4. “La Vicariance du Pouvoir” and the Battle of Othon

Abstract
This chapter charts the critical battle that coursed between Cahiers du cinéma and Positif at the turn of the 1970s over the film Othon by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. Of particular importance here was Jean Narboni’s review of the film, “La vicariance du pouvoir,” which defended Straub/Huillet’s adaptation of the Corneille play by invoking the deconstructionist method of Jacques Derrida, as well as André Bazin’s views on the relationship between theater and cinema. Published a few months after Cahiers’ analysis of Young Mr. Lincoln, “La vicariance du pouvoir” can rightly be seen as its pendant, establishing a method for grappling with radical modernist films much as the earlier article did for classical Hollywood films. It likewise marks an early landmark in a lengthy engagement with the work of Straub/Huillet, which continues to the present day.

Keywords: Cahiers du cinéma, Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet, Othon, Positif, Jean Narboni, Jacques Derrida

Cahiers du cinéma and Straub/Huillet: Early Encounters

At the precise moment in 1970 that Cahiers devoted itself to devising a Marxist re-reading of Ford’s 1939 depiction of Lincoln, it was also grappling with Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet’s latest release, an adaptation of Corneille.1 Earlier in the year, Jean-Claude Biette (an actor in the film) had

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1 Straub/Huillet’s film is officially titled Les yeux ne veulent pas en tout temps se fermer, ou Peut-être qu’un jour Rome se permettra de choisir à son tour, but for the sake of expedience it is usually referred to as Othon. In the 1960s and much of the 1970s, Huillet’s status as a co-director of their films was generally overlooked by critics, including those at Cahiers, who referred to Straub as the sole author of these works. Here I will use the binomial term “Straub/Huillet” when
written a short piece on the filming of *Othon*, and in the same issue as the *Young Mr. Lincoln* article a lengthy interview with Straub/Huillet appeared, conducted by the Italian group *Cinematheka*. In the following number (dated October 1970), *Cahiers* published their own interview with the filmmaking couple, accompanied by one of their most important texts of the journal’s Marxist phase, Jean Narboni’s “La vicariance du pouvoir.” Outside of France, Narboni’s article on *Othon* has not resulted in the same lasting impact that the collective text on Ford’s film has had; an English translation was not published until 1990.\(^2\) But for the development of *Cahiers*’ critical “line” in this period, “La vicariance du pouvoir” can be seen as just as important as the Ford analysis. Appearing in successive issues, the articles on Ford and Straub/Huillet function as complements to one another: whereas *Young Mr. Lincoln* is a reasonably straightforward example of a category (e) film, *Othon* addresses modes of critical reading discussed in categories (b) and (c) of the classificatory system established in “Cinéma/idéologie/critique.”\(^3\) Moreover, it is apt that the two filmmakers marshaled for instituting a new critical practice should be Ford and Straub/Huillet: despite working in extremely different filmmaking environments, there are considerable parallels between them, as Tag Gallagher has forcefully argued, and Straub has always avowed his admiration for and debt to Ford.\(^4\) As with Ford, Straub/Huillet’s films have been consistently championed by *Cahiers*, referring to the films they made together, and Straub when referring to texts or statements in interviews made by Straub alone. In textual citations, however, I will preserve the original usage, which frequently mentions Straub alone.

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\(^2\) The title is, however, mistranslated as “Vicarious Power”: “vicariance,” in both English and French, is a biological term referring to the process of species differentiation due to geographical separation. Its use here by Narboni suggests an affinity with Derrida’s notion of “dissemination.” The translations of passages from Narboni’s text I offer in this volume depart markedly from Hafrey’s rendering of his text.

\(^3\) See Comolli/Narboni, “Cinéma/idéologie/critique,” p. 13 [p. 257]. Straub/Huillet’s earlier film *Nicht versöhnt* was specifically given as an example in category (b). The fact that the filmmakers are conscious Marxists would indicate that *Othon* would also be applicable here, but many of the film’s formal and narrative features seem more pertinent to the “against the grain” reading recommended in category (c). In any case, making this distinction was not a question that concerned Narboni when discussing Straub/Huillet’s film.

\(^4\) See Tag Gallagher, “Lacrimae rerum materialized,” in Astrid Ofner (ed.), *Die Früchte des Zorns unter Zärtlichkeit: Werkschau Danièle Huillet und Jean-Marie Straub* (Vienna: Viennale, 2004), pp. 8-33. Among the many plaudits Straub has given to Ford, there is his early declaration that the director, “after having led the American cinema to its apogee (*Two Rode Together*, *The Searchers* and *Horse Soldiers*) and having precipitated its fall (*Liberty Valance*, *Cheyenne Autumn*) has just sublimated it, as we know: *Seven Women!*” Jean-Marie Straub, “Questions aux cinéastes,” *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 185 (December 1966), pp. 123-124, here p. 124.
even in the face of derision from other critics, and the journal’s advocacy has been a major contribution to the widespread acceptance today of the couple’s work.

Unlike Ford, however, Straub/Huillet did not pass through a period of critical purgatory at Cahiers. From their very first short film, Machorka-Muff, their work was positively received by the journal—a response that may have had to do with the couple’s contacts with Parisian cinephile circles, including writers for Cahiers, before their exile to Germany in 1958. Rivette was the first at Cahiers to write on Straub/Huillet, dedicating a short notice to Machorka-Muff, which he called the “first (little) auteurist film in all of post-war German film production,” and reprinting a letter to Straub written in praise of the film by the modernist composer Karlheinz Stockhausen. Delahaye also discussed Straub/Huillet’s debut film, placing them within a “Munich group” of young filmmakers who were reviving German cinema after two decades of post-war malaise. Against the critical consensus in Germany (including Filmkritik, which censured the film for its “sympathetic” depiction of a military general), Delahaye considered Machorka-Muff to be “the most violently anti-militarist film that has ever been made.”

