



Too Early, Too Late (dir. Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Germany, 1981)

Too Close, Too Far: Cultural Composition in Straub and Huillet's *Too Early, Too Late*

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At every instant, there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored. . . . Most often, our perception of the city is not sustained, but rather partial, fragmentary, mixed with other concerns. Nearly every sense is in operation, and the image is the composite of them all.

—*Kevin Lynch*

To compose is to arrange unequal things.

—*John Ruskin*

Vertigo

Too Early, Too Late [*Trop tôt, trop tard*] (dir. Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Germany, 1981) begins with a traveling shot best described as vertiginous. The shot—more than seven minutes in duration—is filmed from an automobile driving around the traffic circle at the Place de la Bastille in Paris. The camera looks outward; the spectator never sees the center around which the activity turns. The shot provides no clearly explicated ideological

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or narrative context. What it offers, rather, is a constantly transformed articulation of space and a profusion of events, none of which appear to bear more importance than any other. Spectators may take note of the changing architectural setting or will see and hear traffic simultaneously converging and diverging as vehicles enter the frame at different speeds and from different angles. Yet as the shot proceeds, a compelling construct emerges. Not only are speed and direction difficult to discern, not only is spatial orientation a momentary event, but spatial hierarchies are entirely undone and transformed. Here is neither left nor right; north is not above the south. Here the space of the framer will soon be framed. The mobility of the shot undermines even the certainty of a “here” and “there.” In every sense, collisions seem imminent.

Given its nondramatic status and its lack of expressive or even documentary content, observers of the film become attuned instead to graphic pattern and sonic patter—to space, sound, and objects. Such a redirection of attention hardly comes as a surprise, since this is the kind of work that particular strands of the cinematic avant-garde (in Europe and in North America) do best. But this film links spectatorial estrangement with an inescapable cultural critique—or more precisely, the emergence of this spectatorial estrangement is itself a form of cultural critique.¹ This film offers the convergence of a strict and innovative formalism—on acoustic and visual levels—with a cogent, though nonexpository, cultural analysis.

Eventually, for this viewer, the lengthy opening shot produced unexpected pleasures, and the production of this pleasure reveals much about how this film asks us to question our notion of visual, narrative, and ideological orientation. In order to manage disorientation in my viewing, I turned to several models of reading and looking, some privileging narrative and others based on structure. First, I regarded different vehicles as props—or even actors, or (to use Robert Bresson’s term) “models”—and it seemed that fleeting narratives insinuated themselves (the white one is faster; the red one is larger) and even resolved.² Second, I attempted to identify specific structures (to create my own landmarks, since

the film offered none) as they appeared and reappeared, thereby marking a complete journey around the traffic circle—as if the recognition of a previously established space could stand in for coherence or structure. Essentially, given the absence of captions and voice-over, the shot invited me to perceive—to impose—repetitions and patterns. In both cases, the structural and the narrative, I am confronted with emergent desire in the most rudimentary of forms. The film pits desirable object (or event) against intolerable excess and makes it difficult to distinguish one from the other. Emerging from this meditation on excess is the film's thoroughgoing cultural critique, especially in a later section of the film when it extends this querying of excess and desire into a more overtly political space.

Whereas the opening shot initiates a cinematic logic that confounds hierarchies of here and there and north and south, later shots extend this logic to question other evaluations and constructs: country/city, here/elsewhere, France/Egypt, First World/Third World. I invoke at this point seemingly rigid binarisms because initially this is the kind of construct that the film invites. The film is composed, after all, of two clearly delineated parts: the first, titled “Engels,” is set in locales around France; the second, titled “Hussein,” in various locations in Egypt. Each section of the film is sparsely narrated with readings from texts by the writer mentioned in the section titles. With a few notable exceptions, the film consists of a series of lengthy shots (either stationary or slowly panning) arranged into non-narrative sequences.³

In two different respects, then, the film confronts viewers with the problem of finding an orientation: orientation within the shot and orientation or synthesis in the dialectic between shots.⁴ It tempts the spectator to turn an apparent chaos of images into a coherent picture, and it engages this paradigm in a dual context: first, through the play of excess within images, as in the first shot; and second, by confronting the spectator with radically overdetermined images. In this second case, images are overdetermined in that they are presented in a context of cultural and political contact, and the images inevitably summon conflicting associations surrounding race, nation, and historical domination.

Yet the film presents neither an explicit polemic nor an exposition on such discourses. The approach of the film is more meditative and its method more self-reflexive, as it broadly considers the different modes of cinematic articulation in which these discourses appear. After regarding images of rural and urban France, the spectator must evaluate and read images of Egypt, and, in doing so, he or she may likely seek orientation in a three-worlds model, or a model that insists on regarding Egypt in the same terms that produced a picture of France. The film's emphasis then resides in questions surrounding composition and composure: the composition of the cinematic spectacle; the composure of the observer. The latter is always a component of the former.

