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On Fire: Cézanne, Straub and Huillet

Nikolaj Lübecker

Abstract: *This article considers Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's essay film about Paul Cézanne:* A Visit to the Louvre *(*Une visite au Louvre, *2003). Remarkably, this film features no artworks by Cézanne, nor any photographs of the painter—instead, it combines three elements: a female voiceover reads Cézanne's reflections on fifteen famous artworks in the Louvre; as we listen, Straub and Huillet show the artworks in static shots; finally, the directors add three further shots: first we see the Louvre from the outside; halfway through the film, we see the Seine from the Louvre; the film then ends with a circular shot of a forest clearing, lifted from the directors' previous film* Workers, Peasants *(*Operai, contadini, *2000). The article argues that Straub and Huillet teach us to see the world with the eyes of Cézanne. We understand that he searches for a fire-force beneath the level of figuration, and that he relies on colour to render this force. Next, the article examines how the directors communicate Cézanne's fire-force through the singular diction of the voiceover and with their mainly static images. Finally, the article suggests that Straub and Huillet also aim to retrieve the fire-force for political purposes, boldly positioning* Workers, Peasants *as a continuation of Cézanne's art.*

> "We want people to lose themselves in our films […] All this talk about 'distanciation' is bullshit." (Jean-Marie Straub, qtd. in Gallagher)

Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub made two films about Paul Cézanne. The first, *Cézanne - Conversation with Joachim Gasquet* (*Cézanne - Dialogue avec Joachim Gasquet*), is from 1989. The second, *A Visit to the Louvre* (*Une visite au Louvre*), was made fourteen years later, in 2003. These films are neither biopics, nor documentaries: they do not tell the life of the painter, nor do they analyse his painting style and its evolution. Instead, both films take material from Joachim Gasquet's biographical interview book *Cézanne* (1921), but Cézanne's reflections are delivered by female voices (Danièle Huillet and Julie Koltaï respectively). The earlier film shows Cézanne's paintings, the southern French landscapes he painted, Aix-en-Provence where he had his studio, and archival material such as photographs of the painter at the easel; the second film—remarkably—includes no images of Cézanne, no archival documents, none of the settings in which he worked, and, most surprisingly, not a single artwork by Cézanne. *A Visit to the Louvre* can be characterised as a non-representational portrait of Cézanne—what that means will be explored here in due course.

Focusing on the latter, unusual portrait film, I will argue that Straub and Huillet communicate how Cézanne looked at art, making palpable what is essential about the revolution called "Cézanne". As we shall see, this does not mean that Straub and Huillet are trying to place Cézanne's work in the history of art, for instance by exposing the ways in which he is often seen as a forerunner for cubism (Rubin), and, more generally, for modern art. Straub and Huillet do not present a historical narrative; instead their film tends to collapse the distance between ancient art, modern art, and Cézanne's ambitions. But, of course, this does not mean that Cézanne is detached from his time. As Jonathan Crary demonstrates, the painter is a key contributor to the late nineteenth-century "modernization of the observer" (344). This new observer position is not a position "of contemplative distance, of perceptual autonomy, but rather […] of a nervous system interfacing with a continually transforming external

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environment" (344). I will argue that the film exemplifies how that "interfacing" can migrate from painting to film—and, furthermore, that it suggests that Cézanne's revolution could spread beyond the frames of both paintings and film. In that process the film not only offers up a portrait of Cézanne, but also a self-portrait of the filmmakers. Let me begin by describing its main components.

A Visit to the Louvre combines three elements. First, like all of Straub and Huillet's films, it takes a text as its starting point: the 1921 volume by Joachim Gasquet, *Cézanne*. Gasquet and Cézanne met in 1896 through Gasquet's father who was a childhood friend of the painter. At that time Gasquet was a twenty-three-year-old aspiring poet; Cézanne was a famous fifty-seven-year-old painter. Over the next few years, the young man would take notes when he spoke to Cézanne—including during their shared visits to the Louvre in the winter of 1898–1899. Cézanne died in 1906, and Gasquet composed his book in 1912–1913. The book consists of a biographical study followed by three conversations between painter and poet. Due to the volume's protracted production history (the conversations took place in the late 1890s, were written down fifteen years later, and only published after the death of the painter), there has been debate about the accuracy of the conversations. Did Cézanne actually say these words during the conversations, or did Gasquet reinvent *his* Cézanne many years later? It is impossible to give a definitive answer this question, but for many critics the book remains an indispensable resource when studying Cézanne.[1] Importantly, for the arguments put forward here, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze, and Straub and Huillet all draw extensively on Gasquet's volume when they engage with Cézanne. Specifically, *A Visit to the Louvre* takes all its words from the second conversation in Gasquet's book, "Le Louvre". In this conversation, Gasquet and Cézanne (voiced by Jean-Marie Straub and Julie Koltaï) visit the Louvre; Cézanne speaks about artworks he loves—and some he really does not love. The delivery of the text, Julie Koltaï's diction, is singular, and we shall return to it in detail.

The second element is the artworks Cézanne speaks about. Almost all of the image track is devoted to these works. Over the course of forty-four minutes, we are introduced to fifteen works. Their framing is determined by the dimensions of the works. Those with dimensions close to the 4:3 format of Straub and Huillet's film stock fill the screen almost entirely, other works are shown with a substantial amount of background. We never see any visitors to the Louvre: the camera focuses solely on the artworks. The first is a sculpture—the *Winged Victory of Samothrace* (second century BC)—and the remaining fourteen are paintings. For the section on the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, and for four of the paintings, Straub and Huillet first show the works in their entirety, then cut to a different angle or a specific detail; the other paintings are all shown in a single shot. The artworks were filmed at six frames per second to minimise the distortion of light and colours. Additionally, the camera regularly cuts to black. This happens between artworks, and sometimes in the middle of a section on an artwork or when Cézanne (Koltaï) speaks about a painting that does not feature in the film. As I shall argue towards the end of this article, these black frames can be associated with the notion of a "ground" from which the paintings emerge. The camera remains static in all of these shots.

The third and final element consists of three brief scenes, placed at the beginning, towards the middle, and at the end of the film. These scenes show the world outside the museum, and they display movements. The film begins with a pan over the Louvre seen from the Pont du Carrousel. Shortly after the twenty-six-minute mark, we find a second shot of the outside world. This is taken from inside the Louvre, through a window, looking out at the Seine. Finally, the film ends with the directors' signature shot, "*le plan straubien*" ("the Straubian shot"): a slow circular shot, here scrutinising the ground of a forest clearing. This

scene has been lifted from Straub and Huillet's recently completed *Workers, Peasants* (*Operai, contadini*, 2000). We shall also return to these three scenes later.

I have described the film's components in this list-like manner to give a sense of the precise, methodical nature of Straub and Huillet's film. *A Visit to the Louvre* is a restrained film, planned with care and systematicity. It takes a text as a starting point, displays the artworks Cézanne speaks about, and inserts three "outdoor" shots—there are very few human beings in the film (none after the opening shot) and there is very little camera movement. Partly due to their methodical approach, Straub and Huillet are sometimes described as austere and ascetic filmmakers. When it comes to *A Visit to the Louvre* nothing could be more misleading: this is a film about passion, energy, vibrancy. To understand how Straub and Huillet's systematicity helps bring out the force and intensity of painting and cinema, let us begin with Cézanne's metaphysics as presented by the (female) voiceover of the painter.

Cézanne's Metaphysics

In *Eye and Mind* (1961), Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes that "every theory of painting is a metaphysics" (132). Merleau-Ponty's text is strongly inspired by Cézanne, so it is hardly surprising that the painter's conversations with Gasquet confirm this statement. In the conversations, Cézanne explains that he is looking for a force, or a power, that is inherent in the world and expresses itself in nature and through our bodies; Cézanne suggests that the role of the artist is to render this force. In the film, this becomes clear from his comments on the very first artwork, the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*. Cézanne admires the energy that soars through all aspects of the acephalic female body. The statue, he argues, did not lose its head because of a slow, material deterioration over thousands of years. Rather, its headlessness resulted from a surplus of energy, soaring through the body, causing the head to take off: "the marble bled".[2]



Figure 1: The *Winged Victory of Samothrace* (c. 200–190 BC) in *A Visit to the Louvre*. Straub-Huillet Films, 2003. DVD Éditions Montparnasse, 2009. Screenshot.

We may then understand why the second artwork in the film, Ingres' famous *The Source* (*La Source*, 1820–1856), is described in very different terms. Cézanne finds it neat and beautiful, but as with Fra Angelico and Uccello, "Ingres, by God, has no blood either". With his remarks on Ingres, Cézanne takes a side in nineteenth-century debates about line versus colour, drawing versus painting, Ingres versus Delacroix. This debate was itself an updated version of the seventeenth-century disputes over line (or drawing) versus colour, originally associated with the names of Poussin and Rubens. The rather schematic dichotomy opposes the line's classicism, rationality, and clarity, to colour's emotion, affectivity, and individualism. Cézanne associates Ingres' work with drawings, academism, tedious moralism, and lifelessness; and he associates Eugène Delacroix's *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* (*Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, 1834) with originality, intensity, courage, and vitality. Looking at *La Source*, he says:

> I find pleasure in line, when I want to. But there is a pitfall there... Holbein, Clouet or Ingres have nothing but line. Well, that's not enough. It's very beautiful, but it's not enough. Look at this *Spring* [*Source*]… It's pure, it's tender, it's suave, but… it doesn't turn in space ["*ça ne tourne pas dans l'air*"]. The pasteboard rock exchanges none of its stony humidity with the marble of this moist—or what should be moist—flesh. Where is there any pervading penetration? ["*Où y a-t-il pénétration ambiante?*"] And since she is the *Spring*, she should emerge from the water, the rock, the leaves; instead she is stuck to them. By wanting so much to paint the ideal virgin, he no longer painted a body at all. (Trans. modified)

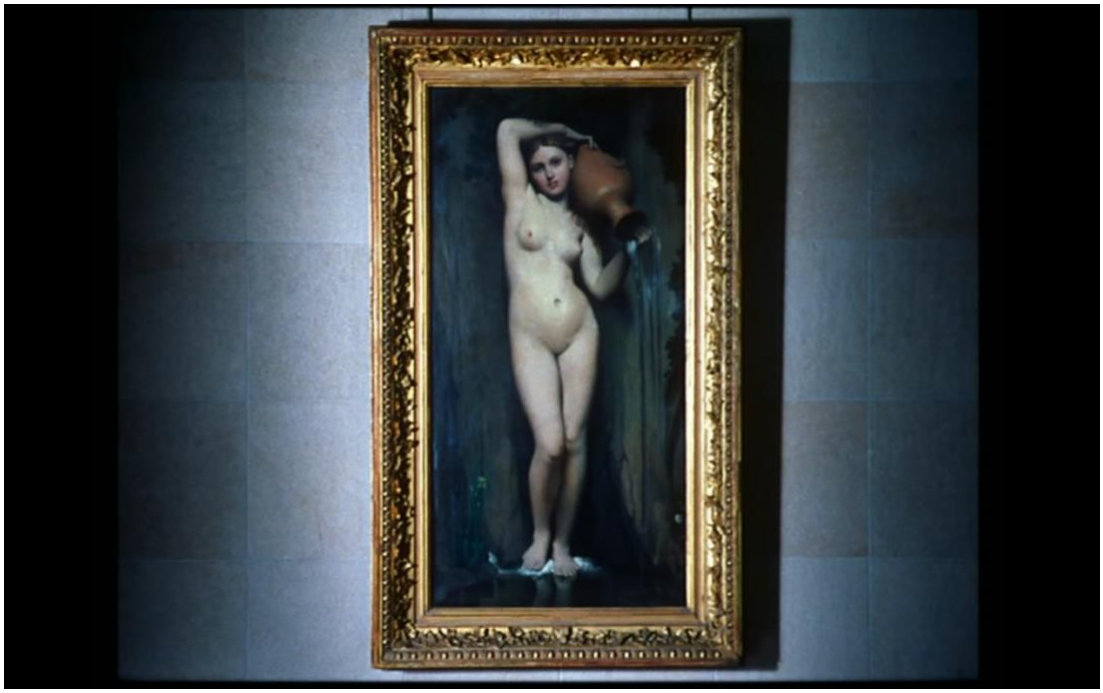


Figure 2: Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *The Source* (*La Source*, 1820–1856) in *A Visit to the Louvre*. Screenshot.

"*Où y a-t-il pénétration ambiante?*"—Ingres' virgin is idealised but sterile. She should be part of the universe, and she should allow us, her spectators, to participate in the universe, to feel its vitality. This is what it means when a painting "turns in space"—and this is why Cézanne (in a passage given in Straub and Huillet's earlier film) struggled to paint the Mont

Sainte-Victoire when he still thought its shadow was concave. Only when he realised that the shadow was convex, that the mountain participates in its environment, was he able to paint it. The Sainte-Victoire "disperses outside from the centre" ("*fuit de son centre*"); this puncture explodes the mountain, taking everything else with it in the process (Gasquet 154).

