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ABSTRACT

The sudden flourishing of reflections on light, nature and poetry that occurred from the mid-80s onwards in the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, could not fail to surprise. Between their reputation as Brechtian, materialist filmmakers and these seemingly apolitical reflections, developed in conjunction with their appeal to Hölderlin's "idealist" poetry, there seems to be an insurmountable rift. By situating their aesthetics in the broader framework known as "aesthetic modernity", i.e. art and philosophy of art since the end of the 18th century (cf. J.M. Schaeffer, J. Rancière), I demonstrate how films such as *Der Tod des Empedokles* (1986) and *Allemagne année 90 neuf zéro* (1991), not so much exhibit a shift to conservatism with this "sudden" interest in nature and poetry, but, rather, the manifestation of a Romantic contradiction characteristic of modern aesthetics. In a period of disillusionment, these "Brechtian" filmmakers increasingly turned to a German literary and philosophical tradition that praised the "revelationist" potential of poetry, while they, simultaneously and still with revolutionary fervour, reflected on Germany's troubled political past and present. I will argue that we can understand this alignment of revolution and revelationism from the perspective of their indebtedness to an antimodern worldview that perceives of the modern age as being in decline, to which these filmmakers oppose a utopian striving towards a "new world", captured in a Romantic discourse of light and vision.

KEYWORDS

Hölderlin; Godard; revelationism; revolution; Straub and Huillet

"And poetry should give the children of the earth the courage to turn their backs on so-called progress, so-called science—the courage of the revolution . . . "[1]

The 1980s herald the increased presence of reflections on light, nature and poetry in the aesthetics of Jean-Luc Godard and the filmmaking duo Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub—an evolution that is surprising to say the least. After all, throughout the decade preceding it, they were continuously described in influential journals such as *Screen* and *Cahiers du cinéma* as being foremost preoccupied with themes of a "Marxist" nature, such as ideology, power structures and revolution. To a certain extent, this appears to have come as a surprise to these filmmakers themselves as well. Straub, for instance, stated that initially he was "like Brecht, who declared himself a child of the city", that nature made him laugh.[2] It took him "fifty years to discover nature".[3] Godard in contrast, in spite of some excursions into nature in early films such as *Pierrot le fou* (1965), developed a much more intense relationship with it after his move to Rolle, Switzerland in 1978, which Antoine de Baecque significantly described as a "return to the homeland",[4] while Godard himself ratified the view that in the 1980s he was increasingly "preoccupied with eternal mysteries of philosophy and metaphysics".[5]

At that time, Huillet and Straub worked on their film adaptations of the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin (*Der Tod des Empedokles* (1986), *Schwarze Sünde* (1989), *Antigone* (1992)[6]), whose work, very much indebted to an idealism of Platonic kind, is punctuated with hymns to nature and to "heavenly" light. Godard, who praised their treatment of Hölderlin's revolutionary mourning play *Der Tod des Empedokles* (1798), seemed more attracted by the poet's melancholy, as encapsulated in the poem "Half of Life" (*Hälfte des Lebens*), which is recited in *Allemagne année 90 neuf zéro* (1991), a film equally invested with German aesthetics and politics. To these filmmakers, Hölderlin incarnates the idea of a visionary artist who—in defiance of institutionalized religion and the theory of progress underlying capitalism—"saw" the true nature of reality and revealed it through his poetry.

Inevitably a question arises: how to understand this apparent "shift" from a Brechtian, materialist perspective (in accordance with which they are still, and sometimes exclusively read[7]) to a much more

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idealist or Romantic tendency pervading modern aesthetics of which Hölderlin is but one example? Placed in a broader historical framework, this shift—in fact an apparent contradiction—can be seized without theoretically reasoning it away, or without dismissing the later work of these filmmakers as regressive in comparison to their "revolutionary" May '68 work. As such, I will first of all historicize the philosophical premises of their ideal of cinema as that which "relearns to see" and show that it is indebted to a German Romantic metaphysics persisting in modern French aesthetics. Inasmuch as they subscribe to, what can be called, for brevity's sake, a "revelationist" aesthetics of Romantic descent, the appearance of idealist and sometimes blatantly reactionary stances might be better understood. Furthermore, this shows to what an extent the idea of a "shift" is mistaken, as this revelationist aesthetics was already present in their films of the 1960s.[8]

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to reduce this legacy to the sacralization of art's revelationist potential—as the work of Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre,[9] or of Jacques Rancière, teaches us—because aesthetic modernity (i.e. art and philosophy of art since the late 18th century) is made up of intractable, often difficult to disentangle contradictions.[10] Intertwined at its core are both the ideal of a mystic revelation of reality and the call for revolutionary aesthetics that reject any authoritarian intervention, be it theological or political. When Hölderlin, for instance, recounts Empedocles's desire to dissolve into nature, to merge with the spirit of the father, i.e. the heavenly light, Straub and Huillet read this to be an act of resistance, leading to Empedocles's strife with both the religious and political leaders of Agrigento. This apparent contradiction is what explains why they were so fascinated by *Der Tod des Empedokles*, which was written in the wake of the French Revolution.[11]

However, this reading of Hölderlin's poetics is by no means undisputed. Throughout the 20th century, Hölderlin had been claimed by authors from the right (Heidegger) and the left (Brecht) alike.[12] Huillet and Straub's reading of the play is informed by Pierre Bertaux who offered a highly politicised interpretation of the poet's work. Bertaux, an acclaimed scholar of German Literature, in 1968 defended his provocative thesis before the German Hölderlin Society, claiming that Hölderlin was, in fact, a Jacobin, and that an understanding of his work is impossible without including his revolutionary commitment.[13] More specifically, he argued in *Hölderlin und die Französische Revolution* (1969) that revolution and revelation (*Offenbarung*) share a fundamental aspect in Hölderlin's aesthetics, namely the idea that "the world no longer appears as something closed or completed (*ein Abgeschlossenes*) but as something open (*ein Offenes*); a moment when suddenly everything is possible or seems possible that was otherwise impossible."[14] The possibility of change, of the arrival of a "Neue Welt", as Huillet says in the final sequence of *Schwarze Sünde* (1989), is immanent to revelationist and revolutionary poetry alike, as both share a view of temporality as the promise of radical change.

