



Film set, *Too Early / Too Late*, Egypt, 1981

Tell It to the Stones

# Tell It to the Stones

## Encounters with the Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub

SternbergPress

Encounters with the Films of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub  
Edited by Annett Busch and Tobias Hering



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(Jules Michelet)*

Cézanne

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zu  
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zu einer Lichtspielszene

UNE VISITE AU LOUVRE

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# REFRAMING WHAT IS ALREADY FRAMED, OR: WHAT IS WRONG WITH PRIMITIVISM?

1  
Joachim Gasquet,  
*Joachim Gasquet's Cézanne:  
A Memoir with  
Conversations*, trans.  
Christopher Pemberton  
(London: Thames and  
Hudson, 1991), 175.

2  
The enthusiasm for  
Flemish primitivism  
culminated in the highly  
influential exhibition  
“Les Primitifs flamands à  
Bruges” in the  
Provinciaal Hof in  
Bruges from June 15 until  
October 5, 1902.

3  
See Max Jacob  
Friedländer,  
“The Flemish Primitives.  
An Anthology of Max J.  
Friedländer,” *Art News  
Annual*, no. 26 (1957).

“I don’t like the Primitives.” The sentence that opens Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub’s *Une visite au Louvre* alludes to the paintings of late Gothic and early Renaissance masters, most prominently Giotto, or his teacher Cimabue, and Uccello. Paul Cézanne’s words continue in the voice-over: “I don’t know Giotto well. I would have liked to see him.”<sup>1</sup> But what is wrong with the Primitives? Why doesn’t Cézanne appreciate these works, yet complains that he didn’t have enough chances to encounter their art?

Disentangling the layers of virtual understanding and possible misunderstandings sparked by a sentence or two put deliberately at the beginning of a 47 or 48-minute film—though they appeared very much in the middle of Cézanne’s conversation with his friend Joachim Gasquet—might seem like an esoteric challenge suited to ivory-tower academics. On the contrary: the questions that flow from contemplating these lines present a sharp insight into some of the most fundamental aspects of the peculiar ethics of a cinema that can reframe otherwise mutually exclusive alternatives like fiction or nonfiction, expression or abstraction. Furthermore, since it is mainly concerned with the difficulties and conditions of the passage from old to new, questioning the problem of Primitivism can also be seen in the wider framework of an aesthetics of subsistence rather than resistance.

The notion of the ‘primitive’ is two-fold, at least. The word alone sparks confusion involving, on the one hand, its Latin meaning as ‘the first of its kind,’ and, on the other, more current and vernacular uses, which derogatorily suggest a value judgment.

In art-historical studies, the term Primitives was coined to distinguish artists of the Early Renaissance period, such as Giotto, from those of the High Renaissance. More specifically, it points to what is nowadays widely considered Northern Renaissance or Early Netherlandish Painting. “Primitifs flamands”<sup>2</sup> denotes several generations of artists who worked in present-day Flanders in the 15th and 16th centuries, ranging from Jan van Eyck to, as some authors like Max Friedländer claimed,<sup>3</sup> