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The Ethics and Politics of Negation: the Postdramatic on Screen

Angelos Koutsourakis

The ethics of spectatorship and the postdramatic

On June 22 2008, in a television interview with Alexander Kluge, the Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke was asked to explain his ethical approach to filmmaking. His response was that the prerequisite for making films ethically lies in a filmmaking practice that takes the spectator seriously and stimulates the viewer's imagination. Haneke's *raison d'être* is grounded on the idea that unlike literature, film runs the risk of restricting people's imagination by showing and clarifying everything. As he says, "one ought to work against this wherever possible... Film, like any other art, should produce a dialogue, not a monologue. Omitting explanation is one of the many ways of inspiring the viewer's imagination" (cited in Kluge, 2008).

Haneke's argument provides a point of entry into thinking about cinema and ethics through the postdramatic lens; according to Hans-Thies Lehmann, the fundamental principle of postdramatic representation is the negation of strategies of dramatic concreteness and the Hegelian view of drama as the conflict of moral attitudes. The postdramatic resists the "Wholeness" of dramatic art and valorizes the idea of representation as a process; it postpones the production of meaning and this is an ethical representational approach, because it negates uniform interpretations and asks the audience to co-produce meaning rather than endorse predetermined conclusions (246). As also mentioned by Haneke, omitting explanation can be an ethical, but also a political act. Both Haneke's and Lehmann's comments recall critical theory's privileging of an aesthetics of negation. From Adorno's idea that authentic art does not simply produce "messages" to be consumed but is committed to an aesthetics of "enigmaticalness" and "determinate negation" (129), to Alexander Kluge's and Oscar Negt's idea that "the domain of the irrational" in art is "the domain of protest", there is a late Marxist tradition that privileges aesthetic negation as the *sine qua non* of social critique (239). The ethical implications of such

an approach rest on the refusal to reproduce a reified reality and the desire to activate feelings of protest – what Kluge and Negt name “the antirealism of feelings” that assist individuals in renouncing a “reality that injures” them (414).

Such a valorization of aesthetic negation sits at the antipodes of the Cultural Studies turn to universalizing moral questions about the representations of the other, and the exploration of ethics in cinema via methodological approaches proposed by analytical philosophy. Activating a dialogue between the viewer and the object is a *modus operandi* that sits uneasily with the normative reproduction of moralist assertions and the unresponsive consumption of ideas. Yet recent work in film studies in the area of the ethics of representation seems to be content with more conventional, monological narratives and approaches to the question of cinema as a medium of ethical thinking.¹ The determining context for much of this work is the understanding of representation as a communication model. David Bordwell aptly explains that such a model (and let me stress that he does not endorse it) presupposes, “that the plans and intentions of the filmmaker shape the movie, which becomes a vehicle for an embedded content” (Bordwell b, 1-2).

Telling in this respect is the work of the moral philosopher Berys Gaut. Gaut goes to great lengths to explain the potential ethical benefits of the audience’s identification with either positive characters in a film or characters who might be deluded or mistaken but whose counter-example can help the audience “grow emotionally.” Gaut surmises that identification with characters can “teach an audience about correct emotional responses” (69). Ethics in this school of thought is invoked in a manner that does not reflect on the reduction of spectatorial labor to a reception of “correct values.” Such nuances are also overlooked by Noël Carroll, who has recently offered an analysis of the tropes and the emotional strategies employed by narratives aiming to overcome biases against homophobia or racism in order to produce moral change. The examples put forward by Carroll are the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and the film

Philadelphia (Demme: 1993). Carroll explains that in the case of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel it is the stress on the Christianity of the slaves that renders them sympathetic, while in Philadelphia it is the way that the character "is inserted into the paradigm of the ideal family scenario" that invites the audience to see his homosexuality in a positive way (51). Put simply, Carroll suggests that the key to fighting an unethical bias is to attempt to counteract it "using a more entrenched bias (such as family)" (54).

It is noteworthy that Carroll uses as case studies two objects not positively received by the communities which they seem to support; at the same time his idea of using one bias to eradicate another one poses some ethical questions with respect to narrative strategies of manipulation. Hence, his model relies on problematic concepts of audience unity and homogeneity that cannot account for questions of diversity in narrative reception. The problem is situated in an unreflective acceptance of the universality of a set of liberal values that are irrefutably equated with an ethical stance, as well as in the assumption that it is ethical to prompt an unambiguous moral response without allowing the audience to reflect on it. Yet, to invoke the political scientist Wendy Brown, a liberal view of the world such as this one depoliticizes conflict by removing it from its historical emergence. Thus, a political and historical issue, such as slavery, is reduced to the status of group prejudice. On this account, hostility towards a racial or sexual minority is treated as if it is simply a matter of an "ontological natural hostility" towards difference and not a concrete consequence of a set of hegemonic social relationships (15). Thus, liberalism and ethics of the sort espoused by Carroll do not intend to provide an understanding of the roots of a concrete social problem, but simply tolerate it, and thus depoliticize it. Another contradiction that needs to be emphasized is that Carroll's argument that films can provoke moral change by manipulating stronger emotional biases calls into question his well-known cognitivist argument that the audience is not a passive but an active agent in the production of meaning. One should also note that Carroll has been a strong exponent of the idea that a "film's dialogical

