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“Actors Simply Explode”: To Act in the Cinema of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet

Manuel Ramos-Martínez

The term *nonprofessional actor* describes different circumstances: amateurs who do not regularly work, actors who have received no proper training, actors who come from outside the culture industries, and so on. Normative cinemas, as Noël Burch puts it, work within the institutional mode of representation and operate almost exclusively using professional actors.¹ In the case of the Hollywood industry, post-Stanislavskian methodologies continue to produce the most valued performers, the so-called method actors.² Nonprofessional actors are rare, and they are usually confined to secondary roles. The use of nonprofessional actors, among other factors, makes possible the distinction between normative cinemas and the critical cinemas of filmmakers like Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. The significance of nonprofessional acting in critical cinemas is not only the consequence of financial constraints (the costs of hiring a star). From the neoreal-

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Figure 1. *Klassenverhältnisse* (*Class Relations*, dir. Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, West Germany and France, 1984)

ist movement to avant-garde filmmaking (such as the work of Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, and John Waters) to feminist filmmaking, working with nonprofessional actors also legitimates cinema's capacity to operate critically and resist the dominant framework of instructed acting. As Kaja Silverman points out, feminist filmmakers like Yvonne Rainer, Patricia Gruben, and Sally Potter have generated an inventive catalog of discord to counter the confinement of the voice within the female body: asynchronism, multiplication, dislocation.³ Straub and Huillet's resistance to the relationship between voice and body based on captivity, which is reproduced by mainstream cinemas, operates in multiple ways in their work with actors. Moreover, their work has relevance for feminist theory and art practices, since they also seek to undo militaristic, patriarchal, and capitalist modes of speech, punctuation, and communication.

In this context, the practice of working with professional and nonprofessional actors developed by Straub and Huillet—my chief concern in this essay—is unique within the history of cinema. Their practice renders the prevailing opposition between professional and nonprofessional inoperative, thereby disclosing a political life or possibility that can operate through the art of acting. It produces different proximities and dislocations between acting and competence; within this practice, intellectual condescension for the nonprofessional actor, in its positive or negative forms, is radically absent. Examining the political life of this approach to acting provides an opportunity to call into question the properness of the term *actor* in other critical cinematic and performance theories and practices. In Straub and Huillet's work, the reconfiguration of the capacity to act, and of what is taken to be a competent exercise of this capacity, challenges prevailing protocols in Western culture that determine who acts and who does not act based on professional, gender, and economic identities and that validate what it means to act in social, cultural, and political fields. The performances in the cinema of Straub and Huillet visualize and articulate, in the sense that they put into practice another world of action. Their cinema materializes a ground of equality, in which any actor counts, in ways that defy identitarian expectations of action and inaction.

Investigating the practice of acting in the cinema of Straub and Huillet and its ability to (re)imagine our cultural and political possibilities requires the examination of their work's common identification as a Brechtian film practice.⁴ The literature on Straub and Huillet has emphasized the influence of Bertolt Brecht's experiments with acting on their work.⁵ Straub and Huillet have commented on their interest in Brecht's experiments with different spectra of diction that use diverse modes of speaking to distinguish characters from one another, which in Brecht's words show "the connection between certain ways of acting and their means of expression."⁶ However, Straub and Huillet's work with nonprofessional actors also differs from the valorization of nonprofessional actors in Brecht's essays, such as "One or Two Points about Proletarian Actors."⁷ In this text, Brecht celebrates proletarian actors because "the way these people act does to some extent betray their lack of surplus energy" (148). The nonprofessional actors' performances convey the fatigue of workers who labor in the factory during the day and perform onstage at night. Brecht values their performances not as skilled acting but as exhausted rehearsals revealing the capitalist division of energy. The powerful performances at work in the cinema of Straub and Huillet, as we will see, differ greatly from this logic of revelatory exhaustion. While Brecht is an influential figure for Straub and Huillet, I move away from the Brechtian framework in which their work with actors has habitually been discussed.

This essay also moves away from the focus on critical cinema's use of nonprofessional actors as disruptive signifiers of reality within filmic texts. To sustain their stance against normative cinema, critical cinemas often have constructed and naturalized a hierarchical opposition, both discursive and practical, between professional and nonprofessional actors. This opposition equates professional acting with an expert, lifeless, serious artificiality and nonprofessional acting with either spontaneity that is more or less comical or self-conscious artificiality. This firmly established opposition values nonprofessional actors as beings and even as so-called bad actors, but it also reduces the potential of nonprofessional acting to its ability to disrupt the relationship between acting and

legitimate technique, experience, or qualification. Within the poetics of neorealist cinema, for instance, nonprofessional actors have a double role to play in portraying the simple complexity of life as it apparently is. Their accents, vocabulary, and unmade-up faces are signifiers called upon to constitute the reality effect of the film.⁸ Nonprofessional actors are seen as a source of an authentic reality, that is, of reality's ambiguity and contradictions. For theoreticians of neorealism, nonprofessional actors contribute to the mystery of reality precisely because they do not act. They are a pure, non-acting, mysterious presence. According to André Bazin, neorealist performance "calls upon the actor to *be* before expressing himself."⁹ He states that, in neorealist cinema, nonprofessional actors do not act but are instead "a silhouette, a face, a way of walking" (65). Nonprofessional actors echo with their voices and movements "the ontological ambiguity of reality" (68). A congratulatory Bazin notes in passing "how much the cinema owes to a love for living creatures" (72). This love for living creatures cannot but reduce the nonprofessional actor to a nonactor, to being one incapable of action.

