Tell It to the Stones
Encounters with the Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub

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Ein Busch, irgendein Kiesel, sogar ein Termitenhügel manchmal: dem Wind genügt das. An ihm richten Wächten sich aus und wachsen sich zu Dünen aus; sie bilden Ketten und Wälle, werden ei-, herz-, oder sternförmig.

— Raoul Schrott[1]

COMMUNISM AS AESTHETIC PROCEDURE

1
Raoul Schrott, *Die Wüste Lop Nor: Novelle* (Munich/ Vienna: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2000), 79, "A bush, a pebble, sometimes even a termite hill: this will do for the wind. Cornices develop on it and grow onto dunes, develop chains and walls, become egg-, heart- or star-shaped," trans. Ute Holl.

2
En rachâchant (France, 1982) is a seven-minute film by Huillet and Straub based on Marguerite Duras' short story "Ah Ernesto!" (1971). Its title, a neologism referring to the sound of the word "researching" in French, *en recherchant*, or, as the schoolboy who is the hero of the film demands: to find out by oneself.

3
Danièle Huillet, "Sickle and Hammer, Cannons, Cannons and Dynamite! Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub in Conversation with François Albera," in *Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet*, ed. Ted Fendt (Vienna: SYNEMA, 2006), 123.

Considering the cinema of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub as a constant construction site for communism includes, as has often been remarked, a certain ambivalence regarding the issue of the people and the popular. On the one hand, their films deal with historical and political conditions of workers and peasants, focus on suppression and call for revolt. The plea for the empowerment of people may on the other hand be felt as contradictory to their idiosyncratic cinematic forms as well as their choice of texts, a rather classical canon of established literature and high culture—Corneille, Montaigne, Hölderlin, Mallarmé and Kafka for instance, including the communists Pavese, Fortini, Vittorini and Brecht, and, for that matter, Bach and Schoenberg in terms of music. In addition, their strict filmic forms tend to disconcert cinema-goers out for entertainment and have contributed to a certain exclusivity of the typical Straubian audience: instead of enlightening a subaltern public to learn "en rachâchant,"[2] their films have attracted a stern bunch of academic specialists, connoisseurs, mostly male and many bookworms. Then again, published letters and memories document lifelong affectionate friendships with all collaborators, a renowned conductor, as well as a sound assistant, an Egyptian journalist, and a Sicilian bricklayer.[3] Where then does their films' hidden people lie? The way people are staged, framed, and filmed in the cinema of Huillet/Straub directly opposes contemporary images of the people and contemporary iconic representations of communism. In the 1970s and 80s, when their films increasingly focused on the nexus of the people and the law, as in *History Lessons* (1972), *Moses and Aaron* (1974) *Too Early/Too Late* (1980/1981) or *Class Relations* (1983), the popular communist notion was enforced by retro-realist images such as *Il quarto stato*, Guiseppe Pellizza da Volpedo's oil painting, depicting peasant hunger protests of the late 19th century in classical centralized perspective, led by sturdy men and frail women. This iconic signature of the revolutionary people was accordingly adapted in the

arts by Joseph Beuys or Bernardo Bertolucci. The films of Huillet/Straub, however, saturated with a different historical experience and devoid of false utopian spirit, are directed against such sentimentalities. Against all idealization and iconic shorthand, they are concerned with particular people, either historical or those whom they came to know during their filmwork and accordingly felt akin to. In *Workers, Peasants*, shot in 2000, texts of Elio Vittorini's *Le donne di Messina* (*Women of Messina*) are read by workers and peasants, "almost illiterate people,"[4] as Huillet underlines. Accounts and memories of fascism and the *resistenza* are spoken as a fugue of opposing voices and carried by the material voices of those who read or recite the text. "What interests us is how the text is embodied in human beings, dialogues, not the plot."[5] The idea of making a film popular or "a part of the people,"[6] then is not to simplify or adapt it to popular or mass cultures, but to insert bodies of living people as a means of resistance against conventional, bourgeois, specialists' receptions of texts. As in *From the Cloud to the Resistance* (1978) and as in several poems of Friedrich Hölderlin, for that matter, it is not as mortals that people confront the gods, but as the living! People are opposed to the immortals not because they will eventually die but because they have decided to live and be alive.

According to Straub, addressing people in a film is the opposite of aiming at the applause of masses, risking, meanwhile, that their films escape their attention:

> Films that pretend to be made for the masses are really made to keep them in their place, to violate them, or to fascinate them. Consequently, these films are made in such a way that they don't give people the liberty to get up and leave. Our films are made so people can leave if they want.[7]

Theirs is a cinema of disobedience. It seems that, rather than underlining this positive freedom of determining one's own time, the work of Huillet/Straub has often been described in negative terms, as "ascetic, minimalist, avant-garde, anti-illusionist, antinarrative, anticinematic, and static,"[8] according to Barton Byg's overview of critiques. This is also true for Gilles Deleuze's repeated formula, molded on Klee, that in the political cinema of Huillet/Straub the people is missing, even if he gives it a productive twist: according to Deleuze, Huillet/Straub belong to

4
Huillet,
"Sickle and Hammer,"
123.

5
Straub,
"Sickle and Hammer,"
120.

6
Huillet,
"Sickle and Hammer,"
123.

7
Straub quoted according
to John Gianvito, "Tough
Love," in *Jean-Marie
Straub and Danièle Huillet*,
144.

8
Barton Byg, *Landscapes
of Resistance: The German
Films of Danièle Huillet
and Jean-Marie Straub*
(Berkeley: University of
California Press, 1995), 4.

