

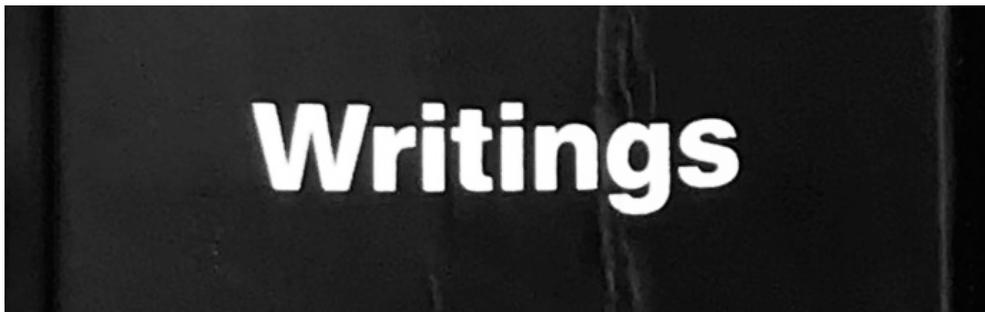
## **Political Life, a note**

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At the beginning of the film-making of *Political Life*, and particularly with regard to a spoken performance of an existent text looking to find intimacy with visual images, the cinema of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub—their filmic practice, ideas and commitments—again made an atmosphere for me. It came on suddenly and unexpectedly, just like how the weather can abruptly change on small islands. And then a book made itself known to me: a thorough and intense volume of writings by, in and around the film-making of, Huillet and Straub—from scripts to conference texts and so much besides.

The volume was simply called *Writings*, white type on lush black. And its existence and endeavour found with in its covers is thanks to Sally Shafto (with Katherine Pickard) and Sequence Press (New York).



As I started to look through this thick volume my eyes fell on words that called out for underlining ... *the quasi-archaic realm of these works is one in which wind seen and heard blowing through the leaves can be sufficient content for an image to exist* (preface p.ix).

And when I came to page 213 I felt something rise in my being, a little difficult to name. I'll risk saying as Spinoza (perhaps) would say: nothing but active affections, in other words, joy. And it did not happen just once; it happened over and over again. Found under the title 'Conference: Conception of a Film', italicised words form an introductory passage to a transcription from a conference given by Huillet and Straub on their film *The Death of Empedocles* at La Fémis film school in Paris, March 1988, and the author of these words: Anne Benhaïm.

The first time I experienced the atmosphere of the film-making of Huillet and Straub was during my MA studies. The then film students at the RCA in London would do Sunday evening screenings (in a large disused and squatted hotel in Kensington) of what ever they could get their hands on; for example, *The Chronicles of Anna Magdalena Bach* (Huillet and Straub, 1968). And roughly at the same time (circa '79–81) a college friend had a job at the newly established Scala repertory cinema in Tottenham Street, central London. At odd times during the day there were surreptitious screening, and to name a few of the films: *The Riddle of the Sphinx* (Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, 1977); *Numero Deux* (Jean-Luc Goddard, 1975) and *Fortini/Cani* (Huillet and Straub, 1977).

The 83 minute film *Fortini/Cani* takes a written text as its starting point, as does many of Huillet and Staub's films. This time it is the book *I Cani del Sina* (*The Dogs of Sina*). Slow panning down the text, extracts spoken out loud by its author Franco Fortini and panoramic views of the Italian landscape where a massacre of the resistance had taken place during WW2: the 83 minutes of my life that this film demanded were tough, an endurance; however, something of that time has never left me.

*The text that follows is based on the conference that Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet gave at La Fémis film school in Paris in 1988.*

*We can read herein—with the jubilation that you might have on the verge of resolving a mathematical problem—how the Straubs, assuming together the artificiality of a film practice and its implacably realistic essence, conceive of their work as film directors as a hyper-organizational pressure exerting itself on matter, movements, and lengths resistant to this pressure (precisely because it is incompressible), and through this muted, suppressed battle giving the best of themselves, which makes, unbeknownst to them, their freedom, their uniqueness, and their beauty.*

*The tension imposed on the shot makes plain to the eye and to the ear matter that, thus seized in its most minute movements, incarnate the correspondence—if not the identity—matter/movement/time, fundamental to the Straubian plan of action.*

*A text is spoken; it merges the sphere of ideas, from which it comes, with an immediate and sensible sphere of bodies that give life to them, with a nature that sustains these bodies, and that they in turn nourish by naming it. The body, in which language resonates, becomes the body of the text itself and protracts its speaking.*

*Imprisoned in the system, matters are taken (shot, recorded) and concentrated, becoming heterogeneous to the world, a world that is not contained in the shot but is nevertheless expressed in it—they enjoy infinite free play within the limits assigned to them by the filmmakers.*

*The cinematographic dialectic whereby the skin of the real, which is all that is shown, generates (or contains) all of the film, an “all” that is irreducible to the visible, has never been so well demonstrated as in the films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet.*

*Here trees are trees and become trees. We learn by taking pleasure in the sublime essence of colors (leaf-green, earth-brown, sky-blue, bronzed-skin...), of timbres (voices, birds, steps...), of textures (flesh, fabric, earth...), the irreversibility of gestures.*

*These shots are rich in their concerted poverty: here's how.*

*Writings, Daniele Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, edited and translated by Sally Shafto with Katherine Pickard, preface Miguel Abreu (New York: Sequence Press, 2016) p 213.*