Forming a Picture

Among European writers who traveled to the Middle East in the middle and latter part of the nineteenth century, one very frequently finds the experience of its strangeness expressed in terms of the problem of forming a picture. It was as though to make sense of it meant to stand back and make a drawing or take a photograph of it. . . . “Every year that passes,” an Egyptian wrote, “you see thousands of Europeans traveling all over the world, and everything they come across they make a picture of.”

—*Timothy Mitchell*

In his history of the British colonization of Egypt, Timothy Mitchell argues that notions of so-called pictorial clarity and pictorial chaos have informed European visions of colonized subjects and territories. Most notably, he posits a similitude between European perceptions of visual order and colonial order, and to this end he tracks how authors of different texts—visual and literary—chronicled the obstacles to and successes at forming “a clear picture” of colonized spaces.⁵ *Too Early, Too Late* actively enters into a dialogue with this similitude in which a cultural symptom appears in the guise of a philosophical or aesthetic principle. Under the cover of a frequently stable, objective observationalism, this film

puts pressure on the procedures by which viewers form pictures of places, nations, and cultures, and the film provokes a spectatorial crisis in which forming a picture is revealed as an ambivalent, even antagonistic, encounter. Earlier I mentioned how I had to “manage disorientation” vis-à-vis this film. Here I concur with Barton Byg’s description of the films of Straub and Huillet as at once “simple, incomprehensible, and threatening.”⁶ The unusual combination of these attributes—simple, incomprehensible, and threatening—summons the dual meaning of composure: (1) the act of arranging elements in a pictorial sense—of “holding elements” in a framed place; and (2) a form of “self-holding”—of being attuned to one’s self-presentation—that is also a form of self-protection against outside stimuli.

The opening shot of *Too Early, Too Late* depicts what might be called cultural vertigo—a state of both centeredness and displacement that questions the certainty and orientation offered by mappable, concrete places. Moreover, with this establishing shot, the film posits this combination of fracture and self-assertion as a fundamental term, as a commonplace to Western visions of post-colonial cultural identity. But most basically, through the use of its sparse two-part structure—its juxtaposition of images of France with images of Egypt—the film engages questions of cultural contact and colonial memory through predominately visual terms. By highlighting discrepancies between a contained, modeled, and predetermined audiovisual field and one characterized by excess and the absence of pictorial order, this film confronts the problem of forming a picture as an intersection between representational and political enframing. Is this a picture of France? Is this Egypt? The film does not pose these questions as such, but probes the foundations of such queries. Turning to the symptom of a colonial relation in which an experience of strangeness is expressed as visual turmoil, the film exposes a process of identification (“this is France”) as an unruly combination of remembrance and projection.

It comes as no surprise that according to some accounts, the problem of forming a picture may result from strictly physical limitations. Mitchell cites several nineteenth-century accounts

that reveal a frustration over the inability to stand back and assume a position from which one can constitute the world as panorama. One vivid example concerns Gérard de Nerval's account of his first day in Cairo, searching for a preferred point of view from which to take a picture. Nerval "followed one crowded, twisting street after another . . . until eventually the profusion of noises and people subsided and the streets became 'more silent, more dusty, more deserted, the mosques fallen in decay and here and there a building in collapse.' In the end they found themselves outside the city, 'somewhere in the suburbs, on the other side of the canal from the main sections of the town.'"7

On several accounts Cairo resisted Nerval's attempts to compose it. Its subjects were for the most part too close and too numerous to satisfy his compositional needs—a result in part of the twisting streets that foil the possibility of a long view. But distance was not the only problem. In fact, the problem of forming a picture was solved only when the human subjects were removed from the scene. Compositional order became explicitly linked with subjective erasure.

