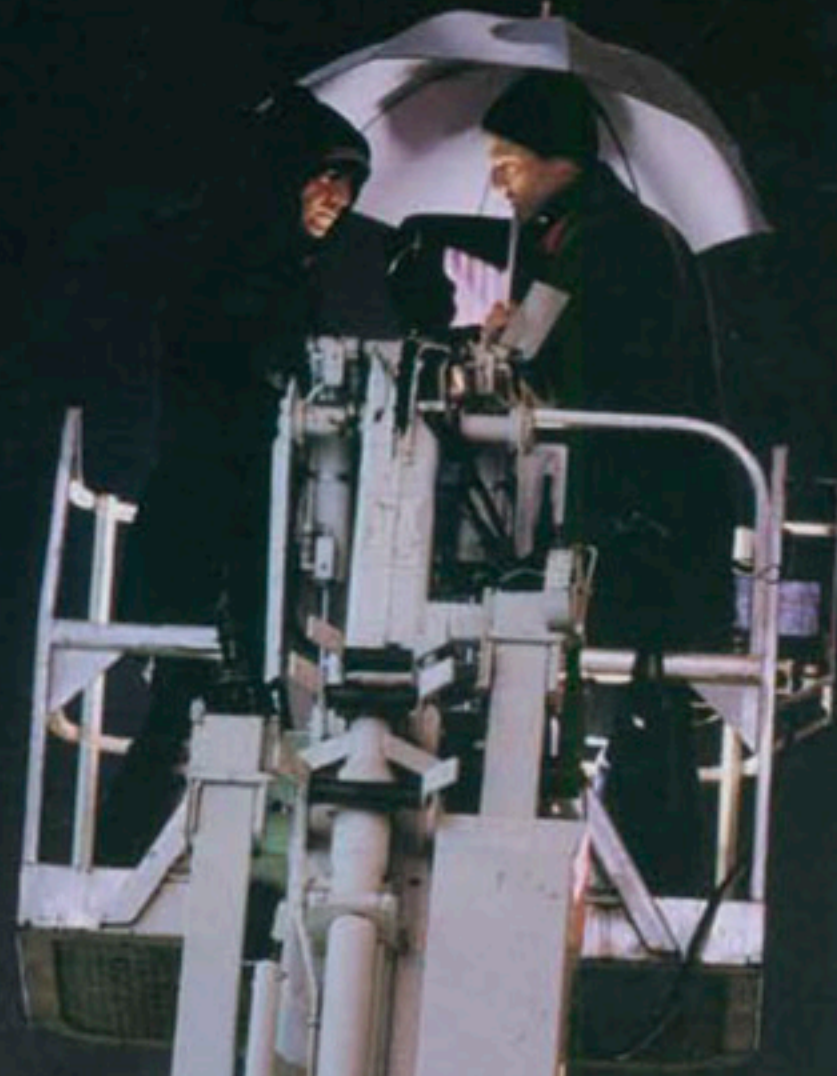


MODERN PAINTERS

The International Art Magazine
April 2007

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ANDREAS GURSKY

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THE DIGNITIES OF DISSENT

The films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet

To those readers already well versed in the life and films of Straub-Huillet, I offer an apology. This article takes advantage of the brute expedience of scandal to introduce the impact of their work to those who are not. (A writer's words are always numbered.) But perhaps the reader will allow that scandal also possesses an honorable charge: to serve as a portrait not only of its players but also of the milieu in which it is played. —JK

Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet bore a reputation for insubordination long before they failed to attend the premiere of their film *Quei loro incontri* (These Encounters of Theirs, 2006), which screened in competition at the 63rd Venice International Film Festival last September, and the uproar that followed did little to convert any detractors. *Quei loro*—a series of five dialogues between Greek gods on their knotty relationship with mortals, lifted from Cesare Pavese's *Dialogues with Leucò* (1947) and recited by plain-clothed nonactors posed in idyllic, pastoral settings—was met with great enthusiasm only by Straub-Huillet fans. Critics began to walk out less than 10 minutes into the hour-long film ("Nothing happens," reported one writer), and disgruntled audience members scrawled their disdain on a notice board on the Lido where the general public post their reviews. One particularly pungent response succinctly—if inadvertently—articulated the opinions of both those who loathed the film and those who adored it: "Is this a mega joke?"¹