By focusing on the entwinement of revolution and revelation, this paper opposes the dichotomy of readings that either presage a "turn" towards an apolitical cinema in the work of the aforementioned authors, and those readings that stress only the revolutionary, materialist penchant of this aesthetics. Through a historicizing approach, not only with regard to a German literary and philosophical heritage in films such as *Der Tod des Empedokles* and *Allemagne année 90 neuf zéro*, but also with regard to the disillusioned political climate at the time, I hope to show that their aesthetic fabric is far more complex in nature. The key to their aesthetics is Godard's, Huillet's and Straub's antimodern understanding of history as decline. From this perspective, defended by left- and right-wing thinkers alike, one can understand their observation that modern man, not unlike Hölderlin's Empedocles, is blind. This worldview underlies both revelationist poetry, aimed at letting nature shine forth in the absence of humankind, and the need for a revolutionary poetry aimed at establishing a break with any authoritarian intervention. What thus might look like a reactionary shift to themes of metaphysical nature, should be read as a deliberate, revolutionary response to the growing awareness that previous revolutions, such as May '68, had failed.

Cinematography as revelationist poetry

The question of why Huillet and Straub turned to Hölderlin in the 1980s can be answered in several ways. One reason, accounted for by Straub himself, is that *Der Tod des Empedokles* recounts a "communist utopia".[15] Beneath this political reading, however, another reason lies dormant. At the beginning of *Der Tod des Empedokles*, Empedocles (Andreas von Rauch) suddenly realises that he has been blinded. Carried away by his enthusiasm, he had declared himself a god, only to later find himself abandoned by the gods: "An eye that saw more lofty things than mortal eye/ Is now struck blind, I grope about me—/ Where are you, O my gods? […]".[16] Isolated and in doubt about his previous declaration, he is shown in the midst of nature with a knife sticking into the ground in front of him, maybe already considering the sacrificial suicide with which the play ends. Somewhat later, however, Pausanias, Empedocles's faithful follower, states that he has witnessed

a sudden change in his friend: "You are transformed and now your eye/ Is glistening as in victory. I do not understand."[17] Throughout the play, the metaphor of seeing anew after a period of blindness finds echoes in the narrative, which describes an ascent from darkness to light, from a modern experience of alienation to dissolution in the One, "godly Nature".[18]

At the heart of *Der Tod des Empedokles* thus lies a quest to re-learn how to see the true nature of reality, which corresponds with Huillet and Straub's description of the primary goal of cinema as learning "to see clearly".[19] Godard also dwells on the term "seeing" (*voir*), and aligns it with a presumed betrayal of cinema which, as an art of the visible, has surrendered to writing and concurrently forgotten to look at the world.[20] What comes to the fore here is an essentially antimodern worldview,[21] according to which cinema, as Godard said with regard to *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–1998) and *Allemagne année 90 neuf zéro*, is a "fallen medium".[22] In an interview on *Der Tod des Empedokles*, Huillet used words such as "decadence" and "loss" to describe cinema's evolution, furthermore asserting that this is a kind of "model of what happens in general".[23] These filmmakers claim that cinema essentially should teach us to "see" reality afresh, that this essence is lost and that it must be restored. This argument concurs with André Bazin's idea that cinema can and must "respect reality", and that, in doing so, it can reveal its hidden "truth": a discourse that Pascal Bonitzer, in his emblematic 1976 essay on Godard, Straub and Huillet, denounced as an idealist metaphysics somewhat bizarrely surfacing in the work of these "revolutionary" filmmakers.[24]

What seems incomprehensible to Bonitzer (who at the time was one of *Cahiers du cinéma*'s chief-editors) is that these "Marxists", formally so radical and inventive, cling to such a naïve and theoretically outdated idea. Nevertheless, Straub and Huillet's films, however Brechtian they are, cannot be understood without acknowledging their debt to a revelationist tradition in French film aesthetics. In a text from 1966, Straub significantly quotes Brecht alongside Bresson in order to explain the specificity of cinema as that which unearths the truth from under the self-evident. He then writes, borrowing a quote from Proust, that the greatness of Bresson's "admirable cinematograph" is precisely "*to rediscover, to reapprehend, to make ourselves fully aware of that reality, remote from our daily preoccupations, from which we separate ourselves by an ever greater gulf as the conventional knowledge which we substitute for it grows thicker and more impermeable.*"[25] Bresson's notion of "cinematography" (*le cinématographe*), which Straub praises, should be clearly distinguished from "cinema", understood by Bresson as "filmed theatre". While the latter merely copies pre-existing reality, the former aims to reveal the (hidden) truth of reality. What comes to the fore here is a "revelationist" understanding of art, which, according to Jean-Marie Schaeffer, has been prevalent in aesthetic modernity, ever since early German Romanticism.[26] In this respect, the German philosopher Friedrich von Schelling introduced a distinction between "art" as mere artisanry and genuine art or "poetry", which seems to resurface in Bresson's distinction between filmed theatre and cinematography. While the former is understood as conscious production, technicality, skill and craft, the latter points to an unconscious revelation, the idea that the artwork cannot be fully attributed to the artist alone, that it is in need of a free favour of nature ("freye Gunst der Natur").[27] True poetry is thus rooted in a form of passivity, which Bresson, Bazin and several other film critics at the time ultimately see realised in photographic representation.[28] In *Scénario du film Passion* (1981), Godard espouses the same idea, stating that "you want to see, you want to re-*see*-ve", thus aligning (by means of a rather spurious etymology) "seeing" with "receiving", that is, with a favour or a gift from the world. This Romantic belief in the revelationist potential of art persists in various guises in the aesthetics of these filmmakers.