Gustave Flaubert's experience of Cairo is similar—uncertainty in the face of excess. He writes, "What can I say about it all? . . . As yet I am scarcely over the initial bedazzlement . . . each detail reaches out to grip you; it pinches you; and the more you concentrate on it the less you grasp the whole" (21). Flaubert's response to Cairo is that it is indescribable: "[Cairo] is a chaos of colour and detail, which refuses to compose itself as a picture" (21). In each of these cases, travelers experience foreignness as an excess of detail. Their problem with Cairo results not from the inability to decipher cultural codes of language or behavior, but from the inability to find visual order, or more precisely, from the displacement of the former questions (concerning cultural codes) into the realm of the latter (formal and aesthetic issues). In effect, these statements pointedly reveal how speaking of formal order also always means inhabiting a cultural phantasm. *Excess*, my fourth-edition *American Heritage Dictionary* informs me, is "the state of exceeding what is normal or sufficient; a behavior or an action that exceeds proper or lawful bounds; overindul-

gence.” It is a concept anchored in law, propriety, and composure. To repeat Flaubert: “I am scarcely over the initial bedazzlement. . . . the more you concentrate on it, the less you grasp the whole.” In other words, Flaubert’s first response to Cairo was to lose composure (“I am scarcely over the initial bedazzlement”), and his second response was to declare Cairo an uncomposable quantity. The work of this film lies in the way it enacts and reveals such displacements and in creating a text of sufficient openness and indeterminacy that such displacements may be observed in singular and collective modalities.⁸ This film presses formal issues into the service of cultural critique. In unpacking its cinematic formalism, we do not discover an aesthetic object; rather we hear the film speaking.

To return briefly again to Nerval’s experience with Cairo, it is especially noteworthy that his search for a proper viewpoint was not merely a question of vision; it also seems to have been hampered because the city was *too loud*. He was stopped short not only by crowds and twisting streets, but presumably by sonic disorder as well (“eventually the profusion of noises and people subsided and the streets became ‘more silent’”). Pictorial clarity depends in this case on silence, or at least on discrete and clear sounds easily wedded to an image. It is in this formal domain that *Too Early, Too Late* constructs its most original intervention.

Sound, the Eye, and Impossible Space

What is for the eye must not duplicate what is for the ear. . . .
A sound must never come to the help of an image, nor an
image to the help of a sound.

—*Robert Bresson*

It is in fact a rule that any voice that is off frame arouses . . .
a desire to go and see who is speaking.

—*Michel Chion*

In all of their films, Straub and Huillet work only in direct sound, involving sound recorded at the moment of filming with no post-

synchronization or dubbing. Such a method has the immediate effect of unsettling hierarchies between image and sound. No longer is image necessarily primary. Straub and Huillet have stated, “If you have decided to make a film with direct sound, the locations that you choose have to be right not only in terms of the images but also in terms of the sound.”⁹ To this end, they seek out shooting locations that may serve a particular sound palette, locations notable for their noises and their silences as well as for their visual characteristics. We find a broad range of locations—and sounds—in *Too Early, Too Late*. Many of the landscape shots of France and of Egypt are notable for their near silence, while others are complicated by a rich, tumultuous sonic field. In different shots, we hear birdsong, cathedral bells, wind, engine noise, human voices; and, in each of these cases, the location sounds unbind the audio and visual components of the film by invoking off-screen spaces and objects. These persistent location sounds redirect the eye to impossible spaces—to places the eye cannot find. This sound design frequently means that no visual substance anchors a viewer’s aural perceptions. The observer’s aural perceptions are anchored, rather, in the space of phantasm, in a gap filled by his or her projections. When this gap becomes the scene of cultural contact, then we clearly are dealing with more than a mere cognitive problem.

It is crucial to add here that although the use of direct sound has no stable or assured cinematic or ideological effect, in the opinion of Straub and Huillet the sound design does contribute to—or inflect, perhaps unpredictably—a film’s ideological position, and much of the critical work that this film produces emerges from its sound design. “Dubbing,” Straub tendentiously remarks, “is not only a technique, it’s also an ideology. In a dubbed film, there is not the least rapport between what you see and what you hear. The dubbed cinema is the cinema of lies, mental laziness and violence.”¹⁰ The filmmakers state additionally that in the dubbed film, the visual space becomes deceptively labyrinthine:

Filming in direct sound you can't fool with the space, you have to respect it, and in doing so offer the viewer the chance to reconstruct it. . . . It's possible to not respect the space you are filming, but then you have to give the viewer the possibility of understanding why it has not been respected and not, as is done in dubbed films, transform a real space into a confused labyrinth and put the viewer into the confusion, from which he can no longer escape. (152)

I am particularly struck by the way this statement resonates with Nerval's remarks associating the labyrinth with sonic disorder. The disorienting nature of Cairo's "twisting streets" is not to be separated from "the profusion of noises." If a so-called coherent picture of Cairo depends on making a series of separations—dividing an image from its surrounding profusion of sounds—Straub indicates that such a series of separations and enframings creates its own labyrinth, the nature of which is ideological. Building on these statements and on the film, one might assert that some systems of montage and dubbed sound constitute not only a colonizing audiovisual system but also a meticulous camouflage, covering over the implicit violence and erasure in this process of enframing.

