rome, 1630* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000), pp. 80–84 (p. 82).

³² ‘Rencontre avec Eugène Green’.

³³ *Poétique du cinéma*, p. 21.

De nos jours, la seule forme d'expression qui retrouve intégralement l'oxymore baroque est le cinématographe: il enregistre le monde comme une réalité, et le fait apparaître comme un rêve, en nous y dévoilant un monde caché, plus solide que l'autre.³⁴

Borromini's and Green's making visible of the invisible come together in singular fashion in one of the film's central scenes when Alexandre and Goffredo finally gain access to Borromini's masterpiece, the church of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza. The two men's epiphanic experience of discovering the church's famous dome recalls that of Green during a trip to Rome in 1976, which he describes in *Présences, Essais sur la nature du cinéma*.³⁵ A vertical pan affords a dizzying visualisation of the effect of movement established by Borromini's ingenious plan, by means of which, in the words of Blunt, 'the eye is carried round the line of the entablature in a ceaseless swing, moving from the simple concavity of one bay to the broken and more angular form of the next.' Blunt adds: 'Never perhaps did the Baroque ideal of movement attain more complete and perfect expression.'³⁶ One can easily understand why a

³⁴ Ibid., p. 18.

³⁵ *Présences*, p. 213. See also *Poétique du cinématographe*, where, once more conjoining cinema (here in a reference to Bresson) and Baroque architecture, Green writes: 'Connaître le sacré en regardant la mort de Balthazar ou en pénétrant dans Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza, c'est la même chose. Dans un cas comme dans l'autre, le présent éternel d'une œuvre d'art fait voir l'invisible' (p. 46).

³⁶ Blunt, *Borromini*, p. 114.

highly sophisticated architectural structure making movement ‘almost palpable’³⁷ would be of particular interest to a filmmaker. Yet, for Green, the genius of Borromini clearly lies elsewhere: not so much in the ingenious kinetic illusion effected by the complex interplay of geometrical forms, but, rather, in the harnessing of architectural space as a means to convey a sense of the divine. Speaking of Sant’Ivo’s lantern, Green comments in *La Parole baroque*: ‘c’est là que la perfection divine du cercle devient enfin visible, et que le spectateur, libéré des contradictions du monde, contemple la vision du Saint-Esprit dans la vérité de la lumière’.³⁸

Notwithstanding the powerfully spiritual effect of the church’s interior, to readers familiar with Sant’Ivo it may come as a surprise that Green should associate the lantern, with its oculus containing a blank gilded glory, with the vision of the Holy Ghost.³⁹ It is true that initially ‘the dove of the Holy Ghost was to have been depicted in the top of the lantern’,⁴⁰ as Blunt points out, but eventually this spiritual symbol was replaced with the secular one (later removed) of the Barberini bee, alluding to the heraldry of Pope Urban VIII Barberini, during whose reign work on the chapel began. By means of what Green calls ‘un geste mystique numérique’, the film restores the

³⁷ See Morrissey, *Genius*, p. 179.

³⁸ *La Parole baroque*, p. 208.

³⁹ In *Présences*, Green relates likewise: ‘levant enfin mon regard vers la colombe du Saint-Esprit, j’ai connu là, dans le secret, cette expérience inouïe: me trouver enfermé dans un lieu construit [...], mais qui m’emportait vers une expérience spirituelle’ (p. 213).

⁴⁰ Blunt, *Borromini*, p. 121.

originally planned sacred emblem to the lantern:⁴¹ accompanied by the mysterious sounds of wind, an upward zoom into the dome approaches the ceiling oculus, when, all of a sudden, as if by a miracle, the figure of the dove appears. Borrowed from the dome of San Carlo allo Quattro Fontane and inlaid over the gilded glory of Sant'Ivo, this symbol of God gives visibility to what the filmmaker considers to be the essence of Borromini's artistic endeavour: to capture divine presence.⁴²

Refashioning the past, sacrifice and salvation

In *La Parole baroque*, Green relates that his goal as a stage director is to revive Baroque theatre in order to 'en faire un art vivant capable de toucher un public moderne'.⁴³ *La Sapienza* can in many ways be understood as an equivalent cinematic attempt to make the architecture of the Baroque accessible to a modern audience. The relationship between past and present and, more specifically, the ways in which later generations of artists engage with and reimagine the works of the past underpin the film's philosophical enquiry. Revealingly, before being introduced in any detail to the

⁴¹ Green comments: 'j'ai incrusté dans l'image la colombe de San Carlino Alle Quattro Fontane, qui est aussi de Borromini; c'est un geste mystique numérique!' See '*La Sapienza*: transmission baroque. Interview d'Eugène Green et Clément Cogitore par Anaël Pigeât', *Art Press*, 421 (2015), 28–35 (p. 30).