However, the quote from Proust that Straub uses to praise Bresson's understanding of cinema points to another aspect of this legacy. He says that we can thus rediscover a reality from which we are increasingly *separated* by conventional knowledge. A distinction between common, conventional, everyday knowledge and poetry emerges here, which seems to be indebted, via Proust, to Henri Bergson: the idea is that generally we do not "see" reality, but only conventional signs, embedded within utilitarian goals. The artist, the poet, however, "sees better than others because he looks at reality naked and without veils", Bergson said, and in doing so, he or she aspires to a form of philosophy.[29] As a consequence, art is not only elevated to the level of philosophy's epistemic aims, recalling the Romantic legacy,[30] but, even more importantly, art may heal the "modern" separation between humankind and nature, as Friedrich Schiller famously argued.[31] As a consequence of this perceived "loss of unity",[32] authors such as Schelling or Hölderlin, appealed to what Schaeffer refers to as "monastic systems of the universe", such as Spinozism or Neoplatonism, and accordingly perceived "nature" as an organic unity encompassing the whole of reality. Inasmuch as the *hen kai pan*[33] (the One and All) escapes rationality, which assumes the separation between a judging subject and a judged object, only "mystic" knowledge of the absolute is possible.[34]

This brings us back to *Der Tod des Empedokles*, which Rancière described as referring to the dream of

the Romantic period. This is the dream of a world "where there would no longer be on the one hand the intelligible world, thought, the law and, on the other, the sensible world", the dream of a world where unity is regained.[35] Once Empedocles has recognised his own blindness, the town council exiles him for his previous hubris. When they back down later and ask him to become their king, Empedocles rejects the power offered to him, for, he says, "The time of kings has passed forever",[36] neither is it a time for institutionalised religion[37]—as both maintain the separation between the intelligible and the sensible, which Empedocles aims to overcome by dissolving into nature. It is suggested, though not shown, that Empedocles throws himself into Mount Etna at the end of the play. This final "voluntary and foundational sacrifice", as Bertaux calls it,[38] is aligned with the hopes of establishing an everlasting unity with nature, not only for himself but also for the people of Agrigento. "Divinely present nature/ Needs no speech [...],"[39] Empedocles says. In accordance with his mystical account of nature, he demands the abolition of human language and rationality, as these will always separate humanity from the One, divine Nature. Through the work of Hölderlin—whom they significantly called a 'visionary'[40]—Huillet and Straub bring to the fore the loss of unity as a fundamentally modern experience. They also defend the Romantic view of art, which emphasises its capacity to reveal genuine knowledge of reality, and, in doing so, to overcome the separation that characterises the modern world.

Such a conception of visionary, revelationist poetry can also be found in Godard's *Allemagne année 90 neuf zéro*, in which we follow Lemmy Caution (Eddie Constantine), a secret agent out of work since the fall of the Iron Curtain, through Germany's rich cultural, and troublesome political past. Just before his final arrival in West Berlin, a city Godard portrays as being in the grip of capitalism (illuminated advertisements for cigarettes, *Deutsche Bank*, etc. dominate the imagery), in the film's fifth part, entitled "Wall without Lamentations", Caution travels through nature. While crossing a sun-drenched lake in a rowing boat, Caution says on the soundtrack: "Ah my homeland, is it thus true, it is like this that I have long imagined you, happy, magical, dazzling country, O beloved earth, where are you?"[41] According to Jacques Aumont this is not so much a reflection on a lost geographical country, the beloved earth rather is the land of art, "the native country, the country of origin, that from which one comes and which artistic activity seeks to find again with much difficulty (*à peniblement retrouver*)".[42] This is linked to a Romantic legacy in Godard's work, Aumont writes, namely with the aesthetic aim of establishing direct contact with the world.[43] The verses that Caution recites stem from one of Jean Paul's Romantic dreams, included in his novel *Hesperus oder 45 Hundposttage* (1795). It is likely that Godard found them in a small book, *Choix des rêves* (1931), edited by the French literary critic Albert Béguin, with whose work on German Romanticism Godard was familiar.[44] In his introduction to *Choix des rêves*, Béguin stresses the importance of the "Romantic theory of inspiration".[45] Although the poet is spoken to through dreams, it would be wrong to regard this as mere subjective fantasy; the truth of the poem, Béguin says, is the voice of God entering poetry as a consequence of the poet's *passive* attitude.[46] Immanent to this scene is the Romantic myth of the visionary poet, who may reveal the beloved earth, the magic homeland—nature before the separation, before industrialisation, which gradually destroys it.

What sets Godard apart is that this myth—the revelation of reality made possible through film—is always combined with his belief that it is impossible, that poets have failed at their task. Significantly in this respect, the fifth part of *Allemagne année 90 neuf zéro* mingles Brecht's condemnation of the poet's silence in his resistance poem "In Dark Times" (*In finsteren Zeiten*) with verses from the melancholic poem "Half of Life" (*Hälfte des Lebens*), part of Hölderlin's *Nachtgesänge*, written around 1803 when the poet was on the edge of insanity. They are "nocturnal chants" because they sing of the "night", the absence of the gods, a time between the disappearance of the old gods and the arrival of new ones; the "interval" constituting the modern age. Almost two hundred years later, Godard meditates on this when he says, with a reference to Heidegger's overtly Romantic right-wing reading of Hölderlin, that "in times of distress, poets must show the trace of the god who has fled".[47] Times are dark, Godard concludes in his 1991 film, and the only possible hope can come from the side of the poets, who may yet become "seers" once more. This hope is linked to nature in *Allemagne année 90 neuf zéro*, the beauty of which Godard contrasts with urban life: while the beloved earth is celebrated in song, the landscape is bathed in sunlight and, just as the camera starts panning along the lakeshore, the elegiac second movement of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 7* (1811–1812) begins to play. The music, the text and the imagery of this "hymn to nature" are all indebted to German Romanticism: the "magical homeland" is found in nature and signs of hope become manifest in the splendour of light.

