

**MoMA PAYS TRIBUTE TO JEAN-MARIE STRAUB AND DANIÈLE HUILLET WITH
FIRST COMPLETE NORTH AMERICAN RETROSPECTIVE**

Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet

May 6–June 6, 2016

The Roy and Niuta Titus Theaters

NEW YORK, April 6, 2016—The Museum of Modern Art presents the first complete North American retrospective of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, which will feature more than 45 films in the Roy and Niuta Titus theaters from May 6 to June 6, 2016. Straub-Huillet, who together formed one of the most intense, challenging, and controversial collaborations in the history of cinema, created highly personal film interpretations of profoundly ambitious art: stories by Böll, Kafka, Duras, and Pavese; poems by Dante, Mallarmé, and Hölderlin; a long-forgotten Corneille play, an essay by Montaigne, a film by D. W. Griffith, a painting by Cézanne, an unfinished opera by Schönberg; and the biography of Johann Sebastian Bach as told through the fictionalized letters of his wife Anna Magdalena. Introductions by noted Straub-Huillet collaborators, including their longtime cinematographer Renato Berta, will take place during the retrospective's opening weekend. The exhibition is organized by Joshua Siegel, Curator, Department of Film, MoMA.

Straub (French, b. 1933) and Huillet (French, 1936–2006) were inseparable partners from 1954 until Huillet's death in 2006, working intimately on every aspect of film production from script writing to direction to editing. There are only a handful of similar moviemaking partnerships, notably Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, Angela Ricci Lucchi and Yervant Gianikian, and Gene Gauntier and Sidney Olcott. Straub-Huillet sought to make what Straub called "an abstract-pictorial dream," while also remaining sensitive to the letter and spirit of the text and to the relationship between sound and image. At the same time, all of Straub-Huillet's films are political, whether obliquely, in reflecting on the lessons of history and advancing a Marxist analysis of capitalism and class struggle; or overtly, in considering ancient and contemporary forms of imperialism, militarism, and resistance, from Ancient Rome to colonial Egypt to wartime Germany. They aspire to nothing short of a revolution in political consciousness, especially among workers and peasants, the colonized and the exploited.

Early on, their films were attacked on all sides. The left found them too esoteric and alienating. The right found them subversive and threatening. Many in the avant-garde thought they were impenetrable and boring. But Straub-Huillet films were not ignored, and in short time they had gained important champions like the influential German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Rancière, and the filmmakers Thom Andersen, Pedro Costa, Harun Farocki, and Michael Haneke.

At 83, Straub continues to make films that never waver from his commitment to the subversion of all forms of cinematic convention, whether through the use of direct sound,

disjunctive editing, amateur actors, and a foregrounding of the natural landscape; fragmentary and elliptical narratives spoken in various languages; Brechtian estrangement; on-location shooting of ancient texts in contemporary, anachronistic settings (for example, on the ground where the Circus Maximus once stood); and a privileging of musical and poetic rhythms and structures over the decorative, the spectacular, the psychological, and the satirical. Dialogue is shorn of emotion, images are deliberately unflashy. "The work we have to do," Straub insists, "is to make films which radically eliminate art, so that there is no equivocation."

Introductions by noted Straub-Huillet collaborators take place during the retrospective's opening weekend. Unless they are listed as 35mm, films are presented in new digital preservations overseen by Straub, Olivier Boisshot, and Barbara Ulrich. Two new publications are available in the MoMA bookstore: *Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's Writings* (Sequence Press, 2016), edited by Sally Shafto, and *Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet* (Austrian Film Museum, 2016), a collection of essays edited by Ted Fendt.

Highlights of the monthlong exhibition include:

- **Machorka-Muff.** 1962. West Germany. Written and directed by Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet. Based on "Bonn Diary," by Heinrich Böll. With Erich Kuby, Renate Langsdorff. Relishing his political and sexual prospects in postwar Germany, a former Nazi colonel muses on the stupidity of the bourgeoisie, who can be easily duped in the voting booth and in the bedroom. Straub-Huillet's first released film is a powerful, almost surreal, distillation of Heinrich Böll's story, skewering the German soul through gallows humor, an interior monologue of calculation and cynicism, and a montage of jingoistic newspaper headlines. Straub would observe that the film is "built on the equation M [military] = M [murder]." 35mm. In German; English subtitles. 18 min.
- **Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach (Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach).** 1967. West Germany/Italy. Written and directed by Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet. With Gustav Leonhardt, Christiane Lang-Drewanz. Johann Sebastian Bach and his wife Anna Magdalena endured the successive deaths of 10 of their young children, a grief we can scarcely fathom any more than we can articulate the beauty of Bach's music, at once an expression of his earthly anguish and his joyous faith in divine love. Nonetheless, Straub-Huillet attempt to capture Bach's ineffable artistry in one of their most sublime films. The seemingly musical structure is based on recitations of Anna Magdalena's intimately domestic yet fictionalized letters to her husband, and on performances in period clothes with period instruments and orchestrations—a radical conceit for the 1960s—of Bach's cantatas, sonatas, and *Passion According to Saint Matthew* in the very rooms and churches where he composed and conducted them. "With the Bach film," Straub said, "we have almost entirely a documentary reality—the actual music and actual manuscript pages, real musicians—and only one seventeenth of fiction, and despite it all, the totality becomes very nearly a novel.... [There is] no divorce in Bach between art, life and intellect, sacred and secular music." 35mm. 93 min.
- **Der Tod des Empedokles; oder: wenn dann der Erde Grün von neuem euch erglänzt (The Death of Empedocles, or When the Green of the Earth Will Glisten for You Anew).** 1986. West Germany/France. Written and directed by Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet. Based on the first version of *The Death of Empedocles*, by Friedrich

Hölderlin. With Andreas von Rauch, Vladimir Baratta, Martina Baratta, Ute Cremer, Howard Vernon. The pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Empedocles possessed magical healing powers through his communion with the gods and nature. He inspired awe and trust in the people by prophesizing a vision of a new Earth, a communist utopia, before committing a noble suicide. However, at the start of Straub-Huillet's mesmerizing film—an adaptation of the first version of Hölderlin's tragic poem, written during the outbreak of the French Revolution—Empedocles is at the point of death. An enemy of the priestly state, he is cast into darkness, suffering the torments of loneliness and doubt, but finds renewed strength, even immortality, through the will of the people. 35mm. In German; English subtitles. 132 min.

- **Les Yeux ne veulent pas en tout temps se fermer ou Peut-être qu'un jour Rome se permettra de choisir à son tour (Eyes do not want to close at all times or Perhaps one day Rome will permit herself to choose in her turn), Othon.** 1969. West Germany/Italy. Written and directed by Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet. Based on *Othon*, by Pierre Corneille. With Adriano Aprà, Anne Brumagne, Olimpia Carlisi, Anthony Pensabene, Jubarite Semaran. The cinematographer Renato Berta, a frequent collaborator of Straub and Huillet, presents the first film that the partners shot together in Italy (on the Palatine Hill of Rome), which was also the first they made in color. A faithful adaptation of Pierre Corneille's *Othon*, the classic tragedy that premiered at the court of Louis XIV at Fontainebleau in 1664 and today is more hallowed than actually performed, *Eyes do not want to close...* depicts the power vacuum that followed Emperor Nero's death. Against a crowd of obsequious and scheming pretenders to the throne, Corneille has Camille as his epic heroine, the mother of all conscientious objectors. In French; English subtitles. 88 min.
- **Moses und Aron (Moses and Aaron).** 1974. Austria/West Germany/France/Italy. Written and directed by Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet. Based on the opera by Arnold Schoenberg. With Günter Reich, Louis Devos, Austrian Radio Choir, Austria Radio Symphony Orchestra. Straub-Huillet filmed Schoenberg's unfinished opera in the Roman amphitheater of Alba Fucense. Taking nearly 15 years to finance, *Moses and Aaron* was based on their rigorous consideration and questioning of Biblical and archeological history, particularly with respect to the collective memory—passed down and transcribed over hundreds of years, however inaccurately—of the Egyptian enslavement of the Hebrews and the Exodus. Straub-Huillet's concern is with the myth of human progress, and the transition from polytheism to monotheism. Lost in the process, they suggest, was a kind of tenderness and rootedness in nature, a traumatic absence into which a new kind of violence was born. In German; English subtitles. 105 min.
- **Klassenverhältnisse (Class Relations).** 1983. West Germany/France. Written and directed by Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet. Based on *Amerika*, by Franz Kafka. With Christian Heinisch, Mario Adorf, Harun Farocki, Manfred Blank, Libgart Schwarz. Straub-Huillet's brilliant distillation of Franz Kafka's incomplete first novel *Amerika* is perhaps the most authentically German treatment of Kafka ever made. An ecstatic and haunted fever dream of the United States—the place where Kafka longed to disappear, if only in his imagination—*Amerika* is told from the perspective of a young German immigrant who encounters a strange new world, with its violent lies and quixotic optimism, like a modern-day Parsifal. Straub and Huillet took pains to render the German mannerisms and dialect of Kafka's novel faithfully, and shot their film almost entirely in the port city of Hamburg. But their depiction of injustice and exploitation transcends historical specificity; as Straub said in 1984, "Kafka, for us, is the only major poet of industrial civilization, I mean, a

civilization where people depend on their work to survive." 35mm. In German; English subtitles. 130 min.

