FILM CULTURE IN TRANSITION

Danièle Huillet, Jean-Marie Straub

"Objectivists" in Cinema

BENOÎT TURQUETY

Amsterdam University Press

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Many, many thanks to Ted Fendt

To the memory of Danièle Huillet

And to the memory of Paul Zukofsky. With love, Paul, as always

Introduction

Abstract
This chapter defines the scope of the book *Danièle Huillet, Jean-Marie Straub: "Objectivists" in Cinema*, beginning with Jacques Rivette's proposal of a kind of 'objectivity' in cinema and the ways in which films by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet have adhered to it almost to the letter in their use of pre-existing texts adapted seemingly without interpretation. It introduces an American poetry movement, Objectivism, and the poetic theories and axioms of Louis Zukofsky, highlighting their similarities to the filmmaking of Straub and Huillet.

Keywords: Straub-Huillet, Zukofsky, Objectivism

"How many difficulties, all caused by the 'variables' of time and change of state, are suggested to informed friends by saying that *Troilus and Cressida* is Shakespeare's *Iliad*, and *Pericles* his *Odyssey*. Or by saying that Bach's dates (1685-1750) and Vico's (1668-1744) agree as music-perceived-as-history."
– Louis Zukofsky, *Bottom: On Shakespeare*[1]

In 1957, Jacques Rivette began his review of Fritz Lang's *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956)—a film whose "intrinsic value" André Bazin gauged as close to "absolute zero":[2]

> The first point that strikes the unsuspecting spectator, a few minutes into the film, is the diagrammatic, or rather expository aspect instantly assumed by the unfolding of the images: as though what we were watching were less the *mise-en-scène* of a script than simply the reading of this script, presented to us just as it is, without embellishment. Without personal comment of any kind on the part of the storyteller either. So

1 Zukofsky, *Bottom*, p. 92.
2 Quoted in Moullet, *Fritz Lang*, p. 142.

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> one might be tempted to talk about a purely objective *mise-en-scène*, if such a thing were *possible*: more prudent, therefore, to suppose this to be some stratagem, and wait to see what happens.[3]

This paragraph applies almost too exactly to the films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, who—excessive literalness being one of the salient aspects of their work—seem to have enjoyed taking every detail of Rivette's description as literally as possible. As if, rather than attempting to distance themselves from their admiration of Lang by overturning or shifting the master's positions, they instead sought to exasperate and radicalize them perhaps to the point of implosion. *Workers, Peasants* (2001), for example, based on a passage from a novel by Elio Vittorini, does not show the scenes the novel describes—a group of men and women attempting to maintain their community during a rough winter in post-war Italy—but people, text in hand, reading their character's words, sitting or standing, and immobile in a sunny valley in Tuscany.

"Less the *mise-en-scène* of a script than simply the reading of this script": unornamented, without personal commentary, without any kind of intervention. Faced with a film with such a minimal approach, many spectators are tempted to judge the "intrinsic value" close to "absolute zero": for them, the filmmakers have shirked the very essence of their work. The result is therefore no longer cinema, no longer art, only a kind of "exposé"—and what could be more boring?

Something about this tempts Rivette. He would like "to talk about a purely objective *mise-en-scène*, if such a thing were *possible*". At first glance, the idea does seem both tempting and absurd. Tempting because according to his description, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* works more like a mathematical demonstration or the style of a civil code than what we usually consider as related to the art of mise-en-scène in film. Absurd because the qualifier "purely objective" seems to go against our most fundamental conceptions of art.

In fact, artistic creation allows for an "objective" part: it is what one can talk about, the reasons a director gives to his producer when he is asking for a crane shot ("it's absolutely necessary because…"), the arguments a fan thinks are convincing and makes to a detractor. But there is the rest, without which art is not art: the indescribable, the unexplainable, the unconscious, of the author's own self, the style. It is unthinkable to renounce this; to imagine a "purely objective" art is an aberration.

3 Rivette, *Rivette*, p. 65.

Yet this idea describes something of Lang's attitude, the singularity of his films, more than many others—and it does so even if it is contradictory or impossible. In a certain way, these very contradictions appear at the heart of the tensions that form Lang's work, that he employs without wanting to resolve them.