Out of respect for reality, and very much in line with Bresson, who was an inspiration to them, Straub, Huillet and Godard all favour outdoor filming. The latter pointed to the religious origin of this view in a debate on *Scénario du film Passion*: "'Let us

shoot outside without [artificial] light according to my old system'. It was a bit religious in those days, let us get the light from God and look, open your eyes [...]."[48] The idea Godard is proclaiming here is that light is a "gift", that it radically eludes the capacity of human, "finite" subjectivity. The acquisition of "infinite" knowledge had before already been described as an ascent to the divine light in Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, as well as in Plotinus's *Enneads*, which were hugely popular with Romantic poets and philosophers such as Novalis or Jean Paul, and also with Hölderlin.[49] Plotinus writes that if a person wishes to acquire knowledge of the *hen kai pan* (the One and All), she must set aside all inherited knowledge and settle in beauty, understood as the sensible appearance of the supersensible. Through such mystical experience, unity is suddenly, as in a flash, perceived in the form of divine light.[50] This reasoning is reflected in how these filmmakers look at natural light. "The light, we have it, it is given to you, and we do not manufacture it,"[51] said Straub in an interview with Aumont and Anne-Marie Faux published in the year when *Der Tod des Empedokles* was released. In this film, Huillet and Straub not only yield to light by recording it in as passive a way as possible, Hölderlin's mourning play itself is fully indebted to a metaphysics of light. Although humankind is separated from its divine origin, Empedocles proclaims that, through the light which drapes itself around "mortals" like a robe, the divine Spirit might be known:

> O heavenly light! – the humans had not
> taught it me – for a long time, since
> my longing heart could not find
> the all-living one, I turned to you,
> hung, entrusting myself to you like a plant [...].[52]

While Empedocles is reciting these lines, speckled light falls on his face and the foliage of the shrubbery behind him is swaying in the wind. Straub and Huillet rely on natural light and direct sound to capture these "gifts of nature". The latter asserted in a 1994 interview that as a consequence of nature's unpredictability, the artist often has to wait, has to have patience and that it is only thus that one becomes able to see that a branch of a tree, which initially seemed to get in the way, is actually "a gift of nature, as Hölderlin would say."[53] Their portrayal of Empedocles during his "hymn to light" emphasises the importance of natural light as an unpredictable and intangible play of nature, whose imagination, says Straub, just as Bazin commented in an early piece of film criticism (1947), is always richer than that of finite human beings.[54] Hence, the respect for, or subjugation to natural light Straub and Huillet demonstrate in their aesthetics stands in service of a revelation of the mystery of nature, that is, its intangibility for the finite human mind as it is described in Romantic discourse.

Revelationist Poetry and the Revolution

Godard stated in *Voyage à travers un film (Sauve qui peut (la vie))* (1981) that after May '68 he had the feeling that he could no longer see. At around the same time, the use of video (whose Latin meaning, as Godard recalls, is "I see"), reflections on montage, and effects such as slow motion should be understood as a laborious quest to regain sight. The combination of a reflection on failed societal revolutions and the desire for renewed visibility is also crucial to understanding Straub's and Huillet's adaptation of Hölderlin's *Der Tod des Empedokles*. In a short text "My key dates" (2003), Straub mentions 1986 as the year when they discovered Hölderlin's play and thus "the sublime utopia of a young man against the threat of the Industrial Revolution and the myth of progress: a Communist utopia that could (still? If it is not too late now!) save those who Hölderlin calls *'the children of the earth.'*".[55] To Huillet and Straub, Hölderlin is not only a visionary, but also a revolutionary poet, given that he proposed a utopia in response to the socio-political shock wave caused by the French Revolution and the rapidly increasing industrialisation at the time.[56] "Straub and Huillet's turn to Hölderlin in the mid-1980s could not, then, have been more timely," writes Leslie Hill, inasmuch as "Hölderlin too had begun work on *Der Tod des Empedokles* at a time of contestation and disillusionment in the wake of the French Revolution, of which he was initially a fervent supporter."[57]

Not unlike Godard, the filmmaking duo's shift to a more overt inclination towards Romantic thought seems to be linked with what they perceived as the failed revolutions of the modern age, while equally being imbedded in a critique of the visual industry which impedes "seeing".[58] It is a "Romantic" turn given that also German Romanticism, which emerged in the aftermath of the French Revolution, was in fact a counterrevolution. It was a critique of the industrialisation, rationalization and progressive disenchantment of the world, write Löwy and Sayre.[59] The Romantic hymns to nature sprang not only from the growing awareness of the alienation of humankind in the modern age, but also from the threat posed to nature by industrialisation. I have argued in the first part that these ideas are formulated against the backdrop of an understanding of history as decay, which is an inherently antimodern notion, close to the worldview of Bresson's films at the time, such as *Le Diable probablement* (1977) or *L'Argent* (1983). Straub once said that people are "being told that progress must go on, that there is no alternative

but to rush down into the abyss of progress until disaster takes place."[60] This can be regarded as a conservative way of thinking, not only because it is formally opposed to progressive thought, but more importantly because an apocalyptic inclination becomes evident here. The essence of the modern world is a kind of decay that, if not stopped, will culminate in an apocalypse (a Greek term translated in Latin as "revelation"): the moment when the barbaric essence of the modern age will manifest itself in the form of an all-encompassing event of closure.[61] This line of reasoning is part of their film, as Straub indicates in the 1987 interview following *Der Tod des Empedokles*, referring to a book by Michel Henry (*La Barbarie*), a philosopher whose analysis of modernity is in line with Heidegger's disparaging assessment of it.[62] The contradictory nature of their aesthetics must be placed against the backdrop of a "Romantic" critique of modernity, whose persistence in the 20th century, Löwy and Sayre argue, is inherently connected with capitalism.[63]

