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Flatness and Interruption:
An investigation in Diagrammatic Writing

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Abstract

This essay revolves around an experimental study towards a method of “diagrammatic writing” to examine the concepts of flatness and interruption, both in critical discussion and visual presentation. The treatment of text/language in this way as a form of material takes its origin from my art practice, in which I explore the relation between language and object and the potential of text/language to materialise. The study of flatness and interruption forms a continuation of my research up to this point, where I previously engaged with the concepts and encountered the ambiguity of these terms to always cause a certain vagueness within the discussion.

I will not arrive with a concise definition of flatness and disruption, which I believe is impossible. Instead I will examine the emergence and manifestation of binary oppositions in three examples of cultural production, to gain a deeper understanding of these ambiguous terms and their interplay. What happens if flatness and interruption collide? What results from this? Do they exclude each other, can they coexist, or do they synthesise or transform?

In the diagrams, the black writing represents my interpretation of the interaction between flatness and interruption in the respective example. The writings in blue are analytical comments and thoughts. Their vertical positioning matches the point of reference in the black text, while the horizontal positioning delineates their focal point. Flatness is treated on the left hand side, while interruption is discussed on the right. The same horizontal distribution is retained in the black text. This visually shows the occurrence and/or emergence of interruption(s) in the examples. I tried to match the style of writing in the black text to the concepts I am examining with them.

The first diagram is written in the style of a report and covers a real event: the tiger attack during a performance of the magicians Siegfried and Roy. I’m examining the flatness within the illusionary and its interruption by reality and the following incompatibility of the two oppositions.

In the second diagram the black text is a factual observation of Chantal Akerman’s “Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles” (1975). I discuss the layers of flatness and interruption in relation to the banal and the dramatic on the level of form and content. “Jeanne Dielman” creates a dissonance of these concepts, both in form and content, which shows itself in a non-hierarchical juxtaposition. The last diagram consists of two reviews from contrasting viewpoints of Straub and Huillet’s “Les yeux ne veulent pas en tout temps se fermer, ou Peut-être qu’un jour Rome se permettra de choisir à son tour” (1970) aka “Othon”. I discuss the ability of flatness and disruption to intersect and, at times, become each other.



Image from <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2012/05/24/siegfried-and-roy-masters-of-the-kitchen/>

Flatness/Interruption
Illusion/Real
Siegfried and Roy

I am thinking here of flatness in relation to the phenomenon of banal mass spectacles such as a magic show. It is in the nature and the framework of these events that they don't raise the claim of being placed in the realm of high cultural works of art, as opposed to theatre or opera performances. Moreover they fulfill the role of entertainment of a general audience rather than that they would encourage reflection or serve as conservation of cultural heritage. The productions that take on the characters of a spectacle are in my opinion quite predictable and flat in their construction. One knows what to expect from them.

For the very example of a magic show it means, that if I am in the audience I do expect to be surprised and amazed by the tricks and illusions performed on stage and am prepared for them.

Even though the terms "magic and illusion" suggest surprise and astonishment, the magic show by itself is of a comparatively anticipated character. A surprise normally would be associated with the character of Interruption. It lives on the fact that it is unexpected – something that is not anticipated and one didn't imagine to happen, something that exceeds the expected.

In a magic show the surprises are expected, which is an interesting contradiction. Would it be worth to say that the prospect of certain interrupting events followed by their anticipated occurrence creates a

An ordinary evening at The Mirage in Las Vegas. Ordinary here of course means exceptional. It's Vegas Baby! The Mirage, besides being a hotel and a casino, is home to the famous show of the German-American illusionist duo Siegfried and Roy (Siegfried Fischbacher, Roy Uwe Ludwig Horn). Since their hiring in 1990 by The Mirage a dedicated theatre and stage were built for them and their show. Their act involved high calibre illusionist techniques and magic, but most notably their performances with wild animals live on stage (ranging from elephants and lions to their trademark animals the white tigers.)

It is the 3rd of October 2003, the 59th birthday of Roy Horn, the artificial volcano in front of The Mirage is erupting to attract and greet visitors. Like every evening the show is sold out. The pair has performed to capacity crowds of 1504 almost daily. Up to this evening Siegfried and Roy have performed in around 5750 shows together with the show running for 13 1/2 years.