⁴² We are reminded here of Green's remark in *Présences*: 'la tâche d'un cinéaste est de sentir, par rapport à ce qu'il cherche à représenter, une présence signifiante, et de filmer l'élément où elle se manifeste de sorte qu'elle devienne appréhensible' (p. 239).

⁴³ *La Parole baroque*, p. 15.

architecture of Borromini, we are made to reflect on the work of one of his successors, Guarino Guarini (1624–1683), known for what Norberg-Schulz terms the ‘systematization’ of Borromini’s architectural innovations.⁴⁴ In one of his first architectural commentaries, Alexandre explains that Guarini ‘rationalized Borromini’s principles [...] by inserting moving forms into geometrical figures, thus stabilizing them’. It is in front of one of Guarini’s most significant buildings, the Church of San Lorenzo in Turin, that the rationalist modern architect confesses his own desire to emulate Borromini, but also his difficulty in connecting with him. This architectural enquiry into influence, emulation and artistic reworking, illustrated via elaborate shots of the church’s interior and exterior, is subtly linked to the cinema by means of a scene where Alexandre and Goffredo visit a photography exhibition of the Turin Shroud, the linen cloth that many Christians believe to be the burial garment of Christ. Housed in Guarini’s Chapel of the SS. Sindone – a building inspired by Borromini’s Sant’Ivo – the Shroud establishes a lineage between the two Baroque architects, but it also, significantly, opens a wider reflection on the relations between different art forms.

Bearing the negative image of a crucified man, the Turin Shroud evokes the workings of lens-based media, which preserve an imprint of the world through light. In the context of cinema, a full-screen shot of a photograph showing the Shroud’s head segment, some 36 minutes into the film, recalls André Bazin’s essay ‘Ontologie de l’image photographique’, originally published in 1945 and reprinted (with variations) in his 1958 collection *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?*. In this seminal piece, Bazin references the Shroud in a footnote to his assertion that ‘[l]a photographie

⁴⁴ Norberg-Schulz, *Baroque Architecture*, p. 123.

bénéficie d'un transfert de réalité de la chose à sa reproduction'.⁴⁵ His reflections are accompanied by a full-page image of the Shroud on the facing page, which illustrates the critic's claims of an ontological identity between the photograph and the reproduced object, cementing his concept of the photographic image as a mould of reality. 'Ontologie de l'image cinématographique' tends to be read as the foundation of Bazin's realist theory, 'which anchors an idea of cinema based on realism – from Erich von Stroheim through Renoir to Rossellini'.⁴⁶ Yet, interestingly for us here, it is also in this essay that Bazin develops his thoughts on the mutual influence between the arts that underpin his cinematic theory. As a direct imprint of reality, Bazin famously posits, photography liberated Western painting from its obsession with realism, allowing it to regain its aesthetic autonomy. In turn the invention of film, by adding a temporal dimension to photographic objectivity, delivers Baroque art from its quest for verisimilitude:

Dans cette perspective, le cinéma apparaît comme l'achèvement dans le temps de l'objectivité photographique. Le film ne se contente plus de nous conserver l'objet enrobé dans son instant comme, dans l'ambre, le corps intact des insectes d'une ère révolue, il délivre l'art baroque de sa catalepsie convulsive. Pour la première fois, l'image des choses est aussi celle de leur durée et comme la momie du changement.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ André Bazin, 'Ontologie de l'image cinématographique', in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Cerf, 2002), pp. 9–17 (p. 14).

⁴⁶ See Dudley Andrew, *André Bazin*, rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. xxvi.

⁴⁷ Bazin, 'Ontologie de l'image cinématographique', p. 14.