These ideas are accentuated in perhaps the most ecstatic of Cézanne's commentaries in *A Visit to the Louvre*: his presentation of Paolo Veronese's *The Wedding at Cana* (*Nozze di Cana*, 1563). Veronese's work is shown immediately after a scathing critique of some of Jacques-Louis David's most famous works ("David killed painting"):

> But this is painting. This is painting. The detail, the whole, the volumes, the values, the composition, the frisson, everything is there… Just listen, it's terrific. What are we? … Shut your eyes, wait, don't think of anything. Open them. Well? All you perceive is a large coloured undulation, an iridescence, colours, a richness of colours. That is what a picture should give us first, a harmonious warmth, an abyss, into which the eye is plunged, a muted germination. A coloured state of grace. All these tints flow in your blood, don't they? One feels reinvigorated. One is born into the real world. One becomes oneself, one becomes painting… To love a painting you need first to have drunk it in like this, in long draughts, to lose consciousness, to go down with the painter to the dark, tangled roots of things, and ascend again with the colours, to blossom out into the light with them. To know how to see. To feel. Look, this one was happy. And he brings happiness to all those who understand him. (Trans. modified)

Again, Cézanne is looking to espouse and communicate a force that is inherent in the world, in nature; he believes that colour is a privileged route for its expression. Elsewhere, he articulates this idea in the beautiful aphorism that "colour is the place the world and the brain meet" (Gasquet 153); here, he details how this encounter with colour can reshape spectators. Visiting the Louvre, Cézanne celebrates how the masterpieces express a force found in matter, how matter comes into being via painting, and how paintings—and the act of looking at paintings—individuate spectators, reinvigorating us, keeping us mobile, bringing happiness.



Figure 3: Paolo Veronese, *The Wedding at Cana* (*Nozze a Cana*, 1563) in *A Visit to the Louvre*. Screenshot.

In sections of the conversations that were not included in *A Visit to the Louvre*, Cézanne makes reference to two poets who preceded him in this exploration of how perception allows participation in the universe. He mentions Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*, and invites us to imagine the encounter between the first two atoms on earth, then the famous atom showers:

> Think of the earth's history as dating from the day when two atoms met, when two whirlwinds, two chemical dances, joined together. When I read Lucretius, I drench myself with those first huge rainbows, those cosmic prisms, that dawn of mankind rising over the void. In their fine mist, I breathe in the new-born world. I become sharply, overwhelmingly, aware of colour gradations. I feel as if I'm saturated by all the shades of the infinite. At that moment, I and my painting are one. Together, we form a blue of iridescent hues. I come face to face with my motif; I lose myself in it. My thoughts wander hazily. The sun penetrates my skin dully, like a distant friend, warming, fertilizing my laziness, and together we germinate. (Gasquet 153)

The second reference is to Charles Baudelaire, who Cézanne regards as a rare example of a great art critic. If we go to the third chapter of Baudelaire's *Salon de 1846* ("De la couleur"), we understand why. Here the poet breaks an object down to its molecular level, speaks of the heat production happening there, and explains that "the workings of latent heat" determine the colours of the object (48). This leads Baudelaire to speak of the "perpetual vibration" of the universe, before finally comparing nature to a "spinning top".[3]

Lucretius, Baudelaire and Cézanne thus all offer beautiful cosmo-poetic texts presenting intimate (often erotic) links between heat (fire), colour, air, and gyratory movements ("turning in space"). As Jonathan Crary has demonstrated, such associations also resonate with the work of late nineteenth-century thinkers and scientists such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Hermann von Helmholz, and Charles Scott Sherrington. Crary's analysis is particularly valuable in so far as it demonstrates how dynamic, gyratory movements depend upon stasis. Late nineteenth-century studies of perception suggest that only a static gaze reveals "the disjunct nature of the visual field, in both a physiological and a subjective sense" (Crary 290). These scientific writings demonstrate that "a subjective visual field [is] a complex aggregate of processes of eye movement that provisionally built up the appearance of a stable image" (290). In other words, if we keep looking, fixedly, like Cézanne did for years and years, we come to realise that "[p]erception constancy is a phantom, and the world thus seen is no longer identical to itself. It becomes, as Lucretius long ago understood, an infinite cascade of self-differentiation" (299).

Crary's remarks also allow me to correct a common misunderstanding about "slow cinema" (a category in which Straub and Huillet are frequently put). Stylistic characteristics such as long takes and an almost complete absence of camera movements are often cast in negative terms: as a defensive and nostalgic rejection of a contemporary culture of speed. But Cézanne, Straub, Huillet and Crary all suggest that speed can be used to mask the radically dynamic and disruptive nature of our interaction with the world. Only when we slow down do we enter a whirlwind; then, "the most inert and rooted form of matter turns into an intuition of metamorphoses, of inflections, of the radical fluidity of the world" (Crary 333).

To further explore Cézanne's metaphysics as it is presented in the film, let me now turn to two twentieth-century thinkers. First, it is helpful to go back to Merleau-Ponty and his intimate conversation with Cézanne's art. *Eye and Mind* opens with an epigraph from Gasquet's text in which Cézanne speaks about he previously called "the tangled roots of

things."[4] The culmination of the volume is arguably a prose-poetic passage about a small pool outside Merleau-Ponty's window. Here, Merleau-Ponty summarises his analyses of seeing and painting:

> When through the water's thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it *despite* the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if it were without that flesh that I saw the geometry of the tiles, then I would cease to see it *as* it is and where it is—which is to say, beyond any identical, specific place. I cannot say that the water itself—the aqueous power, the syrupy and shimmering element—is *in* space; all this is not somewhere else either, but it is not in the pool. It inhabits it, is materialised there, yet it is not contained there; and if I lift my eyes toward the screen of cypresses where the web of reflections plays, I must recognize that the water visits it as well, or at least sends out to it its active, living essence. This inner animation, this radiation of the visible, is what the painter seeks beneath the words *depth, space,* and *color*. ("Eye" 142; trans. modified)

Many things have been written about this passage (and about Merleau-Ponty and Cézanne more generally). Using Cézanne's vocabulary, we can say that Merleau-Ponty's passage describes how water "*tourne dans l'air*", how there is "*pénétration ambiante*". At the heart of the passage is what Merleau-Ponty calls the "flesh" of the water and its reflections, the connections between things. The speculative idea of the flesh is one of the most important and difficult ideas in Merleau-Ponty's late work. In "Ontology and Painting", Galen A. Johnson invites us to consider flesh as "an elemental dimension" (50). This does not mean that flesh is some all-pervasive cosmic substance, but rather that things can become fleshy. In the description of the pool, water turns fleshy, but more frequently the event of becoming-flesh is associated with being animated by fire. Building from Spinoza, Johnson writes that "Being itself, for Merleau-Ponty, is the incarnate principle of Flesh, is imbued with a kind of energy, longing, desire or *conatus*" (49). And further: "The desire or *conatus* of the Flesh is the demand for expression, the demand that the world be brought forth over and over again into visibility" (51). So again (and in alignment with Cézanne's reflections), flesh is co-extensive with forces wanting to express themselves, and as they do so, the world is brought into visibility. Therefore, the mysterious flesh can also, as Mauro Carbone has suggested, be called "Visibility" ("*Visibilité*") (7). In Cézanne's work, things become fleshy, catch fire, turn in space, become *visible*.