Let the magic begin! The Masters of the Impossible perform (as is expected from them) the unbelievable live on stage. It's Vegas Baby! (with an annual guarantee of \$57.5 million for the pair a lot is possible) There is fire, dancers, music, a lot of bling, steam, change of stage sets, props and animals. Everything runs according to plan, as every night. A strictly coordinated routine and accurate choreography. The audience gets drawn into a world of magic and illusion, of vanishing and reappearing – the world of Siegfried and Roy: a well rehearsed, trained and performed spectacle.

Considering Siegfried and Roy's descriptive stage name "The Masters of the Impossible" it is intriguing to look at it in comparison to the Lacanian notion of the Impossible. Lacan links the concept of the Impossible to the Real.

"The real is 'the impossible', because it is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order and impossible to attain in any way. It is this character of impossibility and of resistance to symbolisation which lends the real its essentially traumatic quality." (Lacan in Evans, 1997, p.160).

What happens if the unpredictable/impossible happens on stage? If we argue that the impossible is the real, this implies that something real happens. Which is very much the case in the example of Siegfried and Roy. Ironically it shows their success in making the impossible happen on stage, but their failure in mastering it.

flatness by predictability ? If something is predictable it is not very surprising - whereas in relation to a magic show we still wouldn't know how exactly we will be surprised. Still to me it seems that the flatness I see in this context might be more dependent on the "that" than on the "how". The expectation of something unforeseen to come flattens the interrupting qualities of a surprise.

Roland Barthes (2009) speaks in "The World of Wrestling" about this kind of theatrically staged spectacles. He underlines their predictability by arguing that these kinds of events are based upon a clear sign system, which identifies the characters and the outcome of the spectacle clearly (ibid., p. 5) and compares the cause and effect of actions with algebra (ibid., p. 7). For the magic show this means that the expectation of the audience is that of the magicians as "Masters of the Impossible" (as Siegfried and Roy call themselves) making the unbelievable happen on stage. It is of course clear that all the illusions are fabricated but that loses importance when one is absorbed in the spectacle. "The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees." (ibid., p. 3)

About 45 min into the show, after performing minor tricks to get the audience into the right mood, the main attraction gets primed. The white tigers are introduced and 7-year-old Montecore is let out of his cage. It is an impressively massive animal. Montecore has been trained by Roy since he was a cub and performed on stage since 6 years. An experienced old-stager, well used to the space, audience and the routine of the performance. Roy walks with Montecore on the leash towards the corner of the stage, jokingly telling it is the tiger's first public appearance. A well-known trick used by animal trainers to create suspense. The tiger snatches Roy's arm and they start playfully bickering with each other. It looks dangerous, but that's what it's like to work with wild animals. After a short back and forth the tiger lets go of Roy's arm. The magician moves backwards and stumbles over the paw of the tiger and falls.

In this moment Montecore lunges over Roy, reaches around for his neck and drags the magician off stage; through the same door he normally leaves stage with his master.

Roy's body in the mouth of the tiger dangles like a rag doll while being dragged off. No panic in the audience at first. No empathy. in the first seconds, no emotion except amazement. Many

Montecore appears to be somewhat distracted. His attention moves towards something in the audience (the big hairdo of a woman in the front row is held responsible for the event – but after 6 years of working with Siegfried and Roy Montecore should be used to strange and big hairdos). He makes a tiny movement towards the people in the first row. Watching Montecore changing his behaviour, acting differently than usual, Roy moves and puts himself between the audience and the tiger. The tiger gets more irritated by Roy's change of choreography and grabs his arm with his jaw. Roy stumbles over the paw of the tiger in an attempt to release his arm and falls.

Siegfried and Roy, well aware of the choreography and course of the show, experience the distractedness of the tiger as an interruption which requires improvisation. They deviate from their rehearsed course of events, which for them (and also the tiger) has an interruptive effect. With Roy falling a crucial mistake happens, which gives way to the attack of the tiger. They immediately register the reality of the attack.

The attack introduces an element of reality into the bespoken artificial and illusory environment. It functions as a point of Interruption in an anticipated (flat) sequence and appears as a real surprise. What happens is a collision of the illusory and the real. The attack bears the characteristics of a real surprise, which neither the magicians nor the audience expect.

