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Benoît Turquety, *Danièle Huillet, Jean-Marie Straub: "Objectivists" in Cinema*. Translated by Ted Fendt. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020. 316 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. €109.00 (hb). ISBN 978-94-6372-220-9; €108.99 (eb). ISBN 978-90-4854-306-9.

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Originally published in French in 2009, Benoît Turquety's *Danièle Huillet, Jean-Marie Straub: "Objectivists" in Cinema* is now available to English readers in an elegant and lucid translation by Ted Fendt. The timing for this book, which is part of Amsterdam University Press' acclaimed "Film Culture in Translation" series, is spot-on considering that an increasing number of films from the duo's oeuvre (1962-2006) have recently become available, newly digitized and with English subtitles, through the initiative of the independent distributor and streaming service Grasshopper Film. The renewed interest in Straub and Huillet's work in recent years has led to several book-length publications, among them a volume edited by Fendt and a comprehensive collection of Straub and Huillet's writings, translated by Sally Shafto.[1] The English translation of Turquety's book complements the latter with a more academic approach to the subject, which is long overdue after a good twenty-year-long hiatus of monographic scholarship on Straub and Huillet's films.[2]

Turquety revisits some of the theoretical frameworks that already dominated previous scholarship on the duo's films and practice, from German critical theory to postwar French film criticism and philosophy from writings by Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and Theodor Adorno to Serge Daney, Jean Narboni, Jacques Rivette, and Gilles Deleuze. However, the book's focus and most innovative contribution lie elsewhere. Turquety examines Straub and Huillet's work via the lens of an objectivist poetics, in reference to a group of early twentieth-century American writers whose most prominent representatives included the poets Louis Zukofsky (1904-1978), Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976), and George Oppen (1908-1984). Although the Objectivists formed neither a coherent movement nor subscribed to a common style, "they shared certain ideas and practices" that would not only affiliate them with each other (p. 12), but, as Turquety compellingly argues, with two French filmmakers who worked several decades later under a completely different set of circumstances. Even though this kind of "mirroring" may pose certain "methodological problems," as the author admits at the outset, it is precisely the specific insight that derives from an analysis of "the *forms* and *techniques*--the procedures, their modes of application, and what results--as well as their implications, aesthetics, and politics" Turquety is interested in exploring (p. 13; italics in original).

While this trans-historical, cross-cultural, and inter-medial focus may be less satisfying to readers who demand to understand both the poetry and the films in their respective historical, cultural, and institutional contexts, it is certainly faithful to Straub and Huillet's own creative sensibilities. Throughout their career, the two filmmakers adapted original works from various writers, from the classical to the modernist period, and from various artworks, mediums, and styles (including classical music, painting, photography, and archival imagery), based on the premise that individual creative works or modes of expression can speak to one another across temporal, disciplinary, generic, or geographical boundaries. This includes adaptations in French, German, and Italian of dramas and plays by Pierre Corneille, Friedrich Hölderlin, and Stéphane Mallarmé, operas by Arnold Schoenberg, and novels by Franz Kafka, Maurice Barrès, and Elio Vittorini, among many others. The American Objectivists, likewise, "used quotation abundantly and believed more in rigor, precision, and work than improvisation or automatic writing. They were deeply aware of belonging to a tradition from which they proposed a split while refusing the principle of a tabula rasa" (p. 12). Over the course of seven chapters, Turquety conducts a series of close formal analyses that trace the principles of objectivist poetics throughout Straub and Huillet's extensive body of work. These analyses are complemented by a series of equally compelling examinations of select poems and essays by Zukofsky, Reznikoff, and Oppen, respectively.