Delahaye’s provisional appraisal of Nicht versöhnt was confirmed in his subsequent reports on the Oberhausen and Berlin film festivals, and the critic quickly became a forceful advocate for Straub/Huillet on the pages of Cahiers, an important task given the film was threatened with legal action by Heinrich Böll’s publishers. An interview with Straub on the occasion of a screening of Nicht versöhnt at Pesaro in 1966 was particularly legendary, with

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5 A well-known photograph, for instance, shows Straub with François Truffaut in 1954. Straub also wrote film criticism during this period, although none of it was published in Cahiers du cinéma. See Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Écrits, ed. Philippe Lafosse and Cyril Neyrat (Paris: Independencia, 2014).

6 Jacques Rivette, “Cinéma et nouvelle musique,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 145 (July 1963), p. 36. The original Stockhausen letter can now be found in Jacques Rivette’s archives, deposited at the Bibliothèque du Film (Paris).


8 Nicht versöhnt was based on the Böll novel Billard um halb zehn, but the author later withdrew permission for his text to be adapted. The film was refused by Oberhausen, giving rise to a petition in support of Straub and other young German filmmakers, but screened out of competition at Berlin as well as at Venice, where it was reviewed by Jean-Claude Biette, who saw affinities with Dreyer and Fritz Lang. See Michel Delahaye, “Oberhausen en trois actes,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 164 (March 1965), pp. 59–62; Michel Delahaye, “Berlin entre deux chaises,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 171 (October 1965), pp. 11–15; and Jean-Claude Biette, “Nicht versöhnt de Jean-Marie Straub (Allemagne),” Cahiers du cinéma no. 171 (October 1965), p. 49.
the filmmaker dubbing the vast majority of cinema “pornography”—understood here as the “parody of reality” and counterposed to “cinema in a naked state.”9 With the film’s Parisian release in 1967, Narboni took up the baton from his colleague. In his short but insightful review “Les temps retrouvés,” Narboni argued that the project of the film was to render history “present to itself” and in particular to posit the possibility of a contemporary resurgence of Germany’s past Nazism through the notion of an “eternal return” of the same motifs and themes from 1870 to the present day.10 Anticipating the argument that the cinema’s “ontological presence” (the reference to Bazin is explicit) could aid Straub/Huillet in this undertaking, Narboni instead argues that it “thwart[s] the political will of the author,” and it is Straub/Huillet’s stubborn insistence on operating against the dispositions offered by their own art that prompts the highly lacunary narrative model of the film, defined as “a kind of accumulation of successive moments, a ‘suspense’ in the chemical sense of the word, a crystalline state identical to that of the filmic matter itself.”11

Much of Narboni’s review was inspired by comments Straub himself gave to Cahiers. The filmmaker made many appearances in the journal throughout the second half of the 1960s, which took the form not only of interviews but also letters and public statements. A fecund, ongoing dialogue between the filmmaking couple and Cahiers was thus established. Narboni’s description of Nicht versöhnt as a “lacunary” film, for instance, was drawn from Straub’s missive “Frustration de la violence,” in which, having stated “I risked making a lacunary film,” he quoted the Littré dictionary definition of the term: “Lacunary body, a body composed of agglomerated crystals which produce intervals between themselves.”12 A similar communiqué on Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach was published in the September 1967 issue, where Straub defined his intention to make “a film in which we would utilize music, neither as accompaniment, nor as commentary, but as aesthetic material.”13 In December the same year, Straub even contributed a fiery

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11 Ibid.
article to the journal’s dossier on Dreyer, attesting to the Dane’s influence on his own uncompromising approach to film.  

Along with Delahaye and Narboni, Jean-Claude Biette (who wrote intermittently for Cahiers while based in Italy in the 1960s) also covered Straub/Huillet’s work, penning articles on Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter and Othon. With Othon, Biette called on his own experiences as an actor in the film in order to discuss Straub’s decision “to have Corneille’s alexandrines spoken by the greatest possible diversity of accents, perhaps in order to explode the great unity of the classical verse, and in order that the voluntary, systematic frugality of Corneille’s vocabulary should be redistributed in the most varied, individualized voices possible.” Biette stresses that Straub had nonetheless eradicated every possibility of improvisation, both in terms of performance (the film’s actors underwent three months of daily rehearsals) and in terms of staging (the scenes were carefully blocked out, the framing and camera movements meticulously prepared), thereby replacing the “explosive liberty” of Marc’O or Věra Chytilová with the “methodical, microcosmic repetition of a repressive structure.” Such an approach allowed, in Biette’s view, for “multiple, anonymous traces” buried within each actor to come to light.  

“La vicariance du pouvoir”: Deconstructing Corneille

Biette’s account of Othon, along with the twin interviews with Straub/Huillet published by Cahiers, formed the primary contextual material for Narboni’s response to the film in “La vicariance du pouvoir.” The other decisive framework for this text was the newly prominent theory of Jacques Derrida. In relation to the analytic method of “Young Mr. Lincoln“ de John Ford,” which was influenced by Althusser, Barthes and Lacan, “La vicariance du pouvoir” inflects the theoretical prism towards Derridean deconstruction. In 1970, these interpretative methods were not necessarily seen as being theoretically or politically antagonistic. Rather, they were understood by Cahiers to complement, challenge and develop each other. Indeed, Derrida himself—whose fully-fledged break with the Marxist tradition would not

14 Jean-Marie Straub, “Féroce,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 207 (December 1968), p. 35. This text, and Cahiers’ broader outlook on Dreyer, will be discussed further in Chapter 16.