For many in the audience the 'actual' interruption was perceived on the same level as one of the tricks. It seems as if the constant offering of always new surprises can have mind numbing effect on the receiver – a build up of spectacular events that culminates in the inability to detect the quality of a real surprise, of reality in the sequence

According to Walter Benjamin the condition of a shock is produced by over-stimulation in the modern world. In "On some Motifs in Baudelaire" he concludes, drawing on Freud's theories of shock, that the human body needs shields to defend itself against shock. He names consciousness as a possible blocking mechanism. Applied on the audience I would dare to say that they are situated in an expecting mode of shock from the beginning on to deal with all the impressions (fire, light, music, smoke, animals...) evoked by such a performance.

On the side of the performers a flatness is established by exactly the opposite. The performance and the production is not an out of the ordinary event or purely creative, but a result of the labour of rehearsals undertaken before and during the staging of the show. In this I see a similarity to the labour of modernity – the same sequences are repeated again and again – a constant replay. A never ending refrain without verses. A show of this calibre and run time – like most theatrically performed events on stage are based upon a strict choreography. As in dance, every step, gesture and expression is repeated countless times until it is performed in front of an audience. By constant repetition, the performers develop the routine and experience necessary for the delivery of the piece – improved to perfection. If everything goes according to plan there is no need for improvisation or changes in execution: a flatness of repetition and practice following the same schema.

viewed the attack as part of a magic trick in which the actual body is switched to a doll's one. An act fitting almost perfectly with the constant switching of animals with things with people, which Siegfried and Roy are famous for. Something you would expect from a magic with an average ticket price of \$110. It must be spectacular. It's Vegas Baby! The audience eagerly awaits the punchline of the trick, but slowly gets suspicious of the long silence on stage after the attack. Screams were heard from backstage.

The silence is broken by Siegfried coming back on stage and announcing the cancellation of the show.

I am interested in what happens when illusion and reality collide. Is there a moment where they coexist or do they automatically exclude each other? They never are both – over the process of realisation of an interruption into the established categories one replaces the other. I'd like to think of the two concepts in this case as antagonists which are mutually exclusive. The real as unimaginable and non-anticipated excludes the staged illusory and vice-versa.

of illusions. The show offers constantly a variety of stimuli and moments of amazement which cause over-stimulation. The audience is consciously fixed on the illusionary nature of the performance. Everything that happens is believed to be part of the staged. In this mode of being it is impossible for them to make out a difference between the non-staged and staged. The 'actual' interruption gets absorbed into a flatness, simply by not being perceived as an interruption at all.

The moment of interruption for the audience happens during the process of becoming aware of the reality of the attack by the cancellation of the show ahead of schedule.



Still from Chantal Akerman, "Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles" (1975)

Flatness/Interruption
Banal/Dramatic

Chantal Akerman, "Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles" (1975)

In the case of Jeanne Dielman I believe it is productive to consider two different layers for the study of flatness and interruption: The ones of form and content.

We see a woman completing her daily tasks of house work.

The prescribed and accurate execution of action and its repetitive character together form an interplay of monotony and routine. The rigid framework in which things are done, the time ascribed to their accomplishment and the order in which they are performed doesn't leave room for eventualities, contingencies or emotional life. They appear as tedious, flat tasks without any variation, performed in a mechanical manner, very predictable in their outcome.

A high level of precision and experience lies in each of Jeanne's movements. The work does neither challenge nor fulfill her – she is used to it.

What this well-versed execution does instead, is to provide a structure for Jeanne which appears crucial – on one hand – to offer stability and on the other hand to suppress thoughts about the only part of her life which doesn't match her image of being a housewife and mother – her afternoon prostitution.

Additionally, all of this displays a flatness that women, in particular, are confronted with: the banality and tedi-

Formally another type of flatness is addressed, which I am almost more curious about than the one on the level of content. All the sequences of housework are filmed with a static camera from a low angle. Everything is captured in almost real time and in non-dramatic shots. Ivone Margulies (2009) states that this camera position matches the relatively short height of the filmmaker, whereas I rather see the position of a child in this cinematic arrangement. The position of a child seems more productive to consider in regard to the observational mode the viewer is placed in during the course of the film. The dry, distanced, non-judgemental way in which we see Jeanne follow her daily routine, is suggestive of an unknowing observer who didn't yet establish categories of importance or hierarchies. It is this which makes me think of a small child who merely observes without comprehending what it is looking at. By this means of filming nothing is interpreted and everything is treated with the same level of attention. The time given to tasks is not determined by the filmmaker but by the time they take to be completed, they are literally shown in their totality – and the viewer endures them in a child-like manner.

