

‘Actors Simply Explode’ – To Act In the Cinema of Straub and Huillet

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The term ‘non-professional actor’ describes different circumstances: amateurs who do not regularly work, actors who have received no proper training, actors who come from a world outside the culture industries, and so on. Normative cinemas – cinemas that, as Noël Burch put it, work within the Institutional Mode of Representation – operate almost exclusively with professional actors.¹ In the case of the Hollywood industry, post-Stanislawskian methodologies continue to produce the most valued actors, the so-called method actors.² In normative cinemas, in any of its variants, the use of non-professional actors is rare and they are usually confined to secondary roles. A differentiated use of non-professional actors makes possible, amongst other factors, the distinction between normative and critical cinemas as that of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, on whose work this essay concentrates. The significance of non-professional acting in critical cinemas is not only the consequence of financial constraints (the costs of hiring a star). From the neorealist movement to avant-garde filmmaking, such as that of Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, John Waters, to that of feminist filmmakers, working with non-professional actors is also a practice that legitimates the capacity of certain forms of cinema to operate critically with regards to the industry in its capacity to resist the normative framework of instructed acting. As analysed by Kaja Silverman, feminist filmmakers such as Yvonne Rainer, Patricia Gruben or Sally Potter have generated an inventive catalogue of discord to break the normative confinement of the voice within the female body: asynchronism, multiplication, dislocation.³ The resistance of Straub and Huillet to the relation of captivity between voice and body reproduced by dominant cinemas operates from different grounds in their work with actors. And yet their work has relevance for feminist theory and art practices since they also seek to undo militaristic, patriarchal, capitalist modes of speech, punctuation and communication.

In this context, the practice developed by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet throughout their long career to work with professional and non-professional actors – my chief concern in this essay – is a unique case within the history of cinema. Their practice with actors, simply put, renders the prevailing opposition between professional and non-professional inoperative, thereby disclosing a political life or possibility that can operate through the art of acting. Their practice produces different proximities and dislocations between acting and competence, processes within which there is the least trace of intellectual condescension for the non-professional actor (for *le petit peuple*) positive or negative, is radically absent. To investigate the political life of this practice, as I do in this essay, is an opportunity not only to call into question the properness of the name ‘actor’ in other critical cinematic and performance theories and practices. The reconfiguration in Straub and Huillet’s cinema of the capacity to act, and of what is taken to be a competent exercise of this capacity, challenges prevailing protocols in Western culture based on professional, gender, and economic identities that determine who acts and who does not act, and that validate what is to act in the social, cultural, political fields. The performances in the cinema of Straub and Huillet visualise and sonorise, in the sense that they put into practice, another world of action. The performance practice at work in their cinema materialises a ground of equality from where any actor counts in ways that defy identitarian expectation of action and inaction.

This investigation on the practice of acting in the cinema of Straub and Huillet and its significance to (re)imagine our cultural and political possibilities requires examining the habitual identification of their work as a Brechtian film practice.⁴ The literature on their cinema has emphasised how their Brechtianism is most apparent in the influence on their work of Bertolt Brecht’s experiments with acting.⁵ Straub and Huillet have themselves commented on their curiosity for his experiments with different spectra of diction, with different modes of speaking that distinguish different characters and show ‘the connection between certain ways of acting and their means of expression’.⁶ However, the work of Straub and Huillet with non-professional actors is also far from the logic at the heart of the valorisation of non-professional actors in texts by Brecht 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’.⁸ The acting of these non-professional actors conveys the fatigue of workers who work in the factory during the day, and perform on stage during the 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 are, as we will see, far from this logic of revelatory exhaustion. In this sense, while Brecht is a

significant figure for the work of Straub and Huillet, I move away from the habitual Brechtian framework in which their work has been discussed, in terms of their practice with actors.

