

Straub, Hölderlin, Cézanne

by Dominique Païni

Foreword from the Translator:

The subject of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub's film *The Death of Empedocles* is the Greek pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles (c. 490 BC – 430 BC) who lived in the Greek colony of Agrigentum in Sicily. His theories are mentioned in several of Plato's dialogues. He maintained that all matter is made up of four irreducible elements: water, earth, air, and fire. A mystic and a poet, he is considered to be the founder of classical rhetoric. He is also thought to be the last Greek philosopher to write in verse; two fragments of his works survive: *Purifications* and *On Nature*. An advocate of democracy, he came into conflict with his fellow citizens of Agrigentum, and as result was banished with his young disciple Pausanius. When he was asked to return, he preferred to commit suicide by throwing himself into the active volcano at Mount Aetna. The following fragment from Empedocles has bearing on Dominique Païni's intelligent reading of the Straub/Huillet films: *Cézanne* and *Noir Pêché/Black Sin*.

*"A twofold tale I shall tell: at one time it grew to be one alone out of many, at another again it grew apart to be many out of one. Double is the birth of mortal things and double their failing; for one is brought to birth and destroyed by the coming together of all things, the other is nurtured and flies apart as they grow apart again. And these things never cease their continual exchange, now through Love all coming together into one, now again each carried apart by the hatred of Strife. So insofar as it has learned to grow one from many, and again as the one grows apart [there] grow many, thus far do they come into being and have no stable life; but insofar as they never cease their continual interchange, thus far they exist always changeless in the cycle."*¹

The German writer Friedrich Hölderlin wrote two versions of *The Death of Empedocles* in 1798 and 1800, and a final third version in 1820, all three ultimately unfinished. All three were conceived as five-act tragedies and all three differ in plot. According to Michael Hamburger, Hölderlin's English-language translator, "the main reason why Hölderlin finished no version of the play must be that he remained too closely identified with Empedocles, at the very period in his life when his own view of the poet as philosopher, prophet and priest—and as tragic hero—was subject to perpetual crisis and re-examination."² The Straub/Huillet film *The Death of Empedocles* is based on Hölderlin's first version (the longest of the three), whereas *Black Sin* is based on the third version.³

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Two films whose original treatment didn't imply an association found themselves associated not by the happenstance of commercial distribution, but by the conspicuous will of the filmmakers.⁵ Their coupling renders them richer in meaning and simultaneously sheds light on them, thanks to this principle of conjoining, invisible but highly theoretical: here Hölderlin's romantic interpretation of classical Greece is linked to the oeuvre of one of the forerunners of 20th century painting. Although separated by nearly a century, Hölderlin and Cézanne are brought together by the cinema, according to the principle of a diptych.

And it is to the role of violence in the Straubs' entire lifework that this diptych Hölderlin/ Cézanne refers. Their oeuvre has the sense of *construction* in the meaning intended by Hubert Damisch: "*Freud preferred the term of construction to that of interpretation. He used to say (this distinction was sufficient for him to mark the distance between the words which are the fact of analysis and that of a hermeneutic) that interpretation never only bears on isolated elements or traits, there where construction assumes a linking function: connection between the bits and pieces of the material on which the analysis bears; but link as well between the two pieces (the two monologues) which depend on the two opposing scenes. The aforementioned construction reaches its goal when, from one scene and from one monologue to another, communication is established and something like a truth finds itself revealed.*"⁶ The Straubian construction, which is to say this diptych, is both literary and plastic, a veritable *twofold scene* at the heart of which a truth comes to be revealed, to repeat the words of Damisch.

What does this construction, and more particularly this violence signify, this stylistic brutality that remains when one views the two films again today in the way the Straubs wished to show them united? From the point of view of their production, the two films are totally independent. *Cézanne* was made in 1990 to accompany an exhibition. Made in 1989, *Black Sin* is the adaptation of the third version of Hölderlin's *The Death of Empedocles*. In 1987, the Straubs had already shot five times the first version of *The Death of Empedocles*, and three of their filmings were definitively edited and shown. The minute variations between these five versions have become the thing of legend. There has even been talk of a "lizard" version, on account of the specimen of this kind of reptile, wandering around in the course of a shot on the edge of a travertine ruin.

Cézanne breaks with the traditional films on art, which following Alain Resnais and Luciano Emmer, and following the institutional videos produced by museums, "pay a visit" to paintings or recount in an empathetic manner the life of artists. Nor is it a question of a reconstruction that "makes the painter talk," by using as a point of departure his memories or theoretical considerations.

