

## The Films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet: Complete Retrospective

Reviewed by Jane Madsen

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Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet (dirs),  
*Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach* (*Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*) (1967).  
Courtesy of Belva Film GmbH.

You can't teach people how to think, how to use their eyes and ears – or how to make effective politics for that matter – they either can or they can't – you can pass on a spark of something, show them a concrete operation, but not much more.

(Danièle Huillet cited in Clark and Entwistle, 2007).

The work of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet forms a unique oeuvre in the history of European post-war cinema. The two filmmakers worked together from 1954 for 52 years, making films in Germany, France, Italy and Egypt, as they moved from one town or city to another as exiles, engaged observers and partisans. Their wanderings meant they were not attached to the culture of one country. There is a powerful sense that, throughout their films, they held together various strands of culture, politics and history, while documenting and acknowledging the continuing resistance by people on the political left and the bitter struggles and failures encountered by the inheritors of post-war Europe. The three-month London retrospective was organised by the Goethe-Institut in

collaboration with the BFI, the ICA, the Institut Français and Close-Up Film Centre, as well as Kings College London, the German Screen Studies Network, Birkbeck Institute for the Moving Image, with contributions from the Instituto Italiano di Cultura di Londra and Whitechapel Gallery. The programme, comprising 52 films in total, was a complete retrospective of the 33 films made by Straub and Huillet and the 19 films Straub made following the death of Huillet in 2006, and included previously unseen work. The number and range of agencies involved is an indication of and testament to the cultural expanse of Europe that their work covers and addresses. The London event followed recent major retrospectives at Centre Pompidou, Paris, and MoMA, New York, both in 2016, and Akademie der Künste, Berlin in 2017.

The programming and co-ordination of the London retrospective by Ricardo Matos Cabo, with Martin Brady as consultant, displayed exceptional attention to detail and a deep knowledge and understanding of Straub and Huillet's work. It included films that were historically significant as well as documentaries about their working methods and collaborative practice. As far as possible, the work was shown on the original formats of 35mm and 16mm as well as the later video and digital formats they used. In Straub and Huillet's films from 1962–2006, and Straub's from 2006, their starting point was always to work with source material as 'text', whether they are literary texts, baroque music, modernist opera, newspapers, historical documents or events. The range of writings and music incorporated into their films include works by J. S. Bach, Arnold Schoenberg, Heinrich Böll, Bertolt Brecht, Ferdinand Bruckner, Franz Kafka, Friedrich Hölderlin, Pierre Corneille, Stéphane Mallarmé, Marguerite Duras, Franco Fortini, Friedrich Engels, Cesare Pavese and Elio Vittorini. Throughout their work, they unflinchingly explore acts of resistance made by those on the margins as avant-garde and radical artists and as left-wing political radicals. Combined with this, Straub and Huillet's work is often made up of shots that are long in duration, unbroken by intercuts and close-ups, shots which are meticulously crafted and choreographed where nothing is left to chance. Consequently, their films are not easy viewing.

Following the opening screenings, the season presented the films chronologically and followed themes emerging from the texts and material derived from particular authors and composers. In the 'anyone-can-make-a-film' culture made possible by contemporary digital technologies, it was timely to take stock of a complex, intellectually rich body of work driven by a clear set of intentions in which a sense of history and Marxist analysis is brought to cultural and political formations, such as capitalism and class relations, and to

the sites and places where social conflict has occurred. Initially, the BFI was deeply sceptical about hosting a retrospective of difficult films from the European Marxist, avant-garde canon; the organisers were told that Straub and Huillet were box-office poison. However, the BFI had to hastily move the screening of *Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach* (*Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*) (1967), from NFT3 to the larger NFT1 when it quickly sold out. This may have been because the renowned harpsichordist Gustav Leonhardt, known for playing Bach's music on original instruments, performs the role of Bach in the film. On the whole the screenings were very well attended and for the most part the various cinemas were at least two-thirds or more full. Film academics, philosophers, actors and writers from across Europe introduced each programme of films, including people who have worked closely with Straub and Huillet such as Barbara Ulrich, a producer of and actor in their films. In addition, there were workshops and study days on specific themes, for example on Schoenberg's music. During these events some eminent scholars shared knowledge, interpretation and insights into their work and working methods. Patrick Primavesi's talk 'Stages of Violence' focussed on Straub and Huillet's *Antigone* (1991) and the playwright and poet Hölderlin; actors from the community theatre in Buti, near Pisa, spoke about working on the films that were adapted from novels by Cesare Pavese and Elio Vittorini; and Martin Brady, Laura Mulvey, Erika Carter and Ian Christie discussed *Geschichtsunterricht* (*History Lessons*) (1972) in a session entitled 'History lessons: Brecht, Straub-Huillet and the British context' which focussed on Marxist and Brechtian film theory as exemplified by *Screen* in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> All these events reinforced the complexity of cultural and political thought and aesthetics in Straub and Huillet's films. The retrospective offered an opportunity for reflection on and immersion in their films, leading to greater understanding of their fidelity to a poetics of space and history. This review will focus on two recurrent themes during the retrospective: firstly, Straub and Huillet's relationship to the originating texts and how that determined performances by the actors and non-actors; and secondly, how landscape is represented as the place where oppression has been played out, becoming a site of memory and history.

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<sup>1</sup> See the anthology edited by John Ellis, *Screen Reader 1: Cinema/ideology/politics* (1977) for a good example of this context.

## Reading and the text

Straub and Huillet's work is characterized by a deep sense of culture referencing musical and written texts drawn from classical and the enlightenment to the modernist periods, many of which are rarely read or performed, such as Schoenberg's opera *Moses und Aron* (1974), whose third act was never finished. The use of pre-existing texts has created some questions and criticism, even from those whose work they are adapting. In 1965, Böll said 'I think Herr Straub's weakness is that he needs other people's material to realize his own cinematic ideas' (Böser, 2004: 25). However, this was precisely the point of Straub and Huillet's practice – a dialectical engagement and dialogue with both the text itself and each other as collaborators rather than the generation of new texts and material.

A recurring motif in their films is the representation of reading. This operates in a number of ways. In the 16mm film, *Einleitung zu Arnold Schoenbergs Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene (Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg's Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene)* (1972), which was programmed with *Moses und Aron* (1974) at the BFI, two readers are shown in a recording studio reading aloud. Firstly, Günter Straschek reads from Schoenberg's 1923 letter to Kandinsky in which he declines to work at the Bauhaus, refusing to have his Jewishness made an exception to comply with the German government's anti-Semitism. Following this, Peter Nestler reads from Bertolt Brecht's 1935 speech to the International Congress in Defence of Culture, which condemned anti-Semitism and linked fascism to capitalism's capacity to exploit the powerless. The two texts bring together Schoenberg and Brecht's political resistance. Martin Brady argues that *Einleitung* is their 'most overtly propagandistic film' (2008: 305) as archive film footage of WWII, US bombing in Vietnam in the 1970s, images of the dead from the Paris Commune of 1871 and newspaper cuttings concerning the acquittal of the architects who designed the Auschwitz death camp are interspersed with shots of the two readers. This essay documentary opens with a quote from Schoenberg describing the tone for his musical composition: 'threatening danger, fear, catastrophe', the subtitle being offered by Straub and Huillet as a warning from history about the archive material assembled in the film.

In *Fortini-Cani*, another 16mm film made two years later in 1974, the reader is also the author of the text – the Marxist writer Franco Fortini reads from his book *I Cani del Sinai (The Dogs of Sinai)* (1967), written as political and historical document of his life growing up in Florence during WWII as the son of a Jewish father and Catholic

mother. Including an analysis of the choices that existed for the Left in the 1930s and reference to the atrocities of the Nazi killings of resistance fighters in the Apuan mountains, *I Cani del Sinai* was written as a critical response to the Six Day War in 1967. Fortini appears in the film as writer, performer and reader. In re-presenting his text as film, Fortini becomes the subject and object of the film, unlike conventional documentary form that usually has an external voice-over.