Jeanne is standing in the kitchen, she lights the gas hob and puts a pan on. The doorbell rings and Jeanne goes to open the door for a John. They disappear in the bedroom. After a while they leave the room again. He pays her. He leaves. She puts the money in the terrine on the dining table. She takes a bath, cleans the bathtub, gets dressed. She sets the dinner table in the other room. Her son comes home. They eat together, engage in minimal conversation. After the table is cleared, Jeanne turns on the radio, sits down and knits. Her son reads. They go for their evening walk. Back at the flat, Jeanne sets up her son's bed in the living room. She gets ready for bed and says goodnight to her son. Jeanne gets up. She turns on the heating in the living room. Jeanne prepares her son's clothes for the day, examines if they are in good order. She shines his shoes. Jeanne is making coffee and breakfast. Her son gets up, eats and leaves for school. Jeanne makes her son's bed. She washes and dries the dishes. She leaves the house to do groceries and run errands. Coming home she puts away the shopping. The neighbour brings her baby to be watched. Jeanne puts it in the living room. She starts to prepare dinner. The baby gets picked up again. Jeanne eats her lunch sandwich. She leaves the house to run more

When I think of the everyday – of its banality and the flatness of the latter – I am thinking of sequences of processes. Processes which repeat themselves over and over again. If processes, events, tasks are iterated constantly, in exactly the same way, in a sequential fashion within a certain time frame, over a long time span, these processes become predictable and anticipated – so consequently flat.

Henri Lefebvre detects two modes of repetition in the everyday: "the cyclical, which dominates in nature, and the linear, which dominates in processes known as "rational." The everyday implies on the one hand cycles, nights and days, seasons and harvests, activity and rest, hunger and satisfaction, desire and its fulfillment, life and death, and it implies on the other hand the repetitive gestures of work and consumption."

But what happens when the "linear" becomes predominant to the "cyclical"?

Maybe it is possible to say that for individuals living in the present age of postmodernism the everyday feels flat by being so absorbed in the linear path of repetition (monotonous work, daily tasks) that the cyclic repetitions (which actually introduce changes) go unnoticed. The everyday gets intruded by flatness and routine

ousness of “woman’s” labour, being sentenced to (unfortunately still – Jeanne Dielman was filmed in 1976) merely by virtue of gender.

The interruptions that Jeanne faces are not visible on the formal level. The camera still frames her and her activities with the same intensity, without judgement. Nothing changed in the way of seeing. The disruptive moments are treated equivalent to the flat routine from the beginning.

The only thing we don’t see is what happens inside the bedroom. I think that this might be the only formal interruption we are confronted with. The camera captures even the smallest part of the daily routine, but what happens during the time the john is visiting is not filmed. This could be interpreted as a break or interruption in a representation of daily routine otherwise shown in great detail.

The concealment of this part of the day on the formal level, in my opinion, acts as harbinger for the later course of interrupting events stemming from exactly this moment.

errands. She goes to a cafe and sits down at the corner table. Jeanne orders a coffee and adds two cubes of sugar. She sits for a while drinking the coffee. She goes home and puts the potatoes on the stove. The doorbell rings and Jeanne opens the door for another john. They disappear in the bedroom. They leave the room again, he pays her and leaves.

Jeanne puts the money into the terrine on the dining table but forgets

She takes a bath, cleans the bathtub, gets dressed. Jeanne goes to the kitchen to check on the dinner.

to close its lid. She finds the potatoes she put on the stove earlier boiled over. Jeanne is upset, and starts to walk through the flat in panic – the pan of potatoes in her hands. Finally she tosses them into the trash. Now she has to go out and buy more potatoes. When her son comes home, the dinner is not ready. They are sitting at the table and have to wait for the potatoes.

After the table is cleared, Jeanne turns on the radio, sits down and knits. Her son reads. They go for their evening walk. Back at the flat, Jeanne sets up her son’s bed in the living room.

She says goodnight to her son.

They talk about Jeanne’s dead husband.