This essay also moves away from the idea of critical cinema's use of non-professional actors as disruptive signifiers of reality within the filmic text. To sustain their stance against normative cinema, critical cinemas have often constructed and naturalised a hierarchical opposition, both discursive and practical, between professional and non-professional actors. This opposition equates professional acting with an expert, lifeless, serious artificiality and non-professional acting with either spontaneity (a more or less comical one) or self-conscious artificiality. This firmly established opposition values non-professional actors as beings, even as "bad" actors, but it also reduces the potential of non-professional acting to dislocate the consensual relation between acting and a legitimating technique, experience, or qualification. Within the poetics of neorealist cinema, for instance, non-professional actors have a double part to play in the portrayal of the simple complexity of *life as it is*. Their accents, their vocabulary, their faces without make up are signifiers called upon to constitute the reality effect of the film.⁹ Non-professional actors are seen as a source of an authentic reality, that is, of its ambiguity and contradictions. For theoreticians of neorealism, non-professional 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, in neorealist performances 'it calls upon the actor to be before expressing himself [*sic*].'¹⁰ He understands that in neorealist cinema non-professional actors do not act but are instead 'a silhouette, a face, a way of walking'.¹¹ Non-professional actors are 'living creatures' that echo with their voices and movements 'the ontological ambiguity of reality'.¹² A congratulatory Bazin notes in passing 'how much the cinema owes to a love for living creatures'.¹³ This love for living creatures cannot but reduce the non-professional actor to a non-actor, to being one incapable of action.

Straub and Huillet's de-activation of the distinction between professional and non-professional actors implies the construction of a common ground to work with any actor in order to work toward the dismantling of dominant hierarchies encoded within communicative notation. A glimpse at the castings 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*, 1967) they use non-professional actors who are professional musicians, in *Klassenverhältnisse* (*Class Relations*, 1983) there is a mixed cast of professional and non-professional actors; in *Il Ritorno Del Figlio Prodigo – Umiliati* (*Humiliated*, 2003) they work with people of different professional backgrounds with no previous contact with cinema. Danièle Huillet, talking about their work with this variety of actors, explains:

One must always start clearing away. With professional actors it always takes a little longer than with the others, but non-professionals have their own clichés and, at the end, the work is not so different (...) at the end it is the same.¹⁴

The practice developed by Straub and Huillet is predicated upon the basis of this *sameness*. My concern in this essay is not so much with the multiple variants of their practice throughout what has been a long and fertile filmography - a filmography that Straub continues to expand since the decease of Huillet in 2006 - but rather with this sameness. My concern is with the common grounds from which this art of acting detonates conventional oppositions between proper and improper actors to disclose the capacity of anyone, professional or non-professional actors, native or non-native speakers, female or male actors, to discipline oneself and generate singular acts of resistance within the ideological constraints of a text.

In this cinema, there is no simple erasure of the differences between the different actors, but the common grounds on which they stand short-circuits any essentialist opposition. To act is in this practice 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, which I proceed to interrogate in these pages. First, there is the organisation of an ignorant encounter between the actors and the unreadable texts at the base of the films. These encounters generate resistant relations between actors and texts. Second, there is the construction of new grammars to deliver the lines according to the singular breathings of the members of the cast. And third, there is in this process a militant discipline that distinguishes and yet brings together the different acting voices and bodies. I focus here on these three key aspects of Straub and Huillet's wider philosophy of their own work, a philosophy that insists on the need to practice cinema, including its performance component, as a form of aesthetic dynamite.

1- The Ignorant Encounter

The literature on the films of Straub and Huillet has insistently defined their cinema as ‘a generalised practice of disjunction.’¹⁵ As noted above, for a majority of critics, their cinema strictly agrees with Brecht’s diagnosis on the illusionism produced by the bourgeois fusion of the arts and the remedy Brecht concocts: to radically separate words, gestures, music. This analysis constructs a logical order where separation is valorised as an active art, while fusion, union and identification are relegated to its passive opposite. Within this logic, the actors develop *alienating techniques* to separate themselves from the characters they play. The actors construct a distance: they show, quote, reproduce and refuse to become the character.¹⁶ This art of separation is intended to produce a parallel effect on the spectators. It is the *raison d’être* of the performance technique of *distanciation*: 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 a rigorous militance of separation. Their practice re-articulates the notion of distance as that which does not blindly follow an order that prescribes separation as an antidote to passivity. Straub, quite bluntly, affirms: ‘We want people to lose themselves in our films. All this talk about *distanciation* is bullshit.’¹⁷ Different from 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’,¹⁸ the subjects of their films are ‘chance encounters’,¹⁹ their work is to organise ‘encounters between actors and texts’.²⁰ In their discourse, the term encounter implies distance as difference but also as the 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 not as the opposite of passive identification. By contrast, the logic of separation habitually relies on alienation ‘to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism’.²¹

For Brecht, alienation is the means for 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 *distanciation* or identification. Rather, in the discourse that accompanies their cinema, the term ‘encounter’ indicates that their work hopes to articulate a space for different proximities to take place, proximities that are more or less identificatory, more or less strange. 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 upon which Straub and Huillet experiment with constructions of proximity is the acting process itself. They understand acting as a constructed encounter that re-articulates the given determinations of distance and ignorance. They organise what could be called an ignorant spatiality in which the actors work the distance separating them from texts to create singular readings.

