

THE LUXURY YOU GAIN WHEN YOU'VE GOT NOTHING TO LOSE

THE FILMS BY DANIÈLE HUILLET AND JEAN-MARIE STRAUB

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Non-reconciliation is also a way of making and producing films. It is the stubborn refusal of all the forces of *homogenization*”, wrote the film critic Serge Daney in *Cahiers du Cinema* in 1975 to mark the release of the film *Moses and Aron*, a lavish production of Schoenberg’s opera by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, staged in an ancient amphitheater in the Italian region of Abruzzo. The act of resistance in both the political and physical sense affords elemental and extensive access to the work of Huillet-Straub on many different levels. For always within it lies the defense of something existing, and, at the same time, the assertion of a potential, the condition of a possibility which has yet to materialize. What exactly is being resisted? What is being fought for? Rejecting homogenization, an enforced leveling and standardization, requires a richness, a sensuality and an abundance – an unbounded vitality. In this sense, resistance becomes a mindset and a form, a driving force for forging an open form, an opening. And this can only be achieved with humor, creativity, and generosity of spirit, but not through stubborn determination.

The attitude of resistance is also substantiated by Jean-Marie Straub in his biography. Initially and frequently thereafter, he formulated his resistance to Fascism: In the late 1950s his actual conscientious objection to being drafted into the French army in Algeria prompted his flight to Germany and temporary residence in Munich. After *Machorka-Muff* (1962), Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet then released a second film, *Not Reconciled or Only Violence Helps Where Violence Rules* (1964), which in Germany and in particular Berlin was almost unanimously rejected. The film was screened in a spe-

cial program during the 1965 Berlinale on the initiative of Enno Patalas and Frieda Grafe, and provoked aversion among audiences and, above all, among the critics.

Almost every film by Straub-Huillet is made in defiance of all resistance. And only succeeds by virtue of a network and the assistance of allies, who over many years supported the production and distribution of the films. Out of this an economy evolved, which also formed an integral part of a radical political aesthetic – in the sense that the question of its necessity informs every decision. The luxury they could afford was taking the necessary time and granting us, the audience, the time to perceive, see and hear something, as if it were for the first time. “That is really exhausting work”, as Straub and Huillet never tired in reminding us. Maintaining continuity in their work was a major feat, and a practice of resistance which cannot be praised too highly. And every film features people and landscapes, which, in one way or another, either oppose or contain such a narrative.

Straub und Huillet find the characters and the diverse range of sources for their encounters in the works of Heinrich Böll, Johann Sebastian Bach, Berthold Brecht, Pierre Corneille, Franz Kafka, Arnold Schönberg, Mahmoud Hussein, Stéphane Mallarmé and Friedrich Hölderlin, in the paintings of Paul Cézanne – and, subsequently, less prominently, in the work of the sociologist Jean-Yves Petiteau, or among recalcitrant allies such as the Nationalist Maurice Barrès or the Catholic Georges Bernanos. With Straub and Huillet’s relocation to Rome, the Italian Communist-Modernist authors of the war and post-war period such as Franco Fortini, Cesare Pavese, Elio Vittorini became important for them. Following the death of Danièle Huillet, Jean-Marie Straub continued this work with texts by Dante, Michel de Montaigne, Jean Sandretto and frequently by André Malraux. Straub and Huillet did not adapt, they did not create film versions, but read against the grain. The characters and actors, seldom professionals, were instructed to resist the temptation of representation. They did not act, nor did they pretend. With the inertia of their bodies, they resisted the text, the acceleration of the words, since they did not translate the language, the narrative, into an action. Usually standing, sitting or lying under the open skies, they remained tied to the location, the earth, the ground.¹

Speaking, *Sprech-Gesang*, reading aloud and reciting in the open air, in a clearing, on a hill, in a wood, up a tree, all pose a challenge to the senses and to chance itself. For the weather cannot be relied upon. The clouds, the sun and the wind can fundamentally alter the light conditions, and thus the ambiance of

