

## CHAPTER 2

### Part and Whole: On some uses of landscape in the films of Huillet and Straub

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What makes landscape an intrinsically paradoxical arrangement, Georg Simmel suggests, is that the framework over which it presides is locked in tension with the order of nature out of which it is composed. The conditions under which this form of representation emerges, the ways in which it organises the field of perception, the modes of sensibility it cultivates and the worldview to which it gives expression are each in their turn traversed by this tension, which must therefore be understood as constitutive of the form itself. In ‘The Philosophy of Landscape’, a short study of 1913, Simmel approaches this tension through a stringent categorical opposition: *landscape is to nature as part is to whole*. ‘By nature’, he writes,

we mean the infinite interconnectedness of objects, the uninterrupted creation and destruction of forms, the flowing unity of an event that finds expression in the continuity of temporal and spatial existence. [...] To talk of ‘a piece of nature’ is in fact a self-contradiction. Nature is not composed of pieces. It is the unity of a whole. The instant anything is parceled out from this wholeness, it is no longer nature pure and simple since this whole can be ‘nature’ only within that unbounded unity, only as a wave within that total flux.<sup>1</sup>

It is over and against the natural order conceived as such that landscape takes shape. Whereas nature intersects with itself as a totality in each of its particular instantiations, landscape is instead comprised of an ensemble of discrete elements that make manifest a *locality*, in and through its specificity. The prospect this affords is a partial one, circumscribed in principle. Its formation therefore institutes a break in nature’s open-ended continuum. It detaches itself from the whole of which it is part, by tracing a

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Simmel, ‘The Philosophy of Landscape’, trans. by Josef Bleicher, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 24:7-8 (2007), 20-29 (p. 21).

perimeter where there would otherwise be none. And yet since this part still belongs to the whole – it is, after all, nowhere else – in the same stroke this process of detachment separates the whole from itself, depriving the whole of itself as something whole. Simmel continues:

As far as landscape is concerned, however, a boundary [*die Abgrenzung*], a way of being encompassed by a momentary or permanent field of vision, is quite essential. Its material foundation or its individual pieces may simply be regarded as nature. But conceived of as a ‘landscape’, it demands a status for itself [*Für-sich-Sein*], which may be optical, aesthetic or mood-centred. [...] To conceive of a piece of ground and what is on it as a landscape, this means that one now conceives of a segment of nature itself as a separate unity, which estranges it from the concept of nature.<sup>2</sup>

*Abgrenzung*, delimitation, the determination of place through the delineation of limits, must therefore be considered one of landscape’s predominant structural features: a boundary that renders distinct what it encloses by setting it apart, a ‘unique, characterizing detachment’ (‘eine singuläre, charakterisierende Enthobenheit’), Simmel writes. It is therefore along this borderline that the antagonism between landscape and nature, part and whole, inside and outside, is at its most concentrated. And yet the boundary can be ascribed this set of functions only insofar as it is not itself a visible part of the resulting arrangement. If it makes the field of representation possible – determining what will and will not be made visible, what is given prominence and what is consigned to the periphery, and so on – it is not itself representable therein.

Landscape’s relation to what it detaches itself from necessarily involves a certain force. (How else would the work of detachment be possible without an application of force in some form or another?) In an earlier text, a study of the frame as it pertains to the organisation and reception of aesthetic materials, Simmel even refers to the *violence* implicit in bringing a limit to bear upon nature. As if any position ascribed to the limit *in situ* always ran the risk of appearing arbitrary and therefore lacking in

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 21-22. The German terms have been added to the translation for clarification.

legitimacy, considering the constitutive unboundedness of what it, the limit, is being brought into contact with. Simmel writes in this text:

The frame is suited only to structures with a closed unity, which a piece of nature never possesses. Any excerpt from unmediated nature is connected by a thousand spatial, historical, conceptual and emotional relationships with everything that surrounds it more or less closely, physically or mentally. [...] Around the piece of nature, which we instinctively feel to be a mere part in the context of the greater whole, the frame is therefore contradictory and violent.<sup>3</sup>

It is in this sense that the tension between landscape and nature is irreducible, attested to here by the fact that the line of demarcation separating the former from the latter must itself remain unbreachable: ‘the frame, through its configuration, must never offer a gap or a bridge through which, as it were, the world could get in or from which the picture could get out.’<sup>4</sup>

And yet for Simmel it is this same feature – the inviolability of the boundary, the ‘inner resoluteness’ that comes from ‘its self-contained contours’ – which grants the segment of terrain enclosed a self-sufficiency it wouldn’t otherwise have, allowing landscape to become a ground for itself by giving it a means of subsisting without external support. Here is the moment of dialectical inversion on which Simmel’s account ultimately rests, the point at which ‘one part of a whole should become a self-contained whole itself, emerging out of it and claiming from it a right to its own existence’.<sup>5</sup> Not only, then, does this particular part cease to derive its cohesion from the whole, it manages to re-inscribe the whole as whole within itself as part. Having ceased to be one part among others, no longer commensurable with any other part, the paradox of landscape is therefore that of a part which is greater than the whole it is part of. ‘The specific object thereby created and transposed onto quite a new level then, so to speak, from

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<sup>3</sup> Georg Simmel, ‘The Picture Frame: An Aesthetic Study’, trans. by Mark Ritter, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 11:1 (1994), 11-17 (p. 14).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Simmel, ‘The Philosophy of Landscape’, p. 22.

within itself opens up again towards that total-Life [*All-Leben*] and re-absorbs the infinite into *its still intact boundaries* [*in seine undurchbrochenen Grenzen das Unbegrenzte aufnehmend*].<sup>6</sup> To bring forth the limitless within given limits and on the basis of such limits is thus the particular demand made of landscape as a form, and the response to this demand in each case commits the use of this form, implicitly or explicitly, to an interpretation of nature. Where the enclosing boundary is situated, by what means and to what ends it is delineated, how this delineation effectuates the detachment of part from whole, but also how the whole is then recovered through this same part: all this implies a set of operations that are responsible for determining the configuration by which ‘nature’ is then encountered.

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Throughout the films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub it is possible to discern an engagement with nature undertaken along these lines, through the medium of landscape conceived as such: a diverse repertory of practices and strategies the aim of which is to bring about the ‘unique, characterizing detachment’ on which the use of this medium rests, through the capacities and facilities specific to cinema. Above all else the work of *Abgrenzung* is recognized by the filmmakers as a political task, not least because it requires a decision to be made concerning the relation of part and whole. A watchword of Brecht’s, invoked time and again by Straub, provides a schema for this relation: ‘To dig out the truth from the rubble of the self-evident, to make a marked link between the specific and the general, to capture the particular within the general process, that is the art of the realists.’<sup>7</sup> If the contexts in which Huillet and Straub make use of landscape are manifold, this ‘marked link between the specific and the general’ is what the given arrangement is in each case concerned with, and it is on this account that nature is always approached along an axis that sees it treated not as a mere background, extrinsic to the sphere of politics proper, but as the *res publica* itself, the thing that is constituted through the struggle over what is held to

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 23. My emphasis.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, ‘Introduction to Nestler’, in Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, *Writings*, ed. and trans. by Sally Shafto (New York: Sequence Press, 2016), pp. 99-101 (p. 100).

be common, a site of contestation traversed by conflicting forms of political agency and subjectivation. In a recent conversation Straub gives an indication of what it might mean to treat this ‘marked link’ as a principle of method in the context of landscape when he recalls the location scouting for the scenes of present-day rural France that appear in the first section of *Too Early, Too Late* (1981), those fringes of apparently empty terrain, at first sight unmarked by any explicit sign of human drama, the locations of which are drawn from a text of Engels (a letter to Kautsky of 1889) recalling the conditions of peasant life in the period preceding the French Revolution. The search for the prospect that opens up a terrain to filmic presentation, ‘the spot from where one can simply see something’, is described by Straub in the following way:

And then one discovers that in a village the search often ends where the water tower stands, for needless to say the water tower’s location isn’t arbitrary. It is placed exactly on that spot where water can be fed to the entire locality. And the standpoint from where the locality can be supplied with water just also happens to be the filmmaker’s standpoint, who is likewise attempting to show an entirety. Hence the take of a village then operates like an irrigation system. And Brecht would say: ‘What one films then belongs to the irrigators.’<sup>8</sup>

The point of view through which a landscape comes together is thus explicitly situated within the material relations of production that have shaped the terrain’s topography and rendered it habitable, making the field of vision coterminous with land understood as something ‘transformed and worked by men’, as Huillet writes in another text on the film.<sup>9</sup> Establishing a prospect and its sightlines on this basis is what allows the designated site to be determined in its specificity. Sometimes this gives rise to a stationary shot; other times a curvature that, reaching its designated limit, reverses its direction and retraces its own

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<sup>8</sup> Mikhail Lylov, Elke Marhöfer and Jean-Marie Straub, ‘A Thousand Cliffs’, in *Tell It to the Stones: Encounters with the Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub*, ed. by Annett Busch and Tobias Hering (London: Sternberg Press, 2021), pp. 364-90 (pp. 368-69).