For Bazin, then, in striking similarity to Green's postulation of the cinematograph as the successor of Baroque art mentioned earlier, cinema accomplishes the Baroque project by capturing reality with an unprecedented lifelikeness. But, crucially, and once more tying in with Green's poetics of the cinematograph, for Bazin the photographic image is both the object itself and the making visible of its absence. In the words of Guillaume Dulong, '[l]a photographie [...] est du réel et signifie l'absence actuelle de ce qu'elle représente. L'image cinématographique est donc un signe car elle rend signifiant le réel'.⁴⁸

As we have just seen, Green's examination of Borromini's influence on Guarini connects to a broader reflection on the cross-fertilisation between different art forms, as well as on the nature of the photographic image, via Bazin. Green's own own creative engagement with Borromini is played out in the six-minute-long sequence of Borromini's suicide, restaged, so to speak, by the French director. This film-within-the-film sequence is triggered by a shot of Alexandre in bed, his eyes searchingly open as if he were experiencing a vision. The sequence follows two earlier scenes featuring monuments that were either influential to or created by Borromini, accompanied by voice-over commentary about the architect's life and work relayed by Alexandre – in all likelihood extracts from the book about Borromini he is writing during bouts of insomnia. Apart from the use of historic costume, what instantly sets off Alexandre's vision from the rest of the film is the sequence's markedly painterly aesthetic, effected by soft focus and the golden and bluish hues

⁴⁸ Dulong, 'Vacances romaines', p. 164.

that tint the image, imbuing it with the delicacy of a seventeenth-century painting.⁴⁹ Green intermittently utilizes soft focus effects and increasingly gestures towards a painterly style in the film's later parts, notably in shots of Goffredo asleep illuminated by a candle or the candle-lit lunch at the Villa Medici, reminiscent of the chiaroscuro in paintings by Caravaggio and Georges de La Tour. But, for the first time here, these effects are fully sustained in an intermedial layering of painting, theatre and architecture. The insert begins with the shot of an oil lamp, foregrounding the role of light as a source of life and wisdom. Focusing mainly on their hands and feet – an artistic choice found throughout the film but intensified here – Green's camera shows us Borromini at work on an architectural drawing when his servant Francesco Massari, concerned for his master's health, takes away the lamp.⁵⁰ Accompanied by voice-overs spoken by Alexandre (as the voice of Borromini) and Goffredo (as the voice of Francesco), a series of metonymic shots suggests the unfolding of events, as Borromini, angered and upset by the servant's refusal to give him a light, resolves to do himself bodily harm, falling on his sword in despair. A close-up of his blood-stained hand, framed against a puddle of blood on the floor, speaks of the violence the architect has turned against himself.

⁴⁹ On blur as an intermedial figuration that endows film with a painterly aesthetic, see Martine Beugnet, 'Dream Screen: On Cinema and Painting, Blur and Absorption', in Knowles and Schmid, eds., *Cinematic Intermediality*, pp. 52-69.

⁵⁰ Green explains that these close-up shots of feet and hands are emblematic of the thresholds his characters experience at certain moments. See 'Rencontre avec Eugène Green'.

In an earlier sequence about Borromini's beginnings in Rome, the voice-over relays that Maderno asked Borromini and Bernini to work on the construction of the Palazzo Barberini, while, in fact, Bernini took over the project after Maderno's death, in effect making Borromini his subordinate.⁵¹ Similarly, the film-within-the-film to a certain extent rewrites the official version of the architect's life and death. Whereas in Borromini's own account of his suicide, dictated during his final hours, Francesco had promised to light the lamp again when his master woke up (but failed to do so), in the film the servant assures his master that he will be able to write again at daybreak.⁵² More significantly, in Green's cinematic reimagining of Borromini's last moments, the architect laments that he does 'not have a place', that he wants to 'make a place for [himself]'. His words echo those of a Chaldean refugee from Iraq, played by Green himself in a poignant cameo role in a sequence almost immediately before Alexandre's vision. Having lost his son to a brutal murder and waiting to be reunited with his daughter in France, the Chaldean grieves over the diasporic dispersal of his community ('nous n'avons pas de lieu') but reassures Aliénor that her destiny is 'de trouver un lieu'. If the resonances between the two scenes reinforce Green's identification with Borromini, the Chaldean's lament also gives a new meaning to architecture's mission in the context of the contemporary refugee crisis: it extends the role of architecture to build places of shelter and refuge to a wider imperative of hospitality towards displaced people who no longer 'have a place'.

