

Tell It to the
Stones
Encounters
with the Films
of Danièle Huillet and
Jean-Marie Straub

SternbergPress ✨



Manfred Blank

*Chance
and the
Cinematograph*

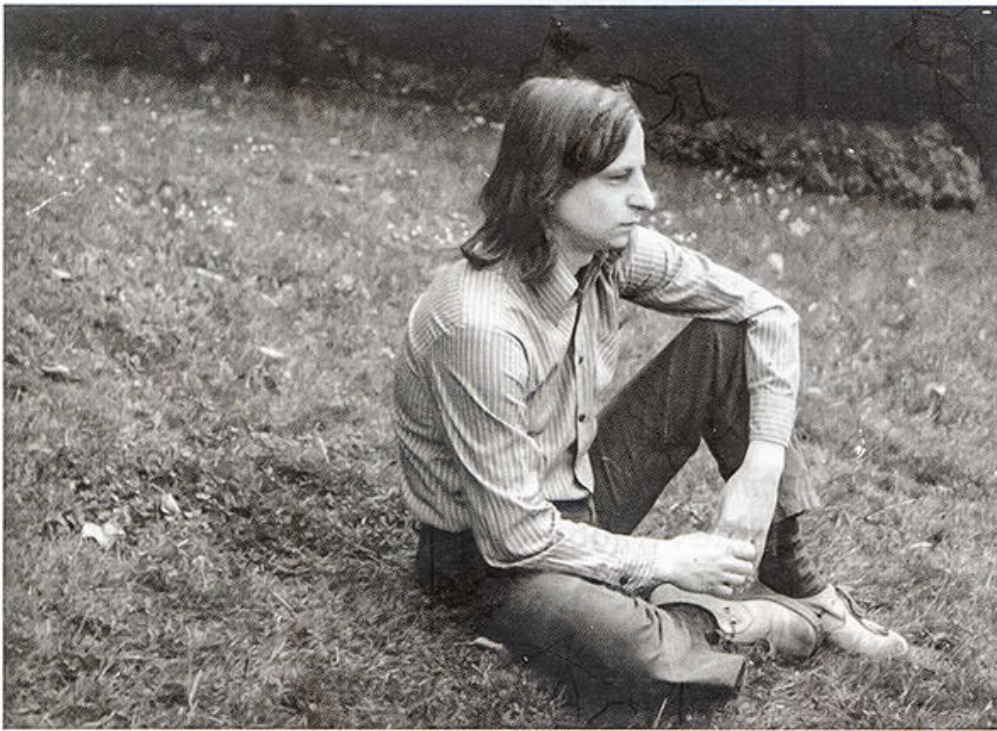
[This text is a slightly modified version of a lecture given by the author on September 16, 2017, at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin as an introduction to the films *Every Revolution is a Throw of the Dice* and *Too Early/Too Late*.]

What follows is a reprise of a talk I first gave to introduce both of these films at the same location in early 1987. On my initiative, the Straubs had made the premiere of *Too Early/Too Late* a gift to *Filmkritik* on its 25th birthday and since then *Filmkritik* had in this potlatch system remained committed to the Straubs. Before we ever published anything about the film, however, we had to abandon the magazine's publication. Shortly thereafter, I dragged *Too Early/Too Late* into the program of an event at the Akademie der Künste about essay films initiated by Harun Farocki and largely sustained by former *Filmkritik* colleagues. I was driven to establish a program proposal as an apparatus of discovery: If I combined *Too Early/Too Late* with *Every Revolution is a Throw of the Dice*, edited both of these films together so to speak, they would mutually illuminate each other.

1.

If the apparatus worked, it would be unnecessary to precede the Mallarmé film with an interpretation. Decades before, both Susan Sontag and Jean-Marie Straub had made declarations against interpretation. With an interpretation, one would need, moreover, if I may use the language of the secret service, to break the poem's code, and minds more refined than mine have already failed at that. I would merely claim—and this is not only a mere hunch—that both films have more to do with one another than one might expect from two films by the same filmmaker. I take the Mallarmé film for a heuristic model.