<sup>9</sup> Huillet, ‘How to “Correct” Nostalgia’, in Straub and Huillet, *Writings*, p. 188.

passage, eventually returning to its point of departure; other times still, a movement that travels full circle, providing a complete panorama. These variations are therefore determined by what in each case is required to establish the locale in its 'entirety'. (The same principle is at work in the film's second part, in an Egypt framed by Mahmoud Hussein's *Class Struggles in Egypt*, with several of the viewpoints onto locations of peasant rebellion determined in an analogous way: if this principle gives rise to a different type of viewpoint in this context – most notably, a forward moving tracking shot running parallel to the Nile – this difference is always derived from the specific features of the terrain and how this terrain has been 'irrigated'.) But as Straub also suggests here, this shooting method is equally concerned with addressing the circumscribed place as a point of entry onto what lies beyond it. 'One doesn't just irrigate a locality', he says, 'one irrigates the earth.'<sup>10</sup> What does 'earth' signify in this scenario? Precisely that which is manifest *within* the frame *as* unbounded. Landscape understood as a means of surveying the earth in this sense is therefore organised around a distribution of part and whole, with the former acting as a frame for the latter.

Of course in Huillet's and Straub's filmic practice a fundamental means of setting this relation in place is through the use of discourse. Landscape is never treated by the filmmakers as a visual proposition alone. It always appears through the mediation of text, in spoken or written form, and the block of discourse thereby assembled is another way of framing what is being registered on the visual plane. The sequences already mentioned from the first part of *Too Early, Too Late* serve as a case in point. As these rural spaces are surveyed, alongside the living sound of each terrain we hear a voice – Huillet's own – reading from the Engels text in question and focussing in on the table of statistics he provides there, figures gathered from the *Cahiers de Doléances*, that in each case makes clear the scale of the local population living in beggary despite the fertility of the land, materially excluded from 'active citizenship'. 'Let the figures speak for themselves', Engels writes in this letter, and indeed they do. As this discursive

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<sup>10</sup> Lylov, Marhöfer and Straub, 'A Thousand Cliffs', in *Tell It to the Stones*, ed. by Busch and Hering, p.369.

material is recited each terrain comes to appear as a site of class struggle, an arrangement of interests and dependencies that mark a particular point in the development of capital, and on account of which the tracts of land surveyed are shown to have been at odds with the plebian demand for ‘well-being for all on the basis of labour’. The function ascribed to text by Huillet and Straub here is not then simply descriptive. Rather, discourse is understood as something like a means for shifting the ground upon which a given referent is perceived and the distribution of categories through which this perception is understood. In doing so it lays bare the extent to which the apparently objective determination of the referent is always in fact an interpretation, and thus itself a site of contestation. In short, discourse relates to its referent here in the form of ‘assessment’ or ‘evaluation’ (*Beurteilung*), a term that should be understood as it is applied by Brecht at a particular moment in ‘Five Difficulties in Writing the Truth’ (1934), and it is in fact worth recalling the practical demonstration provided by this text of discourse behaving in this way:

Anyone in our times who says *population instead of ‘Volk’ and land ownership instead of ‘soil’* is already denying his support to many lies. He divests the words of their lazy mysticism. [...] The population of an area of land has different, even opposing interests, and this is a truth which is suppressed. Thus anyone who says ‘soil’, and describes the fields to nose and eyes by speaking of their earthy scent and their colour, is supporting the lies of the rulers; for what matters is not the fertility of the soil, nor man’s love of it, nor his diligence, but instead principally the price of grain and the price of labour. The people who draw the profits from the soil are not those who harvest the grain, and the scent of the clods of earth is unknown on the stock exchanges. They reek of something different. On the contrary, ‘landownership’ is the right word; it is less deceptive.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bertolt Brecht, ‘Five Difficulties in Writing the Truth’, in *Brecht on Art and Politics*, ed. by Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles, trans. by Tom Kuhn, Steve Giles and Laura Bradley (London: Bloomsbury Methuen, 2003), pp. 141-57 (p. 149).

This is precisely how discourse is called upon in *Too Early, Too Late*, textual reference shifting the frame by which the piece of reality under assessment is being viewed. Indeed, it is in this sense that the discursive element is not subject to the same limits and thresholds that organise the terrain in its visible aspect. Discourse is capable of delineating conditions and circumstances that are otherwise unmarked at the level of vision alone. Deleuze's striking insight into the *stratigraphic* nature of landscape in Huillet's and Straub's work has its context here. Landscape is stratigraphic inasmuch as it is comprised of so many layers of earth superimposed upon one another, history being nothing more than the successive accumulation of these strata, and in relation to which discourse, 'the speech-act' in the lexicon of *Cinema 2*, should be understood as an instrument of excavation, a means of delineating what from the standpoint of the present has been buried beneath the outer surface of things, beyond vision's reach.<sup>12</sup> Traversing a vertical axis, discourse bores down through these strata to draw out the configuration of relations through which the locale in question has been constituted. When Straub refers to the landscapes of *Too Early, Too Late* as a 'geological theatre of figures', it is precisely in this sense: 'geo, Greek for the earth. Geology is the study of that which is not visible, or barely so; that which is underneath.'<sup>13</sup> Discourse is what grants access to these subterranean levels.