come until later in the 1970s—was perfectly happy to publish his work in an avowedly Marxist-Leninist journal, Tel Quel. And yet contradictions are apparent between the two approaches: whereas in the Young Mr. Lincoln article the Cahiers writers were unabashed in their willingness to “force” the meaning of the film, Narboni, at the outset of his response to Othon, questions the very existence of an “ultimate signified” or a “primary truth” in Straub/Huillet’s films and instead, drawing from Derrida’s discussion of Rousseau’s Confessions in De la gramma­tologie, argues that there is a “logic of substitution and supplementarity” at work in the Corneille adaptation.16 The ensuing text is a demanding, theoretically dense piece which rhetorically mimics the works it discusses: not only was Straub/Huillet’s film often accused of illegibility (a charge refuted by Narboni), but Derrida was also notorious for his paratactic, allusive writing style. In this sense, however, Narboni’s response to Othon is something of an outlier in his critical corpus: his articles for Cahiers are generally written in a more limpid style, and he admits that the Othon piece is “the only text of mine inspired by Derrida.”17 While Derrida became a major point of reference for Cahiers in the years 1970-1971, other texts invoking his theories tended to be written by Daney, Bonitzer or Oudart rather than Narboni.

Narboni insists that Othon possesses a radical quality that makes “almost the entirety of what is presently proposed in the name of the cinema” appear to be “in decline and aging.” But the radical character of the film exists en creux, by what it is not. Straub/Huillet’s project is characterized by what it deprives film criticism of, namely: a subject, as the creative authority of the film (the auteur), a theme (the film’s “meaning effects” come from its writing process rather than the expression of a content) and, finally, style—Straub/Huillet’s aesthetic is marked by a distinct lack of ornamentation or symbolism. It is for this reason that what Narboni calls the “sites of obscurantist resistance” within the French critical world rejected the film so brutally, attacking its “imposture, hermeticism, illegibility.” Against this attitude, the critic calls for films such as Othon to “penetrate into a field of wider readability.”18 He cautions, however, against the idea that Othon could be

17 Interview with Jean Narboni, March 18, 2014.
18 These quotes are from Narboni, “La vicariance du pouvoir,” p. 43 [p. 151].
spontaneously received by marginalized or oppressed layers of society—an illusion to which Straub himself sometimes succumbed.\textsuperscript{19} Referring to Bourdieu/Passeron’s study of the “sociology of aesthetic perception,” which argued that workers relate to artistic products on the basis of an “absent bourgeois culture,” Narboni contends that in the present political context, a film such as \textit{Othon} is primarily apt to penetrate into the “petty-bourgeois intellectual layers wishing to align themselves with Marxist positions” (a category in which both the readers and writers of \textit{Cahiers} itself are included), at the same time as being unequivocally rejected by those “holders of bourgeois knowledge who are definitively attached to their codes and conditioning.”\textsuperscript{20} It is thus by fracturing its petty-bourgeois audience along ideological lines—forcing it to choose either the camp of the proletariat (a Marxist critical practice) or the camp of the capitalist class (“obscurantist reaction”)—that the film, for Narboni, finds its political potency.

In charting Straub/Huillet’s desire to make a “film on aphasia” in which the “eloquence” of Corneille’s original play is “strangled” and “reduced to silence,” Narboni’s focus rests on the \textit{dispositif} established by the filmmakers, in particular their choice to give the play’s roles to actors who, for the most part, do not speak French as their native language. Following Biette, Narboni argues against viewing this technique as an instance of “anarchic improvisation” or willed disorder, which in his view, would merely result in exchanging the petty-bourgeois “fantasy of control” for a still more derisory delusion of unhinged chaos. Instead, this strategy works to “sterilize” the film of all “expressivity, emotive nuances, smoothness, oratory, rubato, interiorization and psychology,” privileging instead the mass and density of the speech act itself, the rhythm and timbre of the voices of the on-screen figures reciting Corneille’s text. Additionally, Straub/Huillet’s method has the effect that the “scene” of the filmic representation is no longer dominated by a “speech [\textit{parole}] which commands it”; rather, the utterance (\textit{énoncé}) is transformed into a “desire of the voice […] for the \textit{énoncé(r)}.”\textsuperscript{21} Here Narboni insists that the work on vocal enunciation

\textsuperscript{19} Straub had harbored plans to project the film on 16mm to factory workers, but this quixotic idea was never realized. See Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, interviewed by Joel Rogers, “Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet Interviewed: Moses and Aaron as an Object of Marxist Reflection,” \textit{Jump Cut} no. 12-13 (December 1976), pp. 61-64.


\textsuperscript{21} Narboni’s term “\textit{énoncé(r)}” is an untranslatable pun based on the homophony between the past participle \textit{énoncé} (utterance), a standard term in Saussurean semiology, and the ininfinitive version of the verb (\textit{énoncer}), “to utter.”
in the film takes the form of “light condensations and displacements” (a conscious allusion to the mechanisms of the dream-work in Freud’s *Traumdeutung*). Citing Derrida’s article “La dissemination,” the Cahiers critic argues that *Othon* triggers a “power of inscription no longer merely verbal, but phonic. Polyphonic.” The film’s polyphonic quality stems above all from its wide range of speech registers and vocal cadences, varying from the near-naturalistic performances of some actors to what Richard Roud has called the “gabbling” of others.