Straub and Huillet base their films on complex, unreadable texts from mostly male European authors like Franz Kafka, Cesare Pavese, Friedrich Engels, and so on.²² By complex and unreadable, I mean texts that are not exhausted by the interpretive schemas to which they are subject, texts that ensure a part of themselves remains withdrawn from legibility. In their practice, the actors are first of all readers. More importantly, they are readers who do not know how to read the texts in their hands. This not knowing is not a question of educational deficiency: these are texts encountered as unreadable for anyone. This is the ignorant and paradoxical encounter that Straub and Huillet’s cinema organises, an encounter wherein 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/her life reveals less and hides more. This is different when they say a text that is really strange to them.²³

Straub and Huillet explore this relation between ignorant readers and texts in different ways. They cast actors, for instance, precisely because they do not speak the language in which the text is written or, as is the case with their Vittorini films, they cast Italian actors for whom the Italian texts being worked

with are unfamiliar territory.²⁴ Thus, the actor Laura Betti, who had worked with Federico Fellini or Pier Paolo Pasolini, recites her role in *Class Relations* in German, a language that is not her own. The actors of *Schwarze Sünde* [*Black Desire*, 1988] are not German speakers and yet they have to learn and recite an intricate text by the poet Friedrich Hölderlin. Even though the Italian actors of the Vittorini films read and speak Italian, they still have to deal with the complex prose of Vittorini with its use of different dialects and poetic language.

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 tongue. These encounters with texts thus make apparent the fact that a so-called maternal language 'is never purely natural, nor proper, nor inhabitable'.²⁵ As Jacques Derrida puts it, there is 'an essential alienation in language' where language remains 'deserted like a desert in which one must grow, make things grow, build, and project up to the idea of a route'.²⁶ In the practice of Straub and Huillet, language works as a desert wherein every actor, whether professional or non-professional, struggles to open up a distance *from* – yet a distance marked *within* – language itself. Actors make of this language something other than their own: the field of a common struggle.

There are, at least two ways of understanding and working with this paradox of readers reading unreadable texts, two ways of practicing ignorance. Firstly, this mode of 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 denouncing, the social reality that works to separate a specific reader from a specific text. A proletarian actor struggling to read a text by the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin may function as the occasion to analyse the class distribution of the production and reception of culture. The difficulties encountered by the proletarian actor reading Hölderlin are the vocalised symptoms of a social reality, the impoverished intellectual capacity of the proletariat 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 by 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 to articulate different audiovisual rhythms out of unexpected readings. In the practice 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.

In the practice of Straub and Huillet, the strange encounter between reader and text is not a distance between an ignorant reader and a professional reading, but rather 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'.²⁷ 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, but to recognise and organise the different paths that the actor-readers chance upon, having found themselves cast within this dense textual forest. Without a pre-determined method of negotiating its territory, neither a labyrinth nor a recreational park, this forest demands what Jacques Rancière calls 'a practice of intellectual emancipation'.²⁸ This practice generates a situation wherein 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'.²⁹ 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'.³⁰ 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'.³¹

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 pre-determined 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 to reality. Against the straightjacketing of the text via a professional reading, this method opens up the possibility of contingent encounters between words, actors, and spectators. There is no know-how that separates or identifies readers and texts to validate acting in this practice. Instead, acting engages an anonymous capacity to read, to perform a poetic labour 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, memorise 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 does not testify to an impossibility, but to the possibility, every time renewed, of reading a literary text without exhausting it by creating singular itineraries with words, sentences and punctuation. At stake in the singular itineraries traced out in this practice there is a process of textual democratisation: not to produce an expert reader but to encourage popular readings that re-invent a text.