9
Gilles Deleuze,
*Cinema 2. The Time-
Image* (Minneapolis:
University of
Minnesota Press, 1989),
215.

10
Ernesto Laclau,
On Populist Reason
(London: Verso, 2005),
78 and 121.

11
Laclau,
Reason, 154.

"the greatest political filmmakers in the West, in modern cinema" exactly because "they know how to show how the people are what is missing, what is not there."[9] A closer description of their aesthetic procedures, however, will reveal that Huillet/Straub are less concerned with the absence of a people than with constructing a productive dispositive of communism, from which people might emerge as equals.

In his study *On Populist Reason*, Ernesto Laclau, drawing on structuralist theory, argues that in order to provoke the appearance of the people, three procedures need to be simultaneously introduced: the acknowledgement of a primordial heterogeneity, the implementation of differences and the logics of equivalence. To begin with, an order of heterogeneous, particular differences is organized so as to structure a grid of possible actions or aesthetics. These differences have then to be inscribed within an equivalential chain.[10] In deliberately exposing the particularity of people then, Huillet and Straub do not try to represent a people—or its absence—but rather establish the structures that facilitate the formation of a people or peoples. Communism in their films concerns the set of equal relations allowing for a "construction of the people [which] is the political act par excellence."[11]

The basic procedure of Huillet/Straub's filmwork concerns the focus on the particular and the distribution of particular elements to create fields of equal dispersal. Straub

repeatedly describes this in interviews. The first measure taken is to break down all context into the basic elements of its construction. When discussing direct sound, for instance, Straub refers to "waves" as the common denominator of filmic perception, seeing and hearing. Decisions concerning staging, framing, recording and montage have to consider this. The universality of waves accounts for the equal importance of images and the sonic, as light, music, sounds or noises: "The greatest part of the waves that film contains come from the sound..."[12] Secondly, the equal operational availability of visual or sonic elements is the precondition for all forms of filmic movements and emotions: "The waves that a sound transmits are not just sound waves. Waves of ideas, of movements, and of emotions also travel across sound."[13]

Huillet/Straub's meticulous concern with film stock, optics, lighting, as well as recording and mixing devices stems from the idea to work from materialities, so that no industrially preformatted procedures should enter the filmic process.[14] This is true for the organization of direct sound recordings as well as for camera movements. Their specific use of the pan, for instance, flattens out the landscape, produces an equal value of all its elements, and liberates it from perspective and representational rules.[15] Their framing and use of optical measures constructs equivalential relations, including the hors champ as an unseen but not abstract presence in the films. The procedure of producing equals then starts, as opposed to the reception-based theory of Jacques Rancière, with the material and materialistic processes of filmmaking. The working methods of two of the artists that Huillet/Straub have paid particular attention to, Friedrich Hölderlin and Arnold Schoenberg, prove them to be precursors in the field, in that both have also struggled with concepts of equal distribution in inventing forms to resist and radically reconfigure the aesthetics of their times. For both, these aesthetics are related to spatial reconfigurations. Hölderlin as well as Schoenberg related their spatial and relational concerns to the issue of the people.

12
Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet, "Interview on Direct Sound," in *Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet: Writings*, ed. Sally Shafto, Katherine Pickard (New York: Sequence Press, 2016), 156.

13
Straub, *Writings*, 156.

14
See Danièle Huillet's considerations on material and procedures in "Notes on Gregory's Work Journal," in *Writings*, 277–331. "We are going to use this new negative [...] testing if there is progress over the preceding one or if, indeed, it serves Kodak mainly as an industrial progress..."

15
See my chapter "Panorama Politics: about the Pan," in Ute Holl, *The Moses Complex. Freud, Schoenberg, Straub/Huillet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 194–221.

16
Friedrich Hölderlin, "Notes on the Antigone," in *Essays and Letters*, ed. Jeremy Adler and Charles Louth (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), 331.

17
Walter Benjamin, "Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin—'The Poet's Courage' and 'Timidity,'" in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 1: 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 18–47; "Und so als Symbol des Gesanges hat das Volk den Kosmos Hölderlins zu erfüllen," Walter Benjamin, *Aufsätze, Essays, Vorträge*, ed. R. Tiedemann, H. Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 114.

18
See Friedrich Hölderlin, "Empedokles I," in *Sämtliche Werke. Frankfurter Ausgabe*, ed. D.E. Sattler (Frankfurt/Main, Basel: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1985), Vol, 12, 13.

In his revolutionary effort to put a native reversal ("vaterländische Umkehr") into practice, Friedrich Hölderlin, taking the term literally, had turned toward verses as points of inversion and return of realities. While the process of the native reversal was an open one to him, it could have ended in "wilderness or a new form,"[16] just as his poetry was adapted by German national socialists and left-wing revolutionaries alike, the production of a new people was closely linked to radical poetic reconfigurations of language. To transform language into Gesang, song or poetry are procedures of producing an equivalence of elements. Walter Benjamin had thus observed that the people, "the Volk as the symbol of poetry [has] the task of fulfilling Hölderlin's cosmos."[17] In his poetry, Hölderlin had not only used the rhythmic equalizer of antic meters, Alcaeic, as in "Thränen" (Tears) or Asclepiadeic as in "Blödigkeit" (Timidness), or even hexameters as in "Menon's Lament for Diotima." Hölderlin had also used the open space of the white page in order to set his words according to rhythmic patterns, allowing, in early phases of his poems and plays, for large parts of the page to remain empty. He was thus pointing toward the possibility of materially distributing words on a page long before Stéphane Mallarmé (whose poem "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard" is central in Huillet/Straub's film *Toute révolution est un coup de dés* of 1977) experimented with the empty spaces between signs. Hölderlin's new way of working with space became very visible in the critical Frankfurt edition of his works, on which Huillet and Straub had in fact based their studies for Hölderlin's *Empedokles*. The editor, D.E. Sattler, returned to early manuscripts to demonstrate that semantics and syntax of the verses are evoked through a rhythmical distribution of words on a page, meticulously reconstructing how, in early versions, spaces were intentionally left blank.[18] In this way, Hölderlin enforced his resistance against all conventions in the use of language and texts, and that includes, inverting ways of speaking German.