But I would like to begin with an anecdote. The Straubs have told a lot about the story behind *Too Early/Too Late*, most elaborately and most illuminatingly in an interview with Hans Hurch for the Viennese magazine *Falter*. Remarks about the Mallarmé film are sparser and more cryptic. In 1955, Jacques Rivette shot his first short film, the approximately thirty-minute long *Le coup du berger* (*Fool's Mate*). During the first half of the opening titles, we see two



hands and a chessboard playing out the so-called “Scholar’s Mate” or “Shepherd’s Mate,” which would be the correct translation of the title. This very short series of moves comes out of the playbook for absolute beginners—only very inexperienced players allow themselves to be duped by it. The film follows the intrigue of a young wife and her lover, who as cheaters are absolute beginners. The cheated husband checkmates them with a surprising, well-planned move. The title sequence is therefore *cum grano salis* a metaphor for the entire film. At the same time, the metaphorical image is also reminiscent of a statement Jean-Marie has often made: In a certain way, filmmaking is like playing chess. And the film’s title refers to that famous saying by the one, who Rivette calls “the master” in his film portrait, Jean Renoir, that all of his adepts took to heart: filmmaking is about pulling a job with friends. He used the word “*coup*.”

The only time in his life Jean-Marie worked as assistant director was on *Le coup du berger* when he was twenty-two years old. The same year, he probably also watched Bresson in Lyon during the making of *Un condamné à mort s’est échappé* and Renoir in Paris on *French Cancan*, but those were merely brief, friendly visits. During production, the then-twenty-seven-year-old Jacques Rivette—Jean-Marie told me—constantly recited Mallarmé’s poem, which he knew by heart. With a certain degree of certainty, we can therefore conclude that this is where the nucleus of the Straubs’ Mallarmé film lies, possibly even the nucleus of the Straubs’ and Rivette’s filmmaking. And, more boldly,

that for all three of them, the poem is a metaphor for filmmaking itself.

For many, *Le coup du berger* is the first film of the Nouvelle Vague because it is so entirely an inside job, a *coup* following Renoir's dictum. The film's mastermind, the cuckolded husband who dupes the young cheating pair and presents them in turn his mistress wearing the *corpus delicti*, the young cheater's fur coat, is played by then-editor-in-chief and co-founder of *Cahiers du cinéma*, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze. Chabrol was the film's production manager and Truffaut, Godard, and Rivette himself appear in the final sequence as party guests. We have here nearly all of the pupil's of the charismatic, leftist Catholic André Bazin, those whom he named "young Turks" and esteemed as experts—of American films above all. The Straubs thus appear—not only through their lifelong friendship with Rivette, with whom they exchanged film tips, directors of photography, producers, and crew—from their youth onward as filmmakers marked by the ideas, preferences, and strategies of the Nouvelle Vague—contrary to the popular perception of them as German filmmakers whose native language is French.

2.

Too Early/Too Late has been designated the Straubs' first documentary film. They have begrudgingly accepted this. There are no characters in the film that are actors, but they said the landscapes are like characters. This is also true of the *Cinematographic Scene* film, where Günter Peter Straschek reads a letter by Schoenberg and of *Fortini/Cani*, in which Franco Fortini reads from his own book. But this genre classification does not bring us any further with the Straubs' films. Furthermore, Jean-Marie has correctly pointed out that every so-called fiction film is a documentary about its actors. And I wonder, is not every film a documentation even when it is staged and is not every document a staging? When I first gave this lecture, for contemporary examples I referred to Bernd Eichinger's productions as documentations of desperate attempts to spend lots of money and Klaus Wildenhahn's participatory observations as the staging of undeserved trust. Today everyone can look for corresponding examples.

What is to be seen in *Too Early/Too Late*? What is to be heard?

The film's individual elements as well as what the images and the sounds concern are disparate. Almost at random, I will list a few that are noticeable on first glance, on a first listen. A film in two parts. The first is based on a segment of a letter from Engels to Kautsky, which in turn has two or perhaps even three different parts—an initial, abstract exposition of the French Revolution followed by the enumeration of places, whose social conditions are supported with figures and, at the end, another short theoretical chapter. The second part is based on excerpts from the book *Class Conflict in Egypt 1945–1970* by two Egyptian authors working under the pseudonym Mahmoud Hussein.

Very different kinds of shots: made with a telephoto lens, with a wide-angle lens; tracking shots, static shots, occasional pans back and forth. Black leader. Excerpts from an old newsreel. Two entirely different texts: one historical and one (at the time the film was made) contemporary. A female and a male narrator. Shots in which we can hear the sound of the moving air and ones that are full of human and animal voices. Again and again, there is a kind of extension at the beginning and end of the shots and then camera movements cut very short. There is the postcard-like view from the Sacré-Coeur and shots that—off-centered, Johan van der Keuken would say—only show a small patch of vegetation and lots of sky. (This is only good for a first viewing because the visual system in the work of the Straub-enthusiast van der Keuken is entirely different from the work of the Straubs themselves). The first part comes with an austere text, where in some passages, only figures that are not representative are listed and whose meaning is hard to grasp. The second part has a text written like journalism, with something curiously unclear in the construction of the sentences and whose transitions remain vague, a vocabulary like something out of the program of a political party.