Straub and Huillet's deactivation of the distinction between professional and nonprofessional actors implies the construction of a common ground from which to work with any actor, dismantling the dominant hierarchies encoded within communicative notation (seen, for instance, in the seemingly natural use of punctuation). A glimpse at the casts of Straub and Huillet's films shows their interest in working with actors of different backgrounds for different projects: in *Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach* (*The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*, West Germany and Italy, 1968) they use nonprofessional actors who are professional musicians, in *Klassenverhältnisse* (*Class Relations*, West Germany and France, 1984) there is a mixed cast of professional and nonprofessional actors, and in *Il ritorno del figlio prodigo—Umiliati* (*The Return of the Prodigal Son—Humiliated*, Italy, Germany, and France, 2003) they work with people of different professional backgrounds with no previous contact with cinema. Huillet, talking about their work with a variety of actors, explains, "One must always start clearing away. With professional actors it always takes a little longer than with the others, but nonprofessionals have

their own clichés, and at the end the work is not so different . . . at the end it is the same.”¹⁰ The practice developed by Straub and Huillet is predicated on this sameness. My concern is not so much the multiple variants of their practice throughout a long and rich filmography—a filmography that Straub has continued to expand since Huillet’s death in 2006—but rather this element of sameness. I wish to examine how acting itself detonates conventional oppositions between proper and improper actors to disclose the capacity of anyone, professional or nonprofessional actors, native or nonnative speakers, female or male actors, to discipline oneself and generate singular acts of resistance within the ideological constraints of a text. This is the common ground Straub and Huillet argue for in their filmic practice of using nonprofessional actors.

In this cinema, the differences between professional and nonprofessional actors are not erased but refuse any essentialist opposition. To act is to perform a capacity common to anyone—to engage voice and body in the reading of a text through inappropriate breathings and unqualified gestures. I have identified three main dimensions at play in Straub and Huillet’s practice with actors. First, there is the organization of what I refer to as an ignorant encounter between the actors and the unreadable texts that the films are based on. These encounters generate resistant relations between actors and texts. Second, there is the construction of new grammars that result from the cast members’ singular breathing patterns, which diverge from the intended breaks in the text. And third, there is in this process a militant discipline that distinguishes and yet brings together the different acting voices and bodies. These three aspects of Straub and Huillet’s filmmaking are key to the wider philosophy of their own work, which insists on the need to practice cinema, including its performance component, as a form of aesthetic dynamite.

The Ignorant Encounter

The literature on the films of Straub and Huillet has insistently defined their cinema as “a generalized practice of disjunction.”¹¹ As noted above, for a majority of critics, Straub and Huillet’s cin-

ema is in agreement with Brecht's diagnosis of the illusionism produced by the bourgeois fusion of the arts and his corresponding remedy: to radically separate words, gestures, and music. Brecht's analysis constructs a logical order in which separation is valorized as an active art, while fusion, union, and identification are relegated to its passive opposite. Within this logic, actors develop alienating techniques to separate themselves from the characters they play. To construct a distance, they show, quote, reproduce, and refuse to become the character.¹² This art of separation is intended to produce a parallel effect on spectators. It is the *raison d'être* of the performance technique of distancing: to produce a reasoning space for the spectators to think and not to get lost within the seductive narrative of the spectacle.

But Straub and Huillet continuously distance their cinema from the logic imposed by such militant separation. Their practice rearticulates the notion of distance as that which does not blindly follow a prescription for separation as an antidote to passivity. Straub quite bluntly affirms, "We want people to lose themselves in our films. All this talk about distancing is bullshit."¹³ Instead of the vocabulary of separation, Straub and Huillet repeatedly use the term *encounter* to describe the different tensions and harmonies at work in their cinema. For them, a film is primarily "an encounter with a place."¹⁴ The subjects of their films are "chance encounters."¹⁵ Their work is to organize "encounters between actors and texts."¹⁶ In their discourse, *encounter* implies distance as difference but also as an occasion of a coming together, of framing foreign bodies together. Encounter here involves a separation understood as a terrain that constructs different proximities between strangers, and it is not treated as the opposite of passive identification. By contrast, the logic of separation relies on alienation "to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism."¹⁷

For Brecht, alienation is the means to one end: to activate the conformist spectators into a state of detached analysis and evaluation. While Straub and Huillet are not interested in alienating the spectator, they also do not understand their practice as a formula to solve the problem of separation—whether between a text and an actor, a body and a tree, or a voice and an image—through

either distancing or identification. Rather, their use of the term *encounter* strives to articulate a space for proximities that are more or less identificatory and more or less strange to take place. Their work does not simply dismantle the conventions of bourgeois cinema through separation but instead creates distances and proximities that reciprocally mediate the unexpectedness of different encounters. One privileged terrain on which Straub and Huillet experiment with constructions of proximity is the acting process itself. They understand acting as a constructed encounter that rearticulates the given determinations of distance and ignorance. They organize what could be called an “ignorant spatiality” in which the actors work through the distance of incomprehensibility separating them from difficult texts in order to create singular readings.