Let us examine these tensions in a little more detail, while tracing them back to the late 1960s, to emphasise the continuity of the oeuvre's of Godard and Straub and Huillet in this regard.[64] With regard to the latter filmmakers we will have a look at *Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter* (1968), a film that culminates in a mystical ascent to the light, in spite of the fact that Straub once described it as their response to May '68.[65] Moreover, this short film contains a prefiguration of Empedocles's "discourse to the mountain" (*discours à la montagne*)[66] at the end of *Der Tod des Empedokles*. In his mourning play, Hölderlin calls on his readers to reject, as he had done in the first part of his novel *Hyperion* (1797), the knowledge that has been handed down, and to surrender to "divine nature" (*heilge Natur*).[67] He calls for another way of "seeing" the world, a way of seeing that is impeded by inherited, conventional knowledge:

> So venture it! What you have inherited, what you have acquired,
> what your fathers' mouth has told you, taught you,
> law and custom, the names of the ancient gods,
> forget it boldly and raise, as newborn
> your eyes to godly Nature, […].[68]

Here it is important to recall Bertaux' reading of Hölderlin. After all, he wrote that in Hölderlin's mourning play one perceives "the long reverberations of the spring of the French Revolution".[69] This applies more precisely to the first version of *Der Tod des Empedokles* (the one which Huillet and Straub adapted in 1986), which was written in a period when revolutionaries in Hölderlin's native country were planning to depose the duke and to found a Swabian republic, something to which Hölderlin, according to Bertaux, was involved at least as a confidant [*Mitwisser*].[70] During this hymn to nature, Straub and Huillet no longer show Empedocles's face, but nature in the absence of finite human beings (field, trees and in the distance Mount Etna), immersed in a continuous play of sunlight as clouds drift across the sky. Their revelationist poetry enacts, as it were, the concluding verses by eclipsing the subject and letting (objective) nature shine forth, and in doing so it refers both to the hope to see the world afresh and to societal change, a hope for change deeply rooted in the lines from Empedocles, from which the film's second title is derived: "then out of the bliss of a beautiful dawning/ the green of the earth will glisten anew for you."[71] Exactly this is what Huillet and Straub hoped to achieve with their films, as they firmly believed that political awareness and thus the realisation of a new world is only possible when we have re-learned to "see".[72]

A similar combination of revelationism and hope for social change can be found in *Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter*, a short film in which mystic, revelatory poetry is employed to escape conformism and the laws of society. Inasmuch as mysticism, throughout history, has been an anti-institutional praxis, calling for an individual, personal contact with the divine set loose from tradition, it regularly is opposed to the religion of the doctors of the law. The mystic does not wish to merely follow existing rules and perform his or her religious duties, but seeks a direct experience of God. Crucially, in this respect the mystic experience takes the form of an ascent of the soul towards the divine, where it beholds the splendour of the supreme being and, accordingly, regains a lost unity. *Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter* begins with the line "Stupid old Germany, I hate it over here. I hope I can go soon", and ends, as Rochelle Fack notes, with a mystical marriage.[73] It consists of three at first sight barely connected parts: an underexposed long travelling shot along a dark street in which prostitutes walk to and fro; a condensed version of the thoroughly pessimistic play by Ferdinand Bruckner, *Krankheit der Jugend* (1926); and a wedding scene between a black man (James Powell) and one of the white actresses (Lilith Ungerer). In the third part, the pimp (played by Rainer W. Fassbinder) is awaiting the newlyweds at their house and tells the actress that she "cannot escape the law of the family so easily." In response, filmed in one continuous shot, the actress shoots him, walks to the window, where she sits down on the windowsill, and recites a poem ascribed to the Spanish 16th century mystic, John of the Cross. In the window frame the sun-pierced canopy of a tree rustles in the wind. The camera slowly tracks forward, eventually framing only the sunlit trees, while along the top of the window we see raindrops falling.

Moments later the first notes of Bach's *Ascension Oratorio* (BWV11) are heard, which reminds the spectator of the choir in the openingssequence, as it asked: "Wenn soll es doch geschehen?", when will the ascent take place? When will the transformation of the gaze, the revolution take place? After the actress has completely disappeared from the frame, as in *Der Tod des Empedokles*' "discourse to the mountain", all that remains is nature flooded with light and her voice reading the last verses of the poem:

> My heart of clay,
> which does not endure heat, nor lasts
> more than the flower of the field,
> which while it blossoms
> withers and falls in the air;
> how ever could it
> burn so much, that its sparks would rise,
> as it wishes
> to attain the summits
> of the eternal Father of lights.[74]

Not only does this mystical poem culminate in a metaphysics of light of neoplatonic descent, the structure of the film—the transition from darkness to light—, also concurs with the story of the visionary priest, Diotima, in Plato's *Symposium* (210a-212a), reworked by Hölderlin in his *Hyperion*, which describes the ascent via earthly beauty to the divine light. Here, just as years later in *Der Tod des Empedokles*, the metaphysics of light transforms the gaze, announces hope for societal change, while nature appears as a sanctuary from the inherited laws of "stupid old Germany" that Straub and Huillet condemn with fervour.