In turning to the relationship between cinema and theater in the film, Narboni insists on the possibility of glimpsing a “general materialist writing practice,” which is counterposed to what he sees as the historically failed conception of “engaged art” in the Sartrean sense. This writing practice explodes the standard opposition in the “bourgeois ideology of art” between “servile naturalism” and its “banal formalist inversion.” While it is of necessity connected with the broader social reality, it should be conceived not as the passive reflection of this reality but as being capable of “producing contradictions and meaning effects” with respect to it. Invoking Derrida’s notion of the “cast-aside-reference, the being aside [la référence écartée, être à l’écart],” Narboni locates examples of this materialist writing in the work of Eisenstein, Mallarmé and Artaud (in cinema, poetry and theater respectively) but considers that its most advanced contemporary formulation is to be found precisely in the films of Straub/Huillet, and in particular in the dialectic generated between the theatrical scene and its cinematic equivalent in *Othon*. Refusing the idea of a two-stage process by which the Corneille text is first staged for the theater and then “adapted” to the cinema, Narboni argues that “the film, in a single operation, unites the construction of a theatrical scene and its cinematic transformation, it simultaneously effectuates a theatrical set-up and its subversion.” Here, Derrida’s notion of the supplement is germane: if the supplement draws on the double meaning of the French word to refer to a process of both addition and substitution,
then the relationship between theater and cinema in *Othon*, as Narboni describes it, can indeed be said to be one of supplementarity.

**The Logic of the Supplement: Derrida *avec* Bazin**

It is at this point in the article that Narboni takes what he calls a “historical detour.” Having deployed Derrida, Schefer, Mallarmé and Artaud to discuss Straub/Huillet, Narboni now turns to Bazin, and particularly the text “Théâtre et cinéma.” For those adhering to the idea that *Cahiers* under Comolli/Narboni was “anti-Bazinian,” the terms in which Narboni speaks of his forebear are surprising. He considers “Théâtre et cinéma” to possess “extreme perspicacity and systematic rigor,” judging Bazin to be “well in advance of today’s general film criticism,” to the extent that many of the reproaches directed at *Othon* are already “foreseen, inscribed and deconstructed” by the critic, writing years before the film was released. Indeed, we can most fruitfully understand *Othon*—and Straub/Huillet’s œuvre more generally—as a materialist application in filmmaking practice of some of the key precepts of Bazin’s theory not only on the adaptation of theatrical works to the cinema but also, more fundamentally, on the implications of the ontological realism of the cinematic image for film technique. In Straub/Huillet’s case, this pertains to the filmmakers’ predilection for long-takes, filming in natural settings, intransigent insistence on synchronized sound, and the performances they draw from their actors, who are more often than not non-professionals. It was precisely this Bazinian core in the couple’s work that attracted the *Cahiers* critics of the post-1968 period, but Narboni does not argue for a direct, unambiguous relationship between Bazin and the directors of *Othon*. Rather, in Narboni’s view, Straub/Huillet operate a “displacement” of Bazin’s theory, one that “is none other than the essential *almost-nothing* that separates idealism, in one of its most coherent manifestations, from materialism.”

While rejecting the “filmed theater” of the cinema’s early years, Bazin also disparages the idea that introducing overt “signs” of cinematic specificity into the filmed adaptation of a play is a commendable formal maneuver. Instead, he advocates the injection of “aesthetic catalysts” in “infinitesimal doses” into the *mise en scène* of the film in order to “guarantee its truth,” giving as examples of this strategy the noise of a windscreen wiper in *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*, the “pellet of real earth” in *La Passion de Jeanne*

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d’Arc or a branch rustling in the breeze in *Die Nibelungen*. A more radical approach, and one for which Bazin evinces still more enthusiasm, is that adopted by filmmakers such as Laurence Olivier (*Henry V*), Orson Welles (his versions of *Macbeth* and *Othello*) and Jean Cocteau (the self-adaptation *Les Parents terribles*), in which, far from seeking to minimize or mask the theatrical provenance of the films, their theatrical quality is highlighted and accentuated precisely by means of their cinemactic *mise en scène*. In Bazin’s view, Cocteau, for instance, “understood that he must not add anything to his décor, that the cinema was not there to multiply it but to intensify it.”

For Narboni, the value of Straub/Huillet’s adaptation of Corneille lies in the fact that “in the same movement, in a single gesture” they both “interrogate and threaten” Bazin’s propositions. Narboni focuses on (and cites three times) a key phrase plucked from “Théâtre et cinéma,” which, he argues, encapsulates Bazin’s “classical” ontology, to wit: “The cinema being by essence a dramaturgy of nature, there can be no cinema without the construction of an open space, substituting itself for the universe instead of being included in it.” This notion of the cinema “substituting itself” for the natural universe is, in Narboni’s view, threatened by “the logic of supplementarity” elaborated by Jacques Derrida, a logic which, as outlined above, conceives of the supplement as both a process of addition and substitution. In the case of Straub/Huillet, the supplement arises in their act of showing a “representation in the process of its own making [en train de se faire],” an operation that allows for the superimposition of the film’s “theatrical scene” and its “cinematic scene,” with each scene “inscribing” the other, “which at the same time exceeds it and overflows it.” Narboni detects examples of “aesthetic catalysts” at work in *Othon*—focusing in particular on one of the most controversial elements of Straub/Huillet’s film: the images and sounds of cars and airplanes in the background of shots purportedly taking place in ancient Rome—but he insists that these do not play the role for which Bazin conceived the notion. If this were the case, they would merely

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28 *ibid.*


30 *ibid.* The phrase is a direct allusion to the subtitle of Godard’s *La Chinoise* (1967): *un film en train de se faire.*
function as “effects of the real” (in Barthes’ sense), which would serve to reinforce the scene’s realism (whether in the historical or the ontological sense). Instead, they undo this sense of realism, deconstruct it, and thereby “insert into the closed representation an openness towards its unlimited exteriority, as limited marks worked by the infinity of exteriority (history).”