Chapter one introduces the reader to Straub and Huillet's basic approach to filmmaking, namely the duo's proclivity for direct quotations of original texts and for an oratory performance style that stresses the original text's materiality, its diction, rhythm, and pace. Turquety picks an excellent example to highlight these foundational aspects by focusing specifically on Straub and Huillet's adaptation of Corneille's *Eyes Do Not Want to Close at All Times, or, Perhaps One Day Rome Will Allow Herself to Choose in Her Turn* (1969), commonly referred to as *Othon* (after the title of Corneille's original play). The film, Turquety points out, has been widely debated for its rigorous treatment of a classical text and "[remains], especially in France, [the duo's] most antagonistic film" (p. 17). The objectivist angle allows Turquety to address and potentially reconcile some of the antagonisms the films have provoked over the years--not only in France. This includes, for instance, the seeming tension between a radical modernist approach to film form and the frequent recourse to the classical canon, to which Turquety responds that Straub and Huillet, indeed, "seem to want to have it both ways: intelligent [non-academic] classicism...and radical novelty" (p. 29). This tension between the old and the new constitutes another important connection to the American objectivist poets who were, in a similarly Benjaminian fashion, drawn to reusing preexisting texts and classical poetic principles to wrest new (and potentially revolutionary) meaning from established formal foundations.[3]

As part of a general overview of Objectivism, chapter two elaborates further on the importance of formal austerity to push poetic practice toward its innate revolutionary potential. Turquety points specifically to Zukofsky to explain how strict methods or classical structures function to illuminate and free "the word" from the "predatory intentions" (or "predatory manifestations") it has accumulated over the course of time and in the context of its specific relation to exterior things (pp. 57-59). To apply a strict formal framework to the creation of an objectivist poem has, thus, "both poetic and moral necessity" (p. 56), for "[a] poem can only have a revolutionary effect [if] the object, the singularity, is simultaneously the exterior thing [and if] the context is in turn simultaneously all of the relations in which the thing is caught (thoughts, feelings, economy, politics, history) and the poetic structure" (p. 60). Turquety addresses these correlations of aesthetics and politics in much greater depth in the book's subsequent second part, under the

heading “Language/Authority.” Chapter three focuses on Straub and Huillet’s adaptation of Arnold Schoenberg’s opera *Moses and Aaron* (1974) which is explicitly about the conflict between understanding the word either in its singular materiality or as part of a broader cultural reference system. Once again, Turquety offers an incredibly detailed textual analysis to show how the film’s rigorous “sense of framing and [its] improbably stable, impeccably firm, extraordinary compositions” translate into an objectivist “refusal of *predatory manifestations*” (p. 78; italics in original).

Throughout the book, Turquety highlights how objectivist principles appear in and operate through cinematic form by highlighting aspects of framing, spatial composition, cinematographic movement, and montage, among many others. This allows for some truly compelling new insights, such as, the proposition that the filmic version of *Moses and Aaron* is no longer consumed by Schoenberg’s original question (which is whether the taboo to turn God into an image is justified or not). Rather, through its specific mode of framing and spatial composition, the film “presents itself as an objective work [that] tends to objectify the opera from within” (p. 122). Thus, without extorting Schoenberg’s original argument, the film becomes “a study of the historicity of language as it exists in revolutionary times,” Turquety writes (p. 96). Chapter four attempts to expound on the connections between *Moses and Aaron* and the Objectivists, although this connection remains somewhat elusive. In fact, the chapter would have made more sense as part of the earlier introduction since it revisits some of the foundational formal procedures in Zukofsky’s work, such as the superimposition of various textual fragments which is equally crucial to Straub and Huillet’s filmmaking practice, yet less overtly so in the case of *Moses and Aaron*. Nevertheless, the chapter provides a great analysis of Zukofsky’s “A”-9, a poem that embeds quotations from Marx’s seminal writings, Spinoza’s *Ethics*, and H. Stanley Allen’s *Electrons and Waves* into the formal structure of Guido Cavalcanti’s “Donna mi prega.” The poem, Turquety argues, turns poetic writing (back) into song, a spoken mode of storytelling that resonates with Benjamin’s “dream of a community of self-forgetful people, where labor is artisanal” and undivided. (p. 145) Undivided, this labor is like love and, as such, it forms “a link to language and things (inseparably) and to power (inseparably) that is real, not transformed into a value relation” (p. 147).[4] These lines prefigure what Turquety considers, in conclusion, Objectivism’s most profound contributions to art: to provide us with “[a] theory of love and an artistic method” and, no less, with “a doctrine of *attention*” (p. 310).