Straub and Huillet base their films on complex, unreadable texts by mostly male European authors like Franz Kafka, Cesare Pavese, and Friedrich Engels.¹⁸ By complex and unreadable, I mean texts that are not exhausted by the interpretive schemas to which they are subject. Such texts ensure that they remain partially illegible. In Straub and Huillet’s practice, the actors are first of all readers, and, more importantly, they are readers who do not know how to read the texts in their hands. This state of not knowing is not a result of educational deficiency, since these texts appear unreadable to anyone. This is the ignorant and paradoxical encounter that Straub and Huillet’s cinema organizes, an encounter in which ignorant readers read unreadable texts. Straub and Huillet describe this distance and its generative potential as follows:

HUILLET: One learns a lot more about people when they say a text that is not theirs, a text that is annoying them.

STRAUB: A text that is rebellious at the beginning.

HUILLET: Someone who tells you his or her life reveals less and hides more. This is different when they read and perform a text that is really strange to them.¹⁹

Straub and Huillet explore this relationship between ignorant readers and texts in different ways. For instance, they cast actors

precisely because they do not speak the language in which the text is written or, as is the case with their films based on the writings of Elio Vittorini, they cast Italian actors who are unfamiliar with the terrain of the texts.²⁰ Even though the Italian actors in the films based on Vittorini's work read and spoke Italian, they still had to deal with Vittorini's complex prose and his use of different dialects and poetic language. Also, the actress Laura Betti, who had worked with Federico Fellini and Pier Paolo Pasolini, recited her lines in *Klassenverhältnisse* in German, a language that was not her own. The actors in *Schwarze Sünde* (*Black Sin*, West Germany, 1989) were not German speakers, and yet they had to learn and recite an intricate text by the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin.

In these different cases, Straub and Huillet understand that there is a common relation of foreignness to language as such, a relation not dependent on the actors' mother tongues. These encounters with texts make apparent the fact that a so-called maternal language "is never purely natural, nor proper, nor inhabitable."²¹ As Jacques Derrida puts it, there is "an essential alienation in language" in which language remains "deserted like a desert in which one must grow, make things grow, build, and project up to the idea of a route" (58). In the practice of Straub and Huillet, language works as a desert in which every actor, whether professional or nonprofessional, struggles to open up a distance from—yet a distance marked within—language itself. Actors make this language something other than their own: the field of a common struggle.

There are at least two ways of practicing ignorance in this approach to acting and of understanding and working with this paradox of readers reading unreadable texts. First, this practice may intensify the distance between readers and texts to the point that it breaks out in conflict. Here, estrangement operates as a conflict that exposes, with a view to denounce, the social reality that works to separate a specific reader from a text. The moment when a proletarian actor struggles to read a poem by Hölderlin may function as an occasion to analyze the class distribution of the production and reception of culture. The difficulties encountered by the proletarian actor reading Hölderlin aloud are the vocalized symptoms of a social reality, the impoverished intellectual capacity of the prole-

tariat as a class. To make this difficulty legible, to bring it out into the light, is to expose the cultural hierarchy at work within capitalism. This emphasis is problematic because it implicitly underwrites the essential condemnation of the proletarian actor: in this model, the proletariat is and must remain ignorant. Another possibility is to understand the affect of strangeness between reader and text as a necessary spatiality from which to articulate different approximations between foreign bodies. This second understanding does not work to reveal and accentuate differences in the social space but instead treats distance as a space for articulating different audiovisual rhythms out of unexpected readings. In the work of Straub and Huillet, the ignorance of the actors is neither simply confirmed by accentuation nor understood as a lack of knowledge that the acting process will correct and resolve. Ignorance is the distance or desert across which every reader must navigate. It is the stage upon which the particular idiom of a performance can emerge.

For Straub and Huillet, the strange encounter between reader and text is not a distance between an ignorant reader and a professional reading. Rather, it is the distance that questions the very legitimacy of the distinction between proper and improper readings. That is to say, as Straub affirms, there is no proper reading of a text: "A text is like a clearing in a forest, there are many ways out."²² Straub and Huillet's work with actors does not seek to explain a text, to read it once and for all, to determine a distance or an identification. In contrast, their practice recognizes and organizes the different paths that the actor-readers chance upon, having found themselves cast within a dense textual forest. Without a predetermined method of negotiating its territory, which is neither a labyrinth nor a recreational park, this forest demands what Jacques Rancière calls a practice of "intellectual emancipation."²³ This practice generates a situation in which the master/teacher "does not teach his pupils *his* knowledge but orders them to venture into the *forest* of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen."²⁴ This intellectual venture into a textual forest is altogether different from those pedagogical relations within which the distance between ignorance and knowledge operates like "a radical gulf that can

only be bridged by an expert" (10). Rancière proposes another reading and practice of distance: "Every distance is a factual distance and each intellectual path is a path traced between a form of ignorance and a form of knowledge, a path that constantly abolishes any fixity and hierarchy of positions" (11).

In Straub and Huillet's cinema, acting is a process by which actors walk through the forest of their ignorance, forging a path that has knowledge not at its end point but at each of its successive stages. The relations between Straub, Huillet, their actors, and the spectators are not relations of mere instruction. Straub and Huillet do not simply impart to the actors a predetermined technique with which to read the text in question. The acting process does not therefore culminate when the reader-actor becomes a qualified instructor, teaching the spectators in turn to establish a critical distance from reality. Against the straitjacketing of the text via a professional reading, this method opens up the possibility of contingent encounters among words, actors, and spectators. In this practice, there is no form of know-how that separates or identifies readers and texts to validate acting. Instead, acting engages an anonymous capacity to read, to perform a poetic labor of translation. Different actor-readers construct and rhythmically trace out in all manner of ways this ignorant distance. They do what they do not know how to do: they speak, memorize, and perform a language in which they have no footing, a text of which they are ignorant. This practice verifies the capacity of anyone to read the unreadable. This unreadability testifies not to an impossibility but to the continually renewable possibility of reading a literary text without exhausting it by creating singular itineraries with words, sentences, and punctuation. At stake in the singular itineraries traced in this practice is a process of textual democratization: not to produce an expert reader but to encourage popular readings that reinvent a text.

Breathing Grammars

There are two particular experiments with sound and speech that have played a fundamental role in the cinema of Straub and Huillet.²⁵ Since the start of their filmmaking, Straub and Huillet have

been strong advocates of direct sound, rejecting “the dictatorship of dubbing.”²⁶ But what interests me here is their experimentation with actors’ different breathing capacities. The actors’ vocal deliveries in Straub and Huillet’s films have been alternately criticized or praised for being *antinatural*. As noted earlier, in most of the critical writings devoted to their work, this antinaturalism has been automatically understood as the direct application of a Brechtian model.²⁷ The various critical responses to this practice, whether the Brechtian influence is weighted positively or negatively, have tended to perceive the actors’ voices as inexpressive, neutral, and toneless. However, Straub and Huillet affirm that the voices in their films are sensuous, powerful, and polyphonic, and they vehemently deny claims that their intention is to produce a neutral, antinaturalistic voice.

Straub and Huillet have repeatedly answered questions from the public about the antinatural way actors speak in their films, as seen in the following exchange that took place after a screening of their film *Antigone* (Germany and France, 1992):²⁸

MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC: Why have you chosen such an anti-natural diction?

STRAUB: Because I find horrendous whatever seems natural in art. Because we do not need to do *Dallas* [CBS, 1978–91] all over again, it has intoxicated enough people already; and in any case it looks natural, but it is not.

MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC: *Dallas* you do not find natural?

STRAUB: Not at all.

MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC: Okay, but I speak German and I was really bothered by the way the sentences in your film were cut where they should not have been cut.

HUILLET: What do you mean by “where they should not have been cut”? I have heard a girl in the street saying “Beisst . . . [Huillet holds her breath] der Hund” (It bites . . . the dog).

STRAUB: “It bites . . . [Straub holds his breath] the dog”?

HUILLET: And that was in the street!

STRAUB: Yes, it was a young girl we met at the harbor in Hamburg.²⁹

In this exchange, the filmmakers clarify their repulsion for what appears to be natural but at the same time insist that their work with actors does not necessarily seek an antinaturalistic manner of speaking. For them, what they do happens “in the street.” More than a mere guarantee of realism, this reference to the street affirms the performative work of their cinema as one that is popular. I use *popular* here not in quantitative terms but in a combative sense: this practice struggles against codes that naturalize the voices of the people into predictable articulations and rhythms.³⁰

To a certain extent, the practice of Straub and Huillet is in agreement with that of Brecht, who criticized naturalism in theater for creating a superficial image of reality that obfuscates complex social contradictions. Yet there are important differences between the two approaches. Brecht and his actors practiced a variety of techniques to vocally and verbally counter naturalist theater, which included using quotations, transpositioning the text into the past tense or into the third person, and saying stage directions aloud. These techniques were to function as “new effects” that could both attract and instruct the spectator who was “exhausted with his rationalised day labor.”³¹ These verbal improprieties allow the Brechtian actor to expose the tensions of social reality with “a clash between tones of voice” and “the alienation of the text.”³² However, the voices of the actors in the cinema of Straub and Huillet reveal other timbres of significance beyond a Brechtian schema. Straub and Huillet’s experimentation with the voice does not simply reveal the noisy interior underneath the surface of naturalist performances, with the actors acting as advanced instructors by focusing on “a reality obscured by habitual norms of perception, by habitual modes of identification with human problems.”³³ Instead, it constructs another reality via affirmative, declarative, and embodied readings of complex texts.

As noted in the beginning of this essay, Straub and Huillet’s resistance to dominant cinemas’ confinement of the voice to the body operates from a standpoint different from that of most feminist filmmakers and theorists. And yet their work has relevance for feminist theory and art practices, in that it challenges normative and patriarchal models of speech and communication. From the

operatic declamation of the baritone Günter Reich in Straub and Huillet's *Moses und Aron* (*Moses and Aaron*, Austria, France, West Germany, and Italy, 1975) to the commanding pronunciation of the nonprofessional actor Angela Nugara in *Sicilia!* (*Sicily!*, Italy, France, and Germany, 1999), the male and female voices of Straub and Huillet's cinema are fundamentally powerful affirmations of a declarative capacity that appears to be common to anyone. In their cinema, particularly in the later decades, we do not hear dissonant, ethereal, or precarious voices; we hear instead voices firmly grounded in the nearly immobile bodies of the speakers. In a telling scene of *Sicilia!*, Nugara, who plays "The Mother," reminisces about the past. She speaks of recipes with anchovies and chicory, family members, politics, and love stories through a vocal performance of a formidable weight, making audible a wide range of lyrical intonations in her voice. The immobility of her body serves to ground her voice so that we can better hear its tremendous resonance, which detonates the meaning of her lines in different ways. The cinema of Straub and Huillet makes us see and hear how the cohabitation of voice and body is not achieved at the price of an impoverishment or entrapment of the voice but, on the contrary, makes possible something like a lyrical detonation.