The rigor to transform the spoken German, to turn it, so to speak, into broken German, in order to distill different sorts of experiences from it, is a central concern of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub. The idiosyncratic emphasis they put on the pronunciation of texts during rehearsals

with actors and actresses, their attention toward the impact of each syllable in a sentence in order to preserve an equal valence and relevance of words against the adaptation of language through accustomed and seemingly natural habits thus retrieves its genealogy in Hölderlin. It is a technique to liberate hidden and historically lost emotions that have survived, petrified like traces of dinosaurs, in the textures of the literatures which Huillet/Straub revive in their films. Apart from this archaeological retrieval of historical senses and emotions, however, Hölderlin's work also turns out to open an understanding of Huillet/Straub's approach to the issue of the people.

Walter Benjamin's essay on two related odes by Hölderlin: "Dichtermut—The Poet's Courage and Blödigkeit—Timidness"[19] written in the first winter of war 1914/15, names two fundamental aspects which also seem crucial for the cinema of Huillet/Straub: firstly, that these poems of Hölderlin's concern the intrinsic relation between the poet and the people, and, for that matter, the issue of the gods and the law. And secondly, in comparing these two related poems as a transformation of a basic set of verses, Benjamin observes that in his odes, Hölderlin works on the reconfiguration of space and an intentional disorganization of spatial laws, consequently attacking hierarchies and social orders. Benjamin discusses the second ode, "Blödigkeit," as a turn toward the oriental as opposed to the Greek based forms of "Dichtermut." The second ode's oriental and mystical poetical principle, which "overcomes limits,"[20] is able to abolish the Greek formative principle of the earlier ode and will eventually form a spiritual cosmos out of "pure relations of intuition, sensual existence,"[21] hence a new form of immediated perception. Benjamin is able to unfold his argument already with respect to the first two lines of the poems which focus firstly on "the living," as a more radical substitute for the people in Hölderlin's poetry, and secondly on a new haptic and flat space as it was also being rediscovered by art historians of Benjamin's time, the early 1900s, to challenge the laws of perspective.[22] According to Benjamin, the people and spatial orders remain connected in Hölderlin's work, the central issue for the artist being the problem of where to belong, whom to relate to, whom to speak for, as in the first verses of "Blödigkeit":

Sind denn Dir nicht bekannt viele Lebendigen?
Geht auf Wahrem Dein Fuß nicht, wie auf Teppichen?
Of the living, are not many well-known to you?
On the truth don't your feet walk as they would on
rugs?[23]

The first version of the poem, "Dichtermut," had begun differently. According to Benjamin, this version still "lives in the Greek world"[24] and remains attached to the myth:

Sind denn dir nicht verwandt alle Lebendigen?
Nährt zum Dienste denn nicht selber die Parze Dich?
Is not all that is alive close and akin to you, Does the Fate
not herself keep you to serve her ends?[25]

For "Dichtermut," which deals with the death of the poet, Benjamin maintains that the courage of the poet is supplied by a yet unknown force, and is justified from "another and alien order—that of the relationship with the living."[26] Here, Hölderlin's cosmos is not yet fulfilled with song or sound as with people, on the contrary, it is still attached to a higher force: "The deeper right, by which the poet associates himself with and feels himself related to his people, those who are alive, cannot be felt in this poem."[27] Only in the second version of the verses, the earlier image of poets as being "poets of the people"[28] turns into their being the "tongues of the people,"[29] a new relationship that is authorized by the new spatial interlacing of poet and people. It is here that the "oriental" comes in as the concrete experience of the flatwoven fabric, the rug, or the knotted carpet—a very concrete experience, incidentally, for Benjamin, son of an antiques dealer familiar with oriental fabrics and techniques. The people as well as the poet and the gods then are equally inserted into a flat and haptic space, but specifically the poet and the people are enmeshed as in a single texture, as Benjamin puts it, "Now, depersonalized, the people appear (may we compare this with Byzantine mosaics?) as if pressed in the surface, around the great flat figure of its sacred poet."[30] Space here as an "oriental" or ornamental structure has turned into a production device for a set of new differences increasing probabilities for equal relations. The new space constitutes and contains a world of particularities, derived from the specific place it obtains in the neo-oriental space of equal elements as in the patterns of rugs, carpets or mosaics: "Immanent to everything

19
Bullock and Jennings, editors of Benjamin's essay, translate "Blödigkeit" as "Timidity," Michael Hamburger translates Hölderlin's poem as "Timidness."

20
Benjamin, "Two Poems," 34.

21
Benjamin, "Two Poems," In German: "Das ist das orientalische, mystische, die Grenzen überwindende Prinzip, das in diesem Gedicht so offenbar immer wieder das griechische Gestaltende Prinzip aufhebt, das einen geistigen Kosmos schaffte aus reinen Beziehungen der Anschauung, des sinnlichen Daseins … ." in Benjamin, "Zwei Gedichte," 124.

22
See Wilhelm Worringer and Alois Riegl, or, in terms of architecture and the ornamental, Siegfried Kracauer.

23
Friedrich Hölderlin, *Selected Poems and Fragments*, ed. Jeremy Adler, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 100–101.

24
Benjamin, "Two Poems," 23. Benjamin, "Das Gedicht lebt in der griechischen Welt" in "Zwei Gedichte," 110.

25
Hölderlin, *Selected Poems*, 99.

26
Benjamin, "Two Poems," 23. See Benjamin, "Zwei Gedichte," 109: "Noch begründet sich der Mut des Dichters seltsam aus einer andern, fremden Ordnung. […] Was hat dem dichterischen Mut die Volksverwandtschaft zur bedeuten? Nicht fühlbar wird im Gedicht das tiefere Recht, aus dem der Dichter seinem Volk, den Lebendigen, sich anlehnt und ihnen verwandt fühlt."