Nonetheless, the festival jury (helmed by Catherine Deneuve) awarded Straub and Huillet a Special Lion for "innovation in the language of cinema." But true to the filmmakers' incendiary spirit, the honor was forcefully upended. At a press conference, one of the film's actors read three messages penned for the occasion by Straub, beginning with the nose-thumbing "It's come too soon for our death—too late for our life."² The second message enumerated the years Straub and Huillet had come to Venice with no Lion to show for their efforts, and the third blasted the festival's zealous security measures:

*I wouldn't be able to be festive in a festival where there are so many public and private police looking for a terrorist—I am the terrorist, and I tell you, paraphrasing Franco Fortini: so long as there's American imperialistic capitalism, there'll never be enough terrorists in the world.*³

As though word and deed were equally dangerous, the festival jury reconvened to discuss if the award should stand. One member, American director Cameron Crowe, protested that the honor was no longer appropriate in light of the imminent fifth anniversary of 9/11 but said that he would be appeased if the festival separated itself from the filmmakers' "anti-American" remarks. Straub and Huillet retained their Lion in the end, and order was restored—and the festival jury made no formal announcement regarding its position on the matter.⁴

I am

Just weeks after the pair was justly Lionized, Huillet passed away from cancer at the age of 70, leaving behind her partner and collaborator of more

than 40 years. Although even their most optimistic devotees find it nearly impossible to imagine Straub in retreat, it is even more difficult to conceive of his continuing their fight without her. *the terrorist.*

To begin at the end may seem a flawed strategy, but with regard to Straub and Huillet the choice is prudent. They themselves are slippery subjects who prioritized the political over the personal, and whose Marxist leanings produced one of the most radical bodies of narrative cinema of the late 20th century. Perhaps because of the "difficulty" of their films—their use of nonactors, a neutralized performance style, disarming compositions and camera work, and fragmented narratives with a heavy reliance on dialogue—and because of the pair's smacking distaste for what they deemed to be the hypocrisies of democracy, the power of their work remains largely unknown to American audiences, for whom only one of their 26 films, *Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach* (Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach, 1967), is domestically available on DVD.

For most of their career, the filmmakers, who were known critically and credited professionally as simply "Straub-Huillet," positioned themselves as outsiders, living and working away from their native France. They moved first to West Germany in 1958, so Straub could avoid conscription in the Algerian war, and then to Italy in 1969, where they lived most of their life together. Their sly refusals to provide critics and scholars with clear biographical information or a concise breakdown of their creative roles declined the auteurism to which cinema has dutifully subscribed since the New Wave. (In fact, few who knew them could say whether they were



Last year the Venice Film Festival awarded Straub and Huillet a Special Lion for “innovation in the language of cinema.” At the press conference, they sent an actor in their stead to read three messages that began with the nose-thumbing “It’s come too soon for our death—too late for our life.”



STILL FROM *CHRONIK DER ANNA MAGDALENA BACH*, 1967
FILM, 93 MIN
COURTESY NEW YORKER FILMS, NEW YORK

actually married, a seemingly minor detail that resurfaces in Straub-Huillet scholarship as a kind of giddy proof of their unsettled self-definition.) Incongruities abound: although French-born, Straub-Huillet are commended as an integral, radical force of New German Cinema. Because they eschewed the bloodless integrity of political platforms for a more thorough, uncompromising critique of power and its requisite complacencies, they ignited equal controversy on the left and the right. Their first film, *Machorka-Muff* (1962), adapted from Heinrich Böll's short story "Bonn Diary" (1957), tells the tale of an officer who returns to West Germany to found an "academy for military memories." In 18 minutes, Straub-Huillet create an excoriating portrait of post-World War II restoration that managed to inflame left-wing critics who believed the film had botched an opportunity to parody the Right. The filmmakers' position? "I hate satire," Straub declared years later, in 1982. "When people are no longer able to rebel or to change what happens or, to use a bad word, influence politics or history, they begin to make satires."³