For the Straubs, as in their previous films, what counts is to speak in a personal manner, albeit by borrowing, in faithfully reproducing, a text already written by another. Thus, to go from a text *in* and *of* itself, to a text *for* them. More than in any other of their films, they have identified themselves with another. This is probably why they rely so much on their own voices in *Cézanne*. And yet Cézanne's pronouncements as they have come down to us are suspect, because of their uncertain provenance. Joachim Gasquet's report of them; is perhaps little more than fanciful reconstruction for posterity, readjusted fifteen years after the painter's death. His account assembles moreover remarks by Maurice Denis and by Emile Bernard, along with personal souvenirs.

But rather than undertaking historical and philological research, the Straubs strip the text of a maximum of cultural and philosophical reference, to retain only that which, in the remarks attributed to Cézanne, is useful to them. In other words, the comments with which they identify their method of making films. An unconscious effect of imitation imposes itself then between the word of Cézanne and that of the Straubs, which could be summed up by their common *design*: they wish to be the first and the most straightforward in their art.

Right away, the joining of radically heterogeneous elements in *Cézanne* is essential; the brutal association of elements that *a priori* have nothing in common nonetheless produces continuity from this very discontinuity, a contamination between all the elements from the starting point of a paradoxical bias of discontinuity and of alterity installed in and by the film. The Straubs adopt a dialectical position of distance and of dependence between the various components of the film, i.e. the pictorial elements, still photographs and moving images, static shots and tracking shots. And it is precisely there they want themselves to be the most simple in this art of comparison and violent juxtaposition. The decision to film the paintings with their frames accentuates the radical heterogeneity between painting and everything else, an impossibility to bring them together, deliberately demonstrated, a refusal to reconstruct a global world that would abolish the distinction between matter and expressions, representation and the real.

The principle of montage as it appears in *Cézanne* has more to do with exhibition practices than with cinematographic montage, as it is usually conceived. The photographic portraits of Cézanne painting taken by Derain, the “documentary” parts shot at Aix and the film clips (*Madame Bovary* and *The Death of Empedocles*) are literally placed *end to end*, without any apparent particular attempt to give them a filmic punctuation. The sequence of figurative materials in the film, although they are heterogeneous, have the tendency (more than in other films by the Straubs) to abolish all feeling of intervals.

Are we in the presence of what Christian Metz designated by the expression “dry editing”? “Some filmmakers intentionally suppress punctuation precisely when you expect it the most, and connect by a clear cut two sequences of an extremely different subject, tone, etc. It is no longer a question of a general ‘rhythm’ but of a particular effect of brutal rupture. The clear cut, here, merits to be called dry montage (or ‘dry montage in operation’).”⁷

If we find in Metz’s description the appearance of the Straubs’ montage in their *Cézanne*, we should relativize the adequacy of this description, since it is a matter of a documentary that tolerates, in the most evident manner, the brutal passage between disparate elements. It’s a matter of collage rather than of montage, of a hanging of blocks. In other words, a hanging of pictures that the real canvases of Cézanne filmed in their frames highlight, as opposed to photographs of paintings generally used in films on art.

With regard to the Straubs, well before their *Cézanne*, Gilles Deleuze observed that the “*Disconnected, unlinked fragments of space are the object of a specific relinkage over the gap: the absence of match is only the appearance of a linking-up which can take place in an infinite number of ways.*”⁸ This conception of film could be similar to an *archipelago* of blocks of images. An archipelago, that is to say an organization of islands where the interstices between them make up a part of the whole. The sea and the earth, empty spaces and the full spaces, participate as much in the overall reality of the archipelago.

The archipelago recalls Hölderlinian poetics. One of the poet’s texts is precisely called “The Archipelago.” Hölderlin sings of the archipelago of the Greek islands, naturally conceived as a whole, collecting according to a principle of “dry montage,” if I may say so, the earth and the sea, the phrases between them,

according to a principle which tolerates no rhetorical excess. The semi-marine and semi-terrestrial landscape that Hölderlin translates into words is the reflection of the organization of the words themselves: “*Rest in the shade of your mountains; with arms ever youthful/Still embrace your beautiful land, and still of your daughters, O Father,/Of your islands, the flowering, not one has been taken.*”⁹

It was Pasolini who, very precociously in 1970, had a premonition of what the Straubs’ conception of montage was all about. Thus twenty years before this conception was so deliberately put forth as a veritable stylistic *parti pris* in *Cézanne*. A propos *Othon*, made in 1970, Pasolini writes: “*Straub did not work on the editing; he had completely planned the sadomasochistic self-punishment (here I am, spectator, to torture you; here I am, spectator, to be tortured) in thinking and shooting the film, made of a series of elementary sequence shots, connected simply in the moviola, one to the other. The absence of editing is precisely a provocative element; the freedom from the cinematographic code obtained with the sacrifice of oneself, by feeding oneself to wild animals—by rendering oneself a ‘monster,’ agent provocateur, martyr, flirt, and victim—thus tends violently toward the negation of cinema, toward an almost total frustration which, if it isn’t suicide, is in any case a sort of seclusion: a mystical practice not without humor which abandons the world to its ‘imbecile’ will to lynch and to its return to its habits.*”¹⁰ This magnificent text expresses “the link unchained,” this dialectical distribution of sequence shots which hold together without any punctuating glue and where the stringing together again, which remains to be accomplished by the spectator is precisely, according to Deleuze, the *reading*: “To read is to relink instead of link; it is to turn, and turn round, instead of to follow on the right side; a new Analytic of the image.”¹¹

But what are these unexpected fragments from *Empedocles* doing in a film on Cézanne?

There were thus five filmings of *The Death of Empedocles*, first version of Hölderlin’s tragedy (1798) each made up of 147 shots. The sequences from *Empedocles* that are integrated in *Cézanne* are taken from the fifth shoot.

The first clip from *Empedocles* inserted in *Cézanne* is devoted to light: “*O heavenly light, humans have not taught it to me — already for a long time, when my languishing heart could not find the all living I then turned towards you...*” This excerpt follows Cézanne’s thoughts who wonders: “*The chance fashion in which its rays fall, the way it moves, infiltrates things, becomes part of the earth’s fabric — who will ever paint that? Who will ever tell that story? The physical history of the earth, its psychology.*”¹²

In a way, Hölderlin prefigures Cézanne, responding to him *ahead of time*. Here too is where the Straubian dialectic resides: the response precedes the question and this does not constitute one of the least negations of the traditional principles of documentary film.

The second excerpt is a shot that frames the Aetna volcano. This clip is preceded by these words of Cézanne: “*Touch by touch, the earth would thus come alive. By tilling my field, I would start to grow a lovely landscape.*”¹³ The clip closes on these words of Empedocles: “*Then rise and shine another day; it is they the longtime missing, the living, the benevolent gods.*”¹⁴ And these last words are immediately followed by some of Cézanne’s fruits, according to a principle of sudden and violent appearance, at the risk of encroaching a little on the end of the clip from *Empedocles*. A feeling of the editing’s “awkwardness” is thus engendered, a precipitation for the splice, an impatience for the splice which results in a kind of visual and mental syncopation for the spectator, between the “benevolent gods” invoked by Empedocles and the fruits painted by Cézanne. The art historian Meyer Schapiro rightly noted, with regard to the countless apples painted by Cézanne, the fruit’s ambivalence, its visual and

symbolic uncertainty, visual and symbolic, between two registers of existence: *“The fruit, I have observed, while no longer in nature, is not yet fully a part of human life. Suspended between nature and use, it exists as if for contemplation alone.”*¹⁵

This predilection for bringing together what was not destined to be – whether here, the “benevolent gods” and the fruits – and looking for in the editing the most final results of this bringing together belongs intrinsically to the Straubs’ style of *mise en scène* and montage. Sometimes this style produces the strange effect of “awkwardness,” of amateurism, of an “approximation,” of an insufficiency of work precisely when we know, to the contrary, their maniacal precision in every domain.

But the most important is still beyond all that: this figurative power that results from the will to abolish the interval is not gratuitous, is not only formal. It is also that which is expressed in Cézanne’s lucidity on the functions of painting: *“I paint my still-lives, these still-lives, for my coachman who doesn’t want them; I paint them for children on their grandfathers’ knees to look at while they drink their soup and babble. I don’t paint them for the German Kaiser’s pride or the Chicago oil magnate’s vanity.... They would do better to give me a church wall, a room in a hospital or a town hall and say to me: ‘Do your worst there.... Paint us a wedding, a convalescence, or a nice harvest scene...’ Maybe then I’d extract what I have in my guts, what I’ve carried there since I was born, and that would be painting....”*¹⁶ Unexpected meeting between two incomprehensions, two refusals on the part of the people: Cézanne’s pigs and the inhabitants of Agrigento who abandon Empedocles. The two artists, the painter and the philosopher, are nonetheless very certain to work even for those who turn their back. It is of course back to the Straubs themselves that the spectator is sent: Did they imagine filming for someone other than the working class who moreover want nothing to do with their films?

It is a question, then, of making Hölderlin “correspond” with Cézanne, and sometimes Empedocles with Cézanne. The wise man of Tübingen secluded on the banks of Neckar dialogues with the Provençal misanthrope, the old painter in retirement in the Aix countryside who rails against the stupid fads. We can measure thus how much the undertaking, which consists of doing away with all intervals between the sequences to encourage a proximity verging on the joint between the shots, is an aesthetic utopia that Pasolini detected in his provocative hypothesis of an absence of work, from beginning to end completely crude. This aesthetic utopia merges with a political utopia, even if the latter is presented by the Straubs as disappointed in Cézanne as in Hölderlin. It is undoubtedly there that points imperceptibly the pessimism, the Straubian melancholy, the secret conviction that all is lost and that because it is often too early it is as well ... too late.

The two films, and their relationship then become more evident. A reverence for nature is common to both, if not all four: Cézanne, Hölderlin, Empedocles, Straub. Nothing diverts Cézanne’s attention from nature; his gaze remains fixed, until his eyes burn; as for Hölderlin, he is indignant that the earth is no longer inhabited by the gods. Nature, its respect, its reverence, is indissociable from the gods that men have there placed and Hölderlin’s gods tend to be, thanks to the Straubian montage, “in” Cézanne’s fruits. All punctuating border is banished to encourage this fusion or this simultaneity against the fatality of the successivity that engenders the montage. Hölderlin contaminates the painter of Aix with an unexpected romanticism and lends himself, in return, to a modern, materialist interpretation, in the sense of a Cézannian matterist materialism. One understands straightaway that it is this method, the *mise en scène* and the cinematographic montage, that the Straubs choose in order to “extract” Hölderlin from Heidegger’s idealism.

Often in their interviews the Straubs cite this phrase from Cézanne: “*Look at Sainte-Victoire there.... These blocks were made of fire and there’s still fire in them.*”¹⁷ Deleuze cites him and on this occasion notes that Cézanne has been for a long time the Straubs’ mentor¹⁸ and this at least five years prior to the making of their film. Deleuze adds: “*The visual image, in Straub, is the rock.*”¹⁹ With regard to Sainte-Victoire, Cézanne also said: “*These blocks were made of fire and there’s still fire in them.*”²⁰ He spoke too of “*the shadow falling from them quivers on the rock as if it were being burnt up, instantly consumed by a fiery mouth.*”²¹ The two films are ultimately devoted to mountains on fire, the Sainte-Victoire that Cézanne still perceived as molten and the Aetna volcano still active. In fact, the Sainte-Victoire really burned in 1991. Its entire circumference and its sides were swept by an immense fire destroying all the wild nature that covered it. On the other hand, Aetna filmed by the Straubs is a verdant site for the scenery of their *Empedocles*. The Straubs do not show the lava, nor the burns of the volcano, but the trees, the sky, the wind, the blue, that of the sky: a Cézannian landscape. The sub-title of *The Death of Empedocles* is: “*When the earth’s green will shine again for you.*”

“*From this good green earth my eye must not depart without joy,*” this is not Cézanne speaking, but Empedocles....

Represented in the film *Cézanne*, the Sainte-Victoire literally scorched, astounds and terrifies the spectator as a sin of men, a very black sin, title of the film (*Black Sin*) associated with *Cézanne*. The two films combine these geological foundations and this aerial logic of which Deleuze spoke with regard to the Straubs’ films in 1985, thus well before the making of the mountainous diptych, that the pictorial and sculptural qualities of the filmmakers’ image depends on a geological, tectonic strength, as in Cézanne’s rocks.²²

Finally, these two films are haunted by shadow. *Black Sin* is swept by the clouds that embody, along with the word which rises from the earth towards the sun, this aerial logic of the Straubian cinema. There is not a shot in the film, shots in general long in duration, which is not threatened by a shadow overcast. Deliberately, the filmmakers integrated into their mise en scène these variations of light that trouble the Hölderlinian song. Cézanne, too, from 10 o’clock in the morning, used to stop painting since the light was already going down....

Between their *Cézanne* and this adaptation of the third version of *The Death of Empedocles* called *Empedocles on Aetna* filmed in 32 shots, the Straubs organize thus a weaving, a tight weaving, a “dry” weaving as I said earlier of the montage between Hölderlin and Cézanne. A poetic and figurative weaving which cannot tolerate the least space between the two films, no empty space. The association of the two films is subtle, but also absolutely evident. I brought this up a little while ago; the two films are literally installed like the two halves of a diptych.