27
Benjamin, "Two Poems," 23.

28
Hölderlin, *Selected Poems*, 99.

29
This is metrically deferred in Michael Hamburger's translation, see Hölderlin, *Selected Poems*, 101 and 103.

30
Benjamin, "Two Poems," 28; cf. Benjamin, "Zwei Gedichte," 116: "Nun erscheint—dürfen wir es byzantinischen Mosaiken vergleichen?—entpersönlicht das Volk, wie in der Fläche gedrängt um die flache große Gestalt seines heiligen Dichters."

determinative in space is its own determination. Every situation is determined only in space, and is only determinative in space."[31] The aesthetic procedure has thus created a new sense of beauty, out of which "the people appear."

Finally, as Benjamin points out, Hölderlin turns his poetological resistance against a hierarchical organization of space into a political argument. Referring to the middle verses of "Blödigkeit," Benjamin points toward the equivalential chain of social elements that follows: Gods perform like men, wild animals join heavenly creatures and the cantos of princes as of those of poets is joined with the people:

> For since gods grew like men, lonely as woodland beasts And since, each in his way, song and the princely choir Brought the Heavenly in person back to earth, so we too, the tongues of the people, have liked living men's company.[32]

From this central turning point of the ode, Benjamin concludes, the order of the world tumbles and the once distinguished powers string into a chain or row of equals: "So that here, at the center of the poem, men, heavenly ones, and princes—crashing down from their old orders, as it were—are linked to one another."[33] While it is true here that the figure of a god remains, the god Hölderlin invokes is kinship, a father "who to rich men and poor offers the thinking day,"[34] a god distributing intellectual wealth and force equally, thus enlightening the living "en rachâchant" as a general public. The method of "linking to one another," zu einander reihen, as in a chain or row, is an artist's, but also a divine procedure.

From Walter Benjamin's analysis of Hölderlin's work, Huillet/Straub's transposition of verse into filmic structures, inserting sonic and visual elements on absolutely equal terms, suddenly appears integrated into a longer tradition of poetological procedures. Dissolving the world into particulars, the differential procedures, is a means of disassembling ideas or ideological assumptions, and of analyzing them in relation to cinematic experience. Producing particulars in redetermining the singular place of all things and living beings in space is also to make them precious beyond capitalist or religious value systems. Then, in the editing process, they are reassembled according to the logics of equivalence.

31
Benjamin, "Two Poems," 27; cf. Benjamin, "Zwei Gedichte," 115. "Allem Bestimmenden im Raum ist immanent dessen eigene Bestimmtheit. Jede Lage ist im Raum allein bestimmt und allein in ihm bestimmend."

32
Hölderlin, Selected Poems, 103.

33
Benjamin, "Two Poems," 25; cf. Benjamin, "Zwei Gedichte," 112: "So daß hier, um die Mitte des Gedichts, Menschen, Himmlische und Fürsten, gleichsam abstürzend aus ihren alten Ordnungen, zu einander gereiht sind."

34
Cf. Hölderlin, Selected Poems, 102: "Unser Vater, des Himmels Gott || Der den denkenden Tag Armen und Reichen gönnt."

35
Theodor W. Adorno, "Parataxis, On Hölderlin's Late Poetry," in: T.W.A., Notes to Literature, Volume Two, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 129–130.

36
Adorno, "Parataxis," 131.

37
The German "… einer Vereinzelung, die doch keine Fiktion positiver Gemeinschaft tilgt," dialectically indicates "aware of an isolation that no fiction of a positive community can abolish," as Nicholsen translates—cf. Theodor W. Adorno, "Parataxis. Zur späten Lyrik Hölderlins," in T.W.A., Noten.

38
Adorno, "Parataxis," 135–136.

39
Adorno, "Parataxis," 135.

In an essay on Hölderlin's late poetry published fifty years after Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno called this procedure of equal distribution parataxical, stating that Hölderlin "was allergic to the expectable, preset and interchangeable quality of linguistic convenus,"[35] allergic, one might add, to any preformatted exchange value of words. Adorno explains Hölderlin's poetological strategy as one that radically resists subordination. With the same nonchalance Hölderlin had adopted while supporting national revolts, he was also determined to disturb any sort of order of family, kinship, or the state. Aware of traditions of emancipation he focused on his own willful verse-making techniques, obviously unfazed by the incomprehension and contempt often expressed by his contemporaries. His method points toward a general attitude even when it focuses on the transformation of language: "Hölderlin's technique […] is not lacking in boldly formed hypotactic constructions, still the parataxes are striking-artificial disturbances that evade the logical hierarchy of a subordinating syntax."[36]

In an attempt to rescue Hölderlin from Martin Heidegger's nationalistic appropriation, specifically in terms of "Volk" as a very German concept of people, Adorno refers to the later ode, "Stimme des Volkes" (Voice of the People), to explain the counter-forced tension on the poetic subject which, in the parataxical destruction of linguistic conventions, experiences a painful disconnectedness. "The detached, form-giving subject, absolute in the double sense, becomes aware of itself as negativity," but, exactly through the loss of firm linguistic grounds, it also becomes aware of the presence of a fictional or poetic community: "aware of an isolation that does not abolish / is not abolished by the fiction of a positive community."[37] The community, one might paraphrase Deleuze, is perceptibly missing here, or in the more dialectical terms of Adorno: "Precisely because he revered Rousseau, as a poet Hölderlin no longer abides by the contrat social."[38] Following a subtext of Adorno's essay, one might interpret his reading of Hölderlin's poetology as assembling elements of an aesthetics of insubordination. The procedure of equalizing linguistic elements is, for Adorno, a liberating but also a violent act: "Set free, language appears paratactically disordered when judged in terms of subjective intention,"[39] a statement which sounds

harsher in German where Adorno actually speaks of language as being "paratactically shattered."[40]

