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"The beauty of art stirring us into thought": Some Tributes to Straub-Huillet

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Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet

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When one begins talking about Straub-Huillet, one could easily start with individual films. *Not Reconciled* (1965) is a masterwork, and so is *Class Relations* (1983). The world would be poorer without the riches of *These Encounters of Theirs* (2005). The extended musical passages contained in *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1967), *Moses and Aaron* (1974), and *La Madre* (2011) can bring transcendent lift to viewers willing to be lifted by them, and the considerations of painting undertaken in *Cézanne* (1989) and in *A Visit to the Louvre* (2004) can enrich both the mind and the heart. Diverse works such as *Fortini/Canì* (1976), *En rachâchant* (1982), *Too Early, Too Late* (1980-81), *Workers, Peasants* (2000), and *The Aquarium and the Nation* (2015) use art to explore the complex workings of human thought within political systems—the entrapment that we often feel when serving unseen masters, for instance, and the liberation that can be felt in contrast through direct address with those around us.

Kommunisten (2014) is among the greatest tributes that a man could have made to his late wife. Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's intensely close working relationship is felt throughout their fiction feature *Sicilia!* (1999); shown in Pedro Costa's making-of documentary about that film's editing process, *Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?* (2001); and sensed everlastingly, years after Huillet's 2006 death, in a beautiful love story called *Dialogue of Shadows* (2013).

There are other marvels as yet unmentioned here, all of which will screen over the next month within the Museum of Modern Art's series, the French couple's largest-ever North American retrospective.

The showcase's older films will all screen either on new digital preservation or on 35 mm prints, and several guests—such as Straub-Huillet collaborators including Renato Berta, Astrid Ofner, and Barbara Ulrich—will present screenings. The retrospective is accompanied by the release of two important English-language books, one [an extensive critical anthology](#) (edited by Ted Fendt) and the other a compendium of [the couple's extensive writings](#) (edited by Sally Shafto), many of which are appearing in English for the first time. The second book is itself tied further to an exhibition at New York's [Miguel Abreu Gallery](#) called *Films and Their Sites* that is focused on the couple's detailed relationships to all of the elements—all of them—in their films.

These happenings together constitute a major event, one mounted in celebration of the work of two of history's greatest filmmakers. They are so great that discussing individual films ultimately seems to be too limiting. What endures in memory, more so than titles, are images and a spirit. The images, typically, consist of plain-seeming people standing erect outdoors and regarded by the camera with deep respect as they sing or recite rich preexisting texts. The spirit is one of collaboration, with an extending outwards to acknowledge everyone involved in the work of creating and screening a film and regarding them all as equals.

What follows are tributes to Straub-Huillet written by people who have collaborated with them in various ways and by fellow filmmakers who hold them in admiration. Thom Andersen's text was originally published elsewhere in German, and it is appearing here in English for the first time with his consent. The other tributes were all created for this article, and will be published in longer versions on my website, [The Moviegoer](#).



Lonnie Van Brummelen & Siebren de Haan:

Straub-Huillet are clearly Marxist when speaking about their work. In interviews they claimed repeatedly to prefer to show their films in factories and suggest that their films are best understood by manual labourers. But most of their films recite the works of artists and writers considered part and

parcel to the European canon. When we first discovered their films, we were puzzled: How could a frame of reference from high culture be matched with political engagement?

Trained at a time when the ideas of Gramsci, Bourdieu, and Foucault determined the cultural climate, we had learned to see impressionist paintings as status goods; art museums as prescribers of good taste; and classical Greek culture as the symbol of Eurocentrism, the ultimate representation of values imposed onto the subjugated classes by a dominant elite. Post-structural thinking had brought relativism to its extreme by exposing the truth—and thus also the artwork's truth—as a game of empty signs. It was through Straub-Huillet's work that we started to question these premises.

It was also through their work that we learned a material approach to filmmaking as a more realist alternative to the dominant Aristotelian Hollywood model. We hope to convey the sense that viewers can choose their own trajectory while watching a film, that everything that has a presence in the film is an actor, and that a film can do more than entertaining people within a spectacle of virtuoso illusions.



Barton Byg:

I'm loath to analyze Straub-Huillet's films, look for patterns or developments in their style, or connect them to film history. With each film project the filmmakers attempted to begin anew and avoid repeating themselves. Each viewing of a Straub-Huillet film is new as well, since the works' simplicity of form allows and even encourages each viewer to see something different. This is not to say that the films can mean just anything; they are not arbitrary, but precise, so that each detail can receive the same attention as all the others.

That is perhaps the reason why the films are sometimes described as "anti-cinematic"—to the extent that the magic of cinema gets you to think you have seen things that are not on the screen, or not to notice things that actually are. To appreciate Straub/Huillet films one need only look at them and listen

to them—but really look at them, and really listen to them. To appreciate Straub/Huillet as people, one need only to have looked at a city or a landscape with them. Walking around my South St. Louis neighborhood on that first visit of theirs while they were scouting locations for their film *Class Relations*, Danièle agreed that it was ugly, “but not only ugly.” She saw the beauty and the history in the everyday. At that intersection between everyday experience and high art, even between everyday experience and myth or religion, is where their work is located.



