HISTORY, THEN AND NOW

Paragons of artistic rigor, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet respect and relive the past by keeping their distance

By GILBERTO PEREZ
“A sort of documentary oratorio.”

So Jean-Marie Straub characterized *Not Reconciled* (65), his and Danièle Huillet’s first feature, and that applies to all their films. An oratorio sets a story to music, with orchestra, choir, singers as characters, but no dramatic representation, no acted action. With or without music, Straub and Huillet have their stories not so much acted out as recited in a setting of images and sounds, the film equivalent of a musical setting. They hold back the dramatic illusion, the fiction of another world made present before our eyes and ears. They always start with a given text, something already fashioned, written or painted or composed, and handed down from the past. They stage it and have it performed in a way that keeps it at a distance, at a remove from the present, because they want us to recognize it as a document of its time, just as they want us to recognize its cinematic staging and performance as a document of a later time, and just as they want us to recognize our own situation as spectators at a still later time. In a film by Straub and Huillet at least three different times always come into play.
Their best-known film, *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (68), sets the story of Bach’s life with his second wife Anna Magdalena to his own music. Rather than the man in some dramatization of his character and activities, the music is the rightful protagonist. Sound recorded direct, grounded in a concrete environment, is a governing principle for Huillet and Straub.

We watch musicians playing Bach and hear the actual sound of their playing, right then and there. At a concert they would bring the music into our environment, our here and now, but the film portrays their then and there with vivid distinctness and so prepares us for a larger leap of the historical imagination. Unlike a concert, it asks us to ponder the original ground of the music in the life and times of the man who composed it in 18th-century Germany. The musicians wear the wigs and costumes and play the instruments of Bach’s time in actual old churches and rooms; and Anna Magdalena’s narrated chronicle tells about family matters, personal difficulties, money problems, career setbacks, the strivings and frustrations of her husband’s job as a musician. The film conducts a dialogue between Bach as he survives in his music and Bach as he lived and worked, between enduringly beautiful music and the often worrying circumstances of its composition, between transcendent aesthetic experience and the constrictions of living in the world, between the autonomy of art and its embodiment in history.

A married couple who made films together for more than four decades until Huillet’s death in 2006, Straub and Huillet pursued a solitary path in their art. That besides the reader and the writer we have the recollected Fortini who grew up in Florence during the years of Fascism. “It must have been my father who made me pause before that monument on the Lungarno,” Fortini reads over a shot of the monument—which commemorates patriots who gave their lives for the cause of Italian liberation in the 19th century—and the camera, in a gesture that evokes the movement of someone’s attention, turns toward the base, where we see the mark of a triangle inscribed in the stone step: “and later I noticed in the stone the trace left by a Masonic triangle which the Fascists had torn out.” The mark left in the stone by that triangle, the memory in Fortini’s mind of his younger self before that monument, the written account of that memory, the sound of his voice reading that passage, the image on the screen of that triangular dent still there: all these signs of that missing triangle, in various contexts and with various connotations, are at this point brought together to our notice. The signs of the past are seen to take on a new meaning in each new situation, including our own as spectators invited to make our own connections.

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details captured by Straub and Huillet's camera and microphone are not turned into what is but remain what has been, are to be recognized as things from the past, parts of different wholes, different worlds that no longer are.

Fortini’s father had spoken out against Fascism at the time of its coming to power in the 1920s, had been beaten and arrested, but later he hoped the Fascists would forget about that past and he signed up his son in their youth organization, the “Avanguardisti,” at whose gatherings the boy would see the two sons of his father’s old partner, the lawyer Consolo, who on an October night in 1925 had been killed by the Blackshirts right in his home, in front of his children. As we hear Fortini’s voice recounting this on the soundtrack, we see the Florentine Via dei Servi on the screen. We are not told, but perhaps it was here that the lawyer Consolo was killed, or here that the Avanguardisti gatherings took place, or here that Fortini’s family lived on the floor above Consolo’s widow and children but did not visit them, out of prudence. Our view begins above eye level, at the street sign on the rusticated wall over a corner bar, then pans along the façades until a perspective opens down the street and our eyes can travel into the depth; but at the far end of the street the huge dome of the cathedral brings the perspective to a halt, and the camera now tilts down to eye level and holds the view of the street and its traffic and passersby. If the dome looms large in back, the iron bars of a window now loom large in front, armoring the privacy of a house; if the dome (built by Brunelleschi, inventor of Renaissance perspective) is what we cannot see beyond, the limit of our perspective on public things, the window is what we cannot see into, the limit of our perspective on personal things. We are not told, but perhaps it was here: the story of what happened in the past, what may have happened here, hovers over the present but does not take over, does not appropriate this street as the site of that past. The street keeps its autonomy from the story yet the story resonates in the street, resonates as a possible context for these details we have before us, these parts without a whole, these things without a world.