She turns on the heating in the living room. Jeanne prepares her son’s clothes for the day.

Jeanne wakes up earlier than normal.

Jeanne is making coffee and breakfast. Her son gets up, eats and leaves for school. Jeanne makes her son’s bed. She washes the dishes.

She shines his shoes, the brush slips out of her hands.

While drying the cutlery she drops a fork on the floor.

The actual event of interruption is not represented. One can only speculate what happened behind the closed doors. I assume that Jeanne had an orgasm. For someone who forbids herself to have emotions and sexuality this event would take on the character of a huge rupture in a carefully established order of things.

Jeanne starts to lose control over her actions. The structure crumbles. There are visible glitches in her routine of doing things in the house. She starts to forget things, is either too early or too late and makes mistakes. With some distance, of course, these are all banal events, but for Jeanne they are perceived as dramatic and interrupting. She is not used to failure and contingencies and the unforeseen. She is always in control of everything and following her structure. Therefore she is not prepared to deal with them. If I would portray Jeanne as an obsessive compulsive person, the interruption would not lie in the fact that things go wrong, but in the failure of suppressing unwanted thoughts (about her prostitution, sexuality and the orgasm). The mistakes are just the surface where the interruption shows.

Curiously the murder is placed on the climatic point in the dramatic structure of the film. The first day without mistakes acts as exposition followed by the rising action after the assumed orgasm. Following this composition the murder should act as the climax, as an interruption, which changes the course of narrative. However, its non-dramatic representation, in acting and framing, doesn't measure up with the idea of a climax. Moreover, it stands dramatically equal next the other interruptions, such as the over boiled potatoes or the bad tasting coffee, which makes it appear rather banal. I believe this equivalence of events is to a large extent due to the camera work: after there are no hierarchies established, the murder and other events bear the same intensity and dramatic qualities. By leading up to a climax that doesn't function as one, a similarity of events is established – the banal and the dramatic become homogeneous neighbours.

She leaves the house to do groceries and run errands. **She's too early, the shops are still closed, she has to wait.**

At home Jeanne starts to prepare the dinner earlier than usual. Jeanne sits at the kitchen table doing nothing. She makes coffee. She takes a sip, it tastes bad. She adds milk, it still tastes bad. The milk is fine, she adds sugar. No change, she throws away the coffee and starts more from scratch. Jeanne sits in a chair in the living room, just breathing, doing nothing. She cleans some things inside the vitrine and checks in the hallway for any post. She checks the time. Then she sits down in the chair again.

Jeanne leaves the house and goes to the cafe **but her usual seat is taken by another woman. Jeanne leaves without ordering and goes home.**

She opens the door for another john. They go to the bedroom. **They have sex. Jeanne has an orgasm. After intercourse she gets dressed again. She flattens her skirt and takes a pair of scissors from the dresser. Jeanne stabs the john who is lying on the bed in the throat. Jeanne sits at the dinner table doing nothing. A light is flickering.**

Jeanne starts to face periods of boredom. Moments in which she doesn't know what to do with herself or fill the time.

Under normal circumstances boredom would be associated with flatness. "Quelle que je peux faire? Je sais pas quoi faire" - this scene of Godard's "Pierrot le Fou" is a vivid example for boredom as I usually would see it. One is lacking of general interest or interest to engage. The situation one is confronted with provides too little of a challenge for the individual confronted with it and additionally the surrounding fails in providing stimulation. One is waiting for this moment to pass.

After Jeanne is not used to gaps inside the structure of her daily routine (even her leisure time is highly anticipated) she can't deal with it and feels uneasy about it. An otherwise flat sensation transforms into an interruption.



Still from Straub/Huillet, "Les yeux ne veulent pas en tout temps se fermer, ou Peut-être qu'un jour Rome se permettra de choisir à son tour" (1970)

Flatness/Interruption Absence/Presence

Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet, "Les yeux ne veulent pas en tout temps se fermer, ou Peut-être qu'un jour Rome se permettra de choisir à son tour" (1970) aka "Othon"

I am not entirely sure if it is at all possible to detect flatness and interruption as separate terms in the work of Straub/Huillet.

The two terms appear to me as always standing on a par in close proximity to each other – one bearing the characteristics of both if not even becoming each other.