structure” can be the route to a more active spectatorship a point that he seems to contradict in his abovementioned work on cinema and ethics (Carroll b, 163). It seems then that it is at least catachrestic to name the narrative strategies in Philadelphia and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as ethical. Following Michele Aaron, I suggest that moralist objects of this sort are far from encouraging dialogue and what they promote instead “is the opposite of reflection and implication”, since they deactivate the audience’s capacity to draw their own ethical conclusions. Aaron cites Susan Sontag’s celebrated argument that representational strategies concerned solely with the production of sympathy can be problematic given that they tend to foreclose our own responsibility for the portrayed problems/misfortunes. Emotional responses of empathy and sympathy can be a way of denying our own accountability. The mere fact that we are emotionally moved by the problems we see on screen is enough to confirm our ethical qualities and exonerate ourselves from our social responsibility (116, 117).

Nonetheless, Gaut’s and Carroll’s arguments unwittingly raise some of the issues mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Since both of them describe diegetic devices that lead the audience to respond in specific ways, the question that arises is the following: is it ethical to rely on narratives that are monological, rather than dialogical, even if for a “good reason”? If, along with Haneke and Lehmann, we take the dialogical relationship between the artist and the audience as the barometer of an ethics of spectatorship the question is simply rhetorical. Let me stress, however, that I do not intend to repeat well-rehearsed arguments regarding the superiority of strategies of visual unpleasure, nor do I consider that dramatic forms of representation cannot make us confront forms of ethical experience. Cinema history is filled with examples of visually stimulating narrative films that nurture ethical reflection. Who could, for example, deny the ethical dimensions of the films of Masaki Kobayashi (one of the most pertinent filmmakers on the subject of cinema and ethics), Andrei Tarkovsky, Spike Lee, Billy Wilder, and Christian Petzold among many others? Along with Aaron, however, I suggest that cinema’s capacity to

offer ethical insights does not rest on the simple reproduction of rhetorical statements, but on the ways that it can enact ethical transformations via aesthetic and political provocations that expose our responsibility to the ethical questions they raise (116). Furthermore, following Robert Sinnerbrink, I do posit that questions of ethics cannot be dissociated from aesthetic ones, and that cinema's capacity to raise ethical issues is not simply a matter of producing emotional responses, but rather on how it initiates philosophical thinking that can urge the audience to see reality afresh (17).

The concept of the postdramatic offers a particular fertile terrain for thinking about the ways that aesthetic provocations can nurture an ethical spectatorship. Lehmann's formulation of a postdramatic aesthetic proceeds from the conviction that the precondition for an ethical and democratic spectatorship lies in the way that the object forces the audience to engage dialogically in the production of meaning; meaning is thus irreducible to a single hermeneutical exegesis. While the postdramatic has received extensive commentary in the field of theatre studies, there is hardly any discussion of it in film scholarship, which is quite surprising given that artists such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Jean Marie Straub/Danièle Huillet, Thomas Heise, Peter Handke and Christoph Schlingensiefel, who have worked both on theatre and cinema, have staged productions or written texts which have been critically received and discussed under the banner of the postdramatic. One of the most celebrated postdramatic playwrights and novelists is Elfriede Jelinek, whose novel *Die Klavierspielerin* was successfully adapted to film by Michael Haneke (*La Pianiste*, 2001). Jelinek has also contributed to screenplays such as Ulrike Ottinger's unfinished film *Die Blutgräfin* and Werner Schroeter's *Malina* (1991). Retrospectively, postdramatic theory can illuminate the complex aesthetic and philosophical problems posed by films, whose dramaturgical complexity has for years preoccupied film theory, such as Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima mon Amour* (1959) and *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (*Last Year at Marienbad*, 1961). To this, we should add certain films by Chantal Akerman, whose radical

minimalism has been influential on the work of the postdramatic playwright Peter Handke. This essay undertakes a postdramatic reading of two key films from the canon of New German cinema, Straub/Huillet's *Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter* (*The Bridegroom the Comedienne and the Pimp*) and Fassbinder's *Katzelmacher* (1969), in order to show that the study of certain films through the postdramatic lens can both help us understand their "aesthetics of negation" and allow us to explore the ethics (and thus the politics) of spectatorship in ways that go beyond the consumption of ready-made conclusions.