Straub and Huillet's *Operai, contadini* (*Workers, Peasants*, France, Germany, and Italy, 2001) offers a catalog of these lyrical detonations. *Operai, contadini* concentrates on the discussions between a group of workers and peasants reconstructing a village after the Second World War. Their discussions focus on the government of the common (the cultivation of land, the production of electricity, the distribution and making of food) and their own personal interrelationships. Straub and Huillet are less interested in articulating an audiovisuality that would allow the differences between workers and peasants (much more than between men and women) to be debated and solved than in constructing their mode of appearing and declaring as a common capacity of both social groups (and by doing so, workers and peasants become other than the names of a social group). The actors appear perfectly upright, almost immobile while facing the camera. Their frontal positioning, and the rectitude it represents, is employed in the same manner for

both workers and peasants, depicting all of them as honorable and powerful presences. The script repeatedly describes this frontality as follows: "They [the actors] look in front of them and speak: To a judge? To the spectator? To God?"³⁴ The actors do not simply declare more or less convincingly what has happened in their commune. They perform their lines as declarative verses through a use of language that accentuates the formal and poetic dimensions of the text. Workers and peasants speak in a language that does not separate prose from chant, which as a result transforms the narratives of both workers and peasants into exuberant oratories. Each actor speaks in his or her own rhythm, but in every case each syllable is accentuated and given a dramatic magnitude. Meticulous articulation usually works as a technique to ensure clarity; here, it gives words another rhythm, exploding their self-evident signification. This articulation produces at once a potent eloquence and a fertile incomprehensibility. The solidity of the vocal performances that refutes the equation of voice with incorporeality verifies the essential capacity of any body (that of worker and peasant, man and woman, professional and nonprofessional actor) to read and speak a text in a singular way.

What work do these vocal performances require? In the practice of Straub and Huillet, the vocal performance of actors concerns their capacity to breathe, first of all. In their initial readings, the actors stumble along with the complex texts in their hands, guided less by understanding than by breath, leaving in their wake a new score that delineates their passage through the material, its stops and starts, its difficulties and accidents. In the first rehearsals, Straub and Huillet listen attentively to the vicissitudes of respiration laid bare by the process of reading. They analyze "how the breath of each actor works, what is the magnitude of their respiration, where they are physically forced to stop to breathe."³⁵ Working on performers' breathing is common in acting methodologies.³⁶ What is peculiar about the work of Straub and Huillet is that they are not interested in training the breathing of the reader-actors so that they can properly come to terms with, or even depart from, the rhythms of the text. For Straub and Huillet, what matters is that this exercise in respiration leads to different encounters between text and actor.

Moreover, they understand the hesitations, pauses, and accelerations of ignorant readers as the resistant materials of enunciation with which to work. These readings fashion their own grammars, their own tempos. Straub explains this process as follows:

We make people read the texts. We are all sitting around a table, and then at a certain moment we say, "Look that was interesting, when you breathed at that point. It is interesting for the phrase, the syntax, the grammar; it is interesting for the meaning. We should keep it." And they say, "It is not possible." They protest. We say, "Try it again anyway when we start again." And it becomes a structure, a score. It becomes a construction.³⁷

This construction begins with the destruction of the preexisting semantic and metrical scaffold of the text. In this first encounter with a text, the actor "dynamites" punctuation, to use Straub and Huillet's expression.³⁸ Their resistance to the text disarticulates the presumed correspondence between respiration and punctuation. The reader's breathing ceases to harmoniously coincide with the full stops and commas of the text in question; the two fall out of sync. Ignorant readers do not breathe where the punctuation tells them to breathe, that is, during the long pause following a period or during the shorter pause following a comma. Straub and Huillet's work with actors does not seek to synchronize this break between breath and punctuation, which would vanquish the resistance to the text. Instead, it is about organizing the break as the resistant material at the base of singular performance-readings. The modulation of the text by the breath of the ignorant reader starts to resist precisely when it dynamites the text's punctuation. For Straub, there is a direct political reason behind refusing to follow a predetermined punctuation: "We must not forget that in the Middle Ages the monks who copied Greek literature did not use commas and stops. Who put those commas and stops? It is the Prussian bureaucracy! It is Bismarck who invented the commas and the stops! And a little while after him, it was the Westminster banks!"³⁹ To dynamite the punctuation is, as Straub reveals here with Brechtian brio, to refuse to obey a specific martial order of reading and speaking. It is a refusal to read and speak

according to the grammar of a dominant military-economic complex. According to Straub, the cadence dictated by punctuation has been naturalized: martial punctuation has produced the seemingly natural way of speaking and listening. To detonate these natural ways is to resist the standardization of speech and its cadence. The performances in the cinema of Straub and Huillet are direct acts of resistance that demilitarize and decapitalize a text.