Part three, which only consists of one chapter, explicates the most salient (both poetic and cinematic) procedures and techniques that produce the formal environment necessary to allow this kind of *attention* to thrive. This is done by discussing Straub and Huillet’s films side by side with several poems by Oppen and Reznikoff as well as Zukofsky’s essay on Charles Chaplin’s *Modern Times*. This chapter reveals most explicitly that the Objectivists’ work functions itself as a critical discourse that significantly adds and rejuvenates some of the canonized theoretical approaches that have been applied to Straub and Huillet’s films in the past. This includes, among other things, the ongoing debate about Straub and Huillet’s “Brechtian” sensibilities or the salient role of musical formal modalities that have dominated the critical reception of their films.[5] Thus, rather than to speak of *distanciation* or *alienation* (in reference to Bertolt Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*), Turquety points to concepts such as “the ideogram” or “the fugue,” as well as the creation of “gaps,” “interruptions,” “intervals,” and “stops,” to address how the films both capture and complicate spectatorial attention. This adds, for instance, a new perspective to the famous Driving Shots sequences that appear in the duo’s film *History Lessons* (1972), an adaptation of Brecht’s novel *The Business Affairs of Julius Caesar*. Turquety makes a convincing case that the

continuous shot, filmed out of the backseat of a car that drives through narrow Roman city streets, prompts viewers to alternate their mode of attention, allowing them at times to forget themselves while asking them at other times to direct their focus with renewed intensity onto a scene that constantly changes in front of their eyes. This generates, Turquety argues, less the kind of wholesale critical realization or lesson Brecht had in mind but a dynamic of shock and fascination that derives from the techniques and rhythms of the cinematic device (rather than the “meaning” of Brecht’s original text). In doing so, “[the films] *objectify* the works they start from, apply an additional structure to them, an extra formal layer, excessive in a sense in relation to the original” (p. 221). This relates to the Objectivists “pure desire for objective perfection, pure rhythmic research, pure intelligence freed from the weight of interpretation and intention,” Turquety writes in reference to a statement Zukofsky makes in his own analysis of Chaplin’s cinema (p. 168). This dictum against interpretation or personal commentary constitutes another fundamental principle the Objectivists share with the filmmaking duo: “Personal judgment upsets the film’s movement and diminishes its aesthetic force while damaging its political validity. Cinema (and poetry) is only important if it makes historical events understandable in their full complexity. This is only possible if one renounces passing judgement in order to focus on technical questions alone,” Turquety explains (p. 168).

The refusal to judge informs, furthermore, the practice of dissolving authority among multiple authorial voices, even though, unlike many other experimental practitioners, neither the poets nor the filmmakers renounce narrative storytelling or meaning altogether. Meaning derives instead from the tension between formal restrictions that operate “in counterpoint to a measure introduced from the outside (*cantus firmus*): a narrative and/or discursive text whose development is respected” (p. 232). This referencing of musical terms in regard to Straub and Huillet’s work is itself neither new nor surprising, given the duo’s lifelong intensive engagement with opera and classical music. However, Turquety adds another layer to these critical deliberations by placing these musical (rhythmic, contrapuntal, and fugal) underpinnings into the context of a broader debate about cinema’s intertextual relationship to other art forms. All of the duo’s films, he stresses, highlight “the irreducible difference” between film and other artforms and mediums, as in the case of *Cézanne* (1989), where “the recording on film of a pictorial motif questions the place of cinema—and the primary cinematic tools, photographic, without (subjective effects)—in regard to *seeing*” (p. 208; italics in original).