Taking the cue from Walter Benjamin who had described Hölderlin's poetic procedure as "linking one to another," working according to chains or rows (Reihen), Adorno continues to describe "the transformation of language into a serial order" which he accordingly qualifies as "music-like."[41] Undoubtedly here Adorno had also thought of Arnold Schoenberg and composition on the basis of rows—which he had studied with Schoenberg's student Alban Berg. Since Huillet and Straub in their extended work on Schoenberg, specifically in their singular transposition of the opera *Moses und Aron* into a film in 1974, had carefully studied his basic procedures of composing, it is worthwhile to recall Schoenberg's ideas on techniques of equal distribution in music, and to relate it to the initial idea of this opera: the issue of the people, the law and the question of insubordination in times of danger and exile.

POETOLOGIES OF THE DESERT

In his considerations of a new technique of composition which he first delivered as a lecture at the University of California in Los Angeles on March 26, 1941, Schoenberg explains that his "Method of Composing with Twelve Tones Which are Related Only with One Another"[42] is a procedure of abstraction, transferring an idea into music, and

40
Cf. Adorno, "Parataxis. Zur späten Lyrik Hölderlins," 475: "Losgelassen, freigesetzt, erscheint [die Sprache] nach dem Maß subjektiver Intention parataktisch zerrüttet."

41
Adorno, "Parataxis," 130–131.

42
Arnold Schoenberg, "Composition With Twelve Tones," in: A.S., *Style and Idea* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950), 107.

43
Schoenberg, "Composition With Twelve Tones," 103.

44
Schoenberg, 138.

45
Schoenberg, 116.

46
Schoenberg, 11.

47
Schoenberg, 109.

48
Schoenberg, 138.

simultaneously an aesthetic procedure, relating a form, as Schoenberg had it, "psychologically speaking, to a feeling of beauty."[43] As a conservative musicologist, Schoenberg relies on the fact that in music history, sound or the organization of tone-color had not, as one might think, been an idea of coloring an otherwise mathematically formed idea, as in the difference of *disegno* and *colore* in painting, but that sound-coloring itself had always been "the radiation of an intrinsic quality of ideas..."[44] Schoenberg, in a Kantian twist, is opting for a close relation between the particular and the idea by very practically increasing the range of differences of sounds. It is here that Huillet/Straub find their model in relying on the basic material elements of cinema in order to communicate abstract historical ideas, such as class relations or lessons in historiography.

Without going into details of composing with twelve-tone sets or rows, suffice it to underline that it follows the basic rule that no tone should be repeated unless all others have sounded. The composer uses a specific series of the chromatic scale, a row, as well as its inversion, retrograde and retrograde inversion to achieve an equivalential chaining. Schoenberg's concept can be summarized as creating absolutely equal relations between all tones, avoiding any impression of emphasis on a singular one, which might then be misunderstood as a central root or a tonic that submits the sound to a central ruling harmony.[45] Even if tones are clustered in groups, "this grouping serves primarily to provide a regularity in the distribution of the tones."[46] Setting out from the classical notational system—for which, incidentally, he devised a mechanical typewriter—Schoenberg not only worked in the horizontal plane of distribution according to the rule of the row, but also in the vertical dimension of simultaneity, in other words, paratactically and syntactically. In terms of an aesthetics of equal relevance, it is intriguing that he should pay specific attention to the spaces in-between, spaces that then transcend the traditional concept of intervals in Pythagorean relations, in that they are no longer subordinated to harmonies.[47]

The logics or the rule of twelve-tone composition and its rapidly changing "idea-emotional structure"[48] of music is hard to perceive, as even Schoenberg admits, however, the impression of the sounds as being equally distributed in a

planified audible field is the most prominent characteristic of his music. It follows the idea of equal distribution as in the sands of a desert, at the same time autonomically developing structures according to its own inherent rule of the row. As opposed to composing in keys and harmonies, which submit a piece to a certain spirit or temper, the range of colors and expressions in twelve-tone-music establishes a new form of open sonic space. It "corresponds to the principle of *the absolute and unitary perception of musical space*."[49] At the same time, in superimposing new and unheard of tone-colors, sounds may also meander between music and noise, human and inhuman, instrumental and environmental effects, "overcoming limits," as Benjamin had observed for Hölderlin's poetological procedures, opening new sonic spaces.

The opera *Moses und Aron*, based on a single set, opens in fact with an example of a complex sound between the human and the instrumental. According to the score, a sung "O---" should resound pianissimo from the orchestra pit through the darkness of the auditorium before the curtain rises. Six solo voices intonate it, while sitting next to six solo instruments playing "in unison with them":[50] soprano and flute, mezzo and clarinet, alto with English horn, and, a bar later, tenor, baritone, and bass with bassoon, bass clarinet, and cello. The sound forms an acoustic buzzing, fusion, and confusion of instruments and bodies. Only nine bars later will four more voices be added, the sound crystallized into particular voices and words that turn out to represent "The Voice from the Burning Bush."[51] It is the moment of indistinction, however, that puts the audience into the same awkward situation of Moses grazing his sheep in the desert, irritated by what he cannot distinguish as pure noise or a voice, as mere disturbance or a divine order. And it will be the motive of confusion through a set of increasing differences and equal probabilities that makes the setting of the opera, in the camp in the desert, with the people discussing their fate in face of the mountain of god and the absence of a leader. In this crisis, suspended before the law, Schoenberg, himself persecuted as a Jew and later on his way into exile when he composed—and never finished—the opera, enfolds the confrontations of two positions: Moses, committed to the abstract ideas, the words and the law, and Aron, dedicated to the particular and sensual perception. In this sense, the situation before the law raises a musical,

49
Schoenberg, 115–116.
Italics added.

50
Arnold Schoenberg,
Moses und Aron,
Oper in drei Akten,
Studien-Partitur
(Mainz: Edition Schott),
bar 1.

51
Schoenberg, bars 1–14.
For the question of
whether the initial
vocalize belongs to
Moses' call or not, see
Marc M. Kerling,
"O Wort, du Wort, das mir
fehlt:" Die Gottesfrage
in Arnold Schoenbergs Oper
Moses und Aron.
Zur Theologie eines musika-
lischen Kunst-Werkes
des 20. Jahrhunderts
(Mainz: Matthias-
Grünewald-
Verlag, 2004), 57ff.