Straub and Huillet repeatedly insist in their interviews that their objective is not to do away with grammar altogether, because "language is like life: it cannot be shapeless" (136). The acting process consists of constructing other grammars in accordance with the inflections expressed through actors' breathing practices and their coming to terms with the text. There is a double process at play here. There are readers who with their hesitant breathing inadvertently disintegrate the martial cadence produced by classical punctuation. There is also the work by which another rhythm is constructed in the wake of the disintegration of properly punctuated readings. In the practice of Straub and Huillet, to act implies a process that disintegrates dominant modes of reading and speaking, but in such a way that the resulting fragments form a rhythmic arrangement from the disintegration itself. The breaking down of martial grammar gives rise to other tempos, other associations between breathing and meaning.

The acting process in the cinema of Straub and Huillet does not simply reappropriate the text, nor does it install a new rule concerning what it means, how it sounds, or the associations to which it lends itself. Rather, this work confounds the very opposition between a proper and improper reading. In the process of reading and speaking, the actors produce their own rhythms; but their unique performance is not legitimated by a technical *savoir faire* that would confirm the distinction between professional and nonprofessional actors. This performance is an unqualified capacity, a grammar that verifies the capacity of anyone to make audible the possibility of different associations, approximations, and distances. Straub and Huillet's cinema engages the desert of language as an occasion to construct singular readings that affirm the capacity of anyone, professional or otherwise, to breathe, cre-

ate cadence, and act out a text. This is a work of poetic translation, as Huillet argues: "There is nothing complicated about this: it is the same kind of thing that poets do with language. They take a language, which has become rigid, that has become a system of habits, almost a dead language and they suddenly try to do things that have not been done before or have long been forgotten."⁴⁰ The detonation of the original punctuation allows actors to perform another rhythm latent within the text in a musical manner. In a film like *Operai, contadini*, to poeticize the narrative is to intone or, rather, "de-intone" the prose with which the actors work.

The voices of the different actors in Straub and Huillet's films are experienced literally and poetically as a powerful, intense murmur. Writing about Straub and Huillet's *Der Tod des Empedokles oder: Wenn dann der Erde Grün von neuem euch erglänzt* (*The Death of Empedocles; or, When the Green of the Earth Will Glisten for You Anew*, West Germany and France, 1987), Barton Byg notices how "the speed of the recitation makes it impossible for the audience to always comprehend the text."⁴¹ As an anonymous audience member who had just seen *Antigone* explained to Straub and Huillet, "I could not follow the text very well, but different sentences arrested me."⁴² Straub admits that in their work with actors "the text indeed escapes."⁴³ The disintegration of the martial order of reading and speaking in the acting process produces an analogous disintegration on the side of those listening, the audience. However, this phenomenon, a kind of murmuring, shouldn't be understood as just a loss of intelligibility. Rather, the murmur that disintegrates the martial cadence makes audible different possibilities of conjunction between speakers and listeners, mouths and ears, words and meaning. The retardations and accelerations, emphases, accentuations, or pauses of hesitant readers punctuate the text with a murmuring that discloses an array of listening possibilities.

The verbal performances in this cinema demonstrate the capacity of anyone to either produce or listen to a murmur—that is, to resist the dominant rhythms of signification. The acting process in the cinema of Straub and Huillet does not culminate in readers' obtaining their proper voice and spectators their proper ear. Instead, the voices construct a sonic space to be heard and unheard, to be understood and misunderstood, to leave speech

articulated or disarticulated. In this space, a powerful murmuring detonates the fixity of the communicative situation upholding norms regarding proper and improper speakers and listeners. The vocal performances of the actors in Straub and Huillet's Vittorini-based films, for instance, create a murmur bustling with contrasting interactions between linguistic registers, rhythms, and noises from a forest, a cacophony that ignores the logic of clear and distinct communication to which the subject of action ordinarily appeals. This method explodes the opposition between ignorance and knowledge, making the cavities of the mouth and the ear tremble with potentially inexhaustible reverberations of signification.

A Discipline to Act

Dynamiting the punctuation inherited from the Prussian bureaucracy and the Westminster banks means doing away with a punctuation that transforms speaking into a military march and speakers into regular, ordered, synchronized soldiers. Yet the blast at stake in Straub and Huillet's practice is not concerned with the loss of the discipline to speak; rather, it serves as an opportunity to develop nonmilitary disciplines to read and speak in resistant ways. To act in Straub and Huillet's work is to submit oneself to a new disciplinary process involving the body, breathing, and voice. This disciplined practice once again separates Straub and Huillet's work with nonprofessional actors, if we can still use this term, from any ontological love of opposing enigmatic beings and the deceptive art of the film star. Organizing a discipline for working with nonprofessional actors is significant because it is extremely rare in cinema history. Straub and Huillet's insistence on acting as a discipline is shared by Robert Bresson, a filmmaker Straub and Huillet refer to half-humorously as "papa" (83–109). However, Straub and Huillet do not work with "models," a word Bresson uses to describe nonprofessional actors as malleable material. They work with professional and nonprofessional actors to create new relations between bodies and texts. Their work and Bresson's methodology nevertheless share a process grounded in a view of acting as a strict discipline.⁴⁴

As with Bresson's process, the acting process in the cinema of Straub and Huillet starts with the reading of a text or, more precisely, the reading of an unreadable text. This unreadability calls for a disciplined and committed reader. As Straub asks and answers, "Who is able to read a text? No one, none of us. To read a text one has to live with it for three, four months, and that is the work with the actors. One has to listen to them reading, rereading, learning by heart, reciting well or badly to finally know how to discover a text we were not able to discover at the starting point."⁴⁵ This comment clarifies that, for Straub and Huillet, discipline is not a matter of properly appropriating a text, of properly reading a text, but a matter of constructing the singular relation by which a text is read. In their practice, there is no military conquest of the impossible text, rendering the unreadable finally readable. The actor is not an expert armed with a reading technique. Discipline works as a tool to construct multiple appropriations, proximities, and distances for ignorant readers struggling with complex texts. It is not a discipline that teaches a technique of acting and reading in order to fuse or distance actors, characters, and texts. It is a nonmilitary discipline that does not produce professional actors following a manual of learned behavior. Instead, acting is a matter of disciplining the distances between actor-readers and a text. Acting is a process whereby discipline generates further texts; or rather, it generates murmurs for further distances and approximations between readers and texts, words and sounds, actors and spectators.