¹ For a period of years, the critics identified an ecological cinema in these later works. But Jean-Marie Straub combines concerns about the planet far more with something he described as the „Communist Utopia of Hölderlin“. „Air, which envelops the newly born child ...“

a situation, and the impact of a text. This sounds straightforward, but in detail requires a lot of time, effort, and work – from the choice of the shooting location to the color grading of the copy. With meticulous care, a framework was created, which furnished space for the element of chance. Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet experimented and inscribed the historical texts into life and into the present. This highlights their documentary quality of not divorcing image and sound from the reality of their genesis.² In a certain manner, the filmmakers are returning the texts to whom they actually belong, namely the people of whom the texts relate: workers and peasants. This does not apply to every film, but particularly when working with texts by Pavese and Vittorini in Italy, this level is explicitly relevant.

Herein also lies resistance to a specific kind of intellectuality, to the autonomization of text, image and sound as ideas and communication, detached from a specific starting point and its conditions. Straub-Huillet's films defy such tendencies towards discursiveness and require a special effort both to speak with, and about them. The attention of the filmmakers is focused on the material itself, on how it is translated, how it resists translation, and on how this transforms it as a cinematographic image. For digitization has radically called into question the materiality of the analogue image and the gradual blurring of the information it contains. In the late 1990s Straub-Huillet criticized this trend as a means to control society through images reduced to media and through the attendant loss of the resistance potential of image and sound. During this time, their refuge and the basis for their further activities was the small town of Buti in Tuscany, with its local community theater Francesco di Bartolo, which is still operating today. In this landscape and with this ensemble, a series of films were produced based on texts by Pavese and Vittorini, shot on 35 mm. According to Malraux, art is the only form of resistance to death, and this resistance consists in carrying on. Following the death of Danièle Huillet in 2006 and notwithstanding much adversity, Jean-Marie Straub managed to resume working on his own small oeuvre; out of its time, against its time and impacting upon time, shot on MiniDV and in HD.

But there is another level to mention when touching on the films. Anyone having witnessed Jean-Marie Straub und Danièle Huillet after a film screening will know that Straub used to talk a lot; Huillet, in contrast was a woman of few words. Touring with the films, attending the screenings and debating with the audience over the course of many years became an integral part of their filmic practice. Often Straub would even dismiss his own

comments as nonsense, pointing out that everything has been said in the film. The speech in the film, by the film, and about the film always assumes a different meaning. Within this setting of divided roles, Danièle Huillet acted as a break and a corrective, said little, but made factual, sometimes tactical interventions. One should probably imagine the productive collaboration between Straub and Huillet as an evolution, both through resistance and in resistance.

To some degree Serge Daney has reinforced this image, in respect of the film *From the Clouds to the Resistance* (1978). “[I]t seems to me that Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet silently speak about something that remains largely unsung (because the solidity of the social bond depends on this ignorance): *that there is a profound indifference of women for all belief in an ideal.* [...] Resisting those who are resisting: men. Women, stones.”³ For the stone is not touched by the words, remarks Daney, quoting from Pavese. “Tell it to the stones”, replied Danièle Huillet to an actor during rehearsals for *Antigone* (1991) at the Berliner Schaubühne, when the latter was unsure to whom he should address his lines. Addressing the words to “the things of the world”, to the stones, which are not touched by them, which owe us no reply and which will survive us all. “Art is an act of resistance against communication”, wrote Gilles Deleuze. And in this sense, the oeuvre of Huillet-Straub lies more open than ever before, ready to take us on an exploration of the present.

Translated from the German by John Rayner

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² Over time Straub and Huillet eventually discovered (for themselves) that whilst retaining the same sequence of scenes, they could produce several versions of a film by selecting different moments and different takes of the same shot.

³ Serge Daney, „A Morals of Perception“, www.diagonalthoughts.com/?p=1529. Originally published as „Une Morale de la Perception (De la nuée à la résistance de Straub-Huillet)“ in *La Rampe. Cahier critique 1970–1982*, Gallimard, Paris 1983.