The presence of the reader was revisited as a visual and conceptual representation in films made by Straub on his own. In *Corneille-Brecht* (2009) the actress Cornelia Geiser recites from Corneille's two works *Horace* and *Othon* and reads from Brecht's 1939 radio play *The Trial of Lucullus*, both texts referencing the exploitation of power in Rome. In *L'Aquarium et la Nation (The Aquarium and the Nation)* (2015), psychoanalyst and film theorist, Aimé Agnel, reads from André Malraux's last novel, *Les Noyers de l'Altenberg (The Walnut Trees of Altenberg)* (1948), which is a meditation on history. There is a sense that in Straub's solo films, he is doubling-back and reflecting on previously explored writers and themes. These works by Corneille, Brecht and Malraux were written at times of war and demonstrate how history should be re-examined during times of great uncertainty.

Reading and quoting in Straub and Huillet's films is also connected to their relationship to Brecht's work; this association is well documented and is probably the best-known formal detail about their films. Beginning with their earliest work made in Germany, their films have been interpreted as Brechtian through the assumption that they have applied the *verfremdungseffekt*, the alienation or distanciation effect derived from Brecht's epic theatre. This was reinforced by direct reference to a quote from Brecht cited on-screen in one of their earliest films, *Nicht versöhnt (Not Reconciled)* (1964/5): '[i]nstead of wanting to create the impression that he is improvising, the actor should instead show what is the truth: he is quoting. Bertholt Brecht' (Fendt 2016: 217). *Nicht versöhnt*, an adaptation of Böll's 1959 novel *Billard um halbzehn (Billiards at half-past nine)*, strips down the story of a family of German architects from 1910 until after the Second World War surviving and conniving to avoid any association with their Nazi past. They are represented in modernist post-war interiors; similarly, in *Klassenverhältnisse (Class Relations)* (1983) and in the comic opera critique of violence and irrationality *Von heute auf morgen (From Today Until Tomorrow)* (1996), modernism is represented as the architecture of the bourgeoisie. The degree to which their films of the 1960s–70s were Brechtian (or not) is something that occupied film theory to a considerable degree in the

1970s. Straub and Huillet later argued: '[w]e want people to lose themselves in our films [...] All this talk about "distanciation" is bullshit' (Gallagher, 2005).

The London retrospective did not get overly bogged down in debates concerning whether the films were or were not Brechtian, but rather considered Brecht in the light of the history of political avant-garde films from the New German Cinema and the French New Wave of the 1960s and 1970s and referenced Brecht along with the other writers whose texts Straub and Huillet adapted. However, this does not mean that the connection to Brecht's epic theatre was avoided nor overlooked, for example *Geschitsunterricht*, based on an unfinished Brecht novel, and Brecht's adaptation of Hölderlin's *Antigone* (1992) are significant references to his epic theatre in their oeuvre.

The relationship to the text is explored in the different styles of performance Straub and Huillet applied in their films. Actors and non-actors from various European countries perform the selected texts in their differing accents and voices. This demonstrated a struggle with the texts that reminds the viewer – who is first and foremost a listener – of the primacy of the text as the foundation of the film, rather than creating empathy through naturalistic acting. This textual complexity is included in the preparation of the scripts so that the films become an interrogation of and critical encounter with the writer. During the retrospective, images of Straub and Huillet's scripts were shown and discussed during Martin Brady's workshop on *Von heute auf morgen* – the detailed notes, annotation and diagrams, especially made by Huillet, demonstrated their working methods and the discursive nature of their collaborative practice.<sup>2</sup> The texts were pared down in order to avoid emotional identification. Prior to filming, the actors were prepared, by constant repetition, to iron out differences between actors and non-actors so the viewer can focus on the performers and consider how their proximity to each other is based relations of power.

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<sup>2</sup> This is further revealed in recent publications – see, for example, *Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet: Writings* (2016) – which include archive images of their preparatory and shooting scripts.