This superimposition of the two “scenes” of Othon, following Derrida’s logic of the supplement, can be perceived above all in the idiosyncratic verbal enunciation found in the film, the pauses, gaps and hesitations that dismember Corneille’s verse, rendering it alien by uncoupling its component lexical units and reuniting them along new syntactical and metrical lines. But it also takes place in the relationship between the structure of the play and the film’s découpage. Although the film reproduces the dialogue of the play virtually to the letter, Straub nonetheless noted that: “The découpage of the film in 69 shots […] contradicts the construction of Corneille in a five-act tragedy, and adds itself to it. For the first four acts the blocking is cinematic and the découpage rather theatrical (as in Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach and the first part of Der Bräutigam), whereas for the fifth act the blocking is theatrical and the découpage more cinematic.” Narboni latches onto this statement in order to posit that there is always, throughout Othon, “one scene in addition to the other, one scene on top of the other,” and in this sense, Straub/Huillet’s aesthetic method is an uncanny likeness of Corneille’s play, in which there is “one role, one postulant too many (Othon and/or Pison) for a place, not yet empty, at the head of the Empire (Galba).”

Whereas Narboni seeks to deploy Derrida in order to deconstruct the idealist metaphysics that is supposedly at the heart of Bazinian theory, we may ask if this operation does not, in fact, already take place in Bazin himself—and above all, precisely in “Théâtre et cinéma.” Indeed, Derrida’s efforts, in De la grammatologie, to overturn the hierarchies of such “logocentric” binaries as speech/writing, original/copy and absence/presence are curiously foreshadowed in Bazin’s text. The last dichotomy, in particular, comes in for a highly nuanced discussion. Invoking the notion of the photographic image as a “trace” (itself a term with Derridean echos),

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34 Ibid.
Bazin refutes the notion that the cinema cannot place the spectator in the physical presence of the actor and argues for the existence of a “possible intermediate between presence and absence,” noting that “philosophers and aestheticians” have not yet adequately taken stock of the “subsistence” of presence on the movie-screen. At the same time, and again prefiguring Derrida’s vocabulary, he recognizes the existence of “an indefinable supplement of pleasure that real representation [in the theater] dispenses to me.” When it comes to the relationship between Bazin and Derrida, then, the logic of the supplement works both ways.

Of still more pertinence for the post-1968 Cahiers is Narboni’s assertion of the “almost nothing” separating the materialism of Straub/Huillet’s filmmaking practice from the “idealism” of Bazin’s theory: this is not only a conceptual framework that will persist in Cahiers’ critical reception of Straub/Huillet’s work throughout the 1970s, it is also a notion that ramifies throughout the journal’s critical project during this time. It is particularly striking that, of the contemporary filmmakers defended on the pages of Cahiers during the late 1960s and 1970s, a large number of them—Rivette, Garrel, Jancsó, Rocha, Kramer, Perrault, Duras and, above all, Godard—can in their own ways be considered, like Straub/Huillet, to be “Bazinian materialists,” and this proclivity continues in these writers’ attitudes to more contemporary directors, with neo-Bazinian directors such as Pedro Costa, Abbas Kiarostami and Jia Zhang-ke tending to find favor in the former Cahiers writers’ critical judgements.

The Battle of Othon

“La vicariance du pouvoir” did not appear in a critical void. Othon was not released in France until January 1971, but festival screenings at Cannes and New York had already earned it a significant amount of derision, if not vituperative condemnation, from critics whose adverse response to the film inspired, to a large degree, Narboni’s spirited defense of Straub/Huillet. The

35 Bazin, “Théâtre et cinéma,” pp. 91-92 [p. 185]
37 A later review by Gaston Haustrate (“Le cas Straub,” Hébdo Témoignage Chrétien, January 28, 1971), in speaking of “the impostor Straub, this disciple/victim of the bedroom Marxism-Leninism and pathological esotericism of Cahiers du cinéma,” so infuriated the journal that they printed the piece in full and “refuted” it with a long extract from Barthes’ Critique et vérité. See La Rédaction, “Nouvelles de l’idéologie dominante,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 228 (March-April 1971), pp. 63-64.
previous month (September 1970) had seen Positif publish a disdainful review of the film by Michel Ciment, who labeled Othon a “perfectly reactionary exercise” that had transformed Corneille’s “reflection on the fine arts of governing and marrying into an abstruse, 90-minute long recital,” and which could only be defended by a “fistful of terrorist cheerleaders in Rome, Paris, Munich, New York and London.” In “La vicariance du pouvoir,” Narboni took specific umbrage at this philippic, dubbing it a “sublimated concentration of a decadent, depressed non-reading.” The divergent opinions on the film appositely encapsulated the differing critical positions of the two publications. While Cahiers moved from its rightist dalliances towards a Marxist-Leninist political perspective in the 1960s, Positif retained the left-surrealism that had characterized its outlook since its founding in 1954—and even took glee in mocking its rival for the precipitous swerves in its political orientation. The competing journals had achieved a certain détente in the years 1967-1968, refraining from overt attacks and promoting each other’s “semaines,” but the heightened political stakes of the post-May period and Cahiers’ increasing concern with Althusserian and Lacanian theory revived Positif’s propensity to hurl sarcastic barbs at its counterpart, a practice that was denounced in Cahiers as a form of qualunquismo (populist anti-intellectualism) that evinced “an idea of relations between the journals that was rather close to the Oxford-Cambridge rivalry in British academia.”

1970 saw a sharpening of this debate. In his article “Le cinéma dans la politique,” published in February, Louis Seguin delivered a critique of both Cinéthique and Cahiers. Although he is, in the end, more favorable to Cahiers, judging that “their competence easily dismantled the maladroit mechanicism of Cinéthique” to such an extent that “we quickly have a sentiment of malaise before the crushing of the weaker party, so great is the disproportion of forces,” Seguin nonetheless adopts a tone of condescending superiority towards both journals, reproving them for their “pink” political coloration, which is overly proximate, in his eyes, to the positions of the Parti communiste français (PCF). Seguin censures Cahiers as “fervent Althusserians” who insist on remaining “with prudence and complexity on a purely theoretical terrain.” Seguin's article would prove to be a mild rejoinder, however, when compared to his later contribution “Sur une petite bataille d’Othon” (co-authored with

Ciment), an article that appeared in the same December issue as Benayoun’s rebarbative diatribe against Cahiers, “Les enfants du paradigme.”