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<sup>12</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Athlone Press, 1989), pp. 254-56.

<sup>13</sup> Lylov, Marhöfer and Straub, 'A Thousand Cliffs', in *Tell It to the Stones*, ed. by Busch and Hering, pp. 367, 385. Serge Daney's review of the film also foregrounds this idea: 'If there is an actor in *Too Early, Too Late*, it's the landscape. This actor has a text to recite: History (the peasants who resist, the land which remains), of which it is the living witness.' See: 'Cinemetorology', in *The Cinema of Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele [sic] Huillet* [Film at the Public brochure, 1982], p. 19 <<https://www.straub-huillet.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/brochure-cinema1.pdf>> [accessed 20 December 2021].



This, then, must be considered a fundamental feature of Huillet's and Straub's use of landscape: in their films the work of *Abgrenzung* is pursued across two distinct registers simultaneously – a boundary demarcated at the level of vision, a boundary demarcated at the level of discourse – and a landscape comes together through the exchange developed between these two registers and their respective ways of framing, the co-implication of which is of course a prerogative of cinematic form.

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Here it is instructive to consider another work that addresses the thematic configuration at stake here: *Proposta in quattro parti* (*Proposition in Four Parts*), made for Italian television in 1985. The work is an exercise in quotation, a montage of sequences, three of which are drawn from Huillet's and Straub's previous body of films, and each of which is reframed so as to make explicit the 'assessment' of nature as *res publica* underway there: the concluding stage of the first act of *Moses and Aaron* (1974), in which Aaron implores God's chosen people to free themselves from bondage with the promise of milk and honey, a call to arms that is followed by two elevated tracking shots of the Nile and its environs, the second of which comes to a rest in barren desert, the setting for this promise's fulfilment: 'The Almighty changes sand into fruit, fruit into gold, gold into delight, delight into spirit'; next, the remembrance landscapes of *Fortini/Cani* (1976), sweeping shots that forge a passage along the Apuan Alps, this movement taking in the locations across the region known for the massacre of partisans carried out under Nazi occupation; finally, the sixth dialogue from the first section of *From the Cloud to the Resistance* (1978), an episode under moonlight in which a father and son, sacrificial pyre burning before them, speak for and against the offerings that must be made to the gods to secure the harvest, the son raising his voice against the injustice of this custom and the fatalism which accepts that what once was must always be, especially since this injustice is compounded by another, the masters' exploitation of the peasants' work. Disparate epochs and diverse contexts, broached through modalities of representation and configurations of reference just as disparate and diverse. But common to each of these scenes is an encounter with nature that seeks to make legible the processes of domination and resistance with which it is traversed, thereby allowing the social structure of which these processes are an expression to be accounted for and

evaluated. And the same is true of the first segment of the montage, the single ‘part’ that comes from outside of Huillet’s and Straub’s own oeuvre. This is D. W. Griffith’s short film *A Corner in Wheat* (1909), which plays in its entirety, and given its position within the series it can be said to act as a frame for the work as a whole. The film provides a demonstration, point for point, of Brecht’s analysis of ‘landownership’ already mentioned and the politics of the ‘right word’. Beginning and ending with shots of farmers at work on the land, seed being sown on tilled earth, the film presents the afterlife of this labour once subject to the vicissitudes of financial speculation in an age of monopoly capital, by following the repercussions that result from a tycoon’s manipulations in the wheat market: the price of flour sent soaring; further accumulation of riches for the speculators, further misery for those on the breadline; the link between land and labour broken as farmers return from market out of pocket; and finally, with ‘control of the entire market of the world’ achieved, the tycoon meeting an infelicitous end on a tour of a processing plant, ‘drowned in a torrent of golden grain’ as the title card states. In spite of all this, work on the land continues, as the film’s final shot confirms.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the narrative’s critical impetus is at one with the Brechtian postulate already mentioned: ‘The population of an area of land has different, even opposing interests [...]. The people who draw the profits from the soil are not those who harvest the grain, and the scent of the clods of earth is unknown on the stock exchanges.’<sup>15</sup> This is the antagonism that the film makes manifest, something already announced in the very title of Griffith’s work, of particular importance here inasmuch as it concerns a certain way of organising the relation of

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<sup>14</sup> For an informative reading of this film, including Huillet’s and Straub’s interest in Griffith’s work (albeit without any mention of their direct engagement with it in *Proposition in Four Parts*), see: Erik Ulman, ‘*A Corner in Wheat: An Analysis*’, in *Senses of Cinema*, 14 (2001) <<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2001/feature-articles/cornerwheat/#11>> [accessed 20 December 2021].