2- Breathing grammars

There are two particular experiments with sound and speech that have played a fundamental role in the cinema of Straub and Huillet.³² Since the beginning of their filmography, they have been strong advocates of direct sound, rejecting *the dictatorship of dubbing*.³³ But what interests me here is their experimentation with the different breathing capacities of the actors with whom they work. The vocal delivery of the actors in their films alternately has been criticised or praised for being *anti-natural*. As noted earlier, in most of the critical writings devoted to their cinema, this anti-naturalism has been automatically understood as the direct application of a Brechtian manual.³⁴ The various critical treatments of this question, whether the latter is weighted positively or negatively, have tended to hear the voices of the actors as inexpressive, neutral and toneless. However, Straub and Huillet affirm that the voices one hears in their films are sensuous, powerful and polyphonic. They negate with vehemence the thesis that their intention is to produce a neutral, anti-naturalistic voice.

Straub and Huillet have repeatedly answered questions from the public about the anti-natural way actors speak in their films. For instance, in this exchange after the projection of *Antigone* (1992):

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* 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: Ok, 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...* [she holds her breath] *der Hund*?

Straub: It bites ... [he holds his breath] the dog?

Huillet: And that was in the street!

Straub: Yes, it was a young girl we met at the harbour of Hamburg.³⁵

In this exchange, the filmmakers clarify their repulsion for what appears to be natural but at the same time insist that the work they undertake with the actors does not necessarily seek an anti-naturalistic manner of speaking. For them, what they do happens 'in the street'. More than a mere guarantee of realism, this reference to the street, I would argue, affirms the performative work of their cinema as a popular one. I use 'popular' here not in quantitative terms but in a combative sense: this practice struggles against codes that naturalise the voices of the people into predictable articulations and rhythms.³⁶

To a certain extent, the practice of Straub and Huillet is in agreement with that of Brecht, who criticised naturalism in theatre for creating a superficial image of reality that obfuscates complex social contradictions, and yet there are important differences. Brecht and his actors practiced a variety of techniques to vocally and verbally counter naturalist theatre: quotations, transpositions of the text into the past or into the third person, saying the stage directions aloud, and so on. These techniques were to function as 'new effects' with a view to both attracting and instructing the spectator who was 'exhausted with his [*sic*] rationalised day labour'.³⁷ 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’.³⁸ However, the voices of the actors in the cinema of Straub and Huillet show other timbres of significance. This 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’.³⁹ Instead, it constructs another reality via affirmative, declarative, embodied readings of complex texts.

As noted above, the resistance of Straub and Huillet to the relation of captivity between voice and body reproduced by dominant cinemas operates from different grounds than most feminist filmmakers and theorists. And yet their work has relevance for feminist theory and art practices since they also seek to undo militaristic, patriarchal, capitalist modes of speech, punctuation and communication. From the operatic declamation of the baritone Günther Reich in *Moses und Aron* (1975) to the commanding pronunciation of the non-professional actor Angela Nugara in *Sicilia!* (1999), the male and female voices of Straub and Huillet’s cinema are fundamentally powerful affirmations of a declarative capacity that appears as common to anyone. In their cinema, particularly in their work of the last decades, we do not hear dissonant, or ethereal, dissonant, precarious voices, but voices firmly grounded on the nearly immobile bodies of the speakers. In a telling scene of *Sicilia!* Angela Nugara, who plays ‘The Mother’, reminisces about the past. She speaks of recipes with anchovies or chicory, about family members and 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 and to better hear its tremendous resonance that detonates the meaning of her lines in different ways. The cinema of Straub and Huillet makes us see and hear how the cohabitation voice-body is not held at the price of an impoverishment or entrapment of the vocal, but on the contrary makes possible something like a lyrical detonation.

A film like *Operai, Contadini* [*Workers, Peasants*, 2001] offers a catalogue of these lyrical detonations. *Operai, Contadini* focuses on the discussions between a group of workers and peasants reconstructing a village after the war: discussions about 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 audio-visibility 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 straight, almost immobile facing the camera. Their frontality, and the rectitude it represents, is employed in the same manner for both workers and peasants, determining all of them as honourable 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?’.⁴⁰ 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 and chant and that transforms the narratives of both workers and peasants into exuberant oratories. Each actor speaks in her/his 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 meticulous articulation produces at once a potent eloquence and a fertile incomprehensibility. The solidity of the vocal performances, refuting the equation of voice with incorporeality, verifies the essential capacity of any body (worker and peasant, men and women, professional and non-professional 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 analyse ‘how the breath of each actor works, what is the magnitude of their respiration, where they are physically forced to stop to breathe’.⁴¹ Working on the breathing capacity of the performers is habitual in acting methodologies.⁴² What is peculiar about the work of Straub and Huillet is that they are not interested in training the breath of the readers-actors so that the latter can properly come to terms with, or even depart from, the

rhythms of the text. For them, 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.⁴³

