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Curiosity/Exigency by Adrian Martin

about the writer

Adrian Martin is Senior Research Fellow in Film and Television Studies, Monash University (Australia). He has written books on *The Mad Max Movies* (2003), *Once Upon a Time in America* (1998), *Raúl Ruiz* (2004), and several others. He has won the Byron Kennedy Australian Film Institute Award and the Geraldine Pascall Prize for critical writing. He is also co-editor of the book *Movie Mutations* (2003) with Jonathan Rosenbaum, and the Internet magazine *Rouge*.

When I first pondered writing about the work of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, twenty years ago, I wanted to call the piece "Curiosity." Or even: "Enthusiasm." Because, contrary to so much heavy, theoreticist reflection around at the time about Straub-Huillet, I wanted to gesture towards something that was rare, immediate and pleasurable in their work. The crispness of everything: the cuts, the colors, the shape and texture of objects, the sounds of close birds and distant traffic, the gestures and voices of their ever-reciting performers. The sudden shock of beauty in the way *Class Relations* (1984) starts (as I recall it) with just a few frames showing a man dropping his suitcase to the floor – *thwack!* The sorts of sensations that Philippe Grandrieux valued when, as a young, aspiring artist, he was suddenly confronted with *Moses and Aaron* (1974): "what came through bodies, fragmented bodies, legs, the extremely flat earth, the sunlight at its zenith, the brutality of the shots," as he told *Rouge* magazine. And those trees, those leaves, that wind, as vivid as the nuts in the hand in Bresson's *L'Argent* (1983) – it's almost a cinephile cliché, right now, to go on about the trees, the dirt, the sky, all this Bazinian "index" stuff, but the films of Huillet and Straub comprise the one œuvre that convincingly transcends dreamy New Age posturing about "the real" (which so few of us recognize unless we see it in a movie!), as well as Socrates' immortal conviction that the trees can teach us nothing, that only the people of the city can teach us something ... That's the Godardian part of Huillet and Straub's achievement, long before Godard himself got there: bringing together, in the montage of the concept and the rhythm as much as of the shots or the image-sound juxtaposition or the levels of a frame-composition, two things that are indeed very far away from each other: a chirping bird, say, and the Brechtian run-down on the superstructure of the Roman State. And also, as in Godard, this truly living relation to everything that counts as History: it's not old, it's not even passed, everything is there before us, to be seen in its layers, its traces, its broken and suppressed "verticality" ...

A realism that became a hyperrealism – and then became something else again. When I passed from reading Elio Vittorini's *Sicilian Conversations* in the English translation introduced by Ernest Hemingway, to seeing the editing-in-process of an early dialogue of the book as documented in Pedro Costa's great *Where Lies Your Hidden Smile?* (2001) – why do "page to screen" courses at universities everywhere elect garbage like *The English Patient* when one of the only adaptations truly worth studying is the rendering of Vittorini in *Sicilia!* (1999)? – I marveled at how Huillet and Straub had compressed and captured, in a single, static, black-and-white shot, everything Vittorini and his characters say about the selection, preparation, cooking, and eating of a certain

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fish. The thing is sitting there, getting cooked up: any filmmaker could have faked this detail, this moment, in any or all of its dimensions. But when you take in that shot in *Sicilia!*, you know that Straub and Huillet faked nothing, that they took the time it had to take to get this shot, this event, in all its palpable reality. Every anecdote I have ever read or heard about their filmmaking process and practice – whether quizzically or quasi-religiously related – is a lesson on such intransigence, on exactitude, on doing things in the right, most humane, most ethical way: everything from picking the "only possible camera angle" to ensuring the comfort of elderly extras, or the safety of animals. There's a word, a concept used more naturally in French than in English to describe this: exigency, an exacting demand placed on oneself, one's co-workers, one's subjects and materials. Looking after everything from the props (lovingly selected as the "living relics of history," still in circulation and in use), to the film stock, to the payment of the cast and crew (at the *start* of the week, in trust, not at the end as a capitalistic-sadistic carrot-reward to ensure another week's work). And, evident in all of this, burning and shining right through the undoubted "severity" of the work – indeed, bound up intrinsically with the severity – is a fantastic love of things, of the world, of the peasants and the workers and the honest professionals, the cooks and the mothers and farmyard animals: a tenderness. Not for nothing did a German feminist film magazine of the early '80s give Huillet and Straub pride of place in a dossier devoted to that famous ideal of non-alienation: *Love and Work*. No sentimentality (not overtly, anyway), just this seamless collaboration of soul mates premised on the "one frame difference" that Costa records, in action, in what he cleverly called his "comedy of re-montage."

Godard places a neat sight-gag into *Hélas pour moi* (1993): a Straub-Huillet film (I think it's



Il ritorno del figlio prodigo

Antigone, 1991) at the local video store. It's a gag about the legendary/infamous "purism" of the pair: like Brakhage, no video copies, and scarcely a DVD either. Actually, at the sad moment in which we offer these tributes, I am glad about this. It's like Cassavetes once said, in anger as much as in hilarity: you should *work* to see my films, you should go a *long* way to see them on a big screen, and boy, you should *pay* for the privilege! Nothing to cheapen the experience, no compromise. (They were fantastically finicky about subtitling into other languages, for example, and even turned down an offer of a screening from a Festival director in Australia because the grand-hall-style venue was *too big for their film*.) I find that I can remember every single screening, exactly and vividly, like a sensation upon the

skin, of the Huillet-Straub films that I have seen across twenty-five years: I recall where I was, what time of day it was, who I was with, in a way that I cannot for any other filmmaker. Most recently, that means Paris, early 2004, and the season (small but fervently supported by what Serge Daney wonderfully called the I.S. – the *Internationale Straubienne*) of *Return of the Prodigal Son/The Humiliated* (2003). In this film – so full of the fierce lucidity, the political rage mixed with human compassion, that marks the personalities as much as the "positions" of Huillet and Straub – what works a strange magic is the calmness of the positioning, the recitation, the gesturing of the "non-professional" (strange term in this context!) actors in these fields, on these roads: a labor but also a joy, in a sublime, perfect world that is everywhere strangled and murdered but still ever-present and possible ...

One of the all-time greatest pieces of film criticism takes the films of Huillet and Straub as its subject, and that was composed over thirty years ago: Jean-André Fieschi's essay commissioned for Richard Roud's *Cinema – A Critical Dictionary*, released in 1980. No one can say better than Fieschi that these filmmakers were and are *materialists*, in every sense: material history, material world, material of film. Today, we need to express something else, some other shade or aspect of their work, in tribute to Huillet who has just passed away. Curiosity? Enthusiasm? Rigor? Ethical aesthetics, aesthetical ethics? Just today, I would plumb for this word: *exigency*.

Adrian Martin
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