<sup>15</sup> Brecht, ‘Five Difficulties in Writing the Truth’, in *Brecht on Art and Politics*, ed. by Kuhn and Giles, p. 149.

part and whole, understood as a fundamental tendency of capitalist economy. *A Corner in Wheat*: this of course refers to a situation of monopoly, the acquisition of a stake or share the size of which leaves an entire market subordinate to the interests of a single party. Part appropriates whole. And the same schema is replicated at the level of discourse. *A Corner of Wheat*: this figure of speech is a synecdoche, the part (the corner) standing in for the whole (the market). Here is Barthes, in an essay on Brecht, making clear the politics implicit within this discursive strategy: ‘Synecdoche is totalitarian: it is an act of force.’ Why? Because ‘the Whole is given, abusively, for the part’, this part laying claim to the whole on its own terms alone, over and against any other claim.<sup>16</sup> This categorical arrangement once more reiterates the formal problem with which the representation of nature is compelled to negotiate, and given the prominent place it holds in the sequence, it can be said to provide the framework for understanding the ‘proposition’ that is then re-stated in each subsequent section of the film.

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There is a further aspect of Simmel’s understanding of landscape that requires consideration here. According to him, landscape is a modern phenomenon, a representational form that emerges under the specific set of conditions ushered in by modernity (conversely, the ‘feeling for nature’ (‘Naturgefühl’) characteristic of the pre-modern has ‘no awareness [*Gefühl*] of landscape’).<sup>17</sup> Foremost amongst these conditions that Simmel calls modern is a tendency towards individualization, which sees human existence increasingly channelled through a model of subjectivity the principal feature of which is interiority or inwardness. For him landscape is the evidential sign of this historical development, a way of seeing that is necessarily tied to the individual understood in this sense. Interiority, never a visible dimension of

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<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘Brecht and Discourse: A Contribution to the Study of Discursivity’, in Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 212-22 (p. 218).

<sup>17</sup> Simmel, ‘The Philosophy of Landscape’, p. 22.

landscape's field of vision, and only infrequently thematized there, would nevertheless be a constitutive structural feature of its form.

For the essence of modernity is psychologism, in the sense of a way of experiencing and interpreting the world through inner reactions, indeed as an inner world. Modernity is the dissolution of firm contents in fluid elements of the soul, which itself has been purged of all substance and whose forms are pure forms of movement. [...] And it is why landscape painting, too, is the specifically modern accomplishment of painting as the expression of a particular *état d'âme*, more evidently dispensing with firm logical structure in its use of color and framing than figure painting.<sup>18</sup>

'Mood', *Stimmung*, is the modality Simmel invokes in order to denote this phenomenon. The term encompasses both a disposition of the perceiving subject *and* an innate property of the physical arrangement being perceived: 'it is possible to refer to mood and the coming into being of landscape, that is, the forming of its individual parts into a whole, as one and the same act.'<sup>19</sup> There is no landscape without mood and yet mood has no general form, its manifestation is always untransferable and unrepeatable, it pertains 'to *just this* particular landscape and never to any other', writes Simmel, and it is on this basis that the subject is singled out individually, addressed in the isolation of self-containment.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Georg Simmel, 'Auguste Rodin: Part II', in *Essays on Art and Aesthetics*, ed. by Austin Harrington (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2020), pp. 309-318 (pp. 317-18). Josef Bleicher, in his translator's introduction to Simmel's landscape essay, foregrounds this same passage (Simmel, 'The Philosophy of Landscape', p. 20).

<sup>19</sup> Simmel, 'The Philosophy of Landscape', p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 28. This relational structure is also central to Denis E. Cosgrove's account of landscape's development. See: Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), p. 27.

Now, it is precisely this distribution of categories that Huillet's and Straub's filmic apparatus is constructed with a view to intervening in, their use of landscape laying claim to a fundamentally different model of subjectivation, the prevailing concern of which is not the individual but the collective (of course the latter's composition itself subject to much variation across the filmmaker's work). Crucial, then, is the uncoupling of landscape from the inner world of the individuated subject, since the expansion of this dimension is one way in which the conditions for collective forms of experience have found themselves increasingly nullified over the course of modernity, a tendency also noted by Lukács in *The Theory of the Novel* (in a manner that shares several points of convergence with Simmel's analysis): 'The autonomous life of interiority is possible and necessary only when the distinctions between men have made an unbridgeable chasm.'<sup>21</sup> How, then, is this reconfiguration of landscape and its frameworks undertaken by Huillet and Straub? By what means does their understanding of cinematic form lend itself to this task?