Visibility and vision do not constitute synonymous terms in this case; neither do audibility and hearing. The film presses the implied distinction present in a phrase such as "actually hearing" or "actual seeing"—that is, the distinction between the datum of audition (or vision) and the discursive and imaginative realm of the acoustic (or the visible). Hence offscreen location sounds call up images not in one's field of vision; yet, in doing so, they ultimately render a broadened field of visibility, which surpasses visual data in that it has been shot through with social vision. The spectator creates images to supplement what cannot be seen—all in the name of noise. Yet this film pushes the tension of the invisible image even further. If the sounds of commerce become a "profusion of noises," it is not merely because they indicate activities and events that one cannot see, but because they indicate activities and events that are not easily read—that cannot be assimilated into a governing vision.

For Straub and Huillet, then, the frame works not only as a basic compositional device but as a limit to be undermined. The film undermines the frame first by the ongoing presence of off-screen space as it is produced through location sound, and second by rendering an on-screen space that the frame can only partially “compose.” The stationary shots (and slow pans) of long duration contribute to a pronounced sense of observationalism in the film. Regarding this point, Straub and Huillet claim that they endeavor to create a cinema that is observational while also constantly destabilizing the position of the observer. This destabilized observationalism makes it possible, in their words, to produce a “heightened realism” and to “film the unfilmable.”¹¹

The heightened realism that Straub and Huillet entertain, however, refers not to the production of an illusionistic “reality effect” but to a conceptual goal (an “unfilmable” quantity)—to Bertolt Brecht’s notion of “laying bare the causal network.”¹² In these terms, a realist goal of *Too Early, Too Late* may not be to capture scenes of everyday life, but to make visible the residues of a colonial relation in postindependence Egypt. The result of such an enterprise would not necessarily resemble the illusionism of much realist and neorealist work. On the other hand, with its absence of sets and actors, and with its fundamental dependence on found location, *Too Early, Too Late* appears deeply invested in producing naturalist images. I assert, though, that through its sound design and its selective use of slow camera pans, the film renders an ongoing spectatorial estrangement from naturalist images even while it maintains a devotion to such images. The film does not so much produce naturalist images; rather, it references them.

The estranging effects of the film result not solely from producing unanchored sounds or referencing unseen spaces but also from a changing and incalculable distance between observer and observed. To return to an earlier comment, Nerval’s attempt to compose a picture of Cairo was foiled because the subjects were always “too close.” Straub and Huillet estrange the space through the manipulation of apparent microphone distance—the distance from the microphone to the sound source. Many

of the landscape shots present striking counterpoints between sound and visual image. Typically, the visual subject will be remote and unchanging, while the sound subject will be highly fluid and much more proximal. The intrusion of nearby engine noise, wind, or birds—in auditory close-up—with no new visual presence results in a situation in which the distance from the observer to the observed is simultaneously far and close. One component of the observer's apprehension of the scene is always either "too close" or "too far," and the notion of an appropriate or critical distance between observer and observed is constantly undermined.

The nonselective nature of the microphone and the camera has been posited as both the unique strength of and a fundamental problem for some forms of cinematic practice. What is one to do with the intrusion of inassimilable detail that the microphone and the camera allow? Christian Metz posits detail itself as a fundamental barrier to contained and controlled cinematic reference. He writes:

When it reaches the level of the "small" elements, the semiotics of the cinema encounters its limits, and its competence is no longer certain. Whether one has desired it or not, one suddenly finds oneself referred to the myriad winds of culture, the confused murmurings of a thousand other utterances: the symbolism of the human body, the language of objects, the system of colors (for color films) or the voices of chiaroscuro (for black and white films), the sense of clothing and dress, the eloquence of landscape.¹³

Metz is emphasizing that one has no choice but to read; one cannot *not* read. Or at the very least, one attempts to assimilate detail. Especially notable about this passage is its reference to "murmurings," "voices," and "eloquence" as an explication of visual confusion, as a breakdown of a system. Whatever the initial rhetorical intent, the figuration in Metz's commentary no longer seems arbitrary: the "small" elements threaten to be "too loud." But what Metz refers to as a limit, Straub and Huillet use as an enabling device, pressing such small elements—the uncertain murmurings and voicings—into the service of a self-reflexive observationalism.

In this case, it is not the semiotics of cinema that has encountered a limit; the spectator has been brought up against a radical insufficiency of cultural picture making and has been exposed to a form of picture making that requires subjective erasure.

“The Eloquence of Landscape”

What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance.

—*Roland Barthes*

The setting should be both that of loss of memory and that of vacillating memory, that is to say a place with incidents of light, points of intense luminosity, holes of darkness, breaks . . . a place which one enters via the memory and loss of memory.

