

Retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York

Are the films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet a genuine alternative to contemporary filmmaking?

By David Walsh
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The Museum of Modern Art in New York City, beginning May 6, is presenting a retrospective of the films of Jean-Marie Straub (born 1933) and Danièle Huillet (1936-2006), the Franco-German filmmakers. Straub, at 83, continues to be active.

Straub first made an impression with his intensely pared-down adaptations of works by postwar German author Heinrich Böll, *Machorka-Muff* (1963) and *Not Reconciled, or Only Violence Helps Where Violence Reigns* (1965), which both bristled with anti-Nazi and anti-militarist sentiment.

The former film, only 17 minutes long, follows a German army officer as he pays a visit to his oft-married, wealthy mistress and tries to clear the name of a World War II *Wehrmacht* general accused of retreating without accepting a sufficient number of losses. The latter, in 50 minutes, deals elliptically (and sometimes puzzlingly) with three generations of a family and their various responses to the Hitler regime and postwar German society.

These are probably Straub's best, or at least most concrete films, but, deliberately so, they are not especially appealing—except perhaps in their chilly rigor and restrained but evident anger. An admirer, Martin Walsh, described “the characteristic constituents of Straub's style: the documentary mode, the flat monotony of the actors' dialogue, an ascetic camera style. . . . One might even say that impersonality is a central motif. . . . [T]he characters in NOT RECONCILED are alone, set in a hostilely impersonal environment. One shot that clinches this mood of pessimism is a 360-degree panning shot around a suburban desert.” (*Jump Cut*, 1974)

Straub-Huillet are credited as a team for the direction of *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968), a full-length, black-and-white work that presents the life and struggles of composer Johann Sebastian Bach (played by renowned Dutch keyboard player Gustav Leonhardt) through the medium of a fictional diary kept by his second wife. The film's attention to the music, the authenticity of the locations, instruments and documents and its general air of seriousness brought Straub-Huillet a certain distinction. Again, a documentary style and the rapid, droning delivery of lines prevail.

Much of the work over the subsequent decades was ambitious. The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) refers in a press release to “personal film interpretations” of “stories by Böll, Kafka, Duras, and Pavese; poems by Dante, Mallarmé, and Hölderlin; a long-forgotten Corneille play, an essay by Montaigne, a film by D.W. Griffith, a painting by Cézanne, an unfinished opera by Schoenberg.”

Ambitious and idiosyncratic, yes, but artistically successful or significant? No, in my view, not for the most part. The early works are

worth viewing (they are accessible online), and they communicate an unquestionable intelligence and sincerity. They convey, above all, the horror felt by a certain generation for the crimes of Nazism, the atrocities committed by imperialism, in Algeria (Straub left France to avoid conscription during France's bloody colonial war in that country) and elsewhere, and the danger of another militarist-fascist catastrophe represented by the continued existence of global capitalism.

Likewise, the films expressed a disgust for the ornamentation, exploitation of emotions, laziness and banality to be found in conventional commercial cinema.

However, along with much of their generation, Straub and Huillet lost their way almost completely in the post-1968 period. Despite MoMA's reference to their films' “reflecting on the lessons of history and advancing a Marxist analysis of capitalism and class struggle,” the duo's conceptions had little or nothing in common with genuine Marxism. Far more significant were the pessimistic influences, directly or indirectly, of the Frankfurt School, existentialism and other postwar anti-Marxist trends, along with illusions in Maoism and various petty bourgeois-nationalist movements.

Something of the disorientation of their outlook and work found expression in a letter Straub sent to Venice film festival officials in 2006 on the occasion of a retrospective of his and Huillet's film: “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 that terrorist, and I tell you, paraphrasing [Italian poet and New Left figure] Franco Fortini: so long as there's American imperialistic capitalism, there'll never be enough terrorists in the world.” In fact, the increasing European-nationalist, anti-American tone in the couple's work has been noticeable for some time, as we observed in 2002 [see below].

Straub and Huillet made countless films that are virtually unwatchable. In them unmoving performers deliver lines without expression, often so quickly as to make them incomprehensible, or they turn their backs on the audience, or the screen goes black, etc. This is passed off as “Brechtian” distancing. For all his limitations, Brecht would have rejected with contempt the “alienation effect” of this work, which is merely alienating, as we have previously noted. To make war on legitimate human emotions and movement and the natural curiosity that people have about the drama of other lives and circumstances in this manner is as tyrannical as the most oppressive Hollywood “blockbuster.” Their version of Corneille's *Othon* is a useful example.

This is deeply misguided filmmaking, skeptical and hostile toward its audience, despite the protestations of Straub and Huillet to the contrary.

Here nearly everything is “eliminated,” including art, drama and any serious effort to make a point of contact with other human beings. There is something selfish and arrogant about this type of “left” filmmaking.

German filmmaker R.W. Fassbinder worked with Straub and Huillet in the late 1960s. He acted in their short film, *The Bridegroom, the Comedian and the Pimp* (1968). Later, after Fassbinder critically portrayed a German Communist Party member in his *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven* (1975), Straub mused in an interview as to whether the younger filmmaker might not be a “fascist.”

In any event, in a 1974 interview, Fassbinder noted that “Straub’s weakness is that he continually works against his audience. *Othon* is a film which I reject completely.”

Writing in the *New York Times* on May 3, veteran critic J. Hoberman headlined his comment on the MoMA retrospective, “Sick of Popcorn Movies? Straub-Huillet Retrospective Offers an Antidote.” He suggested that the couple’s films were “monuments to their own integrity” and that they embodied “cinema’s conscience.” Hoberman is no doubt perturbed by the present state of filmmaking and would like to introduce his readers to a more serious-minded alternative.

However, in my view, Straub-Huillet represent no alternative at all. On the contrary, their constipated, often unendurable work complements the mindlessness of the commercial cinema. Their films, by and large, are not an “antidote” to the trivia and bombast, but the other side of the same coin, the complete divorce of a variety of “leftism” from life. Both trends in their own fashion speak to a period of political and cultural stagnation.

A revolutionary socialist artist would be concerned with reaching and influencing an audience, with investigating life and making its complexities and mysteries comprehensible to masses of people. This would inevitably require, as Leon Trotsky suggested, “A definite and important feeling for the world ... a feeling for life as it is ... an artistic acceptance of reality, and not ... a shrinking from it ... an active interest in the concrete stability and mobility of life ... a preoccupation with our life of three dimensions as a sufficient and invaluable theme for art.”

This is the near exact opposite of the dry, immobile art, which shrinks from reality, that Straub-Huillet produced for much of their collective career.

We have discussed a number of the Straub-Huillet works on the *World Socialist Web Site* over the years. I am including comments from 2002 and 2015, editing out as many repetitions as possible.

2002 (at the Buenos Aires film festival):

“*Workers, Peasants (Operai, contadini)*, directed by the well-known team of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, is an absurdity. A group of performers, non-professional presumably, stands in the woods and reads monologues for two hours. The material comes from the pen of Elio Vittorini (*Le donne di Messina*), a left-wing Italian writer (1908-66). It recounts the story of a group of Italians who, at the end of the Second World War, decide to build together a new social life in the ruins of an abandoned village in northern Italy. Various dramas ensue, which will be incomprehensible to all but the most masochistic viewer. The piece is uninvolved, finally excruciating, pure charlatanry.

“Straub and Huillet have represented a certain tendency, of artistic asceticism and the refusal to adapt to popular tastes, for several decades in European filmmaking. ...

[I then referred to an article from the WSWS in 1998] “In commenting on [Straub-Huillet’s] *From Today Until Tomorrow* (1997), based on a relatively obscure Schönberg opera composed in 1929, I wrote: ‘Still, it is difficult to be entirely enthusiastic about a project whose production one feels is permeated by rigidity, self-seriousness and a nearly religious attitude toward art. The work is remarkable for what it is, a film of a Schönberg opera, but there is something disturbing about left-wing artists so frightened of chaos, emotion and confusion, and finding it so difficult

to reach, rather than intimidate, an audience.’

“These comments, as it turns out, were all too generous. To a certain extent, *From Today Until Tomorrow* and *Sicilia!* (1999, also based on the writings of Vittorini) deceived us. They were both relatively short, to the point, even accessible. Now with *Workers, peasants* (no less!), Straub-Huillet have inflicted on us their ‘maximum program.’ Two hours of flatly delivered, unintelligible nonsense. And people politely sit through this at film festivals.

“This passes for ‘dialectical’ art, for ‘communist’ art, as the film’s presenter described it in Buenos Aires. Well, Straub-Huillet have certainly perfected the ‘alienation effect’; the new work is indeed alienating. They have not, however, after some decades of work, proven able to dramatize even the *most elementary* human emotions or situations. Or to convince anyone of anything. If such a thing as ‘sectarianism’ in art exists, Straub and Huillet belong in that category.

“The pair are possessed by a messianism. They believe they are the only true filmmakers on earth. But a messianism toward what end? This is a quote: ‘We must make specific films, for specific languages, dealing with specific questions. We must reinvent borders, destroy the Europe of Dr. Goebbels. We are the only European filmmakers, filmmakers of European nations.’ Long live borders! Long live the European nation-state! This is fairly dire.

“Little more needs to be said about Straub and Huillet. To those who continue to be deceived, so much the worse.”

2015:

“Straub and Huillet for several decades, starting in the 1960s, made a series of films that were for the most part hermetically sealed from the public, in the supposed name of ‘Marxist’ or ‘Brechtian’ cinema. ...

[I then quoted my 2002 review.]

“*Kommunisten* (Communists), Straub’s latest, carries on the absurdity. A black screen; disembodied, monotonous voices; two unmoving figures with their backs to the camera, etc. The work is unwatchable.

“For the record, Straub’s outlook has nothing in common with revolutionary Marxism. This is a man who has said, ‘For me, industrial society is barbarism’ (and who also called himself, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, ‘an old Stalinist’!) The trend Straub has much in common with, however, is the anti-Marxist Frankfurt School of Adorno, Marcuse and Horkheimer, and through them, irrationalist and idealist strains of thought.

“Jacques Rancière is a dreadful ex-left post-modernist, but he was right on the mark when he commented about Straub-Huillet’s moving away from ‘a workerist conception of communism’ and their increasing fascination with ‘a peasant-based, ecological one.’ Rancière also commented, in 2004, about the couple: ‘I don’t know if you can call that mystical. What is certain is that it is a matter of going back to a religion of the earth that existed under diverse forms during the Romantic era. The Straubs’ Marxism has more and more of a tendency to move towards Heidegger and to distance itself from the Brechtianism of thirty or forty years ago.’”

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