## History and landscape

The most significant element of Straub and Huillet's work is the representation of history. Violence and resistance are the themes taken from early European philosophy, history and mythology in *Othon* (1969); *Geschichtsunterricht*; *Moses und Aron*; *Dalla nube alla resistenza* (*From the Cloud to the Resistance*) (1978); *Der Tod des Empedokles* (*The Death of Empedocles*) (1986); layers of history are added by the adaptation of classical and old testament themes in the plays of Corneille, Brecht and Hölderlin; in Pavese's novel; and in Schoenberg's opera. Historical strata are even articulated in the title of their 1991 film *Die Antigone des Sophokles nach der Hölderlinschen Übertragung für die Bühne bearbeitet von Brecht 1948* (*The Antigone of Sophocles after Hölderlin's Translation Adapted for the Stage by Brecht 1948*), the final layer of history being added by Straub and Huillet. In their films, history is shown to be material and spatial. By traversing the sites where resistance, violence, death and power struggles have taken place, the viewer enters the space of history, of politics and of the contested terrain represented in their films. A sense of vigilance is established that the place, space and the outcomes of capitalism's brutal abuse and excess must always be scrutinized and lessons from history learned. In the last session of the retrospective held at the Goethe Institut, Ute Holl discussed the implications of landscape in *Moses und Aron*, arguing that three people's search to find a space underlies the film: Straub was exiled from France to avoid being conscripted to fight in the Algerian war (1954–62); Schoenberg was without a land; and Huillet was displaced from France. Straub and Huillet dedicated the film to the people of Palestine who were left with no land after the 1948 Nakba (Holl 2019). In this way, conflict is spatial and played out in a landscape. In *Moses und Aron*, which was filmed in the Alba Fucens amphitheatre in the Abruzzo region of southern Italy, the technical complexity of the sound recording of the opera was based on Straub and Huillet's insistence on direct optical sound recording in their films; an orchestral track was pre-recorded and the performers sang to it on site. Straub argued that '[i]t is the sound that gives you the space. Anyone who films without sound can easily forget they are filming space' (Böser, 2004: 49).

The Teatro di Segesta, an ancient Greek amphitheatre in Sicily, was used as the location for *Die Antigone des Sophokles*. In this film, there are no establishing shots of the space of the amphitheatre. Instead, the distant landscapes beyond the amphitheatre are

shown, including one featuring a modern road bridge. Elements from the amphitheatre itself are shown as deconstructed spaces; for example, a foundation stone with the faint remains of pillars bisects the ground and divides the central characters from each other. Huillet instructed the actors to ‘tell it to the stones’ (Primavese, 2019), their intense gazing downwards to the ground creating a disconnected quality that reinforces the inevitability and inertia of the violence leading to Antigone’s final demise.

In their best known early historical film, *Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach*, the narrative text is a fictionalised journal kept by Bach’s second wife – historical authenticity being represented by playing Bach’s music on original instruments of the period and through the use of eighteenth-century costumes, wigs, spectacles and interior locations. However, this authenticity is disrupted, for example, in one of the few exterior shots, in which Straub and Huillet back-projected – at an impossible angle – an archive image of an original building that had been destroyed in 1902, reminding viewers of the artifice and that this was a film from 1967. However, the music acts as Bach’s voice in the film, its authenticity being asserted by Leonart’s playing while concurrently portraying Bach and his music as being in conflict with those commissioning him.

In Straub and Huillet’s films, Marx’s concept of historical materialism is acknowledged in the reclamation of real places. In *Geschichtsunterricht*, a young man in contemporary dress drives a Fiat through the winding streets of central Rome. Meeting Caesar’s banker who is dressed in a toga, he endeavours to find information about Caesar. The shot inside the car runs for a long time without commentary or narrative, thereby enforcing contemplation of the place itself – that Rome is a site of commerce and corruption. A similarly long tracking shot occurs in the *Trop tôt, Trop tard* (*Too Soon, Too Late*) (1980–81) in which a car aimlessly drives through Paris; and in the second half filmed in Egypt, a long tracking shot runs by a river – the shots of fields of irrigated crops represent the landscape as a site of production. In addition, there is a lengthy shot of workers leaving a factory, a quotation of the Lumière’s film *La Sortie de l’Usine Lumière à Lyon*, (*Workers Leaving the Factory*) (1895). However, the duration is so long that the mere satisfaction of recognising the historical citation is superseded by the space at the foreground of the Egyptian factory becoming the primary locus for the workers’ day-to-day realities. In *Fortini-Cani*, there is a fifteen-minute sequence of wide shots of the Apuan Mountains where the camera’s intense contemplation of the mountains engenders the recognition that these landscapes contain the historic sites where massacres of resistance fighters during the Second World War occurred – they are ‘places of