As for Godard, I already mentioned the strongly German Romantic-influenced reflections on light in *Allemagne année 90 neuf zéro*. However, just before Caution crosses the sun-drenched lake in a rowing boat, a much more pessimistic scene is shown and it should not be seen as mere coincidence that they are separated (as well as knit together, presumably) by a black screen on which the words "The Decline of the West" (*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*) appear. The setting of this scene is a desolate landscape amidst ruins shot in backlight. Brecht's poem "In Dark Times" (*In finsteren Zeiten*) is performed by a group of actors, although only one can be seen, after which two women become visible in close-up, lying on the ground. After the actors have shouted in chorus "why have your poets kept silent?", Caution murmurs that he doubts whether Brecht can be staged in this way. What Godard seem to criticise here is his own commitment in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as he is reworking a very similar scene from *La Chinoise* (1967), in which the main character, Guillaume (Jean-Pierre Léaud), walks through ruins, on the walls of which "theatre year zero" is written (a reference to Roberto Rossellini's 1948 *Germania anno zero*, even more present in *Allemagne année 90 neuf zéro*), and where a Brechtian theatre play is being performed.

At the very beginning of *La Chinoise*, Guillaume states that he wants to develop a new, socialist theatre, and singles out Brecht for this—while he literally erases sundry other artists and thinkers from the blackboard.[75] After he has entered the ruins, he watches a mini-play, which in Brechtian alienating fashion presents a critique of consumer culture (and incidentally also bears witness to Godard's deep-seated sexism). The play is interrupted several times by words appearing in thick letters on a black background, which read as follows: "Wilhelm Meister's theatrical vocation" (*la vocation théâtrale de Guillaume Meister*), the title of an earlier version of Goethe's famous novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795). The protagonist of Godard's "revolutionary" film in the late 1960s thus seems to be modelled on the protagonist of Goethe's novel, which the German Romantics considered to be one of the most significant events of their time, on a par with the French Revolution.[76] Hope for the development of a revolutionary theatre is key to the end of this film. Not unlike several of Godard's films in this period, *La Chinoise* still conveys a strong belief in the power of art.[77] With the observation that we can no longer stage Brecht in this way, Godard seems to be suggesting that his own mode of staging from the 1960s has become outdated, powerless.

This history of decline concords with Godard's anti-modern worldview, whence the reference to Oskar Spengler's notorious 1918–1922 *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*, which proclaims that the Western world is coming to an end. There thus seems to be a kind of shift, after all, encapsulated in the idea that it is no longer true that "all roads lead to Peking" (written on the walls of a bourgeois apartment in *La Chinoise*), instead "the roads lead nowhere". These last words, the French title of a collection of essays by Heidegger (*Holzwege*), who was influenced by Spengler, appear several times in *Allemagne année 90 neuf zéro*. They should be understood in alignment with Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin in the essay "Wozu Dichter?" (1946), which argues, as I have already said, that in dark times "poets must show the trace of the god who has fled".[78] Godard conveys his belief that the times are dark by his use of Hölderlin's poem "Half of Life" (*Hälfte des Lebens)*, some verses of which Caution melancholically paraphrases just after having witnessed the failed performance of Brecht's poem: "Poor me! Where to take the flowers, when it's winter?" Hölderlin seems to appear here through the lens of a rather right-wing understanding of his work in this sequence, an outlook that testifies, in rather apocalyptical terms, to the decline of the West. Yet only moments later the hymn to light takes place: aligned with images of nature we

hear Jean Paul's vision of the "magic homeland", not unlike the first stanza of Hölderlin's "Half of Life". The melancholy tone and eschatological thought of late Godard still stands in conjunction with the dream of a revolutionary form of poetics, which one day—maybe, if revelationist poetry regains its strength—will relearn to see reality afresh.

"Me or Straub, we are not made to revolutionise the world. We are made to look at certain things and that's all," Godard said with regard to his latest feature *Le Livre d'Image* (2018).[79] Significantly, in the same interview, he circumscribed cinema's goal as getting into contact with a more primordial kind of speech (the speech of nature, of the earth, instead of that of the subject) by means of images; something which Heidegger failed to do, Godard continues, and which sometimes is achieved by poetry.[80] Notwithstanding his view that what he and Straub ultimately aim at was not so much bringing about a revolution, but simply making the spectator "see" reality, Godard keeps on clinging to an idea of revolutionary poetry. Inasmuch as revolution is impossible for these visual artists without having regained the ability to "see" first, revelationist and revolutionary poetry are very much aligned with one another. This alignment is epitomised by the figure of Hölderlin, who resurfaces in Godard's *The Old Place* (1998), a kind of spin-off of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, co-authored by Anne-Marie Miéville, in which, as it were, from the depths, Straub's voice emerges: "one single answer: dissidence, and one single answer: the utopia proposed by Hölderlin in 1798 in *The Death of Empedocles* [...] so: dare it", before it is again swallowed up by the stream of images and sounds. What Straub says is, succinctly put, "venture it", dare to resist, which stand in full agreement with Empedocles's discourse to the mountain, when he called to reject "law and custom, the names of the ancient gods".[81] Through the work of Huillet and Straub, the revolutionary Hölderlin finally also enters Godard's work.

Here, once again, emerges the tension between an underlying and deeply rooted antimodern pessimism and the utopian myth of poetry. This myth is not either revolutionary or revelationist, because, as Bertaux argued with respect to Hölderlin's poetics, they very much concord with one another, given that in both of them the world no longer appears as something completed, but as something radically open (*offen*); both point to that moment "when suddenly everything is possible or seems possible that was otherwise impossible".[82] This intractable entwinement should furthermore be understood against the backdrop of an antimodern worldview, with its penchant for the apocalypse, as an all-encompassing event of closure. This is perhaps the main paradox in the work of these filmmakers, who flirt with reactionary stances, without coinciding with them, because there remains always something unresolved, because their work always guards just the slightest hint of a possibility that people will re-learn to see anew. It is from the perspective of this openness that the alignment of revolutionary and revelationist poetry should be understood.