—*Marguerite Duras*

Beyond the two clearly demarcated sections (“Engels” and “Hussein”), *Too Early, Too Late* does not readily break down into clear sequences, but the film nevertheless accomplishes much of its work across shots. As Raymond Bellour comments, “segmentation is a *mise-en-abîme*, a plumbing of depth, a process which has no end theoretically.”¹⁴ Yet such a segmentation—or the problem of segmenting that this film poses—does not leave one in a state of quandary. To regard segmentation as a *mise-en-abîme* is to begin to grapple with how all texts frustrate and/or lend themselves to particular strategies of segmenting and grouping and to trace the attendant impact on the close readings of these texts.

It is difficult even to describe this film without summoning an almost tendentious conceptual scaffolding. Even if—in an effort for clarity and simplicity—we consider the film’s most basic division to be its dual setting in France and Egypt, the resulting binarism appears too rigid to account for the numerous other formal and ideological schemas with which the film confronts us, all surrounding a series of pairs: Engels/Hussein, voice-over/location sound, stasis/movement, urban/rural, pictorial landscape/uncontained countryside. Even the France/Egypt division is curi-

ous in itself, since it confounds creating the kind of specific historical relation that a division such as France/Algeria or England/Egypt might provide. By setting the second part of the film in Egypt (as opposed to Algeria, Nigeria, or Indochina, for example), the film deemphasizes, but certainly does not exclude, seeing these spaces in immediate colonial relation—in a relation of governance and occupation. The result is a perhaps more overdetermined set of possible relations based on class, race, and hierarchies of global capitalism. The film thus invokes binarisms without ever succumbing to a binaristic and rigid logic.

Sequences here appear as single-shot structures. The relationship between the shots might be considered serial rather than continuous, with each shot maintaining its own space and time. In the face of this radical discontinuity between shots, the differences between some of the landscape shots are so minimal that the shift from one to another seems pointless, taking on the appearance of a series of painterly exercises that focus on subtle changes of light or perspective. The viewer is constantly confronted with this combination of radical discontinuity and repetition with minimal difference. In a discussion of another of Straub and Huillet's films, *History Lessons* [*Geschichtsunterricht*] (West Germany, 1972), Maureen Turim comments on a similar formal patterning between and within shots: "By holding on a frame, Straub and Huillet reduce the effects of montage. By circulating within the frame similar types of signifiers, shapes, and references to objects, the directors magnify subtle changes, transforming them into new, important occurrences. The spectator is challenged visually, asked to derive pleasure as well as meaning from these elements."¹⁵ To confront this question of *identifying an occurrence* or *deriving a meaning*, I turn to a stationary shot of particular prominence. The fourteenth shot of the second section (see figures 1 and 2) is exactly ten minutes in duration—more than one-tenth of the entire film—and features the exterior of, perhaps, a factory and the heavily traveled street in front of it.¹⁶ The scene confronts the viewer with an abundance of visual details and location sounds, which never receive the containing supplement of a voice-over; as a result, the number of narratives that one can con-



Figures 1 and 2. Two stills from the “factory” shot. Everyday life resembles random circulation. Note the strict composition of architectural elements in relation to a changing field of human subjects, the change of lighting in the two shots, the changing distances between camera and visual subjects. This shot asks us to read observational footage in terms of a pictorial composition.

struct around this image is extensive. The shot is remarkable for the amount of information it provides and withholds, and for the extraordinary complexity it builds from simple components. In many respects, one could say it constitutes a film in itself. Most notable about this shot is how it offers a prominent visual (i.e., pictorial) frame but no conceptual frame, and this shot more than any other in the film refers the spectator to, in Metz’s words, “the myriad winds of culture.”

Viewers will be inclined to hazard a guess about the architectural structure in the background of the shot, and the reason for such an inclination is far from arbitrary. The building may be in the background, but it is the only stable “character” in the scene. It is yet another example in which the only stable players in a shot are automobiles, buildings, or sounds. Additionally, the architectural structure is deliberately framed with the conveyor belt/catwalk structure cutting a strong angle across much of the frame, from an offscreen space (above and right) to left-center screen. The framing of this material structure grounds the shot with a sense of discipline and visual arrangement and also establishes a permanent “gesture” into an offscreen space. Because the architecture is far from ostentatious and because of the heavy traffic circulating around the structure, one might infer that this

is a factory or a site of concentrated labor, a site that appears to be swallowing up and expelling hundreds of people. Viewers have time for numerous inferences of this sort and, in the effort to derive pleasure as well as meaning from these elements, will invent narratives based on different conceptual grids. One notices many different modes of dress; a conspicuous lack of women (only two—one in Western dress—compared to the hundreds of men that pass through the scene); motorized, bicycle, and foot traffic; and streams of traffic going in at least three different directions, indicating a complex offscreen city space. It becomes difficult even to identify what kind of public space this is since it works as both street and plaza. The shot is of long enough duration that a viewer may stop considering the content of the shot and begin to ask such general questions as, “What is a public space?” The longer one watches, the more the narratives proliferate as one detects new patterns and new “excesses” and the more difficult it becomes for the viewer to maintain the different strands of activity. What the scene offers is possibility—multiple and ambiguous voices striving to come forth.