A few critics as well as viewers and friends with whom one speaks grumble that the texts in this film and many



others by the Straubs are ugly. To my taste, this is a little bit true of the Egyptian part. But anyone who knows the Straubs a little understands that there is no error in taste here. Jean-Marie works with texts because he claims he himself is unable to write. He takes what he likes from the texts. More precisely, he uses them for his own purposes. His attitude toward them is not that of a servant of noble literature, but, as he once said with a wink, that of a censor. That may be an exaggeration but it hits the nail on the head. And it shows that, even if both occasionally take hold of the incunabula of world literature, the quality of the texts is not of primary importance.

We find shots in *Too Early/Too Late* whose entire duration is filled by the text and ones in which only one or even no words come.

4.

A shot.

It is the first one in the film after the titles. Therefore the first in the French part of this two-part film. The second part shows cities and landscapes in Egypt. In the script, the shot is called, "La Place de la Bastille en carrousel." This describes the effect better than the German word *Kreisfahrt* ("arc shot"). It is a relatively fast tracking shot, filmed out of the right, passenger side door of a car. The French term refers to dizziness, colors flying by, and

the impression of a kaleidoscopic effect—to something strange. Vehicles that drive onto the roundabout seem to be pulled in—an impression emerging from the non-parallel movements of camera and objects and through the short focal length with which this is recorded—and then in the end seemingly blown away. Vertical lines, corners of buildings, and the road are distorted, including a building that houses a Banque de France.

Constant returning, *all for nothing*, is not what the shot says—not futility, but grotesquery. This is surprising at first sight because it in no way corresponds to preconceptions about Straubian images.

The shot of the historical site—in the sense that the one who frames is taking a position on what he shoots—is blasphemous. The view is not of the Place de la Bastille monument, the spirit of liberty on the column. It is behind the camera's back. The monument is, moreover, only indirectly related to the *Grande Révolution* of 1789. It was built in memory of the 1830 July Revolution and later dedicated to the Revolution of 1848. Although a "Spirit of Liberty" stands on top of the column, the monument has less to do with liberty, equality, and brotherhood as with the "*enrichissez-vous*" ("enrich yourselves") of the *Juste milieu*.

That the Place de la Bastille is actually the subject here does not appear essential. One does not even need to know it.

5.

Another shot.

The first shot without voice-over comes in the final third of the film, in the Egyptian part. Four more follow.

This looks like a break from the principle of the film, which one could concisely characterize as: two texts as a guidebook for two different countries. The silence in the voice-over can however easily be explained on an abstract level: there are sites to see that the text does not name, but that it sweepingly implicates. The travelers who are following their guide have made a discovery without it.

But the first shot without voice-over is striking for an entirely different reason. It is the longest one in the entire film, 10 ½ minutes, the length of an entire 120 meter roll—if there had only been longer 16mm rolls, the shot would likely have been even longer.

Upon first glance—when I say *glance*, I am including the ears—the shot might look like the counterpart to the one just described: no circle, no carousel, a forward tracking shot. However, just as little as the shot at the Place de la Bastille deals with circularity in the sense of futility, is it here a matter of *moving forward*: the future, optimism. The shot's gesture—and by that I mean a combination of framing, movement, camera position, and duration—does not permit it. The shot makes a gesture toward seizing the land, and I do not mean the driving of a tank or a low-flying helicopter—camera positions are never so clear. Seizing the land in the sense of an expedition—the Straubs have pointed out that cartographers came to Egypt with Bonaparte's military expedition—which is also a bracket holding both parts together. The French military cartographers drew up the still reliable maps of the Egyptian provinces. The Straubian expedition is therefore an echo of this earlier one. They actually used the old French maps while location scouting. Seizing the land in the sense of conquering it. Even the disempowerment of the British, foreigners, and aristocrats did not free this land.

Also relevant is that later in the shot, before the voice-over ends, we can hear in the distance, but loudly, a donkey braying; that during the entire forward tracking shot we hear the motor of the small bus through the front windshield of which the shot was made; and that every time a tree or group of trees is passed, an excited concert of birds can be heard. I think that the Straubs did not seek these out but found them. That they were gifted them. This brings us to the concept of the cinematograph.

The fourth shot in the film shows the sign for the town of Tréogan. We are then back in the first part, the French part. We are in Brittany. The shot is connected with the previous one: a pan ending on a street, by a meaningful correct/false sound edit. A car drives out of the shot; we can still hear the sound of the vehicle as it moves away.

After the cut, we hear a car coming closer that drives past the sign and into the distance of the image. Like two opening shots in a fiction film—even if the cars are of course not identical. A shack with advertisements and a bush in front of it can be seen behind the sign. Half of the image is made up of the street and its vanishing line. During the previous shot, we hear: “Tréogan: ten well-off families, ten impoverished, ten beggarly.” Bearing in mind the false introductory sound edit, with this shot—and this is the first town that is shown—the film misleads us. It acts as if it wants to represent continuity, “two hundred years ago, this town was already poor and it still is, nothing has changed,” as if the film wanted to confirm a historical fact in a text with an image. This shot is what Godard in his film *Week-end* calls *fauxtography*, *faux* as in false.

If the film permits a doubling in this shot (the text talks about poverty and we see an image that upon first glance seems to mean “poverty”), it permits, especially in the first part, a contrast and stays true to a dialectical gesture so important to the Straubs: to allow the counterpart to appear within what is shown and what is said. This contrast entails that given the amount of towns listed whose inhabitants were once beggars, paupers, and people living on the edge of poverty, the series of pans over green fields and pastures imposes a consideration of how fruitful this land nevertheless is, and yet in which the majority of people suffer from hunger.

Images in films may only exist to put flesh on the bones of the text. The language gives the idea and the image brings the accompanying music. In the Straubs' films, the state of affairs is, at least occasionally, exactly the opposite.

7.

Two shots from the second part.

Twice while the Egyptian central government in the 19th century is being discussed, we see a shot of the citadel in Cairo, the same static shot twice. From an extreme, wide, low-angle—I'm avoiding the word “fish-eye” perspective, because it would make this all too cute—we see a piece of wall at the very bottom of the frame and small towers on

the left and right, distorted by the perspective; overhead, filling up most of the image, the white of the sky.

There is an analogy between image and text here. The text's often loudly enunciated diction, especially in the Egyptian part—significantly not so distinct here—finds its equivalent in the idea of an image. It is the idea of an image gravitating toward a pictogram. Straub was fully aware how *un-Straubian* this perspective and this frame are. He showed it to me, grinning, when he had set up the camera. "Looks a little like something out of Eisenstein," I said. "Sometimes he has to do the opposite of what he likes," said Danièle. This is a kind of shot that does not allow an *impression*, Godard would have said, but an *expression*. This image is an expression, the expression of an attitude of the person who made it. The shots showing the Cairo Citadel are an expression of disdain. Not disdainful images, but images for disdain.

1

Editors' note:

Manfred Blank refers here to the exhibition "Tell it to the Stones" at the Akademie der Künste, on display when he was delivering this talk in the auditorium of the same building.

8.

After all of these preliminaries, now to the shot I have been driving at. It can be seen upstairs in the exhibition, in the middle of the room, as if it were its focal point, its centerpiece.¹ *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*. A throw of the dice will never abolish chance.

A factory gate, the text is speaking about a revolution in the year 1919, the word "worker" is heard for the first time. We might recognize such a connection and such an image. The filmmakers, who were not authorized to go into the factory because capitalism hides work and wants to make it invisible, wanted to meet the workers at a spot where they were still workers and only just beginning to become private individuals again, in front of the factory gate, in order to see a little bit of the work, the *production relations*, perhaps in the workers' faces or their gestures. And here is the site at which visible altercations occur during factory occupations and where statements are delivered during strikes.

Also in *Too Early/Too Late*, this shot, *sortie d'usine*, is not free of some of that hypothetical revolutionary pathos even if it was filmed in 1981 at a time when nobody was

filming this kind of thing any longer, even if through the distance from which the people are filmed and the length of the shot something distinctive and unique is obtained.

Faire la révolution, reads one of the maxims in the script of the film *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach, c'est aussi remettre en place des choses très anciennes mais oubliées*. This is a quote by Charles Péguy: Making a revolution is also putting very ancient, but forgotten things back in place.