- **Geschichtsunterricht (History Lessons).** 1972. Italy/West Germany. Written and directed by Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet. Based on *The Business Affairs of Mr. Julius Caesar*, by Bertolt Brecht. With Benedikt Zulauf, Gottfried Bold, Johann Unterperntinger, Henri Ludwig, Carl Vaillant. An extended shot from a car coursing through the streets of Rome in 1972—which is to say, the ancient Republic in ruins—sets the stage for Straub-Huillet's complex interpretation of Brecht's unfinished experimental novel *The Business Affairs of Mr. Julius Caesar*. The work explores history as it has been written by the victors, with their hero worship of tyrannical leaders (whether Caesar or Hitler), and offers an alternate view of history writing as fractured and potentially revolutionary. Caesar's former slave and former banker are both featured, providing their own differing perspectives on the Emperor's career in the political, economic, and military life of ancient Rome. In German; English subtitles. 85 min.
- **Too Early/Too Late.** 1980–81. France/Egypt. Written and directed by Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet. Based on a letter by Friedrich Engels and *Class Struggles in Egypt, 1945–1970*, by Mahmoud Hussein. With Danièle Huillet, Bahgat el Nadi. Inspired by a letter by Friedrich Engels and *Class Conflict in Egypt, 1945–1970*, a 1974 account of two militant Marxist writers who had been imprisoned by the Nasser regime, Straub-Huillet filmed *Too Early/Too Late* in France and Egypt during the anxious months of 1980 that followed the Camp David Accords and culminated in Anwar Sadat's assassination the following year. They reflect on Egypt's history of peasant struggle and liberation from Western colonization, and link it to class tensions in France shortly before the Revolution of 1789, quoting texts by Friedrich Engels as well as the pioneering nonfiction film *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895). The film was a major influence on contemporary filmmakers like Harun Farocki, Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucci, and John Gianvito. 100 min.
- **Sicilia!** 1998. Italy. Written and directed by Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet. Based on *Conversations in Sicily*, by Elio Vittorini. With Gianni Buscarino, Vittorio Vigneri, Angela Nugara, Giovanni Interlandi. Something as simple as a herring roasting on a hearth, or a meal of bread, wine and winter melon, takes on the humble aura of a Caravaggio painting in this masterful film. That is to say, Straub-Huillet extol ordinary Sicilians who are poor of means but rich in spirit. Filmed in Syracuse and Messina, *Sicilia!* is a tragicomedy involving an orange peddler, an Italian recently returned from America, two "stinky" police officers, a guilt-stricken landowner, a traveling knife sharpener and, perhaps most unforgettably, an indomitable peasant mother who reminisces about meals of snails and wild chicory, her husband's philandering and cowardice, and her own father's belief in an honest day's labor, socialism, and St. Joseph. 35mm. In Italian; English subtitles. 66 min.
- **L' Aquarium et la Nation (The Aquarium and the Nation).** 2015. Switzerland/France. Written and directed by Jean-Marie Straub. Based on *The Walnut Trees of Altenburg*, by André Malraux. With Aimé Agnel, Christiane Veschambre. André Malraux once wrote, "The greatest mystery is not that we have been flung at random between this profusion of matter and the stars, but that within this prison we can draw from ourselves images powerful enough to deny our nothingness." Straub considers this in his latest film, creating a cosmic interplay of Haydn's symphonic *Seven Last Words of Our Savior on the Cross*, a fish tank at a Parisian Chinese restaurant, the birth of a nation in Jean Renoir's 1938 film *La Marseillaise*, the Jung Institute of Paris, and Malraux's wartime novel *The Walnut Trees of Altenburg*. In French; English subtitles. 31 min.

Special thanks to Barbara Ulrich, Ted Fendt, Miguel Abreu, Katherine Pickard.

No. 16

Press Contact:

Meg Montgoris, (212) 708-9757, meg_montgoris@moma.org

For downloadable high-resolution images, register at moma.org/press.