During an interview with the Straubs on the occasion of *Moses and Aaron*, Serge Daney commented on the dialectics of the rapport between Moses and Aaron and noted “*something was united, then disconnected in such a way that union and disjunction were made visible at the same time.*”²³ Daney summarizes here the mechanism of the diptych as a complex articulation that does not reduce itself to mechanical or alternating bipolarity. Nothing in appearance legitimizes the articulation of *Cézanne/Empedocles*. Nevertheless, the iconographic analysis allows for an interpretation at once poetic, figurative and theoretical of this filmic diptych that finally made but a single film. It is this mechanism that transmits itself from the very interior of *Cézanne* to the association of the two films, which has interpretative value. This is what explains that the Straubs conceived of their mise en scène and their montage in such a way that nothing, paradoxically, emphasizes and thus does not “blur,” the passage

between the sequences – from a painting by Cézanne to a shot of *Empedocles* – just as the passage between the two films – from *Cézanne* to *Black Sin*. This diptych forces a kind of conversion of sight: a passage of a film devoted to the art of a painter to the scenographic and filmed adaptation of a philosophical poem. Thus conversion of an activity of looking into an activity of thinking, conversion of painting into idea, and it is this truth that is brought to light. In the hinging together of their two films, the stake for the Straubs is to produce “a complex sensation which would conjugate coupling with resonance.”²⁴

The absence of montage, an apparent absence, is a provocative element as Pasolini said, since there is in fact montage nowhere else. Danièle Huillet has defined well her conception of montage: “When you shoot with direct sound, you cannot allow yourself to fool around with the images: you have blocks which have a certain length and in which you cannot put the scissors like that just for pleasure’s sake, to produce effects.”²⁵ The Straubian *mise en scène* realizes itself thus according to a conception of montage by blocks, perceived by some as crude.

In fact, the images would be islands and the sound the sea, united and disconnected according to the principle of an archipelago.

—Translated by Sally Shafto

¹This quote as well as much of the general biographical information on Empedocles here cited are taken from: Richard Parry, “Empedocles,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2005 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),

URL=<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2005/entries/empeocles/>

²Michael Hamburger, “Introduction,” *Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments*, translated by Michael Hamburger, fourth bilingual edition, with a preface, introduction and notes (London: Anvill Press Poetry, 2005), p. 32.

³The second and third versions are both available in the previously cited edition of Hölderlin, translated by Michael Hamburger.

⁴This article first appeared in: Anne-Marie Faux, ed., *Jean-Marie Straub-Danièle Huillet: Conversations en archipel* (Milan: Mazzotta/Cinémathèque Française, 1999), pp. 96-99.

⁵The two films were indeed distributed together and are advertised on a single poster.

⁶Hubert Damisch, *Un “souvenir d’enfance” par Piero della Francesca* (Paris: Seuil, La librairie du Xxème siècle, 1997), p. 173.

⁷Christian Metz, *L’énunciation impersonnelle ou le site du film* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1991), p. 131. Translated by S. Shafto. A partial translation of the first 35 pages of this text by Christian Metz was included in the following anthology: Warren Buckland, ed. *The Film Spectator: From Sign to Mind* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995).

⁸Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London/New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 235.

⁹Friedrich Hölderlin, “The Archipelago,” *Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments*, translated by Michael Hamburger, op. cit., p. 273.

¹⁰ Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, trans. Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett, ed. Louise K. Barnett (Washington, D.C.: New Academic Publishing, 2005), p. 272.

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, p. 235.

¹² Joachim Gasquet, *Joachim Gasquet's Cézanne: A Memoir with Conversations*, trans. by Christopher Pemberton, preface by John Rewald, intro by Richard Schiff (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 152.

¹³ Joachim Gasquet, *Joachim Gasquet's Cézanne*, p. 162.

¹⁴ Translated by S. Shafto.

For further information on Empedocles, *Empedocles: The Extant Fragments*, edited with an introduction, commentary, concordance and new bibliography by M.R. Wright (Cambridge: Hackett Pub. Co., 1995).

¹⁵ Meyer Schapiro, "The Apples of Cézanne," in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), p. 25.

¹⁶ Joachim Gasquet, *Joachim Gasquet's Cézanne*, p. 223

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 153.

¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, p. 245.

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* p. 235.

²⁰ Joachim Gasquet, *Joachim Gasquet's Cézanne*, p. 153.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 153.

²² Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image* p. 236-37.

²³ Serge Daney, "Le plan Straubien," *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 305 (November 1979), p. 5.

²⁴ This citation seems to be a paraphrase of the following passage ("Coupling or resonance is not the only development of the complex sensation. Coupled figures frequently appear in the triptychs, particularly in the central panel,") from Gilles Deleuze's *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. and with an intro by Daniel W. Smith; afterword by Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 69.

²⁵ Danièle Huillet, in "Sur le son: entretien avec Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet," *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 260-261 (special issue on Straub-Huillet. Moïse et Aaron.), p. 49.