⁵¹ See Blunt, *Borromini*, p. 19.

⁵² Anthony Blunt extensively cites the architect's account of his suicide. See *Borromini*, pp. 208–9.

As a reappraisal of Borromini's suicide, imbued with Christian overtones, the filmic insert reclaims the tragedy of the architect's death as an act of salvation. Not only does Borromini forgive Francesco, as is indeed historically attested (Blunt relays that 'among various bequests he [Borromini] gave five hundred crowns to the servant who had unwittingly caused his death'),⁵³ in Green's rewriting the architect tells his servant 'I have done it for you'. When Francesco continues to blame himself, Borromini, using an affectionate diminutive of his servant's name, reassures him, 'on the contrary, Franceschino, you are saved'. The camera cuts back to Alexandre awake in his bed, who pronounces as if in a trance: 'Nous sommes sauvés, sauvés'.

In an interview, Green elucidates the notion of sacrifice in *La Sapienza* in the context of the rivalry between Borromini and Bernini, but also, more importantly, with regard to art's role as a pathway to spiritual experience and compassion:

I make a sort of parallel with an important aspect of the sacred, which is the sacrifice; there is the idea in *La Sapienza* that in a certain way the real artist – like Borromini, as opposed to Bernini – who lives only for his art, he becomes a sacrificial victim. That's the idea when Alexandre sees a vision of the death of Borromini. [...] The artist becomes a sacrificial victim in the same way that the death of Christ afterwards enables the faithful, through the ritual Mass, to experience the sacrifice without bloodshed. The artist leaves his work of art, which becomes a way for the people who enter in contact with it to know a spiritual experience, to be able to open up to others and experience commiseration and love for [one] another through a work of art.⁵⁴

⁵³ Blunt, p. 209.

⁵⁴ Pinkerton, 'Great Beauty'.

As the ultimate sacrifice, revealed to Alexandre in his vision, Borromini's death delivers the protagonists from the phantoms that had overshadowed their lives. Borromini's forgiveness of the servant who unwittingly caused his death absolves his modern counterpart of his partial responsibility for the suicide of his associate François. It also helps him accept the death of his disabled daughter, whom, against his wife's wishes, he wanted to institutionalise. Relieved of his guilt, Alexandre is able to rekindle his love for Aliénor and to transmit his knowledge to the younger generation: he accepts a Visiting Professorship at the University of Venice, where Goffredo will become one of his students. In turn, the sickly Lavinia's visit to a production of Molière's *Le Malade imaginaire* makes her realize that her mysterious ailments stem from her difficulties to overcome her father's death. In a further interpenetration between fiction and reality, we are made to understand that the play is performed by Green's theatre company, the Théâtre de la Sapience,⁵⁵ though we do not see the actual performance. Miraculously recovered the morning after her theatre visit with Aliénor (which is also the morning after Alexandre and Goffredo's parallel visit to the Church of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza), Lavinia is able to let go of the anxiety she projected onto her brother and can finally constitute herself as an autonomous being. Transformed by the power of art, experienced in the church of La Sapienza and the Théâtre de la Sapience, the adult man and the adolescent girl access the sapience that allows them to forge more meaningful relationships with their loved ones.

⁵⁵ Green recalls in *Présences* that a year after undergoing the spiritual experience of sapience in Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza he chose the name 'Théâtre de la Sapience' for his theatre company (p. 213).

Sapience, as the knowledge that leads to wisdom, then, presupposes an acceptance of the darker, more sorrowful aspects of our existence, on which human beings need to build to gain true knowledge of themselves and the world. Just as Borromini integrated his chapel of Sant'Ivo into the already existing Palazzo della Sapienza, just as he preserved the old basilica in his restoration of the church of St John Lateran, and indeed just as Alexandre resolves to organically develop an already built-up site, so personal development is predicated upon the integration of our past into our present lives. As the meaning of the title 'La Sapienza' reveals its deep plurality, oscillating from Borromini's church to Green's theatre troupe and the spiritual concept of sapience that inspired the plan of the architectural building,⁵⁶ the film spans an arc where different art forms, past and present experience, life and art build upon one another.