Thom Andersen:

I love Jean-Marie, and I hate the world that has made him a cult figure. I don't know if Straub-Huillet cinema is a popular cinema (will we ever know?), but it is a cinema of exhilaration. Many are the unforgettable passages in their films, such as the first shot of *The Bridegroom, The Actress, and the Pimp* (1968) or the last shot of *Too Early, Too Late*. As in some Ford films, a tracking shot can make you cry.

Jean-Marie and Danièle never reconciled themselves to what Alain Badiou has called “the second restoration,” and for Jean-Marie, it's too late to stop now. In this age that manufactures opinions like widgets and despises conviction, he is a man of conviction who says, “I try to have no opinions.” His work, his life are animated by a passion for the real (Badiou again) and especially for the natural world. On the occasion of the German television premiere of *Eyes do not want to close at all times or Perhaps one day Rome will permit herself to choose in her turn* (1969), he wrote of the empty space, the empty ground shown at the end of each act, “How sweet this space would be without the tragedy of cynicism, of oppression, of imperialism, of exploitation. Our earth, let us free it!” Introducing *The Death of Empedocles* (1986) at La Fresnoy, he said, “If we don't want all to perish in nothingness and ruin, there is only one thing that will ever save us: a communist utopia. And not just us, but the only precious thing we have, namely the ground we walk upon! Not the ground as such, but the earth and the children of the earth.” You can sense this love of the earth in almost all their films, particularly the later ones. They are the only films I know in which you can feel the force of gravity.



Sally Shafto:

Straub and Huillet's approach to writing is unique—even from the writings of their French New Wave peers—because they wrote and made films in three languages (French, German, and Italian). In addition, many of their writings exist in multiple linguistic iterations. These incarnations were purposeful and anticipated their practice of creating distinct versions of their films by using different takes.

It's well known that Straub-Huillet's films are based on adaptations or extended quotations of other works. The filmmakers have constructed an œuvre based on an aesthetics of quotation. Straub's writing itself is characterized by his citing other authors, as is seen from his first published article in 1954. The complexities of their works were compounded by the fact that the filmmakers themselves were translators, with precise ideas on what Walter Benjamin called the translator's task. In order to translate them, I first had to have a reckoning with their literal approach to translation. What exactly, I wondered, is a literal translation, and should their style be imitated?



Ted Fendt:

The film that turned me into a Straubian was *Moses and Aaron*, after which the colors of everything I saw for the next few hours felt super-intensified. The later films shot in Buti, Italy—particularly the conversations between men and gods adapted from Cesare Pavese's *Dialogues with Leucó*, and especially the last one on 35mm, *Le Streghe, Femmes entre elles* (2008)—are similarly special to me for the ways in which Straub captures and intensifies the presence of the world before the camera.

Danièle Huillet is likely the only filmmaker to have ever devoted so much time to translating and subtitling her films. The subtitled versions were given just as much consideration as the versions without subtitles, both in terms of the translation (always as literal as possible) and how the words would appear onscreen. (She often left passages of dialogue without subtitles to allow foreign viewers to hear and see the film without reading). Straub, Barbara Ulrich, Bernard Eisenschitz, Misha Donat, and myself (there are several levels of proof-reading) try to maintain her standards as best we can.

For the most part, the language of the films is not complicated, abstract, or vague. Translating Joachim Gasquet, Bernanos, or Malraux is not necessarily difficult, but it can be tricky to find a balance between as literal a translation as possible and a translation that still make sense, even as it becomes somewhat stilted with the grammar of the original language shining through.

I tend to receive the script and come to know it well before I see the film. When I finally do see the film, it is always so radically different than anything that I could have imagined.



François Albera:

I have repeatedly invited Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet to schools where I taught and accompanied them to institutions such as festivals, cultural centers, and museums where I have worked. Each time, they forced me to situate myself within the institution, within society, because they

never came to occupy a definite place in advance but instead drew a place for themselves. They gave me a political lesson.

I have admired—ever since I have understood and had access to it—the aesthetic radicalism, the continual lessons of rigor and tenderness for the world, things, beings, elements and texts. The works that Straub-Huillet's films start from (by Corneille, Schönberg, Brecht, Pavese, Vittorini, Kafka, Malraux, and others) are deeply renewed by the updating that is made, the confrontation with bodies, places, spatial situations, and voices. One of the most extreme examples of this tension and enrichment of a text, for me, is *Too Early Too Late*, a film shot in Egypt and in France that gives the political movements of 1968 their own historical depth and seeks to preserve hope in a changed world. But the heartbreaking lyrical meditations made subsequent to the disappearance of Danièle (adapted from Pavese in particular) are no lesser.