Before I move to the case studies some elucidation of the term postdramatic is necessary. Under the rubric of the postdramatic, Lehmann describes a number of developments in contemporary theatre and performance that question the mainstays of dramatic representation, that is, character, plot, time and textual coherence. The defining characteristic of postdramatic performance is that the text is no longer the principal representational vehicle. Textual and dramatic coherence are replaced by the production of textual and visual materials which are explicitly offered to audience members as the means by which to formulate their own interpretations. Characteristic in this respect is the treatment of language, which as Lehmann says, "Language becomes independent. [...] language does not define the characters, but appears as autonomous theatricality" (14). The emergence of language as "autonomous theatricality" calls into question the hierarchies of dramatic representation and the processes of communication with the audience. This radical auto-critique of representation does not prioritize the concrete communication of an idea, but becomes "more presence than representation, more split than shared experience, more process than product, more manifestation than communication, more energy than information" (146). Lehmann explains that the postdramatic does not do away with all dramatic tropes. Yet the shift from the dramatic to the postdramatic is to be identified in the latter's abandonment of certain dramatic strategies such as the coherence of the narrative

universe, the unified characters, and “dramatic wholeness” as a criterion for the representation of the real (146).

For Lehmann postdramatic drama is post-Hegelian drama, or post-tragic, since it is the product of late modernity, a period no longer tragic or heroic (as in classical Greece) but also a period that has witnessed the failure of the labor movement and the decline of Marxism. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel understands *Antigone* as the quintessential tragedy and the epitome of dramatic conflict. What is tragic is the difficulty in resolving the conflict between the human and the divine law as embodied by Creon and *Antigone* respectively. *Antigone*’s civil disobedience disturbs the *Sittlichkeit* (ethical order) of the polis while at the same time each side – both *Antigone* and Creon – must “acknowledge its opposite” (Hegel, 284). Yet *Antigone* and Creon fail to step out of their personal understanding of justice. *Antigone* must bury her brother and follow the divine law, while Creon needs to ensure that he sticks to the civilian law, so as to maintain the social stability of the polis. Tragedy is thus the outcome of the conflict between two actions which seem ethically valid. Elsewhere, Hegel refers to the play as one of the “most sublime” works of art. As he says, “Everything in this tragedy is logical; the public law of the state is set in conflict over against inner family love and duty to a brother; the woman, *Antigone*, has the family interest as her ‘pathos’, Creon, the man, has the welfare of the community as his” (Hegel b 464). It is by means of the complexity of this contradiction, and the inability of the Greek polis to overcome this duality that tragedy emerges.

Yet, as Lehmann rightly observes, a prerequisite of dramatic representation is the existence of a collective order that is bound by the polis (in ancient Greek drama) or motivated by a collective political project (e.g. the Marxist meta-narrative in Brecht). In this respect, the postdramatic emerges in a period that the people, to invoke Deleuze, are absent (a point to which I will return below); conflict becomes obfuscated and cannot be simply reduced to the battle of individualities, which stand for larger ethical laws (as it is the case in Greek tragedies), or even

of concrete social interests à la Brecht. As Lehmann says, the dramatic tradition employs collision as a central narrative trope and this applies to the Brechtian paradigm of representation – the representational model that destabilizes dramatic coherence via fragmentation, so as to promote the materialist dialectic as the interpretative mechanism that can provide explanations for the contradictions of history.

The postdramatic can be seen as a radicalization of the Brechtian paradigm inasmuch as it pushes further the latter's critique of representation. As Lehmann points out, postdramatic theatre is influenced by Brecht's questions and extends his critique of representation but "cannot accept Brecht's answers anymore" when it comes to his Marxist revolutionary politics.² The postdramatic destabilizes the basic grounds of dramatic representation so as to privilege the depiction of situations that cannot be individualized. Lehmann suggests that Althusser's idea that people's perception of the world is defined by a "melodramatic consciousness" still has some theoretical currency given that there is a prevalent tendency (especially on the part of the media) to individualize phenomena which are the outcome of social processes (Lehmann b, 108).³ Contesting dramatization may turn into an ethical act in the sense that it can involve the audience democratically in the production of meaning.

Lack of unified reception is a democratic gesture that produces a more emancipated spectatorship because it does not reduce the audience to the status of the consumer of ideas. By questioning the tenets of dramatic representation and the boundaries between reality and aesthetic experience, the postdramatic aims to undermine the clearly defined borders between spectators and participants. "One result of such a practice of shuttling between states is the necessity for the participants to make a decision about the nature of what they live through or witness. They find themselves in a double bind, calling for an aesthetic appreciation and at the same time for a reaction of responsibility which would be to some degree 'real'" (Lehmann b, 100).