The Filmmaker as Seer

What then, in the final analysis, are we to make of the extended analogy between architecture and cinema that underpins the film? First, it is important to point out that, despite the opposition between idealist Baroque and functionalist modern architecture that informs *La Sapienza*, Green is by no means a *passéiste* with a nostalgic vision of past cultural production. On the contrary, for this polyvalent artist, architecture, like culture more widely, is neither a fixed form nor a past ideal, but an evolving creative

⁵⁶ Blunt explains that the church's 'plan was originally intended to symbolize the bee of the Barberini family [...] but it seems certain that the architect must also have had in mind the idea that the six-pointed star is the star of David, the accepted symbol of wisdom, and therefore peculiarly appropriate to the church of the Sapienza'

(*Borromini*, p. 116).

practice, which must above all cater for humanity's spiritual needs.⁵⁷ In a note to the film he explains:

Ni l'architecte ni son élève n'imaginent faire des œuvres néo-borrominiennes. La leçon qu'ils retiennent du travail du grand Tessinois, c'est que les formes architecturales les plus douées de vie ne sont pas celles qui cherchent simplement à pourvoir aux besoins matériels, ni qui naissent en suivant des 'règles', mais celles qui sont le fruit de l'imagination créatrice. Ils décèlent aussi chez Borromini ce qui doit être le but de l'architecte à toute époque, à savoir, donner aux gens des espaces où ils peuvent trouver l'esprit et la lumière.⁵⁸

In this regard, Alexandre's comment at the end of the film, '[s]i j'entrevois la sagesse je voudrais la transmettre, en donnant un lieu à ceux qui cherchent la lumière', is paradigmatic for the wider humanist project advocated by *La Sapienza*.

Secondly, we should note that, though permeated by Christian references, notably the tropes of conversion, sacrifice and redemption,⁵⁹ the film is not confined

⁵⁷ See Roger: 'pour lui [Green] il s'agit de tenter de préserver pour la transmettre, une conception vivante de la culture: réapprendre le rapport entre l'art et l'homme en considérant au présent les œuvres du passé' ('Un cinéma de la présence', p. 20).

⁵⁸ 'Propos du réalisateur', in 'Martine de Clermont-Tonnerre et Alessandro Borrelli présentent *La Sapienza*'.

⁵⁹ Fabien Gris traces the Christian references in Green's writings and films to 'la chrétienté médiévale et la théologie de la grâce du XVII^e siècle' ('Eugène Green', p. 66).

to an exclusively Christian worldview. Indeed, the architect Alexandre is a self-proclaimed atheist, while his younger counterpart Goffredo, as mentioned earlier, has designed a temple for all faiths and none as the centre of his ideal city. As for the Chaldean refugee, played by the filmmaker himself, his reference to ‘ma religion’ seems to identify him as a member of the Chaldean Catholic Church, yet the cameo sequence does not dwell on this, focusing instead on his cultural legacy: as the descendant of an ancient Mesopotamian people reputed for its astronomers and astrologers, he is able to read the stars, whose message of love he transmits to the distraught Aliénor.⁶⁰

The filmmaker, then, is first and foremost a seer, an interpreter of signs, who, like the Baroque architect Borromini, gives visibility to the invisible, spiritual realms behind material phenomena. As Green writes in *Présences, Essai sur la nature du cinéma*:

Je crois que sans signes, il n’y a pas de cinématographe. Cela veut dire que le cinéaste part sur sa voie un peu comme un chevalier errant, et son adoubement, c’est lorsqu’il reçoit la faculté de reconnaître les signes, et de les rendre visibles par son art.⁶¹

In *La Sapienza*, the visualisation of Baroque architecture, filmed with a rare sensitivity to the shapes, textures and movements of Borromini’s ingenious designs,

⁶⁰ In the interview with *Potemkine*, Green recalls the reputation the Chaldeans enjoyed in antiquity of being great astronomers and astrologers. See ‘Rencontre avec Eugène Green’.

⁶¹ Green, *Présences*, p. 233.

becomes the gateway through which the experience of an epiphanic inner journey can be imparted. Posited as the continuation and accomplishment of Baroque art, in Green's Baroque visions, cinema fulfills its vocation as an art of revelation.

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