This construction begins with the destruction of the pre-existing 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. 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: with this stop a long pause, with this comma a shorter one. Straub and Huillet's work with the actors does not seek to synchronize this break between breath and punctuation, vanquishing the resistance to the text. Instead, it is about organising the break as the *resistant material* at the base of singular performance-readings. The modulation of the text by the ignorant breath of the readers starts to resist precisely when it dynamites the text's punctuation. For Straub, there is a direct political reason to refuse following a pre-determined 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!⁴⁴

To dynamite the punctuation is, as Straub reveals here with Brechtian brio, a refusal to obey a specific martial order of reading and speaking. It is a refusal to read and speak properly according to the grammar of a dominant military-economic complex. According to Straub, this cadence has been naturalised: martial punctuation has produced the natural way of speaking and listening. To detonate these natural ways resists the standardisation of speech and its cadence. The performances in the cinema of Straub and Huillet are direct acts of resistance de-militarising and de-capitalising 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'.⁴⁵ The acting process consists of constructing other grammars in accordance with the inflections expressed through the taking of breath and the coming to terms with the text. There is a double process at play here. There are readers who inadvertently disintegrate with their hesitant breath the martial cadence produced by classical punctuation. There also is 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 out of 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 re-appropriate the text, nor does it install a new rule concerning what the latter 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 to read and speak; but this *own* is not legitimated by a technical savoir-faire that would confirm the distinction between professional and non-professional actors. This *own* is an unqualified capacity, a grammar that verifies the capacity of anyone to make audible the possibility of different associations, approximations, and distances. Their cinema practices the desert of language as the occasion to construct singular readings that affirm as a common the capacity of anyone, professional or other, to breath, cadence, and act out a text. This is a work of poetic translation, as Huillet puts it:

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.⁴⁶

The detonation of the original punctuation allows the actors to musicalize another rhythm latent within the text. In a film like *Workers, Peasants*, to poeticise the narrative is to intone or rather de-tone the prose with which actors work.

Listening to the cinema of Straub and Huillet is to experience the voices of the different actors, literally and poetically, as a powerful, intense murmur. Writing about the film *Der Tod des Empedokles* [*The Death of Empedocles*, 1987], Barton Byg notices how ‘the speed of the recitation makes it impossible for the audience to always comprehend the text’.⁴⁷ An anonymous member of an audience that has just seen *Antigone* explains to Straub and Huillet: ‘I could not follow the text very well, but different sentences arrested me’.⁴⁸ Straub admits that in their work with actors ‘the text indeed escapes’.⁴⁹ 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. This phenomenon, a kind of murmuring, however, is not to be understood as a mere loss of intelligibility. Very differently, 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 different 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, these 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 with proper and improper speakers and listeners. To listen to the vocal performances of the actors in their Vittorini films, for instance, is to listen to a murmur bustling with contrasting equations between linguistic registers, rhythms, 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 fixation of the ignorance/knowledge opposition, making the cavities of the mouth and the ear tremble with potentially inexhaustible reverberations of signification.

3- A Discipline To Act

To dynamite the punctuation inherited from the Prussian bureaucracy and the Westminster banks is to do away with a military and financial punctuation that transforms speaking into a military march and speakers into regular, ordered, synchronized soldiers. And yet, the blast at stake in the practice of Straub and Huillet with actors is not about the loss of any discipline to speak, but rather an opportunity to develop non-military disciplines to read and speak in resistant ways. For Straub and Huillet, acting, to resist in acting, is to submit to a disciplinary process involving the body, the breathing and the voice. This disciplined practice once again separates the work of Straub and Huillet with non-professional actors, if we can still use this term, from any ontological love opposing enigmatic beings and the deceptive art of the film star. To organise a discipline to work with non-professional actors is significant because it is extremely rare in the history of cinema. Their insistence on acting as a discipline is an understanding they share with Robert Bresson, a filmmaker Straub and Huillet refer to, half-humorously, as ‘papa’.⁵⁰ Straub and Huillet do not work with “models,” as Bresson called the malleable material that for him non-professional actors are. They work with professional and non-professional actors to create new relations between bodies and texts. Their work and Bresson's methodology with his models have nevertheless in common a process of strict discipline.⁵¹