Seguin/Ciment’s article was specifically intended as a riposte to “La vicariance du pouvoir.” Insisting that Cahiers’ Marxist theory rests on the “simplistic” notion that “since contemporary film language is a bourgeois language, nothing can be said in the cinema without destroying this language,” Ciment/Seguin conclude that this standpoint excludes not only the content of films but also the economic and social conditions in which they are made. In similar fashion, Narboni’s decidedly pragmatic recognition that Othon will primarily find an audience among radicalizing sections of the petty-bourgeois intelligentsia, rather than the workers and peasants to whom Straub had dreamed the film could be shown, is interpreted as a “phantasm of […] cultural restriction [that] covers over the reality of the political tactics of the P.C.F.,” with the Positif critics deploying the analogy that, “just as for the P.C.F. the working class is not ripe for the revolution, so for Cahiers it is not ripe for the cinema.” Cut off, in the absence of any alternative practice recommended by Cahiers, from culture (and even from “all real communication”), the working class is thereby abandoned “to television and De Funès.” Cahiers’ present critical practice, however, is not only associated with the “revisionist” politics of the PCF. It is also seen to be drawn from the journal’s own political heritage. Whether “reactionaries, Gaullists or revisos,” its critics have “always manifested the same sovereign contempt for explicitly political cinema,” and as a piece of evidence, Positif makes the dubious move of quoting at length from Comolli’s 1962 disquisition “Vivre le film,” a text from which the Comolli of 1970 would certainly have taken his distance. In opposition to the “revolutionary snobbism” of Straub and Narboni, the Positif critics speak favorably of the “third cinema” of Solanas and Espinosa, who concretely base their film technique on “the means, the theme and the intended spectators,” and Seguin/Ciment also count films as diverse as There Was a Crooked Man, Tell ’em Willie Boy Is Here and Le peuple et ses fusils as positive models of political cinema.

43 Ibid., p. 3. The quotation-marks around the “C” in the French Communist Party’s initials were frequently used by the far left to denote the PCF’s purported abandonment of communism, a practice that would be adopted by Cahiers itself when the journal made its Maoist turn. De Funès was a popular French actor known for starring in low-brow comic films in the 1950s-1960s.
44 Ibid., p. 4. “Reviso” was an informal shortening of the word “revisionist” and thus commonly used to refer to the PCF and its allies by those who were to the left of the party.
45 Ibid., pp. 5-6.
Cahiers predictably considered the dedication of 26 of the 72 pages in Positif's December 1970 issue to polemics against it to be a “calumnious campaign,” and in his response, Narboni critiqued Ciment’s journal for “obscurantism” and the “imposture” of “refusing, in the field of ideological/cultural struggle, the relative specificity of this struggle and of the site where it is inscribed.” Resisting the idea that the battle over Straub/Huillet was simply the continuation of an age-old quarrel between Cahiers and Positif, he loftily declared that “the good old days are dead. [...] The real debate is today taking place in a field from which Positif, in spite of its attempt to feed off of it, finds itself, due to its regressive practice, excluded.”46 This rebuttal also had the effect, however, of closing off any further debate with Positif over Othon. From this point, the forum for Cahiers to discuss the film was the communist cultural milieu. In part thanks to the filmmakers’ own political leanings, Straub/Huillet's Corneille adaptation found a warmer reception among PCF-aligned critics than it did in many other quarters. At the time of the film’s release, both L'Humanité and the party's arts weekly Les Lettres françaises (edited by Louis Aragon) published interviews with Straub and dedicated positive, if occasionally condescending, reviews by François Maurin and Marcel Martin respectively.47 It was in the cultural monthly La Nouvelle Critique, however, that the film was most favorably looked upon. The shared interest in Straub/Huillet's film was only one of the factors drawing Cahiers and the PCF-journal close to one another during this period, a rapprochement that will be more fully discussed in Part II. Jean-André Fieschi, a former Cahiers critic who left the journal at the dawn of the May 1968 protests and joined the Communist Party, had become one of the main film critics for La Nouvelle Critique and in November 1970 gave Othon an enthusiastic review, judging it to be a “difficult film, but only insofar as a (formal and moral) gambit is pushed to the extremes of its rigor—demanding an alert attentiveness, whose reward is equal to the effort solicited.”48

47 See Jean-Marie Straub, interviewed by François Maurin, “À propos d’un film controversé: Entretien avec Jean-Marie Straub,” L’Humanité, January 1, 1971; Jean-Marie Straub, interviewed by Marcel Martin, “Jean-Marie Straub: Balayez-moi tout ça!,” Les Lettres françaises, January 13, 1971; François Maurin, “La voie de la facilité,” L’Humanité, January 16, 1971; and Marcel Martin, “À titre ‘expérimental,’” Les Lettres françaises, January 13, 1971. Maurin appreciated the approach but judged the end-product to be unconvincing, while Martin asserted that “for want of seeing it as a political film, with Othon we can still take the pleasure of a visual and verbal magic that Straub does not consider to be in contradiction with his didactic aspirations.”
afterwards, a round table on *Othon* was organized by the journal involving Fieschi, Narboni and PCF-affiliated theater specialists Richard Demarcy, Maurice Goldring and Aimé Guedj. The proceedings were not published until April 1971, well after the film’s commercially unsuccessful Parisian run.49 Here, although the tone of the debate is refreshingly cordial, opinions on the film were nonetheless divided: while Fieschi and Narboni avidly championed *Othon*, both Guedj and Goldring admitted to being initially irritated during their viewing before adopting a more positive response to the film. Richard Demarcy, meanwhile, expressed more persistent reservations about Straub/Huillet’s method, and the contretemps between him and Fieschi/Narboni would dominate the discussion.