Rather than grotesque but comforting exaggerations, audiences of *Machorka* were confronted with a chilly narrative whittled within an inch of its story, and to a cinematographic frame stripped of all idle distractions. Such economies have time and again been labeled "difficult" and "austere" by viewers unaccustomed to the dignities of their own intelligence and imagination. In this respect, they recall Robert Bresson; like him, they survey the devastation buried beneath cool manners, to which their second film, *Nicht versöhnt oder Es hilft nur Gewalt, wo Gewalt herrscht* (Not Reconciled, 1964–65), amply testifies. Based on the Böll novel *Billiards at Half-*

Past Nine, Nicht versöhnt is a fractured hour-long tale of three generations of German architects that begins with a billiard game and ends with a gunshot. The parenthetical pops of the pool cue and the pistol describe the descent of politics into parlor games and draw a circle around Germany's postwar amnesia. Because Straub-Huillet disallow potentially dramatic or even hysterical narrative elements the traditional comforts of consequence, the viewer is subject to the stunning disorientation of being left to his or her own devices to construct the underlying tale.

If unpopular with general audiences, Straub-Huillet earned a platinum reputation as filmmakers' filmmakers, making "film films." Godard personally paid for the screening of *Nicht versöhnt* at the Venice Film Festival in 1966, and Fassbinder claimed to have learned everything about directing from watching Straub on the set of *Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter* (*The Bridegroom, the Comedienne, and the Pimp*, 1968), which featured the new director and a handful of his troupe in on-camera roles.⁶ To trace the evolution of their aesthetic is tricky, for although certain elements unite their films—a fixed camera, long shots, nonactors, an aggravated realism—they crafted a particular approach for each based on its subject and source material, which tend to be radical literary sources by such authors as Pierre Corneille (*Othon*, 1969), Stéphane Mallarmé (*Toute révolution est un coup de dés* [Every Revolution Is a Throw of the Dice, 1977]), Friedrich Engels (*Trop tôt, trop tard* [Too Early, Too Late, 1980–81]), Marguerite Duras (*En rächâchant*, 1982), and Pavese (*Dalla nube alla resistenza* [From the Cloud to the Resistance, 1978] and *Quei loro incontri*). The way Straub-Huillet



repurpose and reconstruct these texts raises key questions, some of the most important of their oeuvre, about the uses and relevance of history. In *Geschichtsunterricht* (*History Lessons*, 1972), for example, taken from Brecht's fragment novel *The Business Affairs of Julius Caesar*, 1937–39, a young man drives through the streets of modern Rome, stopping to talk about Caesar with players costumed as an ancient Roman peasant, banker, lawyer, and writer. The effect is humorous, if not downright absurd—all these men in togas, their dialogue scored by passing traffic—and the Brechtian breaks in the "reality" of the story (the presence of a contemporary interlocutor, for example) reveal the true stakes of the film to be a present consideration of political leadership and persona. Treated in this manner, history is only a subcategory of literature, as opposed to the usual vice versa; it may offer lessons and bear consequences but, because it is a kind of fiction, it cannot provide a road map one may follow to a certain future. In effect, the

terrorism to which Straub-Huillet subscribe may be as simple as a contempt for the comfort of a present informed by an imposed history whose ramifications overshadow and inhibit progressive thinking—Cameron Crowe's "conscience" a prime example.