Not surprisingly, Lehmann aligns himself with Jacques Rancière pointing out that the production of disagreement, “dissensus” is the prerequisite for introducing politics into the representational process⁴ and such an approach sits uneasily with arguments that Rancière’s writings celebrate standardized forms of spectatorship. For instance, Richard Rushton suggests that Rancière criticizes Brecht’s didacticism, which he understands as an attempt to force the audience to accept the correct ways of perceiving reality, and acting within it (Rushton, 205). Along these lines, Philip Watts intimates that for Rancière Brechtian “demystification” is contradictory in the sense that it aspires to abolish oppressive social structures through the imposition of a new pecking order, that is, an intellectual one (Watts, 98). These approaches, and indeed at times even Rancière’s, erroneously reduce the Brechtian paradigm of representation to a communicative model, according to which the artist/intellectual sends a message, which is docilely received by the public. Nonetheless, Rancière addresses some of the key issues that preoccupied Brecht following the end of World War II.⁵ David Barnett, for example, clarifies Brecht’s “inductive method” during his years at the Berliner Ensemble. The fundamental principle of the “inductive method” was the privileging of a “naïve attitude” not concerned with fixed and predetermined interpretations, but with the articulation of contradictions (Barnett c, 10). Such a *modus operandi* is far from being premised on a separation between informed “masters” and ignorant “students.”

The meeting point between Brecht and Rancière is further indicated in the latter’s writings on Straub/Huillet. As Nikolaj Lübecker rightly observes, Rancière turns to the cinema of Straub/Huillet and Pedro Costa (both heavily influenced by Brecht) as a way of moving beyond Brechtian orthodoxy - which is grounded in the idea that a critique of conventional representational strategies via a dialectical dramatization can produce political enlightenment (41). Still though, Straub/Huillet and Pedro Costa are filmmakers whose films subscribe to an aesthetics of resistance; one of the reasons why they can be understood as auteurs who encourage

an emancipated spectatorship is precisely because of the openness and the interpretative ambiguity of their films, which do not place the filmmaker in a position of intellectual superiority. It is well-known that one of Rancière's doubts about political art is its inability to understand how easily resistant modes of representation can be reappropriated by the market. Antithetically, Straub/Huillet's and Pedro Costa's films resist commodification on account of their refusal to subscribe to a communicative model of political art that reduces the audience to receivers of information transmitted by enlightened "masters."

Rancière, thus, stipulates that Straub/Huillet's cinema is marked by a desire to emancipate spectatorship, precisely because they refuse to convey univocal political ideas. Instead, they develop techniques that invite the audience to participate in the meaning-making without requiring them to reconfirm a set of pre-existing ideas. Their politics is thus to be found in "the ways they exclude all forms of representation, representation in the sense of a relationship between something that is there, present, and another thing that is elsewhere, absent, represented by what is there" (Rancière b, Lafosse). For Rancière, Straub/Huillet's films challenge the dramatic representation by means of formal abstractions that draw attention to the materiality of the texts delivered —"La fable contrariée" —(a postdramatic trope par excellence), and to the movement of the actors' bodies in ordinary (and not expressive) situations. Straub/Huillet radicalize the Brechtian paradigm of representation: while Brecht produced dialectical tensions with the view to generating an understanding of the world, they produce "tension without resolution". Thus, Rancière understands the French duo to be representatives of "a post-Brechtian paradigm of representation" (Rancière cited in Vila, 13). Although this is certainly the case in a number of films, I argue that his points can help us understand certain films directed by Straub/Huillet as postdramatic objects. While in the post-Brechtian model the dialectic (albeit a non-synthetic one) is still a valid hermeneutical medium, in the postdramatic the dialectic has crumbled (see Barnett b, 66).

But Rancière's point comes closer to my analysis of the postdramatic in his discussion of heterology, where he explains that art can achieve its political function by disrupting the tangible connection between what is said and what is shown, refusing to communicate an actual "message" (Rancière c, 63). Both for Rancière and Lehmann, it is the liberation of form that is a necessary step for politicizing the audience's perception, and not form's subordination to the communication of monolithic messages. Lehmann surmises that an overabundance of "bad traditional theater" is produced by the media which deny the possibility of "Ver-Antwortung" (sic) (response-ability) to what is shown (468-469). It is thus implicit in these contentions that there is such a thing as an ethics of negation grounded in the refusal to offer images and sounds that direct the audience's response within a delineated realm of signification. In sum, the ethics of negation are in opposition to the manipulation of the audience proposed by Gaut and Carroll at the beginning of this essay that takes place via a narrative logic that forces them to respond "correctly". Conversely, such an aesthetic of negation involves a desire to produce questions without offering answers and thus to stimulate a dialogical rather than a monological relationship between the object and the audience. In the next section I develop this idea of productive negation with reference to two films that elucidate ways that the postdramatic be understood to operate in the cinema.

Straub/Huillet's *Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter* (1968) and Fassbinder's *Katzelmacher* (1969).

The case studies that I discuss in this section have their origins in a theatre production by Fassbinder's Action-theater staged in 1968. Fassbinder was a committed aficionado of Straub/Huillet's films and in 1968 invited them to collaborate with him on a theatre production. The French exiles accepted the invitation and decided to put on Ferdinand Bruckner's *Die Krankheit der Jugend* (*Pains of Youth*). The problem was that they compressed an eighty-five page drama to ten minutes and such a small performance would hardly attract any people.