52
See Matthias Schmidt,
"Vor dem Gesetz.
Zur religiösen Dimen-
sion eines musikalischen
Begriffs bei Schoenberg,"
in *Arnold Schoenberg*
und sein Gott: Bericht zum
Symposium Juni 26.–29.
Juni 2002, ed. Christian
Meyer (Vienna:
Arnold Schoenberg
Center, 2003), 299–310.

53
Benjamin,
"Two Poems," 25.

54
Schoenberg, *Moses und*
Aron, footnote to bar 9.

55
Translated from
Jean-Marie Straub
and Danièle Huillet,
"Conversation avec
Jean-Marie Straub et
Danièle Huillet (Moïse
et Aaron). Par Jacques
Bontemps, Pascal
Bonitzer et Serge Daney,"
Cahiers du cinéma
258–259 (1975): 23.

56
Michael Gielen,
Unbedingt Musik.
Erinnerungen
(Frankfurt: Insel, 2005).
My translation, U.H.

an aesthetic and a religious question at the same time.[52] In their adaptation of the opera, Huillet and Straub will add a political, probably an ecological one. Working toward communism, in their films, is not only a matter of cinematically creating a matrix for equal relations, but also of opening up a space of unknown relations including those between men and animals, spaces and climates—including, as Hölderlin saw it, "heavenly ones and princes," that had to "crash down from their old orders."[53] A people appears as a secondary phenomenon of this view of the world, just as the people of the opera becomes an issue after Moses had received the message of its oppression from the sound of the bush. With the help of film technology and filmic procedures, Huillet/Straub's film deploys a dense concept of communism as the force of creating new and equal relationships.

To increase the confusion of the initial sound of the opera, Schoenberg had had the eccentric idea of technically augmenting the alienation, suggesting for a staging that "it might be feasible to separate the voices from each other off stage [although remaining visually in contact] using telephones which will lead through loud-speakers into the hall where the voices will then coalesce."[54] It is from this idea of technically separating and then remixing tone colors and sounds, that Huillet/Straub have taken their unique sonic solution for the cinematic adaptation of the opera which was eventually shot in an amphitheater near Alba Fucens in the Abruzzan mountains. As Straub explained in an interview with the *Cahiers du cinéma*:

> *Moses und Aron* is a technical adventure on the level of sound recording that no one had previously dared [...]. I had dreamed of it from the very beginning, and the sound engineer also thought that it was right ... to record the orchestra alone first and then have the singers sing over it.[55]

The orchestral parts and all off-screen choral sequences were thus pre-produced at the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF) in Vienna to provide a very dry, reverb-free, four-channel mono version on narrow tape for the shooting of the film.[56] The prerecorded tracks supported the singers during their open-air performances via small speakers installed among the choristers. The soloists sang equipped with small earplugs to be able to follow

the orchestral sounds, which had to be carefully kept out of the sensivity range of the microphones. In the arena of the theater with all its reverberation effects and ambient noises, the voices of chorus and soloists were recorded with several microphones on booms for two of the three Nagra-IV devices present.[57] In order to hear the orchestra parts, Michael Gielen, the conductor, who stood on a mobile pedestal, had to wear "a headphone which covered both his ears, preventing him from hearing what those he was conducting were singing."[58] During the shoot in the amphitheater, sound engineer Louis Hochet added the Vienna studio recordings as a sort of "live" synchronization to those of the singers. After editing, the synchronized material only had to be dynamically mixed.

The micromovement of separating voices, music, and sounds, which Schoenberg had implied both in his composition and in his stage directions was thus established on a large scale in Huillet/Straub's filming. To form a new sonic space, they integrated all sorts of particular effects: Voices in cultural framings of a technical studio were mixed with voices on location, disturbed by the wind or modulated by animal sounds. Reverberations of different historical architectures were mixed—and this was possible only

> because the Straubs and their sound engineer had found out through experiment that the natural reverberation of the studio in Vienna more or less corresponded to that of the arena in Alba Fucens, where the shoot took place.[59]

The circumstances of a theater ruin in mid-1970s Italy, irregularity in the electric frequency, old copper cables, all point to the fragile situation of a synchronization that never submitted to a central metricalization of the music but much rather corresponds to a paratactical shattering of orders. The paratactic acoustic space that Huillet/Straub devised included the disturbances caused by the radical separation of parameters to produce new layers of sound fields—and the linking of elements according to equal relations. After technically isolating the participants—singers, peasants, technicians, musicians, and animals—and then superimposing the particular phenomena in the two stages of mixing to form an absolutely hybrid space, the complete sound of the film-opera, "the absolute and unitary perception of the filmic space,"[60] would be perceived for the first

57
For more details see Danièle Huillet, "Notes" in *Writings*, 277–331; see also: "Propos de JM Straub publiés dans *Le Film Français*" in NEF Diffusion, *Moïse et Aaron*, Presse Information. I thank Volko Kamensky for sharing this document from the archives of the Fondo Straub-Huillet, Cineteca di Bologna.