As with Bresson, the work with the actors also starts in the cinema of Straub and Huillet with the reading of a text, more precisely with, as we have seen, 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,

re-reading, 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.⁵²

These lines clarify 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 the practice of Straub and Huillet, there is no military conquest of the impossible text, rendering the unreadable finally readable. The actor is not an expert armed with a technique of readability. Discipline works as a tool to construct multiple appropriations, proximities and distances for ignorant readers struggling with complex texts. It is not a discipline to learn a technique of acting and reading in order to fuse or distance actor/character/text. It is a non-military discipline that does not produce professional actors following a manual of learned behavior. To act is instead a matter of disciplining the distances between actors-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 rather it generates something of the order of a deflagration at the level of the performance. As 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'.⁵³ Discipline does not simply evaporate meaning but makes audible the murmur of its possible reconfiguration in the actors' performance, in their expirations and postures. Memorisation, endurance, and repetition create moments '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'.⁵⁴ The acting methodology in this cinema dispossesses actors from any particular *savoir-faire* (professional actors) or *savoir-être* (non-professional actors). In this practice actors have nothing but a body and a voice; 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.

For the tradition of critical realism, non-professional 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'.⁵⁵ Discipline could only corrupt the 'simple appearance of beings'.⁵⁶ The equation of acting with deception for the tradition of critical realism is yet another avatar of the malaise 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 what they are themselves. To act is understood as a deceptive operation, creating and concealing distance, mediation and representation. The role of the critic is then understood as the unveiling of such deception. Non-professional actors, in this view, are therefore valued not for constructing, not for creating, not for acting, but for merely being extemporaneous bodies that abolish this evil distance, the distance of representation.

The explosion of the distinction between professional and non-professional actors determines acting as a capacity that re-signifies the relation between a body and a text; a capacity that can be exercised by anyone, and which 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 non-acting but organizes disciplines with which to read, breathe, and punctuate this distance. *Making acting strange*, to adapt Brecht's dictum, is to question the consensus equating professional actors with artificiality and non-professional actors with authenticity. The insistence on mere being as the signature of authenticity turns non-professional actors into incapable non-actors, 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 does not take the form of professional specialisation nor of spontaneous performances. It is a form of popular discipline - the discipline of *those who have nothing and those who have something*. In this cinematic practice workers, musicians, peasants, men, women, students, intellectuals, 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 re-signifying the sense(s) of the textual world they inhabit.

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- ¹ Noël Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1990
- ² Konstantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, Methuen, London, 1988; Mel Gordon, *Stanislavski in America – An Actor's Workbook*, Routledge, New York NY, 2010
- ³ See Kaja Silverman, 'The Fantasy of the Maternal Voice: Female Subjectivity and the Negative Oedipus Complex' in *The Acoustic Mirror, The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1988, pp.141-186
- ⁴ This description of their work as Brechtian is prevalent in the existing literature in English. See for instance Martin Walsh, *The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema*, Bfi Publishing, London, 1981
- ⁵ Barton Byg, *Landscapes of Resistance – The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1995, p.24
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Bertolt Brecht, 'Two Essays on Non-Professional Acting' in *Brecht on Theatre, the Development of an Aesthetic*, Methuan Drama, London, 1964
- ⁸ Ibid., p.148
- ⁹ Roberto Rossellini, for instance, changed the scripts of his films according to the non-professional actors' manners of speaking but also according to their life experiences. See Peter Brunette, *Roberto Rossellini*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1996
- ¹⁰ André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Volume 2*, University of California Press, Berkeley CA, 1971, p.65
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid., p.66
- ¹³ Ibid., p.72
- ¹⁴ Philippe Lafosse, ed, *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.84. My translation.
- ¹⁵ Serge Daney quoted by Ursula Böser in *The Art Of Seeing, The Art Of Listening, The Politics of Representation in the Work of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 2004, p.23
- ¹⁶ See Bertolt Brecht, 'Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect' in *Brecht on Theatre, the Development of an Aesthetic*, Methuen Drama, London, 1964, pp.136-147
- ¹⁷ Jean-Marie Straub quoted by Tag Gallagher in 'Lacrimae Rerum Materialized', *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 37, October 2005. Available at: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2005/feature-articles/straubs/> (accessed: 15/03/2014).
- ¹⁸ Jean-Marie Straub quoted by Barton Byg, op. cit., p.20
- ¹⁹ Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet and Jean-Louis Raymond, *Rencontres avec Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet*, Beaux-arts de Paris, les éditions, Paris, 2008, p.13. My translation.
- ²⁰ Philippe Lafosse, ed, *L'Etrange Cas de Madame Huillet et Monsieur Straub*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2007, p.81. My translation.
- ²¹ Bertolt Brecht, op. cit., p.136
- ²² An exception is their short film *En Rachâchant* based on a text by Marguerite Duras.