Fassbinder offered to write the play that would become *Katzelmacher* to follow Straub/Huillet's piece each evening (Barnett, 47). Both pieces were almost immediately turned into films. In the same year, Straub/Huillet incorporated the full ten minute performance of *Die Krankheit der Jugend* in their twenty-three minute film *Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter* while a year later Fassbinder adapted his play for the screen. The fact that both films have their origins in a theatre production bespeaks the importance of the performative experimentation in the work of Straub/Huillet and Fassbinder. My analysis of these films in this section endeavors to serve to rectify misinterpretations of Straub/Huillet's aesthetics of resistance, which have been received ad nauseam under the rubric of orthodox Brechtianism. My intention is also to theorize a pathway that will allow for the discussion of other films through the postdramatic lens.

In Fassbinder scholarship it is not unusual to find comments that the theatre "shaped the director's style, determined the stringency of his storytelling and the visual concentration of his work" (Schütte, 35). Fassbinder himself has acknowledged that "in the beginning it was pretty extreme with me. In the theatre, I directed as if it were a film, and then I made films as if they were theatre" (cited in Barnett, 255). This dialogue between different media is intimately linked with Lehmann's idea that postdramatic theatre tends to absorb stratagems from the new media technologies (207), but what interests me here is the opposite, that is, the way cinema engages with a theatrical austere aesthetic that has postdramatic elements. In Straub/Huillet's case, theatre plays a determining part across their oeuvre; a number of their films are shot in open-air theatres in which the actors recite a text, while they are also committed to an ascetic theatricality reminiscent of the early days of the medium.

Theatre plays an important role in Straub/Huillet's *Der Bräutigam, die Komödiantin und der Zuhälter* not least because the second part of the film is the reproduction of the whole performance of *Die Krankheit der Jugend*. Straub/Huillet undermine narrative temporality and spatial fluidity and as Barton Byg suggests, "Both *Bräutigam* and *Katzelmacher* have at their

core a stylized depiction — one might say a dissection — of constellations of sexual, social, and class relations, abruptly revealing the sometimes-violent dynamics of personal and political power” (Byg b, 411). The film starts with a graffiti in a Munich post-office which reads: “stupid old Germany. I hate it here. I hope I can go soon. Patricia”. This is followed by a prolonged documentary-style tracking shot, filmed from the window of a moving vehicle, in the red light district in Landsberger Strasse. The camera captures several female sex-workers soliciting clients, while a series of images focusing on gas stations, neon lights and other forms of commercial activity interject. This long sequence in itself does not operate as an establishing shot because considering that this is the opening of the film, it illustrates a general inclination to dedramatization. The scene presents a number of visual materials that have political implications. For example, as Barton Byg intimates, within this tracking shot Straub/Huillet place themes of female exploitation within social processes of financial transaction and exchange (86). Claudia Pummer similarly observes that the camera captures the sex workers and the signs of commercial activity through the point of view shot of some soliciting customers. Consequently, the produced image is also put in the framework of production and exchange (85).

A significant formal element is also that the origin of the POV shot remains absent, since we never get to see the soliciting punters. The whole sequence is alive with ambiguity because it mutes any sense of dramatic development and agency. At the same time, the sequence cannot be reduced to the status of avant-garde antirepresentationalism/abstraction because its starting point is a concrete social space and solid social relations of production and consumption. It is, however, dramatic elucidation that is notably absent. If the text in the postdramatic theatre operates as material for interpretation, rather than as a dramaturgical formula laden with some sort of hermeneutical thrust, then in Straub/Huillet’s postdramatic experiments on screen visual elements turn to materials that repudiate the production of uniform conclusions and responses.⁶

In the shot that comes immediately after the opening tracking shot, Straub/Huillet reproduce on screen the whole production of their own performance of Bruckner's *Die Krankheit der Jugend*. The play itself focused on the crisis of identity of Austrian youth in the period following the end of the World War I; a crisis that was intensified by Freud's writings on Eros and Thanatos, which exercised an enormous influence on the youth of the time. In Bruckner's episodic play, the uncertainty of youth is depicted by reducing all sexual interactions to forms of domination and manipulation, while gender exploitation occupies an important role too. In their theatre production, Straub/Huillet did away with characterization and as a newspaper of the time reports: "there is no trace of psychology, it is not a skeleton of the play, but the original piece has become pure pace. The essence of a film is for Straub condensed time and as he says "I've tried to do the same on stage, to go in the same direction" (6).

The formal stratagem of condensed time is also emphasized in the reproduction of the performance on film. Straub/Huillet's frontal framing of the action on stage emphasizes the piece's status as reproduced theatre. Their understanding of representation as "pure pace"—the presentation of temporal duration which is not in service of dramatic continuity—communicates a lack of pathos in the presentation of action, which is emphatically underscored by their reduction of the characters' interactions to linguistic utterances. We can see in this small piece the idea of language as *Ausstellungsobjekt* (exhibited object), which is the essence of postdramatic representation (Lehmann, 266). Emphasis is not placed on the characters' morals but on the medium of language. By prioritizing language over dramatic action, Straub/Huillet place Bruckner's play in the present time and point to linguistic structures whose oppressive features were still ubiquitous.