For example, the flatness of the speech and the non-emotional acting becomes an interruption to the ideas we have of towards the delivery of High Art works and what we do expect from cinema. At the same time it is exactly this feeling of interruption that creates a distancing effect, hence the viewer, right from the start, can not easily gain access to the work, which enforces the argument that Straub/Huillet's films are unintelligible and boring.

The same is the case in terms of the visual image and the sound we hear.

Deleuze describes their relation as dissociated but nevertheless belonging together: "What constitutes the audio-visual image is a disjunction a dissociation of the visual and the sound, each heautonomous, but at the same time an incommensurable or 'irrational' relation which connects them to each other, without forming a whole, without offering the least whole." (Deleuze, 1994, p. 256)

Othon appears as a very difficult film; it is hard to make it

through. A description that jumps to mind easily is "boring". The revisiting of a 17th century play in the 20th century, which belongs to the realm of the European canon of High Art feels somewhat out of place, not to say irrelevant.

If it is not considered as irrelevant, it could be seen as only an intellectual gesture which doesn't allow much pleasure on the side of the viewer. An interpretation of Othon as a costume film set in ancient Rome gives it an non contemporary/outdated feeling. The setting Straub and Huillet chose for their film are the ruins on top of Palatine Hill; remains of the palaces of ancient Rome. But after they work with direct sound, the background noises of today's Rome are audible, which undermines the logic of this chosen set

and makes it feel out of place and almost ridiculous. It becomes impossible to follow the narrative plot. Corneille's Alexandriner verses, originally written in French, are spoken by foreign (mainly Italian) actors. This leads to a very peculiar and indistinct accentuation of the textual material. Some words are simply pronounced wrong or spoken

The inaccessibility and the resistance the material imposes is what makes the films especially worth watching. It needs to go beyond the first frustrating streaks of ennui to open up a completely new way of seeing, hearing and perceiving. The High

Art works Straub and Huillet choose as material for their films and the way they work with them always evoke contemporary socio-political parallels. Also they bring with them a certain expectation on how they should be delivered, which Straub/Huillet deliberately ignore in order to make visible their own fascination with the material. Othon for example revolves around the struggle for power inside the governing structures and the absence of the people in the process of making political decisions, a conflict still prevailing in contemporary times.

The setting of the film is very carefully chosen, with the Palatine Hill as the power centre of ancient Rome. The interruptive noises and visual impressions of modern Rome on the foot of the hill distance the viewer purposely from being absorbed in the verses or following the plot. It is the real, non-staged world invading the fictitious narrative. Also they show traces of the people, apart from that absent in the film and Corneille's play.

As flat as the delivery of speech, the austere sets and performance of the actors might seem in the beginning, they fulfill a distancing, interrupting function. At first I was reminded of the Brechtian Distancing Effect, but think by now that there is a fundamental difference between these two. Brecht usually interrupts his plays in an abrupt and short-timed manner - a sharp incision, whereas Straub and Huillet distance their viewers right from the beginning and over and over again. Once one gets used to being distanced constantly we find another kind of flatness in this continually interrupting effect, which surprisingly allows us to go deeper and find access to the material in an unexpected way. If one tries to approach the film in the receiving attitude of a spectator, there is in my opinion hardly anything to gain. Whereas if we try to observe without an established idea of what and how we will see it, the films open up a variety of different aspects to reflect on.

This kind of intersection of elements is equally present in the Straubian Shots (even though not directly applied in *Othon*, but worth to mention in the discussion of the works of Straub/Huillet): On one hand the Straubian Shot interrupts the speech (which could be perceived as flat) – the sound of the material language – but on the other hand one could argue that the take only shows a seemingly empty landscape for several minutes with the camera only panning, which would mean flatness interrupts flatness. Then again we learn to understand that the landscape and nature shots in Straub and Huillet's films are never flat – they show something else, exactly by the emptiness and absence they visualise at first. Often they show historic locations of political struggle (*Othon*, *Toute Révolution est un Coup de Dés*) especially that of workers and peasants, or – by a longer reading of these images – one realises that exactly in these empty shots lies a variation and presence of things and attributes, absent in the human figures of the film.