58
Huillet, "Notes," in *Writings*, 293.

59
Translated from Michael Gielen, "'Aus einem Gespräch mit Michael Gielen.' Wolfram Schütte spricht mit Michael Gielen," *Filmkritik* 221/222 (1975): 281.

60
Schoenberg, "Composition," 115–116.

61
Danièle Huillet, "Small Historical Excursus," *Writings*, 161–176.

62
John Cage, "The Future of Music. Credo," *Silence* (Cambridge, 1971), 3–7: 5.

time in the cinematic screening. It is in the mosaic space of the cinema that a new sort of people, technologically evoked and enhanced, makes its appearance.

In her preparations for the film, Danièle Huillet had produced a historical study on the life and customs of Semitic nomads in the Middle East, largely drawing on Adolphe Lods' book *Israël, des origines au milieu du VIIIe siècle avant notre ère*, first published in 1930. In her notes, Huillet underlines that the desert is a hybrid space of different cultures.[61] The film transposes this idea of the desert onto a set of relations, connecting the architecture of the theater and its *arena*—Latin literally for sand—to the single characters, exposed to wind and climate, as well as to peasants acting and to the animals filmed in their movements and sounds. Huillet/Straub's way of filming is distinguished by the complete refusal of a central order or regime: neither the technicians, nor the actors, nor the directors dictate the procedures, but the filming captures and thus documents the intricate interaction of all elements. Here of course they act more radically than Schoenberg had probably envisioned his opera to be realized. However, John Cage had qualified even the music of Schoenberg, a well-known conservative, in this sense: "Schoenberg's method is analogous to a society in which the emphasis is on the group and the integration of the individual in the group."[62] The art of integrating without submitting the particular to a central idea or a totalitarian law is the art in question.

DIFFERENCES AND COMMUNISM: DANIÈLE HUILLET AND JEAN-MARIE STRAUB

The initial shot of the film-opera, corresponding to the sounds of Moses' confusion, begins with a close-up on the back of the prophet's head and then moves in a single take across the arena of the amphitheater up into its ruins, across brush and bushes of abandoned olive orchards and a deserted plain to stop, with the end of the first musical movement in front of a double peaked mountain. This pan exposes the gaze to a once cultivated landscape that is now thoroughly pervaded by cultural techniques of industrialized societies. This is true for the landscape as well as for the camera technology that reveals it. The pan strings the particular elements into a series of equals; it frees and

simultaneously alienates the landscape of its perspective order, opening this cinematically estranged new serial space to the gaze of the audience. But the audience still needs to make all necessary distinctions by itself: does it want to see a sublime landscape or rather the wastelands of capitalist economies that exploit peasants and workers? Does it want to see a historical setting or an analysis of the peasants' situation of the seventies? In this sense, the pan is a collective movement that awaits distinction, that demands a series of particular and individual decisions—as opposed to a homogeneous mass reception—to become reality. It is from this beginning that French film critics suggested the people of the film are actually hidden in filmic procedures or cultural techniques, such as, for instance, the pan:

> *Cahiers du cinéma*: The striking thing in *Moses and Aaron* is that the people are conceived like a gaze. It is a gaze that requires us to satisfy it.
>
> Straub: My thought just now was that the people, despite everything, are the gaze. Okay, so what then suddenly causes the gaze to bring about the pan? It isn't Aaron who brings about the pan, and not the connection between Moses and Aaron. For Moses is never linked to the people through a pan (apart from the one that passes him by). Moses is never linked to the people through any kind of camera movement—apart from the pan of his "calling," (Burning bush = people in the *hors-champ*.)[63]

The metonymical relationship of pan, burning bush, small chorus, and people, a bundling of technical, musical, cinematic, and political conceptions, connects the film's diverse levels from the very beginning. For Straub, making people's films then, constructing cinematic communism, is an issue of learning to perceive without a central guiding force on the gaze, as it is iconic for the singular god:

> One must realize that with civilization, the peasants invented gods. One must realize that what the invention of monotheism means, that it is very difficult to do without gods. That it will still take us centuries to get there and that doing without gods like the Voltairian bourgeoisie did is certainly no solution. It's only cynicism.[64]

63
Translated from Straub/Huillet, "Conversation," 13–14.

64
Jean-Marie Straub, "Sickle and Hammer," 119.

65
Roland Barthes, "L'Effet de Réel," *Communications* 11 (1968): 84–89. Thanks to Peter Ott for hints and critical remarks.

66
Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*. Authorized English Translation, edited and annotated by Frederick Engels, published online by the Socialist Labor Party of America, www.slp.org.

67
Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 7. In her lectures, Arendt reads Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and the beautiful as a political program.

Straub's enterprise of making and seeing films is one of unlearning monotheism. This is true not only in terms of a Kantian responsibility of using one's own understanding without another's guidance, but it practically means a radical analysis of the world, taking it apart with filmic means, so that it resists any conventional category. And this is specifically true for the modern category of the real, "la catégorie du réel," which Roland Barthes, in 1968, had denounced as a mode of creating the effect of realism in modernity, the hidden implicit signifier of realist art.[65] The goal of Huillet/Straub's films is much rather to construct new and equal relationships for a coming society or people. Here, they prove to be precise communists:

> The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes.[66]

As opposed to Kant, who in his *Critique of Judgement* had based the art of making distinctions on the sensus communis and aesthetic differences and had defined the beautiful as an end to itself, "without linkage, as it were, to other beautiful things,"[67] the cinema of Huillet and Straub prepares the ground for all sorts of possible linkages, multiplied and made equal, as Straub maintains: "Jeder sei wie

alle (Each be as all). It's Empedocles' big speech that I call Hölderlin's communist utopia."[68] This communist construction is based on and enforced by technical measures: the manifold layers of synthesized sounds, the complex construction of cinematic spaces and hence the opening of specific gazes which will then prepare for the formation and appearance of a people. But it is as difficult to get rid of guided and centrally organized forms of perception as it was for the proletarians Marx addresses to lose their chains. However, he writes: "They have a world to win."[69]