When commissioned to write this article, I immediately tried to track down all of the films of Straub-Huillet, only to find that few were available through the usual channels. Their American distributor, New Yorker Films, kindly arranged for me to screen what it had in its collection, but only *Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach* was available to take home. I could watch each of the rest just once, and whatever details or ideas escaped my attention or slipped through my memory were then unavailable to me later. The French distributor of *Quei loro incontri* could not assist me, as it had been instructed by Straub-Huillet not to release screening copies. An American archive could not help me screen the film they had unless I could arrange to travel to it, and again, no copies. It was then

that I began blindly to contact any writers, curators, historians, or filmmakers who I knew from my research had written, curated, or met Straub-Huillet, and soon I was entangled in a deeply rooted network of fellow cinephiles with whom I found myself trading and sharing bootlegs, articles, translations, catalogues, JPEGs, and other materials. Conversations took place about who had what, whose clones were dubbed from which source, which films are rumored for release and where, and where still other of their films might be hiding. Some shared stories of having met Straub-Huillet, others pined that they had missed their chance, but all mourned Danièle's loss. To one who wondered how their films would ever find a larger following, I offered a tip of my own. "On YouTube," I wrote, "someone uploaded a beautiful copy of *En rächâchant*. No English subtitles, but it's a start."

As of this writing, the film has had 1,159 views.

For endnotes, see the Index, page 110.

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Introducing

VARDA CAIVANO will have solo exhibitions at Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf, from June 2 to July 7 (sieshoeke.com) and at Chisenhale Gallery, London, from June 2 to July 22 (chisenhale.org.uk). She is represented by Victoria Miro Gallery, London (victoria-miro.com).

MARTIN SOTO CLIMENT will have a solo exhibition at T293 in Naples in winter 2007-2008 (t293.it). He is represented by Broadway 1602, New York (broadway1602.com).

Andreas Gursky

ANDREAS GURSKY'S RETROSPEKTIVE 1984-2007 is on view at the Haus der Kunst, Munich, through May 13. The exhibition will travel to the Istanbul Modern from May 29 to August 26 and to the Sharjah Art Museum from November 28, 2007 to January 28, 2008. He is represented by Matthew Marks Gallery, New York (matthewmarks.com); White Cube, London (whitecube.com); and Monika Sprüth/Philomene Magers, London and Munich (spruethmagers.com).

Mary Heilmann

MARY HEILMANN'S retrospective TO BE SOMEONE will be on view at the Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, California, from May 20 to August 26 (ocma.net). Her work is included in HIGH TIMES, HARD TIMES: NEW YORK PAINTING 1967-1975, at the National Academy Museum, New York, through April 22 (nationalacademy.org) and WACK! ART AND THE FEMINIST REVOLUTION, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, through July 16 (moca.org). She is represented by 303 Gallery, New York (303gallery.com), and Hauser & Wirth, London and Zurich (hauserwirth.com).

Wang Qingsong

WANG QINGSONG'S work is included in ZHUYI! CHINA: CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY FROM CHINA, at the Artium de Álava, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain, through September 23 (artium.org), in the Milan Triennale through June (triennale.it), and in

THERMOCLINE OF ART: NEW ASIAN WAVES, at the ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art, Karlsruhe, Germany, from June 9 to October 21 (zkm.de). He is represented by Salon 94 in New York (salon94.com), Marella Gallery in Milan and Beijing (marellagallery.com), and Art Scene Warehouse, Shanghai (artscenewarehouse.com).

Working Practice

MAUREEN GALLACE has a solo exhibition at the Maureen Paley Gallery, London, through April 15. Her work will be included in the LYON BIENNALE from September 17 to December 31 (biennale-de-lyon.org). She is represented by 303 Gallery, New York (303gallery.com), and Maureen Paley, London (maureenpaley.com).

Straub-Huillet

NOTES

1. Silvia Aloisi, "Cryptic Film Baffles Venice Festival," scotsman.com, September 8, 2006.
2. A full translation by Tag Gallagher of Straub's "Three Messages" can be found online at mastersofcinema.org/straub.html.
3. *Ibid.*
4. It is also interesting to note that the scandalo went largely unreported by any major news source outside Italy, and that it was film writer-critic Tag Gallagher whose independent report has been the source most often cited by writers and critics, including this one.
5. Phil Mariani, "An Interview with Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet," *Wedge: An Aesthetic Inquiry* 1 (1982): 26.
6. For more on Fassbinder and Straub-Huillet, see Barton Byg, *Landscapes of Resistance: The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 89-90.

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