Notes

1. Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, *Writings*, ed. and trans. Sally Shafto (New York: Sequence Press, 2016), 209.
2. Jean-Louis Raymond (ed.), *Rencontres avec Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet* (Paris: Beaux-arts de Paris, 2008), 90. All translations are mine unless stated.
3. Ibid.
4. Antoine de Baecque, *Godard. Biographie* (Paris: Grasset, 2010), 543.
5. David Sterritt (ed.), *Jean-Luc Godard. Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 192.
6. This film is an adaptation of Hölderlin's translation of Sophocles' play edited by Brecht in 1948.
7. See, e.g. Nenad Jovanovic, *Brechtian Cinemas. Montage and Theatricality in Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Peter Watkins, and Lars von Trier* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017); Irmgard Emmelhainz, *Jean-Luc Godard's Political Filmmaking* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
8. Recently, more scholars have criticised the idea of a "shift" in the work of these authors. See, e.g. Daniel Fairfax, "Straub/Huillet's Ecological Communism", *Senses of Cinema*, 29 (October 2019), www.sensesofcinema.com/2019/jean-marie-straub-daniele-huillet/straub-huillets-ecological-communism/, Accessed 23 February 2022.
9. Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, trans. Catherine Porter (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2001).
10. See, for instance, the third part of Jacques Rancière's *Mute Speech*, trans. James Swenson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
11. Straub and Huillet's *Der Tod des Empedokles* is an adaptation of the first version of the play. Hölderlin wrote two more (incomplete) versions. *Schwarze Sünde* (1988) stages the third version, written in 1799.
12. See, for instance, Geert Lernout, *The Poet as Thinker: Hölderlin in France* (Columbia: Camden House, 1994); Robert Savage, *Hölderlin after Catastrophe. Heidegger—Adorno—Brecht* (New York: Camden House, 2008).
13. Pierre Bertaux, *Hölderlin und die Französische Revolution* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969), 13.
14. Ibid., 65. It is also possible that they derived this reading from another book of Bertaux, *Hölderlin ou le temps d'un poète*, which came out in 1983.
15. 'Sickle and Hammer, Cannons, Cannons, Dynamite! Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub in Conversation with François Albera, in *Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet*, ed. Ted Fendt (Wien: Synema , 2016), 111.

16. Friedrich Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles. A Mourning-Play*, ed. and trans. David Farrell Krell (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 48.
17. Ibid., 79.
18. Ibid., 96.
19. "Entretien avec Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet par Jacques Aumont at Anne-Marie Faux," in *Der Tod des Empedokles/La mort d'Empédocle*, ed. Jacques Déniel and Dominique Païni (Dunkerque: Studio 43/Paris: DOPA Films/Ecole des beaux-arts régionale, 1987), 32.
20. This theme is key to Godard's auto-commentary *Scénario du film Passion* (1981).
21. See, Antoine Compagnon, *Les antimodernes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), part I, chapt. 3–4.
22. Sterritt (ed.), *Jean-Luc Godard. Interviews*, 187.
23. Déniel and Païni (eds), *Der Tod des Empedokles/La mort d'Empédocle*, 39; 40–41.
24. Pascal Bonitzer, "J.-M. S. et J.L. G.", *Cahiers du cinéma*, 264 (February 1976), 5–10 (p. 5–6).
25. Straub and Huillet, *Writings*, 67.
26. Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age: Philosophy of Art from Kant to Heidegger*, trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 5–7.
27. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, "System des Transscendentalen Idealismus (1800)", in *Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe*, vol. 9, 1, ed. Harald Korten and Paul Ziche (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2004), 318.
28. Robert Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016), 39.
29. Henri Bergson, *Mélanges*, ed. André Robinet (Paris: P.U.F., 1972), 1201.
30. Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age*, 5–7.
31. Cf. *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1795). This theme already occupied Hölderlin in the second letter of the first book of his epistolary novel *Hyperion* (1797), which connects it with alienation caused by scientific knowledge.
32. Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age*, 67–68.
33. This formulation, derived from Plotinus (see *The Enneads*, V, 2, 1), entered German Romanticism through Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (1785).
34. Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age*, 84–5.
35. Philippe Lafosse (ed.), *L'étrange cas de Madame Huillet de Monsieur Straub* (Toulouse: Ombres, 2007), 148.
36. Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles*, 87. Cf. the German version: "Diss ist die Zeit der Könige nicht mehr" (see the bilingual edition: Friedrich Hölderlin, *La mort d'Empédocle*, ed. and trans. Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet (Toulouse: Ombres, 1987), 130).
37. Hölderlin, *La mort d'Empédocle*, 122.
38. Pierre Bertaux, *Hölderlin ou le temps d'un poète* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 193.
39. Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles*, 93. Cf. Hölderlin, *La mort d'Empédocle*, 142: "die göttlichgegenwärtige Natur/bedarf der Rede nicht".
40. Lafosse (ed.), *L'étrange cas*, 123.
41. Jean-Luc Godard, *Allemagne année neuf zéro* (Paris: P.O.L., 1998), 75.
42. Jacques Aumont, *Amnésies. Fictions du cinéma d'après Jean-Luc Godard* (Paris: P.O.L., 1999), 57.
43. Ibid., 56–57.
44. Godard says this during an interview with Nicole Brenez contained in the DVD-collection *Morceaux de conversations avec Jean-Luc Godard*, filmed by Alain Fleischer (Paris: Éditions Montparnasse, 2010).
45. Jean-Paul, *Choix de rêves*, trans. and with an introduction by Albert Béguin (Paris: José Corti, 1964), 37.
46. Ibid. Béguin also writes that "the spirit of the poet is contemplative, open to revelations from the depths (*révélations des profondeurs*)".
47. Jean-Luc Godard, *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*, ed. Alain Bergala. Vol. 2: *1984–1998* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1998), 321. Cf. the final sequence of the second episode (1B: "Une histoire seule") of Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, which was released in 1988.
48. This television debate is available online: "Séminaire Image du CMCC, rencontre à propos du scenario filmé Passion", 20 November 1982, http://derives.tv/discussion-avec-jean-luc-godard/. Godard seems to be pointing here to a tendency that was already present during his Nouvelle Vague period. When Godard says that it was "a bit religious", he refers to the Bazinian conception of the ontology of photography as a revelation of the real, equally defended by a Catholic filmmaker like Rohmer. This reading, he seems to be saying, links his work in the 1980s to that of the 1960s.
49. Johann Kreuzer (ed.), *Hölderlin-Handbuch. Leben—Werk—Wirkung* (Berlin: J.B. Metzler, 2011), 109.
50. See, Plotinus, *The Enneads*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 843: "Someone actually leaving all learning, up to then having been educated by instruction, settles in Beauty. Up to then he thinks, carried along in a way by the wave of the intellect, and in a way raised on high by it, puffed up in a way, he sees suddenly without seeing how. The spectacle fills his eyes with light, not making him see something else through it. The seeing was the light itself. For in the Good there is not one thing which is seen, and another thing that is its light; nor is there intellect and object of intellect, but the radiance, engendering these things later, lets them be beside itself." (VI, 7, 36, 16–24)
51. Déniel and Païni (eds), *Der Tod des Empedokles/La mort d'Empédocle*, 35.
52. Straub and Huillet, *Writings*, 208.
53. Jean-Louis Raymond (ed.), *Rencontres*, 16.
54. Straub asserts this in an interview with Frédéric Bonnaud, published in *Le cinéma de Danièle Huillet et Jean-Marie Straub: du livre au film* (Paris: FDL éditions, 2002), 13; and also in Philippe Lafosse, *Maintenant dites-moi quelque chose* (Hoenheim: Scribest Publications, 2010), 32. See also, André Bazin, *Écrits complets*, ed. Hervé Joubert-Laurencin (Paris: Macula, 2018), 292; 306.
55. Straub and Huillet, *Writings*, 264.
56. "Sickle and Hammer, Cannons, Cannons, Dynamite!", 111.
57. Leslie Hill, "O Himmlisch Licht!", *Angelaki*, 17:4 (December 2012), 139–155 (p. 148).
58. Straub and Huillet believed that there can be no political change if people do not become conscious, and that in order to acquire a "political