This practice certainly has its roots in the Brechtian paradigm, but Straub/Huillet's *modus operandi* pushes this detachment of language from the speakers even further, since their programmatic prioritization of language over character resists narrative fluidity and coherent

dialectical collision. It should be noted that while both auteurs have repeatedly expressed their admiration of Brecht's work and have acknowledged his influence on their work, they are wary of the danger of Brechtianism turning into a formula of "brechtisme de patronage" (simplistic Brechtianism) (Straub, 35). Indeed, simplistic Brechtianism is in direct contrast to Brecht's desire to make the familiar strange; as Straub says, this method follows the advertising logic of capitalist society, turning the audience into consumers of ideas, albeit radical ones (35). This is consistent with Rancière's abovementioned critique of political art and, as he rightly observes, even Brecht was aware of the risk of the politicized artist turning into an "opinion seller", which is what Straub/Huillet seem to denounce here (Rancière, 111).

Straub/Huillet instead produce audiovisual materials without offering interpretative schemata. While critics tend to agree that this is achieved by using pre-existing texts as "co-authors" (Pummer, 37), or as "material documents", (Byg, 2) the reception of their films remains chained to doctrines of orthodox Brechtianism or to theories of deconstruction, neither of which address their postdramatic form. Rancière has obliquely identified the postdramatic elements in their work arguing that:

The Straubs seem to think that nothing or almost nothing can be done with actors. Above all because they advocate a certain kind of relationship to the text and actors are not necessarily trained to say or to read texts. Actors are trained to interpret characters, which the Straubs don't want. They want people who speak and read texts. This means that they are looking for a very material relationship with the text itself (Rancière, Lafosse).

Rancière's point synthesizes the French exiles' desire to liberate form beyond the levels of coherent meaning-making production and allows us to see in a new light the validity of his objection to the "stultifying pedagogue" (Rancière d, 14) in *The Emancipated Spectator*. It is precisely the desire to emancipate spectatorship that informs Straub/Huillet's practice. As the prominent postdramatic playwright Peter Handke suggests, there is "a rhythm of immobility and abruptness" in their films which asks viewers to imagine the actions invoked by the recited words

(21). By refusing to present actions in an expressive way, Straub/Huillet seek to activate the viewers' imaginations and make them image-readers rather than image-consumers.

This lack of expressive pathos is also compelling in the last part of the film focusing on the story of Lilith (Lilith Ungerer), a prostitute who escapes from her pimp (Fassbinder) and marries her black boyfriend (Jimmy Powell). In an emblematic scene towards the end of the film we witness her killing Willi, her former pimp, who has intruded into their house, with the view to taking her back. Within a frame that perfectly encapsulates the French duo's will to impersonality, Lilith takes the pimp's gun and, in a very undramatic way, shoots him. The camera refuses to linger on the action and abandons the dead character as if he has exited the locus dramaticus; the postdramatic effect here is heightened by the camera's refusal to surrender its movement to diegetic action. Cutting to Lilith we see her quoting the Spiritual Canticle by the St John of the Cross and the film finishes.

Despite the lack of intelligible dramaturgy, female oppression acts as a connecting element in this convoluted film. In the first part, this is evidenced in the ways that female prostitution is shown as part of the context of the post-war consumerist industrial society, while in the Bruckner piece it is evidenced in the ways that the audience can make parallels between the sexual antagonisms amongst different classes, which take on a new importance in the post-war West-German environment. Finally, the last piece offers an aggressive gesture that points to female liberation. Commenting on the film's interest in gender issues, Huillet has said that it was not intended to produce a story for women using the practices of the "dream factory" (cited in Byg, 13). The film's interest in presenting material without offering unambiguous knowledge effects is in line with the postdramatic valorization of presenting rather than representing, offering fragments which resist a uniform interpretation and thus refuting the patronizing communication of "messages".

Straub/Huillet's austere approach to dramaturgy was very influential in Fassbinder's theatre work, as well as in his early engagement with the film medium. Commenting on their collaboration in the Action-Theater Fassbinder said:

This experience I had with Straub, who approached his work and the other people with such an air of comic solemnity, fascinated me. He would let us play a scene and then would say to us, "How did they feel at this point?" This was really quite right in this case, because we ourselves had to develop an attitude about what we were doing, so that when we were acting, we developed the technique of looking at ourselves, and the result was that there was a distance between the role and the actor, instead of total identity (cited in Byg, 90).