unstressed, others drown in a strange form of dialect. The actors pause their speeches on unnatural points. There is hardly any chance to fully understand and concentrate on the meaning of the language spoken, due to its unfamiliar sound. In addition to the somewhat incorrect pronunciation, the speed the text is delivered in becomes another major obstacle for trying to grasp the meaning of the mono-/dialogues. *Othon* speaks fast in a language clearly not his native one, to such an extent that it becomes obnoxious for the viewer to follow the lines. One gets frustrated by failing to follow the text right from the very beginning. The speed draws attention to the meter of verses but one notices equally the monotony of delivery. Others in turn speak so slow that the text loses its meaning through being ripped apart – there is no uniformity in the delivery of language to settle with as a spectator. Every actor speaks in a different way – the only thing they have in common is that they appear as equally incomprehensible. The text and the acting in general is delivered in a completely unemotional manner. No clues are given in favour of the inner

Straub/Huillet are using language as a material. The delivery of speech, or moreover the reciting of lines with a strange or non-existent accentuation, the pauses and continuous monologues do draw the attention away from the original meaning of the text, but instead reveal the materiality of the text itself. The difficulty of an actor to deliver text in a language not their own creates an exciting effect – one discovers the rhythmic and melodic qualities of language; a distinct pattern. By means of the non-emotional delivery of text, new relations between words become apparent. The language becomes an object in the films of Straub/Huillet. The variation in speed of speech between the characters seems to serve as a tool to indicate the difference in status and character. Whereas *Othon* speaks a large quantity of text extremely fast, which identifies him as an eager but inexperienced character, Galba communicates in a slower more settled way that shows his state of established power. In this way another point of access to the adapted material is offered, a way beyond understanding the meaning of words. The unemotional acting gives room to fully focus on the materiality of language. Additionally, the diminishing presence of the

Somehow it almost could be said that apart from flatness being interrupted by a typically disrupting event, flatness also is interrupted by another kind of flatness and interruption by another interruption. Also it can be possible that flatness produces interruption in itself, and interruption – especially if imposed on us constantly – becomes flat. As confusing as this sounds, to me the terms of flatness and interruption here stand so close to each other that they intersect at some points. Things are not flat or interruptive, they have the potential to be both at the same time.

By constantly oscillating between the concepts of flatness/interruption, absence/presence, it seems to me that Straub/Huillet's films carry an elementary message.

They teach me how to see things I normally would ignore. Every absence in these films shows a presence of something else. The absence of accentuation and emotional performance of text reveals the rhythm, tempo and material of the language. Once I got over the first resistance the speech imposed and gave up trying to understand every word, I started to focus on the materiality of language – and consequently wondered how wrong I was in my approach to just understand the meaning of it – how wrong it was to exclude language from the material world. It is I guess about the realisation: yes language is material – it always is.

constitution of the characters, no gestures or expressions humans/actors, brings to the foreground phenomena in the show their emotional/psychological motives. They appear surrounding that otherwise could easily be ignored. The lit-flat, mechanic and lifeless. Over the time the film runs this title movement and gestures of the actors stand in contrast to turns out to be both unsettling and annoying. Filmed to a that which one suddenly starts to perceive in the lifeliness of large extent in an almost theatrical fashion, in two dimensional long shots with the camera only moving back and forth, an additional distance to the characters and the plot suddenly gains importance and appears more, or at least equally alive as the human performance. The almost static camera is created. Furthermore the background sound of the set and the rigid framing acts in support of this effect. Interrupting gets in the way of the spoken word and the plot. The ing sounds from the contemporary background setting don't noises of the wind, a fountain, and most notably the noises get in the way of the objectified language, but stand equivalent-of the traffic of today's Rome conflict with the sounds produced by the actors, and make the whole experience of listening to the text, and by that understanding its meaning established between humans, nature and the man-made (objects, literature, politics, film...).

While this may bring to mind Derrida's Theory of Deconstruction, I'm not quite sure if this is how I see flatness and interruption in Straub/Huillet's work. Derrida suggests that opposing concepts always stand in "violent hierarchy" where one always "has the upper hand" (Derrida, 2010, p. 39). In Straub/Huillet's non-hierarchical film-making we encounter struggle, resistance, but not dominance of one concept over the other. Therefore it is not possible to overturn any hierarchy. On the other hand Derrida also pleads "not to synthesize the terms in opposition, but to mark their difference and eternal interplay": possibly, the interplay of constant oscillation between flatness and disruption we find in Straub/Huillet's work.

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