In its specifics and its generalizations, its personal details and its political concerns, its movement from the Jewish boy in Fascist Florence to the more recent
past of the Middle East, from Israel as potential mediator between the West and the Third World to Israel as complicit with the global interests of capitalism and imperialism, Fortini’s text covers a great deal: much too much for us to assimilate in one hearing. It is characteristic of Straub and Huillet to put us deliberately in the position of not catching everything. They adapted History Lessons (72) from Brecht’s unfinished novel The Business Affairs of Mr. Julius Caesar, and the critic Colin MacCabe complained that “to understand History Lessons you have to know the Brecht novel and the Roman history independently of the film.” When I first saw History Lessons, I hadn’t even heard of the Brecht novel, and what I knew of Roman history I had learned in high school. Nevertheless I was gripped. People around me were walking out (as happens at the New York Film Festival with some of the best films), and I certainly didn’t understand everything, but I understood enough to be gripped. No one would dispute that Straub and Huillet’s films are difficult, but it seems to me that what people find most difficult is giving up the notion that they have to understand everything. Politics is an area in which people have strong opinions about things they don’t know enough about, and it serves a useful political purpose just to make us aware of all that we don’t know.

**Fortini/Cani** compares two distinct moments in history, so that we may consider how words—like any other human expression—are motivated and understood in a concrete situation and circumstance.

A married couple who made films together for more than four decades until her death in 2006, Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub pursued a solitary path in their art. Both of them were born in France (Straub in Lorraine, on the border with Germany), and they might have been associated with the nouvelle vague had they not moved to Germany so that Straub could avoid being drafted into the French army at the time of the Algerian War. Their films speak German, French, and Italian—always the language, the wording of the original work. Their adaptations include a short story by Heinrich Böll in Machorka-Muff (63) and his novel Billiards at Half Past Nine in Not Reconciled, a Corneille tragedy in Othon (70), a Schönberg opera in Moses and Aaron (75) and another in From Today Until Tomorrow (97); Pavese’s Dialogues with Leucò and The Moon and the Bonfires in From the Cloud to the Resistance (79), Kafka’s Amerika in Class Relations (84), two versions of a Hölderlin play in The Death of Empedocles (87) and Black Sin (90), and his and Brecht’s translation of Sophocles in Antigone (92); Cézanne’s reported observations in Cézanne (90) and A Visit to the Louvre (04), the Sicilian novels of Elio Vittorini in Sicily! (99), Workers,
The two filmmakers have been compared to Robert Bresson, who famously disdained theater and called his actors “models” because he didn’t want them to act. But Straub and Huillet, while close to documentary, are seldom far from theater, whether they adapt plays or operas or turn written pages into talkative scenes. Though they keep dramatic enactment in check, their cinematic oratorios are even so a kind of theater performed by actors who may lend their speech uncustomed inflections but still inflect it, may not act naturalistically but still act. Sicily!, for example, is forcefully acted in a mode verging on the operatic and at the same time rooted in material reality. On the screen Straub and Huillet manage to stage texts unsuitable to current theatrical practice or never meant for theater in the first place.

They could be compared to Ozu in the weight they give to scenes of conversation and the way they deploy shots and reverse shots in notable departure from the norm. Except that Ozu arranges his own regular patterns, disregards convention and sets up his own alternative system of shot/reverse shot, whereas Straub and Huillet take an approach more irregular, more about breaking patterns, disrupting expectations. History Lessons is something of an essay in the shot/reverse shot and its expressive variances and anomalies: look at the young man’s conversation with a peasant as opposed to the two he conducts with the banker. Or look at the opening scene of Sicily!. The Sicilian-born protagonist, returning for a visit after many years away, is shown with his back to us, by the Messina harbor, as we cut between him and his interlocutor,
making films at a time when it seemed possible to change the world, to sharpen weapons against, as the knife grinder puts it, those who offend the world. Faithful through the passing years to that revolutionary aspiration, Straub and Huillet bring their film to a stirring close with the protagonist’s hopeful newfound solidarity with the knife grinder.

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Éric Rohmer

*A Biography*

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