The French couple's influence is more than evident in Fassbinder's cinematic adaptation of his own play *Katzelmacher*. The play itself is sixteen pages but its film adaptation runs for eighty-eight minutes. But the form of the play is, as Barnett explains, "highly filmic" (49). It consists of syncopated scenes which resist character and plot development, while dramatic linearity, temporal and spatial demarcations are constantly problematized. When the play was put on stage by the Action-Theater, Alf Brustellin from *Süddeutsche Zeitung* described the performance's aesthetic as follows:

Casually acted, arranged as street Ballet from which miniature scenes are dissolved and the result is episodic dialogue and small independent actions. This is like a fascinating game of movement. New centers constantly emerge and new arrangements are incessantly produced. It is like a kaleidoscope of attitudes, prejudices, passions, dreams and everyday cruelty (24).

The cinematic adaptation of *Katzelmacher* follows exactly the same penchant for the production of performative connections instead of expressive actions. The film narrates the regular play of domination, cruelty and submission within a group of lumpen proletariat outcasts, which is disturbed by the unexpected appearance of a Greek Gastarbeiter (guest-worker), Jorgos (Fassbinder). While the postdramatic aspect of the staged performance has been discussed (Barnett, 51), this is evident in the film version too, which is like a concoction of constellations of power relations – as mentioned by Byg above – devoid of dramaturgical cohesion. Throughout

the film, Fassbinder employs static frames and places emphasis on non-expressive body language, while dialogue is reduced to linguistic citations. The produced vignettes show nothing that promotes dramatic plot per se and are concerned with the investigation of circumstances and conditions – the power relationships within a group of social outsiders. In many respects, Katzelmacher's stylized tableau narrative draws on a slow modernist aesthetic, which according to Lutz Koepnick, is predicated upon an understanding of the present in its transitoriness, "as the site at which we can actively negotiate meaningful relations between past and future" (37); in Fassbinder's case this is pertinent in the ways the traumatic past still haunts his homeland in the age of the *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle). Moreover, in adopting slowness he privileges an analytical style grounded in his desire to make the audience reflect on their own feelings (cited in Elsaesser, 16).

Fassbinder programmatically avoids point-of-view shots, shot-reverse shots and eye-line matches, while the characters' bodies are subject to an artificial/calculated movement. The combination of artificiality with a fragmented use of language suspends the causal linkage of the portrayed actions. In addition, the static camera movement produces a rigorous frontal staging similar to the theatrical quality of early cinema. Tension and energy are not produced by means of a succession of actions, but there is vitality in the stillness of the tableaux and the corporeal activity within them. David Bordwell calls Fassbinder's staging of the action as "mug-shot staging" that repudiates Hollywood *mise-en-scène* and favors dedramatized simplicity (261-263). The emphasis on the characters' gestures and movements reduces all interpersonal interactions to power relationships, whose origins are to be attributed to social structures and oppressive gender hierarchies. Moreover, as in the play, the real protagonist is language and Fassbinder shows how the oppressed are imprisoned in linguistic and corporeal structures which do not allow them to view the roots of their oppression. The central motif of the film is the way

that the oppressed find scapegoats (from their own circles or people outside their group such as the Gastarbeiter) to divert their attention from the causes of their misfortune.

The unusual diegesis is also indicated by the fact that the central point for the production of dramatic conflict, that is the appearance of the Gastarbeiter, takes place after forty-four minutes (whereas in the play Jorgos appears in the very first scene). Before Jorgos' arrival, the film could be described as combining kinetic exercises and linguistic utterances to emphasize the conditions under which the characters operate. Commenting on Fassbinder's early cinematic period András Bálint Kovács explains that:

He does not mix styles; he attempts to create a consistent theatrical style throughout the film rather than using theatrical stylization as one effect amongst others. His goal is to reach abstract representation of personal relationships, which needs some distance from a realist context. In order to do so he uses analytical tools rather than synthetic ones. One of his main tools to achieve abstraction is the very loose connection between dialogues and dramatic situation. In this he follows the Godard- Straub trend to use dramatic situations as delivery mechanism for abstract monologues or dialogues (198).

The dramaturgical abstraction described by Kovács produces a negation of representation which persists even in moments of dramatic conflict. Consistent with the postdramatic practice, the film is not focusing "on action, but on conditions" (Lehmann, 113).

In the second part of the film, the appearance of the Gastarbeiter produces a dramatic tension which is revelatory apropos the historical residues of fascism in post-war West-Germany. Ethical questions emerge with respect to Fassbinder's refusal to show any solidarity amongst the oppressed. The only form of solidarity amongst the lumpen outcasts takes place when they collectively isolate and later on beat the Gastarbeiter. As with Straub/Huillet, Fassbinder's postdramatic treatment of the subject-matter does not moralize, that is, it does not offer unambiguous answers to complex questions. Jorgos' portrayal does not conform to the clichés of the positive depiction of the downtrodden either. His posture of machismo towards Marie (Hanna Schygulla), a German woman who has fallen for him, shows that he too is a prisoner of an imposed language. But Jorgos' interactions with Marie are also emblematic of Fassbinder's

approach to sexual politics throughout his career and what he calls “emotional exploitation”, which he thought to be part and parcel of small-scale (family, sexual and everyday relations) and large-scale politics (the individual’s exploitation by the state) (cited in Elsaesser, 19). Unfortunately, the film omits one characteristic scene from the play in which Jorgos refuses to share a room with a Turkish Gastarbeiter or even to work with him in the same factory. This scene shows compellingly how the oppressed are also imprisoned in dogmatic linguistic structures (Barnett, 46). Fassbinder has frequently explained that one can learn more about the oppressors by looking at the strategies of survival on the part of the oppressed (cited in Elsaesser b, 30).