Huillet and Straub seem determined to outdo the strangeness of this position. Their films tend towards a *radical objectivity* in which all traces or residues of subjectivity—of personal intervention and even of style—disappear in favour of a form precisely calculated according to rigorous principles for which the simple "good will" of the director is an unacceptable argument. Every basic tenet of their films persists in minimizing possible cracks through which biographical incidents or other individual contingencies could penetrate the result. Systematically starting from pre-existing texts and works of which they are not the authors is one of the most visible strategies singularly displacing the question of *authority*.

To maintain these kinds of principles is of course not without provocation. When Edgar Allan Poe wrote in 1846:

> It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referrible [sic] either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.[4]

—Baudelaire could not help from commenting in the introduction to his French translation:

> Fans of *delirium* may be revolted by these *cynical* maxims; but each may take what he wants. It will always be useful to show them what benefits art can draw from deliberation and to show worldly people how much labour this luxury object we call Poetry demands.
>
> After all, genius is always allowed a bit of charlatanism. It is not even unwelcome.[5]

Charlatanism, cynicism, craftiness, or mere impossibility: those who refuse to abandon themselves to *inspiration* expose themselves to reproach. But it also appears—to varying degrees—that adepts of this strange tendency towards objectivity are not as isolated and/or crazy as we might think: they

4 "Philosophy of Composition" in Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, pp. 14-15.

5 Poe, *Histoires grotesques*, p. 261.

can be located at different moments in certain contexts and ultimately form a kind of underground history whose outcroppings sometimes come to light through irregularities in the local terrain. Flaubert was undoubtedly among the very first to base his practice and theory on this notion; it was subsequently essential for poets as much as for painters, photographers, musicians, and philosophers. In fact, a non-negligible part of modernity (or should we say modernities?) plays a role here: from Stéphane Mallarmé to Theodor W. Adorno, as well as Walter Benjamin, those who have oriented themselves in relation to the problem of objectivity are not so rare.

But not everyone has believed in the possibility of a radically objective art in the same way. Not everyone has organized their work so fundamentally around this idea, finding and applying methods to come close to it.

A group on the forefront of 20th-century American poetry whose importance long remained secret was especially focused on these reflections, the term, and the project of an *objective* art: the "Objectivists". The works of these artists—Louis Zukofsky (1904-1978), Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976), George Oppen (1908-1984), Carl Rakosi (1903-2004), as well as, depending on the scholars, Lorine Niedecker (1903-1970) and Basil Bunting (1900-1985)—display such profoundly different conceptions of poetry that it has been argued that the group had no coherence or real existence. But they shared certain ideas and practices. They used quotation abundantly and believed more in rigour, precision, and work than improvisation or automatic writing. They were deeply aware of belonging to a tradition from which they proposed a split while refusing the principle of a tabula rasa. And they wanted to connect their work to a historical movement without giving up any of their very high formal demands—they reflected on the question of expressing this and found solutions that remain profoundly novel.

The basis of this coherence is located in a fundamental tension. The common part of this project consisted in creating the possibility of combining formalism and social consciousness, a leftist artistic modernity in American poetry. In every sense of the term, radical objectivity appears to these artists as a means of escaping the imperative of choosing between innovation/elitism on the one hand and engagement/simplicity on the other—an undoubtedly impossible escape but utopian enough to provoke turmoil. The Objectivists expressed these problems and determined what objectivity could contribute with the greatest precision, as indicated by the name Zukofsky chose for the movement.

In a sense, studying the works and essays of these poets is necessary to determine as best as possible the stakes of radical objectivity; but in another sense because it reveals a number of programmatic and formal affinities

with the work of Huillet and Straub, suggesting that radical objectivity creates deeper consequences than one might initially think.

Like axioms of theories, a series of themes and procedures flows out of these projects and principles. Studying the results is the only way to measure the exact scale of what was at their origin: it is therefore through the analysis of Objectivist works and essays—insofar as they incarnate the purest and subtlest of radical objectivity and its aesthetic-political tensions—and a close comparison with the films of Huillet and Straub that the importance of this notion for their films can be defined, revealing a new coherence in them. The mirroring implies methodological problems that are nevertheless important: the artists under consideration are European filmmakers who began working in the 1960s and American poets who began in the 1920s. The one never heard of the other and nobody has ever proposed comparing their work. It is always possible to connect themes and perhaps situations, but what it is important to compare goes beyond them: the *forms* and *techniques*—the procedures, their modes of application, and what results—as well as their implications, aesthetics, and politics.

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