The swimming pool passage quoted above concludes that "[t]his inner animation, this radiation of the visible, is what the painter seeks beneath the words *depth, space,* and *color*". What then is a painter? A human being who seeks to express "the radiation of the visible"? Yes, but this formulation gives too much agency to the painter. We may therefore adjust it by drawing on the evocative passage that precedes Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the pool's fleshy water in *Eye and Mind*:

> The painter's vision is not a view upon the outside, a merely "physical-optical" relation with the world. The world no longer stands before him through representation; rather, *it is the painter to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible*. Ultimately the painting relates to nothing at all among experienced things unless it is first of all "autofigurative". (141; emphasis added)

For Merleau-Ponty, painting has little to do with representation (likewise for Straub and Huillet). The paradigm of "representationalism" invites distinctions between originals and models, subjects and objects, whereas Merleau-Ponty's texts (and Cézanne's conversations)

leave such dualist vocabulary behind.[5] Instead, Merleau-Ponty's sentence communicates how the painter is born of visibility—born in a process through which the visible comes to itself via the painter. This is why painting is "autofigurative", and if the painter does not get in the way of this process, we, the spectators, may be caught up in the expressive event also. So, in one sense, the world manifests itself, comes into itself through the activity of the painter, but that does not mean that the painter is an omnipotent creator. As Carbone writes, Merleau-Ponty's late work brings "creating" and "hosting" into a state of indistinction (156). The birth of the painter is an event that sets the subject on fire. Merleau-Ponty writes:

> In the immemorial depth of the visible, something has moved, caught fire, which engulfs [the painter's] body; everything he paints is in answer to this incitement, and his hand is "nothing but the instrument of a distant will".[6] ("Eye" 147)

Merleau-Ponty can therefore describe painting as a "celebration of visibility" ("Eye" 126). That is, a celebration of the encounter between our bodies and the world, in which both of these co-constitute each other, and in that process become visible. It is this celebration that Cézanne finds in Veronese's *Wedding at Cana.*

The other thinker we can draw upon when approaching Cézanne's metaphysics (and Straub and Huillet's film) is Gilles Deleuze, in particular his book on the artist Francis Bacon. Here Deleuze argues that "Bacon is Cézannean, even more so than if he were a disciple of Cézanne" (*Bacon* 36). It is therefore not surprising that, as we move through Deleuze's analyses of Bacon's paintings, references to Cézanne abound. The affinity between the two painters largely has to do with the fact that they give the same key role to colour. For Deleuze,

> It is very simple. Painting directly attempts to release the presences beneath representation, beyond representation. The color system itself is a system of direct action on the nervous system… [Painting] liberates the eye through color and line. But *it does not treat the eye as a fixed organ*.[7] (*Bacon* 51–2)

Like Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze moves away from the representational regime, emphasising instead that the task of the painter is to "*peindre les forces*" (the title of Deleuze's eighth chapter is precisely "*Peindre les forces*" ("Painting Forces")). These forces can then work on the viewers. Deleuze pushes this argument to such an extent that he can claim "no art is figurative":

> In art, and in painting as in music, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces. For this reason no art is figurative. […] And was it not Cézanne's genius to have subordinated all the techniques of painting to this task: rendering visible the folding force of mountains, the germinative force of a seed, the thermic force of a landscape, and so on? (*Bacon* 56)

How may painters capture these forces, how can they "liberate the eye"? According to Deleuze, the key operation (for both Cézanne and Bacon) lies with "this modulation *of* colour" ("*modulation de la couleur*") (*Bacon* 118). Here, the genitive case "*de*" works in all its multidirectionality. It refers to the manner in which painters modulate colours, but also to the ways in which colours modulate the painted world—as well as the painters, and the spectators. Precisely by holding these movements together, painters produce sensation. As Deleuze puts it: "There is neither an inside nor an outside, but only a continuous creation of space, the spatializing energy of colour" (*Bacon* 134).

What Deleuze thereby emphasises is the continuous process of colour modulation through which Bacon and Cézanne undo the work of figuration and representation. They do this without opting for abstraction, instead showing figures that unwork figuration, opening up a world of forces which representations tend to hide: Cézanne's Sainte-Victoire remains recognisable even as "it disperses outside from the centre" (Gasquet 153); Bacon's twisted faces reveal their fleshiness whilst remaining recognisable as faces. Again, the idea of heat and energy appears: Merleau-Ponty talked about the visible catching fire and invading the body of the painter; we now see Deleuze highlighting Cézanne's ability to make us sense "the thermic force of a landscape" (*Bacon* 57). And as both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze know, this theme is developed at length by Cézanne in his conversations with Gasquet. Cézanne speaks about everything—beings and things—as "a bit of solar heat that has been stored up and organized" (Gasquet 152). This heat is now seeking to return to the sun (like the head of the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*).[8]

What Deleuze's account adds—what makes it more confrontational than Merleau-Ponty's—is that, as a heat and colour quake, painting is a force so powerful that it carries us beyond a phenomenological framework—liberating the eye from its adherence to the organism. This is what happens when an image "*tourne dans l'air*" (as Cézanne said), when it turns the universe. In this gyratory state, bodies are caught by movements they can no longer anchor. Seeing becomes, as Cézanne puts it, a "sort of deliverance. Colour that expresses the radiance of the heart, that gives an outward form to the mystery of vision, that links earth and sun, the ideal and the real!" (Gasquet 154). But how might Straub and Huillet communicate this experience? How do they transpose the painterly gesture of Cézanne to the medium of film?

To Render the Forces: From Painting to Film

Given what I have argued so far, it will no longer come as a surprise that *A Visit to the Louvre* does not "represent". As mentioned, this later film does not show any southern French landscapes, and it contains no archival material, nor even a selection of Cézanne's works (all of which featured in the earlier *Cézanne*)—and, by giving a female voice to Cézanne, Straub and Huillet disrupt common logics of identification too. Instead, *A Visit to the Louvre* insists on a shared aesthetic: both the painter and filmmakers aim to bring out the forces which art moulds and spreads. For Cézanne, Straub and Huillet, art is (as the usually more mild-mannered John Dewey writes) a chance "to be set on fire" (68). The task of the filmmakers, therefore, is to transpose what we might call Cézanne's gesture (or operation) from painting to film. To explain how this happens, I will first analyse Straub and Huillet's engagement with the Gasquet text (and for this I shall draw on their engagement with Stéphane Mallarmé also), and then consider the notion of "ground" and what I called the "outdoor" scenes.

One of the most striking aspects of *A Visit to the Louvre* is how it works with words. For Straub and Huillet, language is a kind of matter that is shaped and moulded in the act of enunciation; in that process it individuates the speaking subject too. Koltaï's diction wrests the words free from their expected rhythm; she pauses unexpectedly, speaks loudly, fast, all with a view to intensification, to kindling the fire of words.[9] Language is therefore not the expression of some pre-existing idea, conscious or unconscious. It is not representation, but material that can be de- and re-articulated. This delivery is carefully rehearsed at a (high) number of practice sessions in which the articulation gradually settles. From this work something akin to a musical score is produced:

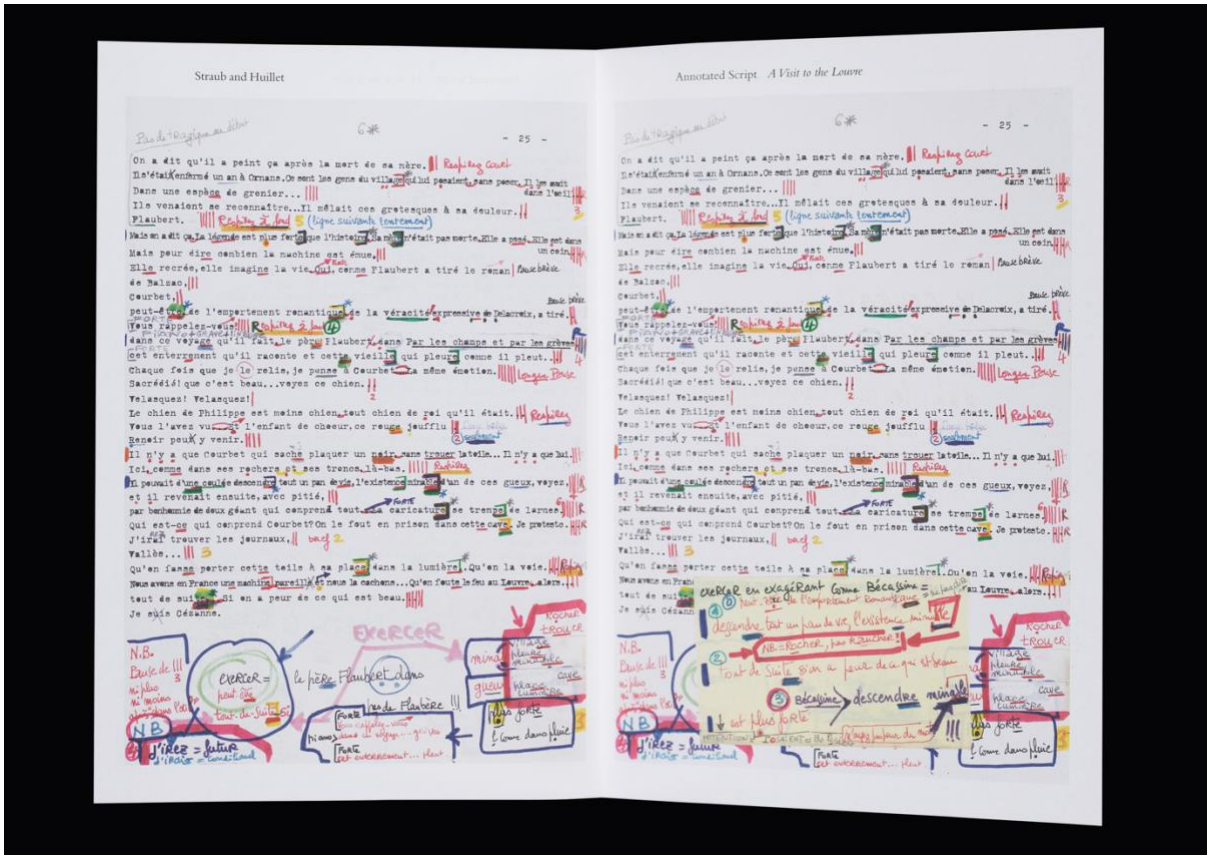
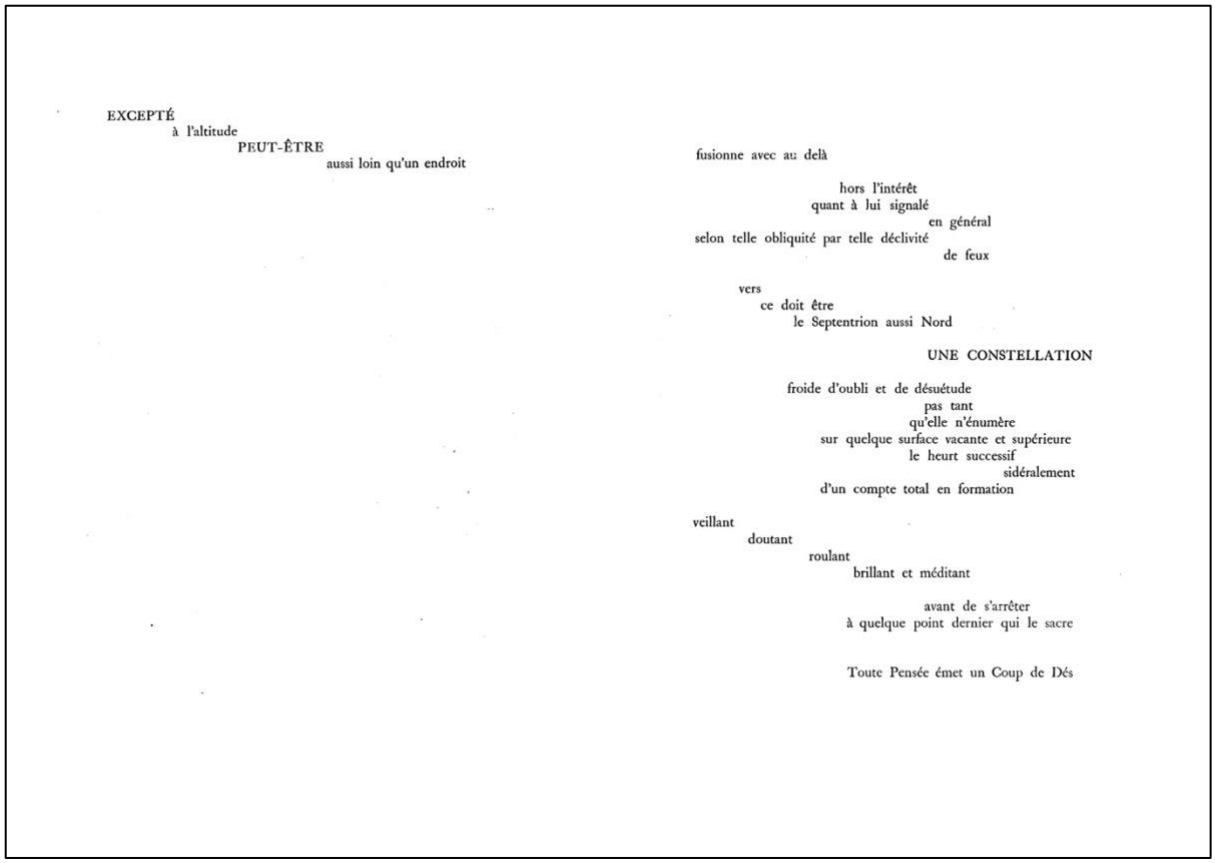


Figure 4: Annotated Script for *A Visit to the Louvre* in Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Writings* (pp. 486–7). Sequence Press, 2016.

