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Sick of Popcorn Movies? Straub-Huillet Retrospective Offers an Antidote

By J. HOBERMAN MAY 3, 2016



"Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach" (1967) is considered one of the more accessible films created by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet.
via MoMA

Some movies want to be loved. Others prefer to be admired. And then there are the movies, like those by [Jean-Marie Straub](#) and Danièle Huillet, that, indifferent to love or admiration, are monuments to their own integrity.

It's appropriate that this couple, who married in 1959, would have their first complete retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. (Its show covers over 45 titles, those made together as well as those Mr. Straub, still active at 83, directed after [Ms. Huillet's death](#) in 2006.) Few filmmakers are more uncompromising in their modernism or their devotion to art. Their first short feature, adapted from a novel by Heinrich Böll, was titled "Not Reconciled" — words that could stand as their motto.

The [retrospective](#), which runs from Friday through June 6, may not be the toughest ticket to attain in New York, but it could be the city's most tough-minded show. Mr. Straub and Ms. Huillet were anything but frivolous.

In her memoir, "[The New Yorker Theater and Other Scenes From a Life at the Movies](#)," the distributor Toby Talbot described a party in Rome, sometime in the 1970s, where "everybody was drinking wine and beer, smoking pot, dancing, having a ball," when the bell rang, announcing Mr. Straub and Ms. Huillet's presence. The director Bernardo Bertolucci called on the revelers to flush the drugs and hide the liquor quickly, explaining, "The Straubs are here!"

Straub-Huillet, as they preferred to be called, are cinema's conscience — an antidote to all the junk movies you've ever seen. Drawing on Kafka, Cézanne, Brecht, Schoenberg and Malraux, to name only some of their best-known sources, Straub-Huillet films are meant to raise ethical questions on subjects as varied as proper camera placement and the appropriate political approach to the subject.

"We make our films so that audiences can walk out of them," Mr. Straub once said, perhaps not altogether in jest. Nevertheless, the Straub-Huillet oeuvre, long championed by a devoted cadre of academics, programmers and fellow filmmakers, is having a moment. Two newly published books — a collection of their writings and an anthology of other people's essays on their work — may be found at the [Miguel Abreu Gallery](#) in Lower Manhattan, where an exhibition of Straub-Huillet stills, videos and annotated scripts is on view.

Although Mr. Straub and Ms. Huillet were both born in France and met as students in Paris, their nationality eludes precise classification. Mr. Straub left for West Germany to avoid service in the Algerian war. After making their first movies there, he and Ms. Huillet moved to Rome in the late 1960s. Since his wife's death, Mr. Straub has lived in Rolle, Switzerland, where one of his neighbors is Jean-Luc Godard.

Mr. Godard, a sometime comrade of Mr. Straub's, is thanked in the end credits of "Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach" (1967). That film was chosen to open [MoMA's](#) retrospective because, as the curator Joshua Siegel, the show's organizer, explained, it was the most "accessible."

Based on letters written by Bach's second wife — stoical accounts of domestic tragedy and artistic frustration — "Chronicle" uses lengthy takes and a static camera to document the performance of Bach's music in period costume with period orchestration. The experience is both transcendent and material, described by the film critics Manny Farber and Patricia Patterson as creating "a feeling of cement blocks and extraordinary poetry at the same time."

Perhaps concerned that "Chronicle" might be too seductive, Straub-Huillet followed it with a feature-length adaptation of Corneille's 17th-century verse tragedy "Othon," declaimed by costumed nonactors in the noisy streets of contemporary Rome. The New York Times critic Roger Greenspun, who reviewed this Dada-style assault at the 1970 [New York Film Festival](#), estimated that half the press screening's attendees [fled for the exit](#).

In those days, Mr. Straub presented himself as an aesthetic terrorist. "If we hadn't learned how to make films, I would have planted bombs," he maintained around the time he and Ms. Huillet, more temperate in her public statements but equally committed to cinematic clarity, made a 1974 version of Schoenberg's never completed opera "Moses und Aron" — originally dedicated to a former film student who joined the Red Army Faction and died in prison on a hunger strike.

Mr. Straub and Ms. Huillet shot "Moses und Aron" on location in Egypt and Italy and insisted that it be shown in the original German. ("Dubbing is murder," Mr. Straub wrote, quoting the filmmaker Jean Renoir.) In calling attention to its source as an unfinished work, the film is less an adaptation than the documentary representation of a text.

Many Straub-Huillet films do not dramatize their source material but present it for contemplation in the context of a tranquil landscape that was once the site of a strike, a revolt or a massacre. The feature-length “Fortini/Cani” (1976) juxtaposes an essay by Franco Fortini, the Italian poet of Jewish descent, with a sylvan vista outside Florence where the Nazis murdered a group of Italian partisans.

Their movies are elemental things, concerned with the flow of history, the beauty of the natural world and the specificity of their human actors. The filmmakers may be Marxists, but their aesthetic can be gleaned from their admiration for Cézanne, the subject of two typically oblique short features. It is not simply that Cézanne, like them, is an artist of landscapes, but that his paintings, like their movies, are as much tangible objects as they are representations.

I first encountered Straub-Huillet as a teenager at the 1968 New York Film Festival; digging up my notes, I see I reported back to my college film society that the shockingly austere “Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach” was “a hard film to sit through but if you can dig it, it’s like 90 minutes of Tantric exercises with the same cleansing results.” In an age of sensory overload, such a movie was good for your mental health.

And so it is. Asked if he was afraid that encouraging audiences to see Straub-Huillet might be akin to pressuring children to eat their spinach, the curator Mr. Siegel was unfazed. “They might find that they like it,” he told me. “Spinach is delicious!”

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