A response to these questions can be developed with reference to *Moses and Aaron*, the filmmakers' encounter with Schoenberg's unfinished opera, not least because, thematically and compositionally, the question of the collective is what is at stake in this work, a situation recognized by Adorno when he refers to 'the pathos of the music of *Moses und Aron*', in terms of an 'intensity [that] gives reality to a communal "we" at every moment, a collective consciousness that takes precedence over every individual feeling, something of the order of the togetherness of a congregation'.<sup>22</sup> Of particular interest here is the filmic interpretation of the first act's opening scene, the encounter staged between Moses and God, in which the former receives from the latter his calling (*Berufung*): to bring God's word before the chosen people (to constitute this people through this word). From the outset, then, the *mise-en-*

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<sup>21</sup> György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1978), p. 66.

<sup>22</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'Sacred Fragment: Schoenberg's Moses und Aron', in Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (London & New York: Verso, 1998), pp. 225-48 (p. 228).

*scène* is concerned with the representation of a space insofar as this space is *sacred*, as the divine voice that first addresses Moses clearly establishes: ‘Do not come any closer. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground’ (a citation of Exodus 3: 5). A place is sacred inasmuch as its distinction sets it apart from every other place; said otherwise, it involves a determination of place once more conditioned by the work of the boundary. Huillet says as much in the ‘Small Historical Excursus’, a research document written in conjunction with the film, concerned with the material conditions and cultural practices of the Hebrew tribes in this period.

When the people settled at the foot of the mountain of God, Moses received the order to set the limits all around the mountain (Exodus 19: 12-13, 21-25). In order to understand the significance of this sacred enclosure for the Semites and the rites that were linked to it, it’s not enough to imagine a private seat for God, his garden or his park; this place shouldn’t be understood either according to current ideas of property but as a place where the radiance of the magical force of the sacred or of taboos is perceptible.<sup>23</sup>

The terrestrial manifestation of the divine is therefore tied to the work of *Abgrenzung* and the particular form of ‘enclosure’ with which this work is concerned. Regarding the film’s own schematics on this count, of course the choice of shooting location, the amphitheatre of Alba Fucens,<sup>24</sup> makes a contribution to establishing this principle of spatial containment. But in the opening shot of the first act the dimensions of this setting are not yet discernible. The demarcation of limits needed to denote the sacred is therefore initially achieved through other means, namely, by the way in which the dramatic subject is positioned within filmic space. The scene opens from an elevated viewpoint, along a sightline

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<sup>23</sup> Danièle Huillet, ‘Small Historical Excursus’, in Straub and Huillet, *Writings*, pp. 161-76 (pp. 168-69).

<sup>24</sup> An overview of the historical contexts that shape this setting can be found in Jacques Aumont, ‘The Invention of Place: Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub’s *Moses and Aaron*’, trans. by Kevin Shelton and Martin Lefebvre, in *Landscape and Film*, ed. by Martin Lefebvre (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1-18 (pp. 3-4).

that looks down onto Moses who is thereby shown in oblique profile, from behind, meaning his countenance cannot be seen directly, is inaccessible to the field of vision, even as his physical presence takes up the predominant share of the frame (Figure 2.1). His head initially bowed, it will then be raised with a slow, deliberate movement, coming to a rest once his gaze has secured an upward trajectory.<sup>25</sup> Only then does Moses deliver his first words, in speech, not song: ‘Unique, eternal, omnipresent, invisible and unrepresentable God.’ Technically speaking, these words are imparted in the form of an *apostrophe*, that figure of speech which addresses someone in their absence and therefore requires the ‘turning away’ – this is what *apostrophe* means – of the one who speaks. If Moses appears turned away or turned aside here, this is because the mode of address that the encounter demands of him dictates the way in which his comportment must be organised. This unconventional rotation of the axis by which he is situated in space relative to the cinematic frame is how the sacred nature of the terrain is first made legible.

Figure 2.1 Huillet, Straub *Moses and Aaron* (1974, DVD Éditions Montparnasse)

As Moses delivers this address, gaze still fixed upwards, off-screen, his words are accompanied by a further gesture, a gradual raising of hands that are then brought down momentarily over the eyes as a

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<sup>25</sup> The gesture appears in keeping with Kant’s understanding of ‘the idea of God’s sublimity’: ‘It seems that in religion in general,’ he writes, ‘the only fitting behavior in the presence of the deity is prostration, worship with bowed head’; the adoption of this posture in supplication gives the body its proper form, as an indication of God’s might. But at the same time this submission should never give way to fear of any kind; instead it must form the basis of an attunement (*Stimmung*) that prepares the stance by which God may be met on his own terms, as it were: that is, the worshipper must ‘recognize in his own attitude a sublimity that conforms to God’s will’. See: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett, 1987), pp. 122-23. These are the two dispositions that the transition from head bowed to head raised encompasses.