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- ²³ Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet and Jean-Louis Raymond, op. cit., p.42. My translation.
- ²⁴ I call *Vittorini films* their films based on texts by the Italian writer Elio Vittorini: *Operai, Contadini* [*Workers, Peasants*, 2001], *Il Ritorno Del Figlio Prodigio - Umiliati* [*The Return of the Prodigal Son – Humiliated*, 2003], *Sicilia!* [*Sicily!*, 1999].
- ²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1998, p.58
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet and Jean-Louis Raymond, op. cit., p.22. My translation.
- ²⁸ See Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto CA, 1991
- ²⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London, 2009, p.11
- ³⁰ Ibid., p.10
- ³¹ Ibid. p.11
- ³² Danièle Huillet observed in the early nineties, 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 (reported by Barton Byg, op. cit., p.201). In the last decades, the primacy of the visual as the essence of cinema, often making of the soundtrack a mere appendage or even a pollutant, has been increasingly challenged with film sound becoming the subject of numerous film studies investigations, although these are rarely dedicated to experimental films.
- ³³ 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', in E. Weiss and J. Belton, eds, *Film Sound, Theory and Practice*, Columbia University Press, New York NY, 1985, p.152
- ³⁴ For instance Thomas Elsaesser understands that 'Straub (...) explicitly fashioned the acting style and verbal delivery of his protagonists after Brechtian precepts'. See Thomas Elsaesser, 'Political Filmmaking after Brecht: Harun Farocki for Example', in T. Elsaesser, ed, *Harun Farocki, Working on the Sight-lines*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2004, pp.133-15
- ³⁵ Philippe Lafosse, ed, op. cit., p.80. My translation.
- ³⁶ My understanding of the popular as a combative field owes a great deal to the work of Stuart Hall, see his text 'Notes on Deconstructing the Popular', in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, John Story ed., Pearson Hall, London, 1998, pp.442-453
- ³⁷ Bertolt Brecht, 'On the Experimental Theatre', *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1961, p.3
- ³⁸ Bertolt Brecht, 'Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect' in *Brecht On Theatre, The Development of An Aesthetics*, Methuen Drama, London, p.136
- ³⁹ Peter Wollen, 'Ontology and Materialism in Film', *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter-strategies*, Version and NLB, London, 1982, p.201
- ⁴⁰ Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet and Elio Vittorini, *Ouvriers, Paysans*, Editions Ombres, Toulouse, 2001, p.35. My translation.
- ⁴¹ Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet and Jean-Louis Raymond, *Rencontres avec Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet*, Beaux-arts de Paris, les éditions, Paris, 2008, p. 23. My translation.

⁴² For an analysis of the significance of breathing in different acting methodologies see Marion Hampton and Barbara Acker, Barbara, eds, *The Vocal Vision, Views on Voice by 24 Leading Teachers, Coaches and Directors*, Applause Books, New York, 1997

⁴³ Jean-Marie Straub in Philippe Lafosse, ed, op. cit., p.136. My translation.

⁴⁴ Jean-Marie Straub in Lafosse, Philippe, op. cit., p.136

⁴⁵ Ibid. My translation.

⁴⁶ Danièle Huillet quoted by Ursula Böser in *The Art Of Seeing, The Art Of Listening, The Politics of Representation in the Work of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt, 2004, p.213

⁴⁷ Barton Byg, op. cit., p.200

⁴⁸ In Philippe Lafosse, ed, op. cit., p.79

⁴⁹ Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet and Jean-Louis Raymond, *Rencontres avec Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet*, Beaux-arts de Paris, les éditions, Paris, 2008, p.21. My translation.

⁵⁰ Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet and Jean-Louis Raymond, op. cit., pp.83-109

⁵¹ See Robert Bresson, *Notes on the Cinematographer*, Quartet Books, London, 1986, and Anne Wiazemsky, *Jeune Fille*, Gallimard, Paris, 2007.

⁵² Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet and Jean-Louis Raymond, op. cit., p.87. My translation.

⁵³ Jean-Marie Straub quoted by Barton Byg, op. cit., p.211.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ André Bazin, op. cit., p.65

⁵⁶ Ibid.