Discipline does not make texts more understandable, but it fosters something of a deflagration at the level of the performance. Straub explains, "After so much rehearsal the actors understand what they are speaking so well that they no longer need to understand the sense of each word: the sense (meaning) becomes bodies that think and breathe."⁴⁶ Discipline does not simply evaporate meaning but makes audible the murmur of its possible reconfiguration in the actors' performances, in their expirations and postures. Memorization, endurance, and repetition create moments, to quote Straub, "where actors simply explode. They do not blow up like fireworks—which has nothing to do with the text. But rather the text itself becomes an explosion" (211). The acting methodology in this

cinema dispossesses actors from any *savoir faire* (that would distinguish professional actors) or *savoir être* (which is commonly attributed to nonprofessional actors). In this practice, actors have nothing but a body and a voice, and through discipline they disclose singular assemblages between words, intonations, and postures. These performances demonstrate that anyone can be an actor. This is a popular discipline: any body and any voice can discipline itself to detonate a text and generate new constellations of signification.

In the tradition of critical realism, nonprofessional actors do not need discipline because, quite simply, they do not act. Their ignorance of theatrical techniques is, as Bazin writes, "a guarantee against the expressionism of traditional acting." Discipline could only corrupt the "simple appearance of beings."⁴⁷ The equation of acting with deception in the tradition of critical realism is yet another avatar of the malaise that the verb *to act* continuously provokes in modern Western culture. Professional actors are suspicious because they instantiate a separation between spectators and reality by expressing and simulating something other than themselves. Acting is understood as a deceptive operation, a process of creating and concealing distance, mediation, and representation. The role of the critic is then understood as unveiling such deception. Nonprofessional actors, in this view, are therefore valued not for constructing, creating, and acting but for merely being extemporaneous bodies that abolish the evil distance of representation.

The explosion of the distinction between professional and nonprofessional actors determines acting as a capacity that resignifies the relation between a body and a text. This capacity can be exercised by anyone and has profound possibilities for thinking more specifically about how voice and text operate in many forms of critical cinema. Acting in the cinema of Straub and Huillet does not abolish the distance of representation through the supposed immediacy of nonacting but organizes disciplines with which to read, breathe, and punctuate this distance. Making acting strange, to adapt Brecht's dictum, questions the consensus that equates professional actors with artificiality and nonprofessional actors with authenticity.⁴⁸ The insistence on mere being as the signature of authenticity turns nonprofessional actors into incapable nonactors, whereas the insistence on singular disciplines turns acting into an

affirmation of capability that has far-reaching political implications. To act in the cinema of Straub and Huillet is to resist the form of professional specialization or spontaneous performance. This practice enacts a form of popular discipline—the discipline of those who have nothing and those who have something. Workers, musicians, peasants, men, women, students, intellectuals, and filmmakers are all bodies that stand in front of the camera and breathe with resistant rhythms. They are actors detonating normative protocols for the subject of action and resignifying the senses of the textual world they inhabit.

Notes

1. For a discussion of the institutional mode of representation, see Noël Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, ed. and trans. Ben Brewster (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
2. Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* (London: Methuen Drama, 1988); Mel Gordon, *Stanislavski in America—An Actor's Workbook* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
3. Kaja Silverman, "Disembodying the Female Voice: Irigaray, Experimental Feminist Cinema, and Femininity," in *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 141–86.
4. This description of their work as Brechtian is prevalent in the existing English-language literature. See, for instance, Martin Walsh, *The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1981).
5. Barton Byg, *Landscapes of Resistance: The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 24.
6. Bertolt Brecht, cited in Wilhelm Große, *Bearbeitungen des Johanna-Stoffes* [The works of Johanna-Stoffes] (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1980), 90.
7. Originally written in 1940, "One or Two Points about Proletarian Actors" is the first of two essays published in Bertolt Brecht, "Two Essays on Unprofessional Acting," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 148–52.