A Visit to the Louvre is not the only film in which Straub and Huillet reshape language through performance. They always do. A rich example is *Toute révolution est un coup de dés* (*Every Revolution Is a Throw of the Dice*, 1977). This film was based on Stéphane Mallarmé's famous avant-garde poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (*A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*) first published in 1897. Mallarmé's poem explodes the titular sentence over eleven double pages, using different font sizes, playing with italics and capital letters, encouraging us to read the poem both line by line and by following its typographical expression (*OC I* 363–87). In Mallarmé's writings too, we find an archaeological approach to language. A famous early letter speaks of "digging into the verse" ("*en creusant le vers*") (*OC I* 696), and two of his late prose texts compare the activity of the poet with that of workers digging into the ground, laying a railroad near his summer residence ("Conflit", *OC II* 104–9; "Confrontation", *OC II* 260–4). More generally, Mallarmé is concerned with unearthing a force he calls "Le Mystère dans les lettres" ("The Mystery in Letters") in an essay of this title (*OC II* 229−34). *Un coup de dés* is perhaps the most literal illustration of this ambition to dig into the verse, with Mallarmé mining the titular sentence.

In Straub and Huillet's film version of the poem, nine speakers, each reciting a particular typographical expression (depending on font size, italics, etc.), perform the text together. The reading is set in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, next to the monument commemorating the victims of the Paris Commune. The speakers sit on the hill where the bodies of the Communards were buried. The mining of verse is therefore linked to the revolution of a particular political order: any digging into the ground would unearth the revolutionaries.[10]



EXCEPTÉ
à l'altitude
PEUT-ÊTRE
aussi loin qu'un endroit

fusionne avec au delà

hors l'intérêt
quant à lui signalé
en général
selon telle obliquité par telle déclivité
de feux

vers
ce doit être
le Septentrion aussi Nord

UNE CONSTELLATION

froide d'oubli et de désuétude
pas tant
qu'elle n'énumère
sur quelque surface vacante et supérieure
le heurt successif
sidéralement
d'un compte total en formation

veillant
doutant
roulant
brillant et méditant

avant de s'arrêter
à quelque point dernier qui le sacre

Toute Pensée émet un Coup de Dés

Figure 5: Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hazard*. 1897. *OC I*, pp. 386–7.

Released in 1977, it is logical to associate *Toute révolution est un coup de dés* with Julia Kristeva's reading of Mallarmé (and of *Un coup de dés*) in *La Révolution du langage poétique* (*Revolution in Poetic Language*) (1974). Kristeva finds in the writings of Mallarmé (and in those of his contemporary, Lautréamont) a use of language that is socially subversive. She famously distinguishes between a semiotic and a symbolic dimension in language (whilst emphasising that neither exists in pure form). At the semiotic level, we find affects, drives, and those dynamic dimensions of language that dominate avant-garde texts by writers such as Mallarmé and Lautréamont. The symbolic, on the other hand, is characterised by more formalised linguistic structures such as those governing many legal, mathematical, and political texts. Kristeva associates those two dimensions of language with two different conceptions of subjectivity: the semiotic can help to produce a "*sujet-en-procès*" ("subject-in-process"), whereas symbolic texts structure our subjectivity in accordance with more rigid, thetic logics. When seeking to unearth "Le Mystère dans les lettres", Mallarmé therefore pulls readers towards the dynamic "*sujet-en-procès*". In Kristeva's reading, this is political work also: Mallarmé generates a subject position that is incompatible with conventional social structures. Her readings of Mallarmé thereby examine the relations between artistic work, conceptions of subjectivity and the invention of new social structures. Moving closer to Cézanne's vocabulary, we may say that she is thinking the political consequences of setting fire to subjectivities. Straub and Huillet build similar links when they locate the reading of Mallarmé's poem at the Mur des Fédérés (Communards' Wall). And they do this, too, when digging into Cézanne's conversations, reworking diction, re-sculpting bodies with *A Visit to the Louvre*.

My argument here is therefore double: on the one hand, Straub and Huillet mould Cézanne's words in such a way as to open this language to viewers and afford them the

experience of becoming "*sujets-en-procès*". On the other, this way of working with language parallels what Cézanne does when dis- and re-articulating (for instance) the Sainte-Victoire, liberating the fire lodged in the mountain (see note 8). This does not mean that there are simple causal links between (a) reworking (pictorial) language, (b) reworking subjectivities and (c) revolutionary politics; but it does mean that Straub and Huillet belong in an avant-garde tradition that explores how the reinvention of artistic forms may alter subjectivities and collectivities. Jean-Marie Straub explicitly considers this relation between form (here syntax) and politics, when he protests against what Kristeva would call an excessive drift towards the symbolic:

> We must not forget that in the Middle Ages the monks who copied Greek literature did not use commas and stops. Who put those commas and stops? It is the Prussian bureaucracy! It is Bismarck who invented the commas and the stops! And a little while after him, it was the Westminster banks! (Qtd. in Ramos-Martínez 107)

A similar reading is suggested by Jacques Rancière. For him, too, the political force of Straub and Huillet's work lies in its ability to render a force that can rework relations in the social world as well as the artistic one. Rancière makes this argument in an analysis of Straub and Huillet's *From the Cloud to the Resistance* (*Dalla nube alla resistenza*, 1979), where he emphasises how their work with language—"[to] give the greatest palpable intensity to the most difficult speech" (*Intervals* 112)—is intensified by filmic means: "Their camerawork aims to augment that palpable power ['*puissance sensible*']" (112). As Rancière explains in multiple texts, the politics of visual art (and literature) has to do with the ability to take advantage of this "*puissance sensible*" to disrupt the conventional organisation of people and places (aristocrats here, artists there, and workers far from here). Instead, we have "a subject who is composed of an infinite network of sensations and a sensual world that exceeds any closure of the field of strategic action" ("Infinite Taste" 38). Precisely what that new social world may look like, however, is not determined by the artworks.

As Rancière argues, Straub and Huillet are not crafting language alone. In *A Visit to the Louvre*, the filmmakers "augment" the linguistic intensities through editing, framing, shot duration, etc., taking inspiration from Cézanne's dis- and re-articulation of (for instance) the Sainte-Victoire (*Intervals* 112). An important aspect of this work concerns the way in which the image emerges from its "ground". I use the term "ground" in two complementary ways here. First, it refers to the walls on which the paintings are displayed. Straub and Huillet give these walls a prominent place. In the case of Tintoretto's *Paradise* (*Il paradiso*, c. 1579), for instance, the upper frame of the painting aligns with the upper frame of the cinematic image. As the dimensions of the painting are far from the 4:3 format of the film stock, the lower third of the cinematic image is fully taken up by the dark blue wall on which the painting is exhibited. On the other hand, the final artwork in the film, Gustave Courbet's *A Burial at Ornans* (*Un enterrement à Ornans*, 1849–1850), leaves the upper third of the cinematic image free to show the grey wall on which the painting hangs. But I also use "ground" to refer to the black frames that interrupt the presentation of the artworks. Sometimes the screen goes black when Cézanne speaks about works he does not care for; sometimes the black frames appear to undermine the convention of title cards. However, Cézanne's voiceover also invites a third reading, which relates both to the prominence of the walls and to the recurrence of these black frames. The painter explains that, more than anything, the old masters understood the art of laying a ground for their images. They began by carefully covering their canvasses with greyish or other dark tones, and out of these depths they moulded or sculpted the figures and motifs seen in their paintings. Cézanne regrets that this art of the underpainting has disappeared in modern times.