This single shot sequence offers a combination of deliberate composition and elements resisting composure. As a viewer attempts to form these elements into a coherent picture, he or she is forced to engage different models of explanation: economic, cultural, or social. All of these elements circulate within the frame, but the shot does not present a clear picture in any of these terms. There is too much happening (on- and offscreen) to “read” the image in any final way—to convert it into some form of broad cultural knowledge. Instead, the viewer comes to regard fields of possible order and multiple order. Ultimately, the best picture we can assemble is of observation itself.

The effect is neither spectatorial confusion nor certainty, but an acknowledgment of insufficiency and of the shortcomings of a totalizing description. This shot, and others in the film, share a sentiment in which totalizing descriptions are initially entertained and then cast aside. More concretely, it actively assaults the monolithic totalities frequently used to make sense of a cultural encounter. To

turn to one example, the “three worlds theory,” writes Aijaz Ahmad, “has a propensity to think of global division in monolithic terms: white/non-white, industrialized/non-industrialized,” and these dichotomies frequently result in a massive oversimplification, especially of the second term (the nonwhite, the nonindustrialized). Ahmad continues: “Cultural contradictions within the imperialized formations tend to be so very numerous—sometimes along class lines but also in cross-class configuration . . . that the totality of indigenous culture can hardly be posited as a unified, transparent site.”¹⁷ The difficulty of reading this film lies precisely here, in the impossibility of positing “Egypt” or “France” as unified or transparent quantities. Spectators are not offered specific cultural or social articulations, but are faced instead with the radical insufficiency of the pictures that may form from a Western conceptual unconscious.

The film does not dwell entirely, though, on the arbitrary and insufficient nature of different interpretive models. Some shots in juxtaposition, assisted by the voice-over, create certain pairs the viewer will be encouraged to read relationally, even if not as clear sequences. The chain of urban and rural landscapes not only appear in economic relation to one another, especially with the Friedrich Engels text in voice-over, but the two mark the beginning of a series of conceptual borders. We read images of the French countryside after viewing images of Paris. Not quite halfway through the film, when we first encounter images of Cairo and rural Egypt, the scenes of Paris and of the French landscapes become strictly retrospective. Though the different shots do not elaborate the same physical space, they come to elaborate a conceptual space, and the film creates a series of peripheral “states” in relation to the remembered, vertiginous center, shown in the first shot of the film.

Given this structure of the film, one might infer that it posits “a place of order, reason, propriety, cleanliness, civilisation, and power, [in opposition to] what is irrational, disordered, dirty, libidinous, barbarian and cowed.”¹⁸ Such a logic has certainly been invoked (see figures 3–7). Yet there is much more



Figures 3 and 4.
Two stationary shots
featuring the
European city as a
place of visual order.
Figure 3 is visually
anchored by the
cathedral, and
figure 4 presents a
city as a grid.



to this film than this by now familiar model in which a national-cultural identity is contingent on a set of exclusions and opposites. When I first viewed the film, I composed a list of what I saw: different kinds of objects, compositional details, events, and, most important, a vague sense of “quality” that manifested itself in my notes in the form of adjectives. My list of descriptions for many of the French scenes included such phrases as *picturesque*, *lovely*, *green crops*. For the Egyptian scenes, I had a more complex response: my notes for one shot mention warm sunlight and debris; shots appear close, cluttered (clutter is always proximal), and filled with activity; or a picturesque landscape is transformed into a less picturesque desert and then altogether undermined as the camera pans and reveals dilapidated housing. The shots in the “Hussein” section often undergo a profound transformation. This is not to say that Straub and Huillet position sanitized vistas of France next to scenes of obvious—and obviously non-French—clutter, dirt, and disarray. They create a much more complex and



Figures 5 and 6. Two stills of the same shot. In contrast with the urban images in the previous section, this hazy cityscape is much more difficult to read as a composition. The slow pan in this shot makes it less susceptible to anchoring by a single architectural feature. This shot, and later shots of Cairo, place subtle emphasis on economic and military contact.

nuanced syntagmatic chain, which indicates a series of enframings and exclusions, and which recapitulates and unsettles some of the ways in which the Western modern state represents itself.