8. Roberto Rossellini, for instance, changed the scripts of his films according to the nonprofessional actors' manner of speaking and their life experiences. See Peter Brunette, *Roberto Rossellini* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
9. André Bazin, "De Sica: Metteur en scène," in *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 2, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 65, emphasis in original.
10. Quoted in Philippe Lafosse, ed., *L'étrange cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub* [The strange case of Mrs. Huillet and Mr. Straub] (Toulouse: Éditions Ombres, 2007), 84, my translation.
11. Serge Daney, "Einleitung zu Arnold Schoenberg's 'Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene'" [Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg's "Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene"], in *Les films de Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet* [The films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet], ed. Jean-André Fieschi (Paris: Goethe Institute, 1977), 65.
12. Bertolt Brecht, "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting Which Produces an Alienation Effect," in Willett, *Brecht on Theatre*, 136–47.
13. Quoted in Tag Gallagher, "Lacrimae Rerum Materialized," *Senses of Cinema*, no. 37 (2005), sensesofcinema.com/2005/feature-articles/straubs/.
14. Quoted in Byg, *Landscapes of Resistance*, 20.
15. Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet, and Jean-Louis Raymond, *Rencontres avec Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet* [Encounters with Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet] (Paris: Beaux-arts de Paris, 2008), 13, my translation.
16. Lafosse, *L'étrange cas*, 81, my translation.
17. Brecht, "Short Description," 136.
18. An exception is their short film *En rachâchant* (*Recheating*, France, 1982), based on a short story by Marguerite Duras titled "Ah! Ernesto" (1971).
19. Straub, Huillet, and Raymond, *Rencontres*, 42, my translation.
20. Straub and Huillet's films based on Vittorini's work include *Operai, contadini* (*Workers, Peasants*, France, Germany, and Italy, 2001), *Il ritorno del figlio prodigo—Umiliati*, and *Sicilia!* (*Sicily!*, Italy, France, and Germany, 1999).

21. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 58.
22. Straub, Huillet, and Raymond, *Rencontres*, 22, my translation.
23. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).
24. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), 11, emphasis added.
25. Danièle Huillet observed in the early 1990s, in unison with other practitioners and theorists such as Michel Chion and Kaja Silverman, that experimentation with sound and speech is much less acceptable than visual experimentation. Byg, *Landscapes of Resistance*, 201. Recently, the primacy of the visual as the essence of cinema, and the resultant status of the sound track as a mere appendage or even a pollutant, has been increasingly challenged with film sound becoming the subject of numerous scholarly writings on film, although this work rarely focuses on experimental films.
26. Straub's stance against dubbing is unequivocal: "Dubbing is not only a technique; it's also an ideology. In a dubbed film, there is not the least rapport between what you see and what you hear. The dubbed cinema is the cinema of lies, mental laziness, and violence, because it gives no space to the viewer and makes him still more deaf and insensitive." Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, "Direct Sound: An Interview with Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet," trans. Bill Kavalier, in *Film Sound, Theory and Practice*, ed. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 152.
27. For instance, Thomas Elsaesser writes that "Straub . . . explicitly fashioned the acting style and verbal delivery of his protagonists after Brechtian precepts." Thomas Elsaesser, "Political Filmmaking after Brecht: Farocki, for Example," in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight-Lines*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 137.
28. The film's full title is *Die Antigone des Sophokles nach der Hölderlinschen Übertragung für die Bühne bearbeitet von Brecht 1948* (Suhrkamp Verlag) (*Sophocles's Antigone Based on the Hölderlin Translation Adapted for the Stage by Brecht 1948* [Suhrkamp Verlag]).

29. Quoted in Lafosse, *L'étrange cas*, 80, my translation.
30. My understanding of the popular as a combative field owes a great deal to the work of Stuart Hall. See Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey (London: Pearson, 1998), 442–53.
31. Bertolt Brecht, "On the Experimental Theatre," trans. Carl Richard Mueller, *Tulane Drama Review* 6, no. 1 (1961): 3.
32. Brecht, "Short Description," 136.
33. Peter Wollen, "Ontology and Materialism in Film," *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-Strategies* (London: Verso, 1982), 201.
34. Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet, and Elio Vittorini, *Ouvriers, paysans* [Workers, peasants] (Toulouse: Éditions Ombres, 2001), 35, my translation.
35. Straub, Huillet, and Raymond, *Rencontres*, 23, my translation.
36. For an analysis of the significance of breathing in different acting methodologies, see Marion Hampton and Barbara Acker, eds., *The Vocal Vision: Views on Voice by 24 Leading Teachers, Coaches, and Directors* (New York: Applause Theatre of Cinema Books, 2000).
37. Quoted in Lafosse, *L'étrange cas*, 136, my translation.
38. Straub and Huillet use this expression in multiple interviews. See, for instance, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, *Rencontres . . . Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet* [Encounters . . . Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet] (Le Mans: École régionale supérieure des beaux-arts, 1995). They also use it throughout Straub, Huillet, and Raymond, *Rencontres*.
39. Quoted in Lafosse, *L'étrange cas*, 136, my translation.
40. Quoted in Ursula Böser, *The Art of Seeing, the Art of Listening: The Politics of Representation in the Work of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet* (New York: P. Lang, 2005), 213.
41. Byg, *Landscapes of Resistance*, 200.
42. Quoted in Lafosse, *L'étrange cas*, 79, my translation.
43. Straub, Huillet, and Raymond, *Rencontres*, 21, my translation.
44. See Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (London: Quartet, 1986). See also Anne Wiazemsky,

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Jeune fille [Young girl] (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), which details her experience working with Bresson in her acting debut, *Au hasard Balthazar* (*Haphazard Balthazar*, dir. Robert Bresson, France and Sweden, 1966).

45. Straub, Huillet, and Raymond, *Rencontres*, 87, my translation.
46. Quoted in Byg, *Landscapes of Resistance*, 211.
47. Bazin, "De Sica," 65.
48. Bertolt Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," in Willett, *Brecht on Theatre*, 92.

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Figure 2. Angela Nugara as "The Mother" in *Sicilia!* (*Sicily!*, dir. Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Italy, France, and Germany, 1999)