It can be argued that Straub and Huillet reinvent this art for the cinematic medium, showing the ground from which the images form, chiselling the film out of its ground.[11] The black frames, then, are not a simply negation of the image; they seem to push the film stock forward, and in that process they bring spectators—who were turning in space—back to their bodies, adding physicality to the viewing experience.



Figure 6: Gustave Courbet, *A Burial at Ornans* (*Enterrement à Ornans*, 1849–1850) in *A Visit to the Louvre*. Screenshot.

This reading connects to the first of the three outdoor scenes, in so far as it immediately establishes the mineral dimension of the film. The opening shot is a 200-degree pan that begins on the right bank of the Seine, moves across the river, pans over the southern wing of the Louvre, from east to west, and then halfway back again. We see traffic and pedestrians on what appears to be a spring day in Paris. The shot reworks conventions we might associate with the establishing shot: the panning movement goes too far, and then tracks back; it flattens the Louvre, showing the imposing building as a massive, mineral block from which it is impossible to find an appropriate distance.

Midway through the film, a second outdoor scene shows the Seine through a window in the museum. This shot is accompanied by Cézanne's voiceover as (s)he speaks about the desire to "render the Seine, Paris, a day in Paris", adding that anyone capable of doing this should be able to hold their head up high when visiting the Louvre. The static shot shows the moving river through the dense foliage caught in the wind. In other words, it emphasises the movements of the world. When Cézanne articulates his desire to capture everyday Paris, he is reminding us that both world and paintings "*tournent dans l'air*" ("turn in space"). It is possible to associate the shot with the famous moving leaves in the background of Louis Lumière's *Le Repas de bébé* (*Feeding the Baby*, 1895). These leaves have travelled through film history

(from Méliès to Griffiths, Krakauer, Godard, etc.) as a reminder of film's ability to capture a force that exceeds the representational intentions of filmmakers (Baumbach; Schonig).

The final scene lasts for two minutes and twenty seconds, most of which are taken up by the slow, circular movement of "the Straubian shot". The significance of this scene is triple. As the directors' signature shot, it immediately places Straub and Huillet in the lineage of Cézanne (pointing all the way back to the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*). This is a confident gesture: an act of solidarity through which the moving image takes its rightful place alongside sculpture and painting. Secondly, this shot (again) communicates the force of a landscape. It speaks to the vibrancy and dynamism of the world. Even when the camera ceases to turn, movement continues: we see the lower section of a tree trunk (see note 4), and, next to it, some rippling water in a small pool; on the soundtrack we hear the movement of insects, water, and wind. Thirdly, as mentioned, this is a scene lifted from Straub and Huillet's previous film, *Workers, Peasants*. In this manner, *A Visit to the Louvre* is signed off twice: with a Straubian shot and with a scene from an earlier film. In *Workers, Peasants* the directors worked with nonprofessional actors, who acted in a style specific to the region of Modena, Italy, delivering texts according to traditional, oral practices. This film offered another example of chiselling in language. The words come from selected chapters of *Women of Messina* (*Le donne di Messina*, 1949) by the Italian communist author Elio Vittorini (1908–1966). Vittorini's text relates the lives and daily hardships of post–Second World War workers and farmers: their conflicts, the process of industrialisation, their political longings. These workers and peasants strive to organise communal life, and the film conveys how these efforts grow from an environment that is natural as well as social. How, then, should we read the inclusion of this shot in the later film? By letting *Workers, Peasants* enjoy *A Visit to the Louvre*, Straub and Huillet suggest that the energy and force which Cézanne finds in the masterworks at the Louvre can perhaps be harvested for the reinvention of social life also.[12]



Figure 7: The forest clearing in *A Visit to the Louvre*. Screenshot.

Both Gasquet's section in *Le Louvre* and Straub and Huillet's film end with an incensed Cézanne. He has climbed a ladder so he can study Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* more closely. Overwhelmed by the intensity of the painting, and by his despair at the memory of Courbet being sentenced to prison for his participation in the Paris Commune, Cézanne gets animated; soon guards surround the ladder. He protests against the positioning of Courbet: "We have something like this in France, and we hide it. Why not set fire to the Louvre, then!"[13] As the guards escort him to the exit, he shouts "*Je suis Cézanne!*" Gasquet then describes how Cézanne breaks down in tears; Straub and Huillet cut to the circular shot of the forest clearing.

The central gestures of the film—and of Cézanne's metaphysics—come together in this ending. This is a film about Cézanne ("*Je suis Cézanne*"), about a particular way of looking, a particular way of being in the world. This is also a film about fire ("Why not set fire to the Louvre?"): the fire lodged in the stones of the Sainte-Victoire, which elevates the mountain, propels it into the universe, like a head flying into orbit when it leaves a marble statue. This fire catches the artist, dislodges identities, and reshapes the world—including its painters, filmmakers, and everyone else who knows how to see. Cézanne's outburst is not just megalomania (Cézanne claiming a status that should make it impossible for anyone to kick *him* out of the Louvre). When the painter shouts out that he is Cézanne, he is an impersonal, incendiary force. Adding their signature shot to the fire, the filmmakers repeat Cézanne's gesture, albeit less loudly: *Nous sommes Straub et Huillet! A Visit to the Louvre* is a self-portrait too.

Notes

[1] Jonathan Crary's *Suspensions of Perception* is just one of many texts that builds from Gasquet's text. As Crary begins to cite from Gasquet, he adds the following footnote (with which I agree): "Within some 'empiricist' art historical studies, Gasquet's reconstructions of his conversations with Cézanne remain controversial. My use of elements from these texts indicates my sense of their general authenticity and of their value as a historical resource. See the sensible assessment of this material in Christopher Pemberton's 'Translator's Introduction,' in the above volume" (341).

[2] If nothing else is indicated, I am (as here) citing the DVD subtitles; occasionally I have made minor alterations to clarify the meaning of the original. Christopher Pemberton's published translation of Gasquet's volume differs slightly from the one offered in the DVD subtitles and Shafto's translation of the audio-track. In the article, all translations from Gasquet are mine.

[3] This is the opening to Baudelaire's chapter "On Colour": "Let us suppose a beautiful expanse of nature, where there is full licence for everything to be as green, red, dusty or iridescent as it wishes; where all things, variously coloured in accordance with their molecular structure, suffer continual alteration through the transposition of shadow and light; where the workings of latent heat allow no rest, but everything is in a state of perpetual vibration which causes lines to tremble and fulfils the law of eternal and universal movement" (48).