The first section of the film establishes a logic in which singular views are not only privileged but tend to make visual sense. This section of the film presents what one may read as pictorial landscapes—spaces that the eye can comprehend in a single view. Although some of these shots pan and some remain stationary, the scenes from the French countryside invoke a sense of a composition in which the different elements, human and natural, cohere. The panning shots (sometimes panning as much as 360 degrees), for example, may reveal a town neatly arranged in the hills, which comes as no visual surprise. These landscapes are composed from points of view similar to the imaginary space that Nerval sought in Cairo, the search for which literally removed him from the city—his presumed photographic subject. The French vistas attempt to show a distant world, flattened out, free of textures, pleasing, and unpopulated by human figures. Yet the attempts are only nominally successful. These are far from sanitized vistas. And there are other surprises (usually sonic ones) in these shots that subtly break the visual composition. As mentioned earlier, the use of location sounds often reveals auditory (but not visual) subjects in close



Figure 7. This shot, by means of the visual distance of its subject, prevents the viewer from regarding it as a documentation of rural property. The shot occupies a middle ground between “composition” and “documentation,” and it denatures each.

proximity to the camera/microphone, in contrast to a remote visual subject. As a result, observers are offered unseen objects—or objects with no visual place. Straub and Huillet reveal this form of visual picture making as an eternally haunted one. There are always elements that refuse to cohere. These frames are haunted by minor intrusions—the hard texture of a paved road competes with the soft shapes in the distance; the sound of a single distant automobile sends the eye looking for the source.

The shots of the French landscape are set against a much different kind of composition or vision in the second half of the film—which invites composition along pictorial lines and then refuses it. If producing a landscape requires a position set apart from which one can constitute the world in panoramic terms, this model of enframing is not successfully duplicated—or at least it is not sustained—in the scenes of the Egyptian countryside.

Many of the Egyptian scenes are too close ever to be thought of as landscape. These scenes are thick with the motions, figures, and objects of everyday life. They show textured surfaces, materials, and details that have no clear “visual place.” Even more important, many of the panning shots allow a viewer to establish a system of visual coherence that is then fundamentally undermined with the “intrusion” of human figures, debris, and farm animals. That human figures can even intrude (like debris, or *as* visual debris) on a visual scene that also happens to be the space in which these subjects live, suggests a colonizing logic this film pointedly exposes. These shots reference a colonizing subjective erasure by invoking—but not maintaining—specific pictorial qualities. These figures refuse to be subsumed into another’s landscape, and because they remain “uncomposable,” this landscape can never be “eloquent.”

Voice-Over and the Anti-caption—Engels and Hussein

If much of this film intervenes in and exposes a form of subjective erasure, the voice-overs in the film expose what one might call historical erasure. Viewers of the film will note that the voice-overs do not comment on the images in particularly clarifying ways. Of the three principle components of the film (image track, sound track, voice-over), the voice-overs exert the least influence over the film as a whole. Long stretches of the film have no voice-over whatsoever. Yet the voice-overs initiate crucial associations and encourage observers to regard some shots in relation to one another. The voice-over in the early section of the film consists of texts by Engels that relate only indirectly to the image track. The Engels text consists of what may be considered a set of statistics concerning specific villages shown in the image track. The opening section repeats a highly formulaic pattern. “Village of Montreff,” for example, “of thirty-seven families; according to parish records, fifteen relied on alms.”¹⁹ The interventions from the narrator are few, unpredictable, and occur at different moments within the time frame of the take. The voice, therefore, does not dominate the image track, but it does inflect the image in crucial

ways. These captions undermine the pictorial quality of the landscape shots by calling attention to economic conditions of existence. Land is no longer an element in the landscape, but it becomes property and a site of labor.

This conceptual disjunction between voiced caption and image offers a way to articulate counterhistories and reveal presences invisible to photographic observationalism. If, as mentioned earlier, offscreen sounds call our attention to what is “invisible” or what is unseen in the “eloquent” picture, the voice-overs perform similar, but not redundant, work. They point to historical traces and traumas and indicate a continuous reinscription of a historical economic condition in present-day life. The remarks from the Engels text, disjunctive as they are, retain some bearing on the present recorded in the footage. These nineteenth-century data are not important as statistics per se, but as reinscriptions of the past—they indicate a form of historical persistence. Similarly, the Hussein voice-over—which chronicles different events during the struggle for Egyptian independence as described by Mahmoud Hussein—posits a persistence of ideological structures and conflicts, and it thereby emphasizes (along with the film’s visual structure) that the conceptual-imaginary apparatus of the colonial relation is still very much in place.²⁰