Straub/Huillet are traditionalists, so much so that they—accepting how unfashionable this connotation has become—mean something far older: the invention of cinematography, of the cinematograph. The Lumières' factory gate in Lyon, filmed at the end of the working day with the newly screwed together cinematograph belongs, along with *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* and *Déjeuner du bébé*, to the archetypes of cinema. It is not merely being quoted here. The Straubs are positioning themselves in the frequently forgotten tradition of the Lumières' cinematographic images. While these were at first home movies of the employer's family, soon camera operators were sent out into the world with the new device in order to make panoramas and moving views for fair stands and diverse programs in newly opened movie theaters. The Lumières themselves were thinking of widespread uses for the new recording and playback device for scientific purposes. In the final years of the 19th century, a massive amount of first cinematographic pieces emerged almost everywhere in the known world.

When I was commissioned in 1993 on the occasion of Jean-Marie's 60th birthday to make two short documentaries for a Straub/Huillet evening on ARTE, the French interviewees were unanimous in saying that: *the Straubs are going back to the cinematograph*. In my little film, Helmut Färber stated this in detail in German, but we were unable to reach the ordinary German arts and leisure bureaucrat. When I was invited on local Berlin radio in 2003 for a short interview for Jean-Marie's 70th birthday and explained this as an essential characteristic of the Straubs' work, the moderator looked at me pitifully, thinking I had nothing more to say than the tautology *cinema is cinema* and was therefore using the quaint term "cinematograph."

She could not grasp that I was talking about something very specific.

For the Straubs, it goes without question that it is meaningful to travel around with a camera and sound recorder and sometimes to record events with fervor and wrath; that by watching these moving images it may be possible to find out something that we could not otherwise find out. How a horse gallops, for instance. That the heart of filmmaking lies in the cinematograph, an instrument for studying the world. This approach is programmatic for an essential aspect of *Too Early/Too Late* and for the Straubs' cinema in general.

9.

But what does any of this have to do with the Mallarmé film and to what degree does the Mallarmé film provide a key to *Too Early/Too Late*?

During my lecture in 1987, I made myself into a reciter, reading a number of lines from the poem aloud without commentary, complete with the German translation that Danièle, Jean-Marie, Andrea Spingler, Helmut Färber, and I had prepared during the shooting in Paris. (This translation can be seen upstairs in the exhibition as a subtitle list.) Mallarmé's poem, in which, on the one hand, a logical system is constructed through the elaborate typography and in which pure musical language reigns on the other, did not become easier to understand through my recitation. Therefore I would now like to attempt a short paraphrase of the play's in fact hardly important *plot*: in a precarious and hopeless situation (*du fond d'un naufrage*—from a shipwreck's deck) characterized hermetically and with numerous nautical metaphors, a man—called *maître* and *vieillard* (old man), formerly ship's captain, among other things—attempts, in a titanic effort, to throw a particular number that would allow him to free himself and others from this situation and for them to escape. The endeavor cannot guarantee success however. He remains ultimately surrendered to chance.

The final line of the poem, *Toute pensée émet un Coup de Dés* (*Every Thought emits a Throw of Dice*)—a straightforward

line, so to speak—makes it clear that each and every mental activity is meant, in other words: the mastery of life itself, which includes the composition of poetry and the shooting of films, as Rivette probably once meant by his recitation. It is relatively easy and obviously appropriate to relate this titanic struggle around “l’unique nombre qui ne peut pas être un autre—the one number that cannot be another” to Mallarmé’s thirty year wrestling with this, his final poem. The Straubs do not simply record Rivette’s recitation again. They place it in a very Straubian context. Their Mallarmé film is called *Toute révolution est un coup de dés*—Every Revolution is a Throw of the Dice. There is therefore a further connection to *Too Early/Too Late*. The theoretical passages of the Engels letter (at the beginning and end of the first part) are about how a revolution is by no means to be taken for granted, but depends on concrete historical facts and ultimately on chance.

The title of the Mallarmé film is a quotation; a line that the historian Michelet wrote decades before the Commune and decades before the development of the Mallarmé poem, which was published for the first time in 1897 shortly before Mallarmé’s death. The Straubs sat us, the reciters, in a semicircle on the burial mound in Père Lachaise cemetery that covers the remains of the 147 fighters of the 1871 Commune who were shot here and rises before the so-called *Mur des fédérés*, the monument for the 30,000 who died during the Commune and over which the film’s opening pan sweeps.

The quotation-title is an answer to or a variation on the poem’s final line, Every Thought emits a Throw of Dice. It is the third element of the montage that makes up the film: the quotation-title, the site of the events, and the text of the poem. Mallarmé was not exactly a political man, but it is doubtless that he witnessed, not in Père Lachaise, but in his apartment near Gare St. Lazare, the Commune and the struggles. And it is irrelevant whether he meant the Commune as well with this poem. Nothing is meant in poetry, metaphors and the music of language reign.