remembrance, shreds of time engraved in stone' (Naboni, 1977: 34). In these films about traceable histories, Straub and Huillet suggest that landscape and history are intertwined, not because of what can be seen but because of what must be remembered.

In Straub and Huillet's first Hölderlin film, *Der Tod des Empedokles; oder Wenn dann der Erde Grün von neuem euch erglänzt* (*The Death of Empedocles or When the Green of the Earth Will Glisten for You Anew*) (1986), the title itself implies that the representation and function of landscape in their work is changing. In his life, Empedocles, a pre-Socratic philosopher from the Greek city Akragas in Sicily, chose exile and then death. This film is pivotal because the spatial depth-of-field narrows to the 'green of the earth', the visual referent beginning to move from landscape as demarcated historical site to a more generalized idea of nature, or nature without a perspective, towards a viewpoint that is ahistorical and apolitical.

In later films made in Buti with the Teatro Francesco di Bartolo group based on the work of Pavese and Vittorini, such as *Operai, contadini* (*Workers, Peasants*) (2000), *Dolando* (2002), *Il ritorno del figlio prodigo – Umiliati* (*The Return of the Prodigal Son – Humiliated*) (2001/03), the performers are in a forest where there is no horizon and no sky. By contrast to the earlier films, in the Buti films, profilmic space has been compressed. The actors perform in secluded glades, which create painterly backdrops and canopies of bucolic greenery and vegetation that signify a dislocated, undifferentiated nature. In groups of two and three, they appear before the camera in a narrowed depth-of-field, which make them seem as if they are in dialogue with each other, whereas, in previous films, Straub and Huillet often isolated characters from each other through the use of medium close-ups. The specificities of located place where history emerges from the materiality of the very stones, themselves as part of the landscape, now seem to be superfluous in favour of the power endowed by nature alone. Yet, their work does not develop in a continuous linear, one-way direction. *Intinéraire de Jean Bricard* (*Itinerary of Jean Bricard*) (2007), the last film credited as a Straub and Huillet film, although it was completed after Huillet's death in 2006, is an elegiac, black-and-white, 35mm film that, through long tracking shots from a boat on the Loire, returns to themes of movement and contemplation where sites of loss and mourning, history and memory are located and attached to place.

## Conclusion

Why now? Why was it important to look at Straub and Huillet's work again in 2019? The retrospective was a timely reminder that, in the uncertain climate created by the emergence and progression of right-wing politics, history offers prescient interpretations of present circumstances. The body of films made by Straub and Huillet, and latterly Straub, bring together intellectual and cultural depth together with fidelity to Marxist political thinking and analysis. Throughout their films, Straub and Huillet ask what was inherited by the generation emerging from the Second World War, what the responsibility of history conferred on them and how the lessons of history may be used in the continuing fight against fascism and the resistance to forces of implacable state power. Through their peripatetic moves through Germany, Italy and France, they questioned what they, as Marxist filmmakers, could and should do, and suggested that all political action and cultural production must be scrutinized, while at the same time provoking and needling Europe's conscience. In their reflective and often intensely beautiful films, Straub and Huillet's critical encounters are at the heart of the poetics and politics of commitment. The retrospective demonstrated Straub and Huillet's significant contribution to post-war European film culture as well as creating and critically engaging with new audiences for their films.



Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet (dirs),  
*Der Tod des Empedokles (The Death of Empedocles)*, 1986.  
Courtesy of Belva Film GmbH.

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