Demarcy argued that Straub, “by privileging the text, willingly cuts himself off from a signifying scenic discourse,” and gives the example of a shot in the film of a grotto where communist partisans had stored weapons during World War II (a political context that can only be known with recourse to statements from Straub/Huillet). Comparing the filmmakers unfavorably to Brecht’s version of *King Lear* and Patrice Chéreau’s staging of *Richard II* for the Théâtre de France,50 Demarcy deemed the formal work in *Othon* to be “uncontrolled, confusing, contradictory and illegible.”51 Fieschi opposed his *Nouvelle Critique* colleague: while accepting that Straub/Huillet’s system was not “uncriticizable” (and giving credit to the idea that their work is “elitist”), he argued against the notion of an “equivalence of signs between the theatrical expressive system and the cinematic expressive system” and accused Demarcy of equating the “signs” in the film with “symbols.” Fieschi insisted that “signification is born, here, from the relations between signs and from the series of signs, not from pure and simple addition.” He thus called for a “musical reading” of *Othon*, in addition to the standard narrative/dramaturgical approaches to reading a film.52 Narboni, unsurprisingly, also defended Straub/Huillet, arguing that, in contrast to Chéreau, they position themselves “outside of any attempt to ‘express meaning’”; instead, their film “produces a new distribution of the play, following a different [signifying] economy,” which involves both the

50 Patrice Chéreau’s production of the Shakespeare play screened on French television in February 1970. While originally active as a theater and opera director, Chéreau turned to filmmaking in the mid-1970s and is known for works such as *La Reine Margot* (1994) and *Intimacy* (2001).
51 Demarcy, in ibid., p. 63.
52 Ibid., pp. 63, 65-66.
The theatrical scene, the Representation, is never abolished, drowned in an overload of cinematic effects, but maintained—not in its opposite (which would encompass it), but at the same time as its opposite (the cinematic work). Here, once more, there are two texts, which neither cancel each other out nor constrain each other; they are simply, each one in its own turn, legible inside each other.55

Straub/Huillet and Cahiers du cinéma: A Long Engagement

The “battle of Othon” proved to be one of the most memorable polemics in the history of Cahiers. In essence, it is a battle that its critics have not ceased waging. The journal’s critical support for Straub/Huillet was enduring, and its writers continue to speak highly of their films to the present day. Alongside Godard’s output, they saw Straub/Huillet’s work as one of the major sites of a truly political film practice, presenting it in these terms in texts such as “Film/politique (2)” by Comolli (which counterposed Othon to the negative example of Costa-Gavras’ L’Aveu) and Bonitzer’s “La ‘Réalité’ de la dénotation.” The journal was also willing to publish Straub/Huillet’s own writings: in November 1971, Cahiers printed a letter from Straub consisting of a “montage of texts” (his response to a questionnaire from the Italian film magazine Filmcritica, a translation of a passage from Eisenstein, and a bilingual version of a poem by Brecht on theater) in which he advocated a mode of film criticism—one that, as he noted, even Cahiers was not practicing—that would analyze “the means (including TV) of (non-)production

53 Narboni, in ibid., p. 64.
54 Ibid., pp. 64-65.
55 Ibid., p. 66.
and (non-)distribution of anesthetizing or toxic (film) products.” Shortly afterwards, in 1972, Straub/Huillet’s shooting script for Geschichtsunterricht also appeared on the pages of the journal. It is commonly accepted that, during Cahiers’ “hardline” Marxist-Leninist phase, virtually the only filmmakers who still found grace in the journal’s eyes were Straub/Huillet and Godard. Indeed, in the aftermath of this period, Bonitzer would dedicate an article to “J.-M.S.” (Jean-Marie Straub) and “J.-L.G.,” (Jean-Luc Godard) defining them as the “two extremes of cinematic modernity.” But the reality is more nuanced than this: other films were defended during the journal’s Maoist phase, while the years 1973 and 1974 also saw the journal remain relatively taciturn about Straub/Huillet’s work. The release of Moses und Aron in 1975, however, led Cahiers to publish a flurry of texts relating to the film; for the next half-decade at least, Straub/Huillet’s work again became central to the journal’s critical project as it negotiated new paths for articulating politics and cinema.

This question came to the fore in Serge Daney’s article “Un tombeau pour l’œil”: written for the July-August 1975 issue, it was, surprisingly, the first text written by a Cahiers critic to be solely dedicated to a Straub/Huillet film since “La vicariance du pouvoir” five years earlier. Daney’s piece focuses on Einleitung zu Arnold Schönbergs Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielscene, made in tandem with their adaptation of Schönberg’s opera, but the critic uses the short film to open up a wide-ranging discussion about the couple’s filmmaking method. For Daney, Straub/Huillet’s entire œuvre is governed by a “master idea” that is already spelled out in their early film of the same name: not reconciled. This stance constitutes an approach to the cinema that leads Straub/Huillet towards what Daney calls a “refusal of all forces of homogenization” and a “generalized practice of disjunction.” Such a practice finds itself instantiated not only in the “filmic heterogeneity” present in Einleitung (the irreconcilable montage between images of historical atrocities and the letters between Schönberg, Kandinsky and Brecht read out on