The final two chapters deepen those discussions by focusing on techniques of cinematic framing and oral performance in films that both reveal and dismantle power structures through the use of formal restrictions and the dissolution of authoritative speech acts. Chapter six focuses on Straub and Huillet’s film *Class Relations* (1983), an adaptation of Franz Kafka’s unfinished novel, *Amerika/The Missing Person*. The film, Turquety argues, transforms the original text into the medium of the trial or testimony. Organized around a strict “strategic point” that anchors the camera in one place throughout the entire length of a scene, Straub and Huillet stage the continued clash between two discourses: a “ritualized [and idealized] site” of law and justice that is continuously displaced by a corrupt system of class hierarchies. The final chapter delves deeper into the disappearance of subjectivity within the framework of witnessing and testimony by focusing on Straub and Huillet’s Hölderlin adaptation, *The Death of Empedocles, or When The Green of The Earth Will Glisten for You Anew* (1985) and the lesser known *Workers, Peasants* (2000), which is based on a novel by Italian author Elio Vittorini. Turquety examines the two films’ testimonial mode in conjunction with Charles Reznikoff’s long-form poem *Testimony*, which dissolves the specific identity of individual witnesses so that only “naked facts are exposed” (p.

290). In *Workers, Peasants*, a group of actors recites Vittorini's text in a non-descript ravine in an Italian forest. While these oral recollections testify to specific processes, rituals, and struggles of the past, and thus to the (historical) reality of class structures and power relations, the cinematic form minimizes any concrete identity of the individual (or the community). What appears instead is "a literal utopia—a geographic non-location, lost in a ravine with no signs specifying it as such" (p. 300). This kind of objectified cinematic framing of a literary text imagines not only a society without class or identity but also a spectator who is ready to give these films his undivided attention: "Watching becomes a labor of love," writes Turquety, "seeing the possibility offered by the desiring dissolution of the self in the objects of the world" (pp. 309-310).

Turquety's study addresses a reader who is inclined to meet his extremely rich explorations with an equally undivided amount of attention. The study's great strength, which is, aside from its innovative approach and thorough research, an incredible amount of close formal readings, will especially appeal to readers who are either familiar with Straub and Huillet's films or well-versed in the terminology and techniques of cinematic texts. The uninitiated reader may have a harder time navigating the sometimes dense, extended shot-by-shot descriptions. The complete lack of images or illustrations is in this regard especially frustrating because their integration could have helped to elucidate some of these matters. Another disappointment is the extremely short index, which remains much too curtailed and inconsistent to offer any significant use. Perhaps to mitigate these shortcomings, each chapter is prefaced by a brief summary and a list of keywords to highlight major concerns, topics, and takeaways. This provides a useful tool to assure that the book, overall, has the potential to interest readers and film viewers, academic and non-academic, across a wide spectrum of disciplinary and creative boundaries.

NOTES

[1] Ted Fendt, ed., *Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet* (Vienna: SYNEMA-Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2016); and Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, *Writings*, ed. and trans. Sally Shafto et al. (New York: Sequence Press, 2016).

[2] Barton Byg, *Landscapes of Resistance: The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Ursula Böser, *The Art of Seeing, the Art of Listening: The Politics of Representation in the Work of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004).

[3] See Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4 (1938-1940), eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[4] See Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007).

[5] See for instance Martin Walsh, *The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1981); Barton Byg, "History Lessons: Brecht's Caesar Novel and the Film by Straub/Huillet," in Marc Silberman, ed., *Essays on Brecht = Versuche über Brecht* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Daniel Fairfax, "Straub/Huillet--Brecht--Benjamin--Adorno," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 29 (2012): 34-49; and Nenad Jovanović, *Brechtian*

Cinemas: Montage and Theatricality in Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Peter Watkins, and Lars von Trier (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017).

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