Jean-Marie often said that with every film he and Danièle tried to go one step further. That sounds very abstract and could easily be written off as a vague, conceited comment. And yet it is probably true. In the 1977 Mallarmé short film, there is a new concept for them that grew in importance over time. On the slant of the burial mound in Père Lachaise, all of the reciters were filmed from almost the same camera position, which their arrangement of course made possible. We find this again in a few of the "crowd scenes" in *From the Cloud to the Resistance*, filmed one year later, it nearly becomes a rule in the multi-person spectacle *Class Relations*, and is more or less an iron law from the "theater film," meaning from *Empedocles*, onward. For this to work, one must calculate the positions of the actors exactly. One must play chess, says Jean-Marie, meaning to anticipate the consequences of a decision far ahead. Such rigorous pre-planning, determination, and commitment exists in other areas than the camera position, and this is how the Straubs gained a reputation as workaholics, control freaks, and fanatics for precision. Even in 1974, Rainer Gansera joked in *Filmkritik*, "no false move, Moses and Aaron."

As I was the Straubs' assistant for the first time in 1978 and, among other things, brought the exposed film stock to the lab in Rome every two or three nights and picked up the work print that we watched the following evening in a cinema near the shooting location, I noticed that the production was simultaneously poor and rich. The catering and hotels were rather poor, all of the assistants were working for free, the department heads had accepted very low wages because they liked the Straubs, and the lead actors were non-professionals and worked on an expense basis. But the quantity of exposed and printed footage was a pure luxury. The Straubs shot a minimum of at least twenty, usually thirty, and often more than forty takes per shot. And when we saw the dailies, it became clear that this was not because something had gone wrong technically or the actors had made a lot of mistakes. That was taken care of during the technical tests and rehearsals.

When we made a short trip around France in 1980 for the first part of *Too Early/Too Late*, Danièle decided on June

as the production period because at that time in northern France, where we were mainly moving around, there was little rain but lots of wind and therefore changing clouds to deal with, meaning both textured skies and frequent changes of light. Only so-called landscape shots were planned, lots of static shots and a few pans, which for an artful camera operator like Willy Lubtchansky did not present any technical problems. But we shot two to three shots a day over a time period of nearly an entire month. A crew working on a TV production might have received ten days for this task. We would wait and wait and we would shoot and shoot, although we lost no shooting days due to the weather or technical problems.

For both films, more or less all of the dailies were good technically and aesthetically speaking. Since this luxurious use of film stock and time—which as you know is also money—was not about the perfection of the results, the Straubs must have had something else in mind with the many slates and the waiting. Looking at our heuristic model, the Mallarmé film, it becomes clear what this is. They were waiting for an unexpected, unique moment. They wanted to provoke something unplanned, they wanted to let something happen, which might happen entirely independent from their intentions and that had nothing to do with prefabricated meanings. They made a calculation. But not in order to control something. They wanted the appearance of “the one number that cannot be another.” They pursued the calculation of chance. They wanted to go back to conditions in which the film images become documents again, like in 1895 at the factory gate in Lyon; not propaganda, not language, not a concept, but a document.

This is not about workaholics being redeemed because they strive with all their might. This is about the mercy of “kairos—καίρῳ”, of the right moment, neither too early nor too late. This is about receiving “a gift” in humility. That is a word that Jean-Marie always used in this context, “gift.”

11.

It has been said that the text in *Too Early/Too Late* is a pretext—a pretext to travel to the locations it speaks about. To travel to them and to record what is happening there.



Or with the help of recordings, to measure the facts in these locations. Actually, a little what a cartographer who surveys does and who from the sum of his measurements creates an image of a landscape, a map.

Now, a sound recorder and a camera do not measure meters, height, etc. Maybe one could say that both instruments are carried to these areas in order to consider what is alive there. Alive in the people, the plants, and the animals, and this series has no hierarchy. In dramatic moments, interviews, discussions, and press conferences, Straub often referred in this context to Rosa Luxemburg: "For Rosa Luxemburg, the fate of an insect fighting in some corner for its life without mankind noticing was just as important as the fate and the future of the revolution in which she believed."

A suggestion as to how he would like the film to be watched and listened to; and it is a principle that one should perhaps follow in life.

Translated from German by Ted Fendt.