consciousness", one must first learn to use one's senses. "And to do it, to reach this result," Straub said in 1976, "consists of making films that are the opposite of the noise of the cultural industry or of the society in which we live that makes people deaf and blind." See, "Rage and Resistance: Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet interviewed by Claude-Jean Philippe (1976)", trans. Sally Shafto, *Senses of Cinema*, 83 (June 2017), https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2017/straub-and-huillet/interview-1976/, Accessed 6 April 2022.

59. Löwy and Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*, 29–43.
60. "Sickle and Hammer, Cannons, Cannons, Dynamite!", 110.
61. I am indebted to Georges Didi-Huberman's discussion of the tension between "apocalyptical" and "messianic" discourses in the work of Pasolini and Agamben in the third chapter of his essay *Survivance des lucioles* (Paris: Minuit, 2009).
62. Déniel and Païni (eds), *Der Tod des Empedokles/La mort d'Empédocle*, 54: "C'est ça qu'il y a dans notre film; les Canuts avaient raison contre les Marxistes de l'époque. Et aussi les paysans réactionnaires qui s'en prenaient aux tracteurs avaient aussi raison contre Lénine."
63. This is one of the main argumens in Löwy and Sayre's *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity*.
64. Hölderlin, for instance, is already mentioned in Godard's *Le mépris* (1963), in a reworking of Maurice Blanchot's essay on the poet in *L'espace littéraire* (1955). Straub mentions *Hyperion* as early as 1966 (Straub and Huillet, *Writings*, 82).
65. Straub and Huillet, *Writings*, 266.
66. Charles Tesson, "L'heure de vérité", *Cahiers du cinéma*, 394 (April 1987), 50.
67. Hölderlin, *The Death of Empedocles*, 52. Cf. Hölderlin, *La mort d'Empédocle*, 44.
68. Straub and Huillet, *Writings*, 210.
69. Bertaux, *Hölderlin und die Französische Revolution*, 62.
70. Ibid., 85.
71. Straub and Huillet, *Writings*, 210.
72. Lafosse, *Maintenant dites-moi quelque chose*, 78.
73. Rochelle Fack, "D'avoir tué la mort, en vie tu l'as changée", in *L'internationale straubienne* (Paris: Éditions de l'oeil, 2016), 136–141 (p. 136).
74. Jean-Marie Straub, 'Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter,' *Filmkritik*, 12 (1968), 677–687 (p. 687): "Mein Herz aus Lehm,/ das nicht erträgt Hitze, noch dauert/ mehr als die Blume des Feldes,/ die während sie blüht/ in der Luft welkt und fällt;// wie jemals könnte es/ brennen so sehr, daß stiegen seine Funken/ wie es möchte/ bis zu den hohen Gipfeln/ jenes ewigen Vaters der Lichter."
75. James S. Williams mentions the importance of Althusser's essay on Brecht for this film. See his book *Encounters with Godard. Ethics, Aesthetics, Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 24.
76. See Friedrich Schlegel's 216th *Athenäum*-fragment: "Fragmente", *Werke in zwei Bänden* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1980), 189–259 (p. 214).
77. Alphaville, the other main reference for *Allemagne année 90 neuf zéro*, is a good example of this, as Caution, who plays the main role in this film too, says towards the end of the film that it is not technology but poetry, which turns darkness into light. See, Daniel Morgen, "The place of nature in Godard's late films", *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 3 (2009), 1–24: "Looking back from 1990, Caution sees that his singular, virtuosic act of beauty and courage was inadequate; the spirit behind Alpha 60 not only survived but thrived." (p. 15)
78. Godard, *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*, 321.
79. "Ardent espoir", *Cahiers du cinéma*, 759 (Octobre 2019), 17 (p. 8–20).
80. Ibid., 12.
81. Straub and Huillet, *Writings*, 210.
82. Bertaux, *Hölderlin und die Französische Revolution*, 65.

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