[4] Merleau-Ponty's epigraph: "What I am trying to convey to you is more mysterious; it is entwined in the very roots of being, in the impalpable source of sensation. — J. Gasquet, *Cézanne*" ("Eye" 121). See also the famous remark by Georges Braque: "In Matisse and Manet you get only the flower, in Cézanne you get the flower and root as well. And what counts is

the way in which he goes from the root to the flower; there a whole life is summed up" (qtd. in Rubin 169).

[5] In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Karen Barad offers a succinct summary of what she calls the metaphysics of representationalism and its particular conception of individuality (a metaphysics and a conception of individuality she then criticises). She explains that "the idea that beings exist as individuals with inherent attributes, anterior to their representation, is a metaphysical presupposition that underlies the belief in political, linguistic, and epistemological forms of representationalism. Or to put the point the other way around, representationalism is the belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing. That is, there are assumed to be two distinct and independent kinds of entities—representations and entities to be represented" (46).

[6] The quotation marks signal a citation from Paul Klee. In Merleau-Ponty's *Notes de cours 1959–1961* we find the same quotation by Klee (alongside many others by Klee) and the same emphasis on painting's ability to express nature (and, in the process, to create the painter). Merleau-Ponty asks: "Why then is painting so different from appearances? Precisely […] because it is *natura naturans*: it's 'nothing but the instrument of a distant will'; because it gives what nature wants to say and does not say: the 'generative principle' which brings things into being and the world into being" (*Notes* 56; my trans.).

[7] There are no italics in Deleuze's text, and there is no "but" either. The French sentence more clearly argues that painting liberates the eye from the organism ("*Libérant les lignes et les couleurs de la représentation, elle [la peinture] libère en même temps l'œil de son appartenance à l'organisme*") (*Bacon* 37).

[8] Cézanne says: "Look at this Sainte-Victoire […], these boulders were on fire. There is still fire in them". These sentences appear in Straub and Huillet's earlier film *Cézanne*, and, according to Deleuze, the directors frequently cited them (*Cinema 2* 338).

[9] It is important to add that Straub and Huillet make cuts to Gasquet's text. In the previously cited passage on Ingres, for instance, Gasquet's text offers the following: "Look at this *Spring* [*Source*] … It's pure, it's tender, it's suave, *but it's platonic. It's an image*, it doesn't turn in space." The filmmakers eliminate the reference to Plato and the image (highlighted here). While we can speculate about this cut (did they think this more academic aspect of the passage was superfluous?), this kind of chiselling points to a general aspect of their aesthetic. This comes out most clearly in Danièle Huillet's idiosyncratic approach to subtitling. In many films she makes very large incisions, translating only half of the spoken words.

[10] In *The Time-Image*, Deleuze characterises Straub and Huillet as geological, archaeological and tectonic filmmakers. They often show landscapes, reminding us of what happened in those landscapes, inviting an archaeological reading of the image. *Toute révolution est un coup de dés* is an example of this, but the geological dimension is a general aesthetic principle. Deleuze associates this aesthetic with that of their "*maître*" Cézanne (*L'Image-Temps* 333). In the English translation, he writes: "The aesthetics of the visual image therefore takes on a new character: its pictorial or sculptural qualities depend on a geological, tectonic power, as in Cézanne's mountains" (*Cinema 2* 246). As Deleuze also expands in a footnote: "It is a new system of visual sensation which contrasts equally with the dematerialized sensation of impressionism, and the projected, hallucinatory sensation of expressionism. It is the

‘materialized sensation’ cited by Straub with Cézanne as his reference: a film not thought of as offering or producing sensations for the viewer, but as ‘materializing them’, achieving a tectonics of sensation” (*Cinema 2* 326).

[11] The metaphor of chiselling can also be found in Miguel Abreu’s short, excellent foreword to Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub’s *Writings*. In sentences that resonate richly with the argument presented here, Abreu writes: “I came to realize that, starting with the very choice of the text to be staged, it is the sum total of ethical, sure-handed decisions—like those of an accomplished sculptor chiselling into shape a block of marble—that account for the potent effect these film objects produce, as they reach the viewers’ sense perception at what could be described as a pre-conscious, or pre-cultural level. The quasi-archaic realm of these works is one in which the wind seen and heard blowing through leaves can be sufficient content for an image to exist” (*Writings* ix–x).

[12] It may be worth adding that Cézanne’s “political convictions” were far from revolutionary. He can more accurately be described as conservative or politically disengaged. Mallarmé was also far from the engaged position of, for instance, Courbet, cultivating friendships on both the political right and the political left—Sartre famously spoke of Mallarmé’s “*terrorisme de la politesse*” (“terrorism of politeness”) (Sartre 151). Of course, none of this prevents their work from being read politically; as Kristeva does for Mallarmé, and Straub and Huillet do for Mallarmé and Cézanne. Crary suggests that it is precisely by withdrawing from politics, that Cézanne’s work becomes political: “It is from the perspective of Cézanne’s much-vaunted ‘isolation’ of these last years (isolation of class, geography, community, old age) that his luminous Precambrian images of formlessness in fact corresponded to the deterritorialising processes of capitalism and its imperatives of perpetual renovation, to the uprooted, ‘nonorientable’ subject who was compatible with its flows”. This “compatibility” is obviously not an “equivalence”, rather it allows Cézanne to present “a subject capable of a *creative* as well as an efficient and productive interface with the dynamic and mobile complexity of a modernizing lifeworld” (Crary 343, 352).

[13] Pemberton translates: “We’ve got a masterpiece like this [‘*une machine pareille*’] in France and we hide it. Let them set fire to the Louvre. Right away” (204). “*Machine pareille*” is difficult to translate. In the classical texts on painting, “*machine*” (and “*grande machine*”) refers to very large multifigure paintings (history paintings, for instance), generally more pompous than Courbet’s work. From the early nineteenth century *machin*/*machine*/*machins* becomes a catch-all term used to designate objects or people that escape easy naming. More interestingly, to avoid getting in the way of the world expressing itself, Cézanne wants artists (and their works) to become machines/apparatuses (“a recording machine” [“*un appareil enregistreur*”], “a good machine” [“*un bon appareil*”] (qtd. in Gasquet 150). Courbet and his paintings are clearly good machines in that sense also.

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Nikolaj Lübecker is Professor of French and Film Studies at the University of Oxford. His publications include *The Feel-Bad Film* (Edinburgh UP, 2015), *James Benning's Environments: Politics, Ecology, Duration* (Edinburgh UP, 2017; coedited w. Daniele Rugo), and *Twenty-First-Century Symbolism: Verlaine, Baudelaire, Mallarmé* (Liverpool UP, 2022). His current research considers images of political violence in experimental documentary film.