shield, a gesture signifying that in the presence of this God, the gaze cannot act as a guide, it is as good as blind (Figure 2). With these words and this action the film is thereby placed under the sign of a presence that remains withdrawn from the order of visibility, a kind of absolute out-of-frame (and how to bring this presence before the people – through the naked immediacy of the word or through the mediation of the image – is of course what the dispute between Moses and Aaron consists in). The exchange continues, Moses voicing his resistance to what is being asked of him. And then the camera begins to move, so that for the first time in this scene the field of vision is modified at the level of the frame. Both the orientation and gradient of this movement follows the trajectory of Moses's line of sight, and because of this from the moment this movement begins it unsettles, insofar as the protention this movement harbours – that which, at any given moment, is not yet present at hand but is on the point of being so – concerns the unrepresentable itself. Once in motion the viewpoint first of all takes in a section of the arena's stonework and the parched vegetation that borders it, next a stratum of timeworn rockface, all the while rising incrementally, until it finds the upper verge of the enclosure, lined sparsely with trees, its movement now settling along this curving perimeter that henceforth forms a ribbon of matter along the frame's lower edge, earth and stone flecked with greenery, above which or behind which blue sky and dense cloud, white, then grey, growing denser as the sweep continues until, a little way short of completing a full rotation, it alights upon a mountain formation in the far distance, two distinct peaks, joined – or separated – by a plateau running between them, an arrangement that stands for Mount Sinai (Monte Velino in reality), and with this viewpoint achieved the opening scene comes to a close.

Figure 2.2 Huillet, Straub *Moses and Aaron* (1974, DVD Éditions Montparnasse)

This extraordinary movement, one of the great acts of *Abgrenzung* in Huillet's and Straub's oeuvre, engenders a landscape the compositional rule of which could be considered 'disorientation'. For Lyotard, such *dépaysement* is in fact landscape's constitutive feature. 'This estrangement [*dépaysement*] is absolute', he writes in 'Scapeland', his short study of landscape ('paysage'), 'it is the implosion of



forms themselves, and forms are mind. A landscape is a mark, and it (but not the mark it makes and leaves) should be thought of, not as an inscription, but as the erasure of a support.<sup>26</sup> In the scene in question, this sudden absence of ground, the ‘vanishing of a standpoint’, is precisely what the upward drift of the camera achieves, all the more so because the further this movement progresses, the more difficult it is to situate its course in relation to the little square of earth from which it initially took its leave and to which it in principle still remains tied, given that the pan has taken place in a single continuous motion, without the interruption of a cut. This has a further disorienting effect: delineated through the tracing of this unbroken arc, the resulting landscape is left to manifest *successively*, across variable depths of field, making it a composite the parts of which are always contiguous and yet never present to one another as a totality. In an interview of 1974 Straub explains that the schema of this structure was the result of a specific reading of the original opera: whereas Schoenberg envisaged staging the work through a principle of simultaneity, meaning each scenic arrangement would harbour several courses of action undertaken at the same time within a single field of vision, the filmmakers conscientiously supplanted this principle with another, that of succession. An act of demystification, Straub says, inasmuch as it contests the possibility of representing divine presence in its immediacy. But in the context under discussion here, this formal move from simultaneity to succession also has concrete implications for the determination of landscape: it means, for instance, that the burning bush, the token of presence from which the divine voice issues in this episode, is not confined to a single form, but instead appears as though relayed through the metonymic chain of terms established by the pan. Straub: ‘the bush

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<sup>26</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Scapeland’, in Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp. 182-90 (p. 189). The French term has been added to the translation for clarification.

transforms itself. There are the sky, the rocks, and the mountain.’<sup>27</sup> ‘Landscape’ here consists in the movement that passes along the terms of this series, terms that belong to the series only on account of this movement.

Disorientation, *dépaysement*, has at least one further source in this scene. What the encounter between God and Moses also brings to the fore is an irreducible gap between vision and speech, the gaze and the voice, inasmuch as the divine presence must remain withdrawn from the field of visibility (recall that when Moses asks God to appear before him, he is met with the following response: ‘Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live’ (Exodus 33: 20)). The encounter with God therefore casts the gaze and the voice in a relation of mutual exclusion, so that their respective spheres, whilst always co-present to one another, are at the same time fundamentally dissociated, without a common frame or a possible point of intersection. Huillet and Straub organize the cinematic frame in recognition of this situation. For instance, when the divine voice addresses Moses in frame, the space from which this voice issues is not an out-of-frame contiguous with the field of vision; it is, with respect to this field, on screen or off, always elsewhere. In ‘Speaking is Not Seeing’, a canonical treatment of this thesis, Blanchot writes the following:

This is sight’s wisdom, though we never see only one thing, even two or several, but a whole: every view is a general view. It is still true that sight holds us within the limits of a horizon. Perception is a wisdom rooted in the ground [*sol*] and standing fixed in the direction of the opening; it is of the land [*paysanne*], in the proper sense of the term: planted in the earth and forming a link between the immobile boundary and the apparently boundless horizon – a firm pact from which comes peace. For sight, speech is war and madness. The terrifying word passes over every limit and even the limitlessness of the whole: it seizes the thing from a direction from

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<sup>27</sup> Joel Rogers, ‘Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet Interviewed: *Moses and Aaron* as an object of Marxist reflection’, *Jump Cut*, 12/13 (1976), 61-64. <<https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/jc12-13folder/moses.int.html>> [accessed 20 December 2021].

which it is not taken, not seen, and will never be seen; it transgresses laws, breaks away from orientation, it disorients.<sup>28</sup>

The ‘wisdom of sight’, derived through a stance or a standing that makes of the earth a foundation or a ground: this is the wisdom that Moses finds himself suddenly deprived of by the calling. His ordeal is the giving way of ground in this sense, an uprooting. After the camera begins its upward drift, quickly leaving Moses out of frame, what makes the movement so vertiginous is that its passage across the field of vision no longer appears connected to or conditioned by the coordinates that organise the field; instead the gaze is carried by a voice that reaches it from an absolute outside, having traversed an untraversable interval: ‘The terrifying word passes over every limit and even the limitlessness of the whole’, in Blanchot’s provocative phrase. This is how the divine voice must be heard when it sings these words in the initial passage of the pan – ‘As from this thorn bush, dark, ere the light of truth fell upon it, so wilt thou perceive my voice from every thing’ – and that this voice is arranged as a chorus heightens the disorientation still, scattering its source across manifold points.

If the gaze is indeed drawn along by the voice here, leaving it to pass along sightlines unaligned with the recognized channels of the visual order, this perhaps accounts for a further disconcerting effect produced by this shot: always in clear and determinate focus, at the same time what is picked out by the pan can appear as if momentarily unbound by the strictures of its given form, manifesting instead as a concentrate of material in open flux. This is what Lyotard means when he insists that the disorientation of landscape is tied to ‘the implosion of forms’. On the other side of this implosion lie the ‘many untameable states of matter’: ‘It is a question of MATTER. Matter is that element in the datum which has no destiny... Landscape as a place without a DESTINY.’<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Maurice Blanchot, ‘Speaking is Not Seeing’, in Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 25-32 (p. 28). The French terms have been added to the translation for clarification.

<sup>29</sup> Lyotard, ‘Scapeland’, in *The Inhuman*, pp. 185-86, 183.

But to reiterate, the point of departure for all this is Moses, Moses insofar as his calling has compelled him *to turn away*. The camera's subsequent movement and the landscape engendered through this movement is one with this turning. No doubt, then, this is a landscape that maintains a relation to the individual as a constitutive point of reference. And yet the individual is treated here in highly specific terms. The moment Moses appears in frame, countenance turned aside, his bearing is organized so as to preclude the possibility of interiority. There is no sense of 'absorption' here, his outer bearing is not a means of expressing an internal state.<sup>30</sup> The one who turns away is first and foremost turned away from himself. 'One of the characteristic traits of this experience', Blanchot writes, 'is that it cannot be assumed by the one to whom it happens, by a subject in the first person.'<sup>31</sup> This is what the idiomatic arrangement of Moses's physical presence testifies to, and its achievement, formally speaking, is the nullification of the individual's inner space. Interiority is not the correlate of the landscape brought into view here, one sign of which is the uncanny absence of 'mood' that persists throughout the scene. Instead, turning away is what opens up the passage along which Moses will approach the people to be constituted through God's word. As Straub insists repeatedly, the pan *is* this people. This people are what the pan announces.<sup>32</sup> On this account, landscape and the collective find themselves drawn together in one and the same configuration, nature once more staged as *res publica*, 'geology mixed with human history.'<sup>33</sup> And the means by which this association is forged here in the opening scene of *Moses and Aaron* is precisely through this figure of turning away: a manner of speaking, a mode of embodiment, a principle of movement. Huillet's and Straub's use of landscape is always tied to a figure in this sense, a figure that,

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<sup>30</sup> Of course, this is Michael Fried's term, a mode of pictorial representation the function of which is tied to a 'capacity for inwardness'. See: Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> Blanchot, 'The Most Profound Question', in *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> See: Rogers, 'Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet Interviewed', for example.

<sup>33</sup> Huillet, 'How to "Correct" Nostalgia', in Straub and Huillet, *Writings*, p. 189.

given every landscape implies a 'unique, characterizing detachment', is itself always singular. To reconstruct the workings of each figure in its context is to ascertain the ways in which nature appears there, traversed by the dominations and resistances of political struggle.