Danièle Huillet, in her notes on the shooting of *Moses and Aaron*,[70] carries the argument further. For her it is not just the expulsion of a single God but the introduction of new cinematic differences such as a cinematic time as duration, filmic space as an open field, montage as a way to think about the hitherto unrelated, and the appearance of unforeseen phenomena captured by the cinematic apparatus: movements of light the wind makes in leaves of trees, the marks of the sun on pale Austrian singers' noses, sounds of animal's hooves on dry and sandy ground, climatic elements that rule a space, a culture or a people. For Huillet, the camera is a Vertovian apparatus to reveal the normally unseen, as she maintains, "an apparatus for radiography, a mirror that helps to see and … hear, to discover, under the accumulation of habit and clichés, reality—the truth?"[71] Cinema is the art of establishing links to the unseen, the overlooked, the hitherto unknown things in their own right. But as opposed to a fetishism of the real which Barthes exposes in the arts of the Sixties, an interspersing of elements of the real to stitch the signifier directly to the bare referent, Huillet and Straub show the entire series of linkages that cinema can produce, an intricate network of particular things, senses, sights and sounds.

One set of shots illustrating this is a sequence accompanying the construction of the *Golden Calf*. It begins with the image of a glaring sculpture of a calf, seen behind Aaron, who, while law-maker Moses does not return from the mountain, tries to calm the protesting people in explaining that sensual images and material things are connected by an intrinsic principle. This, says Aaron, is just as reliable as an unchangeable law. Aaron is opting for a sort of materially based set of rules, a sort of flexible economy, a

gold-standard[72] instead of a pure monotheistic law or else, a radically revolutionary economy:

> This image attests that in everything that is, a God lives! Unchangeable, like a principle, is the material, the gold, which you have given. Seemingly changeable, like everything is, secondary, is the shape which I gave it. Revere yourselves in this symbol![73]

Huillet/Straub cut this propaganda-piece of Aaron's short by immediately adding a wide-angle shot of a group of animals, including donkeys, oxen, and a white camel. Huillet recounts:

> We will shoot three very long takes, for such a shot one must film and allow for life to carry on its own flow. Georges [Vaglio] takes the sound, for we hold out for the breathing and the noises of the harness or of the cart—very beautiful.[74]

Then, through the roofless, clear southern *parodos* of the amphitheater, shepherds wearing theatrical costumes drive more animals, herds of sheep and cows, into the arena, with movements that recall cultural techniques of a few thousand years. These different layers show that the film is not concerned with historicizing but with analyzing historical forms of representation and reality. The shot entangles cultural and natural history in recorded gestures, traces, and voices. Here, Schoenberg's music is again overlaid by many kinds of animal noises, whose tone colors, at the end of a long orchestral section that juxtaposes extreme and eccentric *glissandi* with quasi oriental rhythms, mingle with those of the instruments. String instruments and woodwinds merge with the whistling and shouting of the herdsmen, percussion instruments merge with the clattering of the sheep's hooves, the voices of oxen and contrabassoon merge, in the way that previously the Voice from the Burning Bush was a mix of instruments and voices, breathing and vibrating.

In this scene of driving the herds, filming had to wait, as Huillet writes, for the rhythm of the shot to evolve. But as opposed to the sequence of the Burning Bush,[75] the call synthesized here from animal voices and instruments is no longer a call from a god or a transcendental otherworld,

68
"Questionnaire on May 1968," *Writings*, 267.

69
Marx, Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, 40.

70
Huillet, "Notes," 277–331.

71
Huillet, "Interview: No appeasement," *Writings*, 252.

72
This economic subtext suggests itself, since the post-war Bretton Woods agreements, a set of rules to balance economic powers, failed just as the film was being shot, leaving the field open to venture, and vulture capitalism. Aaron's allusions to gold as a token of social peace might suggest, at least for 1970s audiences, an option for the capitalist utopia of a self-controlling monetary system based on gold reserves (including US American economic supremacy). Moses opposes all of that in his defense of an immaterial universal, or rather "an omnipresent, unperceived and inconceivable" law, as Moses addresses the new god in the beginning of the opera.

73
Schoenberg, Act II, Scene 3, bars 308–319. English translation by Danièle Huillet.

74
Huillet, "Notes," 327.

75
See Huillet, "Notes," 329–330: "We start again a second time: it is better, the rhythm picks up."

but a call from the living. It is a concrete sonic mixture of beings, things, instruments, and probably recording machines: animal and mechanical. In this shot, every single viewer is challenged to make a distinction: not to think of gods but of living conditions. These also appear during the dance of the butchers that follows: laying on the altar, confronted with other antique fragments of architecture, are chunks of meat as a reminder of a capitalist society separating production and consumption, and the injustice of the distribution following it. The images of living things, objects and people here are not a confrontation of cultural images with pure or real life, on the contrary, they are again a series of images that allow observers to perceive and think in terms of historical constellations and class relations. This however implies to "overcome limits," as Benjamin put it for Hölderlin.[76] Or as Laclau explains, "the emergence of the 'people' as a historical actor is thus always transgressive *vis-à-vis* the situation preceding it."[77]

The particular beauty of the particular sounds in the sequence of animals, herdsmen and butchers, the breathing of dancers and animals alike, reminds us that we too are living beings, distinguished from immortals or gods, making our own distinctions. The films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub remind us that "it is very difficult to do without gods," but we have a world to win by doing so.

76
Benjamin,
"Two Poems,"
34.

77
Laclau,
On Populist Reason,
228.

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Film set during the shooting of *Too Early/Too Late,* Egypt, 1981. Photo Maggie Perlado.

Frontispiece
Stills from films by Huillet/Straub whose title fonts were used in the design of this book.

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