57 Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, “Leçons d’histoire (d’après Les affaires de Monsieur Jules César de Bertolt Brecht): découpage avant tournage,” Cahiers du cinéma no. 241 (September-October 1972), pp. 46-66. In the position platform “Quelles sont nos tâches sur le front culturel?: Projet de plate-forme,” published in the following issue of Cahiers (no. 242-243, November-December 1972-January 1973, pp. 5-25), the journal criticized itself for having published the script “without presentation or justification of any sort, precisely due to our incapacity to clearly demarcate our position in relation to this film, and to the ‘avant-garde’ in general” (p. 6).
the soundtrack) but also, more importantly, in Straub/Huillet’s “staging” of the voice-over readings themselves. The announcers in the film are Günter Straschek and Peter Nestler, and their manner of speech, as Daney observes, betrays the fact they are “not ‘speakers,’ not even simulacra of speakers.”59 We see them reading out the correspondence in the recording studio, surrounded by “recording devices” [appareils], as they make use of their own “enunciation apparatus”: their voices.60 In counterpoint to these voices is the archival footage shown in the film and in particular a pair of images depicting the corpses of murdered Communards and an American B52 conducting bombing raids during the Vietnam War. For Daney, these are “images produced by naked power, the power of repression and genocide,” and the film’s method consists of excising from such images that power which “would like us no longer to be surprised by them.” It is this that makes every shot of the film, in Daney’s evocative language, “a gravesite for the eye.”61

Daney’s article accompanied an interview with the filmmakers, while the following issue of Cahiers was largely devoted to Moses und Aron, with the journal publishing the English critic Gregory Woods’ diary of the film shoot, another interview with the filmmakers, a dialogue from the film, and an article praising Straub/Huillet’s work by none other than Louis Seguin, who had quit Positif over political differences the previous year.62 In 1977, the release of Fortini/Cani, which completed Straub/Huillet’s “Jewish trilogy,” garnered similar coverage from Cahiers: the script to the film was again published in the journal, and Narboni, who had resumed writing for Cahiers after a post-1973 hiatus, provided a review. Returning to Straub’s definition of Nicht versöhnt as a “lacunary body composed of agglomerated crystals,” Narboni judges that Straub/Huillet’s new film is composed of “lapidary inscriptions, sites of memory, shards of time immured in stone, landscapes, mountains, monuments, ossuaries. And each shot […] is itself a stone.” As with his treatment of Othon, Narboni again has recourse to Mallarmé—in particular, the poet’s line from Un coup de dès n’abolira jamais le hasard

60 Ibid., p. 31.
61 Ibid., p. 35.
that “nothing will have taken place but the place”—and defines Straub/Huillet’s “topographical” filmmaking method as “a meticulous research of the place.”

Returning to Othon, the Cahiers critic discloses that Barthes’ discussion of “writing aloud” was inspired by a viewing of the Corneille adaptation but asserts that, in filming the author Franco Fortini reading extracts from his 1967 book, I cani del Sinaï, it is not the “pleasure of the voice’s grain” that is emphasized but “the effect on the character of listening to his own reading, of listening to himself speak: an effect of astonishment, stupor, non-recognition, or of adhesion and the already-heard.”

Following on from “Un tombeau pour l’œil,” Daney returned to Straub/Huillet’s work with a commentary on Dalla nubia alla resistenza for Cahiers in 1979, in which he introduced the term of the “Straubian shot,” defined as “the product, or rather the remains (the remainder), of a triple resistance: that of texts to bodies, places to texts and bodies to places.” Reviews for Libération followed of Klassenverhältnisse and Trop tôt, trop tard, in the latter of which the critic perceived that the main “actor” of the film is the landscape and affirmed that the essence of Straub/Huillet’s art is their search for the “moral point” from which a given scene demands to be filmed.

Perhaps the most poignant response to their work by a Cahiers critic, however, was Comolli’s 2010 retrospective look at Othon for Les Lettres françaises. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, Straub/Huillet’s film is far from being dated or formally stale. Rather, it is an enduring perceptual challenge to the “accelerated whirligig of images and sounds” that characterizes the contemporary media landscape.


64 Narboni repeats this claim with an anecdotal recollection of taking the theorist to a suburban screening of Othon, driving a bemused Barthes to the auditorium in a Citroën 2CV. See Jean Narboni, La nuit sera noire et blanche: Barthes, La Chambre claire, le cinéma (Paris: Capricci, 2015), pp. 33-34. This quixotic adventure is also firmly lodged in the memories of Jacques Aumont and Pascal Kané, who attested in interviews to Barthes’ sense of unease during the excursion.

65 Ibid., pp. 13-14.

66 Serge Daney, “Le plan straubien (De la nuée à la résistance),” Cahiers du cinéma no. 305 (November 1979), pp. 5-7, here p. 5.


“a workshop where the vision and the hearing of the spectator is formed,” and the former Cahiers editor argues that their political program is expressed less in the subject matter of their films and more in a manner of filming in which the invisible is as important as the visible. Moreover, Comolli sees Straub’s controversial comments at Pesaro in 1966 on the pornographic nature of mainstream cinema as being of particular pertinence for today. For Comolli:

All the images that dance around us, are they not prone to being publicity? Misery, indignity, infirmity, combat, beauty, ugliness, horror, nudity, death, nothing, anymore, is safe from the tentacles of the spectacle. Everything has to be seen, everything has to be shown, ad nauseam. No, it doesn’t have to, Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub’s cinematograph tells us. Saving the cinema from itself, preserving it from its fatal disposition to the commodity-spectacle, seems to me to be one of the urgent tasks of the present.69

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69 Ibid., pp. 556-557.
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—, interviewed by Joel Rogers, “Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet Interviewed: Moses and Aaron as an Object of Marxist Reflection,” *Jump Cut* no. 12-13 (December 1976), pp. 61-64.