Postdramatic experiments in both films set the parameters for rethinking issues of spectatorial ethics. Both films demonstrate a willingness to produce a dialogical instead of a monological relationship with the audience. This is achieved by representational choices that question the existence of self-governing subjects and diminish the impact of dramatic conflicts that subscribe to moralist binaries. How does this relate to ethics? In one of his most celebrated essays, Deleuze (one of the theorists that Lehmann draws on in his discussion of the postdramatic) suggests that the work of Straub/Huillet can be understood as political precisely because of the absence of the people in their films.⁷ What Deleuze identifies in Straub/Huillet is an aesthetic of negation that avoids paternalistic answers or even precise dramaturgical information. We could elaborate on this point and suggest that the absence of the people in the abovementioned case studies is a correlate of the existence of structures (e.g. gender inequality in *Der Bräutigam*, or oppressive linguistic structures in Fassbinder’s case) that produce homogeneity rather than collective subjects concerned with political change. For Deleuze, the French exiles produce objects which refuse to subscribe to the informational structures of the current “societies of control” (17). As he says, “in all of the Straub’s oeuvre, the speech act is an act of resistance”, rather than a reproduction of surfaces (19). The ethics of this aesthetics of

resistance, he concludes, is to be located in social crises outside the realms of dramaturgy. While Straub/Huillet's films address questions related to "human struggles", they are about "a people who do not yet exist", and the implication of his argument is that unlike the Brechtian model, the collective subject that can produce political change is an absent referent (19).

In a related vein, the idea of art as resistance to standardized forms of communication is the central aspect of the postdramatic. In the era of what Jodie Dean labels "communicative capitalism", in which the exchange value of communication outweighs its use value and reduces even the most radical "messages" to innocuous circulation of content (26), our engagement with other postdramatic objects on screen can open new ways to reconsider the ethics and politics of representation. Unlike the reduction of cinematic ethics to a mere production of involuntary emotional responses, which lead the audience to achieve consensus by means of manipulative narrative devices, the postdramatic capitalizes on the crisis of meaning and its ability to produce objects which break with the consensual uniform interpretation of complex questions. Therefore, along with Haneke's understanding of cinematic ethics as respect for the audience, the postdramatic model has ethical implications on account of its valorization of spectatorial labor and the understanding of the audience as co-producer and not simply consumer of predetermined conclusions.

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¹ To see more scholarship concerned with the ways that characters “illustrate” ethical attitudes, see Murray Smith, “Just What Is It That Makes Tony Soprano Such an Appealing, Attractive Murderer?”, in Ward E. Jones and Samantha Vice (eds) *Ethics at the Cinema*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011:66-90 .

See also Thomas Wartenberg “Moral Intelligence and the Limits of Loyalty”, in Ward E. Jones and Samantha Vice (eds) *Ethics at the Cinema*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011: 300-318.

In a way, much of the recent work on cinema and ethics is very much allied with a return to affect theory. The problem is, as the affect scholar Eugenie Brinkema rightly observes, that “the return to affect”, is “in most cases, a naive move that leaves intact the very ideological, aesthetic, and theoretical problems it claimed to confront”. See Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014, p. xiv.

² At the same time the postdramatic should not be confused with the post-Brechtian. For more on this see, David Barnett, “Performing Dialectics in an Age of Uncertainty, or why post-Brechtian does not Mean Postdramatic”,

in Jerome Carroll, Karen Jürs-Munby and Steve Giles (eds) *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political*. London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2013:47-66.

³ Lehmann's employment of the Althusserian term melodramatic is by no means a reference to the genre; it is rather a somehow radical critique of conventional drama's tendency to individualize social problems instead of showing them to be the outcome of social processes.

⁴ This is also acknowledged by Jerome Carroll, Karen Jürs-Munby, and Steve Giles in their Introduction to their edited collection *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political*, p.22.

⁵ See also Laras Stevens, *Anti-War Theatre After Brecht: Dialectical Aesthetics in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Palgrave, 2016: 15.

⁶ Such a view of representation as "material" is a trope used by the famous playwright Heiner Müller, whose dramaturgical practice is predicated on the production of audiovisual material rather than a coherent dramatic text. According to Müller, the audience has to work with this "material" rather than follow a dramatic narrative.

⁷ He makes the same point in *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlison and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p.216.