Keeping this audiovisual structure in mind, it seems erroneous to regard the voice-overs as paradigms to frame and contain the image track. To do so would imply that the film is motivated by a strict economic determinism—an incomplete and misrepresentative statement, to say the least. The quoted texts from Engels and Hussein force one to speculate on how the film engages these economic constructs, but I read these texts in the film not as an abstract order for the film but as palimpsest. The film presents different temporalities with its multiple settings in contemporary Egypt and France, nineteenth-century France, and Egypt at the time of revolution. Although Straub and Huillet’s footage shows the setting to be contemporary Egypt and France, the voice-over and newsreel footage that conclude the film reveal in the present a persistence of vision and of colonial picture making.

Although many aspects of the film *Too Early, Too Late* reveal and counter different mechanisms of erasure, it is also clear that Straub and Huillet resist the highly problematic effort to give voice or grant a history where none has been visible. Such an effort may in fact recapitulate a fallacy of the three-worlds theory, insofar as it sometimes schematizes the first and second worlds as production systems (capitalism and socialism) and the third world as simply an unsystemized experience.²¹ In fact, the film helps to unlock this binary by problematizing the notion that an encounter with Cairo may be regarded as an “*experience* of visual turmoil.”

Notes

1. For further discussion of their commitment to cultural critique and artistic practice, see Maureen Turim, “Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet: Oblique Angles on Film As Ideological Intervention,” in *New German Filmmakers: From Oberhausen through the 1970s*, ed. Klaus Philips (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1984), 335–58.
2. Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York: Urizen, 1977).
3. Exceptions to stationary shots and slow pans are the opening traveling shot; a lengthy traveling shot in the “Hussein” section; and, at the conclusion of the film, a brief montage of newsreel footage of events immediately surrounding Egyptian independence.
4. The long duration of the shots (sometimes eight or more minutes in length) would appear to discourage reading this film as a set of sequences. Indeed in this film, it is easy to fetishize the shot, just as it is possible to overemphasize montage in films that privilege the sequence. Yet in spite of my frequent attentiveness to specific shots, it is clear that this film does much of its work of cultural critique on the sequence level.
5. Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). The authors in Mitchell’s study include Edward Lane, Gérard de Nerval, Gustave Flaubert, Husayn al-Marsafi, and Pierre Bourdieu.

6. Barton Byg, *Landscapes of Resistance: The German Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), xi.
7. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 27.
8. Although the film clearly attempts to expose a broad cultural imaginary in the way the postcolonial subject frequently is “framed,” it famously prompts a singular viewing “crisis” in its viewers. That is, watching this film remains an intensely—often intensely difficult—subjective experience, even as it addresses broad cultural discourses.
9. Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, “Direct Sound: An Interview,” in *Film Sound: Theory and Practice*, ed. Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 151.
10. Straub and Huillet have theorized extensively about film and about their own work, and, although some of their rhetoric gives me pause, many of their statements provide fruitful entry points for understanding their films. I hesitate, however, to accept their theorizations as *necessarily* descriptive of their films’ effects, and *Too Early, Too Late* repeatedly exceeds the theorizations that inform it.
11. Straub and Huillet, “Interview von Karsten Witte,” in *Herzog/Kluge/Straub*, ed. Ulrich Gregor (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1976), 206–7; my translation.
12. Quoted in Robert Stam and Louise Spence, “Colonialism, Racism, and Representation: An Introduction,” in *Movies and Methods*, vol. 2, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 639.
13. Christian Metz, “Problems of Denotation in the Fiction Film,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 57.
14. Raymond Bellour, “Segmenting/Analyzing,” in Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, 70.
15. Maureen Turim, “Textuality and Theatricality in Brecht and Straub and Huillet: *History Lessons* (1972),” in *German Film and Literature: Adaptations and Transformations*, ed. Eric Rentschler (New York: Methuen, 1986), 238.

16. Each section is composed of exactly twenty-six shots.
17. Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), 8.
18. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, 165.
19. Because of the difficulty in working with 16mm film (and because this film is not available on VHS), my quotations from the film are not based on a word-by-word transcript. Yet the pattern of this voice-over is consistent: a recitation of statistics that emphasizes a systemic and widespread impoverishment. Such statistics serve as captions for images of the picturesque French countryside.
20. Excerpted from Mahmoud Hussein, *L'Égypte: Lutte de classes et libération nationale* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1975).
21. That which constitutes human history itself is present in the first two cases, but absent in the third case. See especially Ahmad, *In Theory*, chapter 8, for a full discussion.

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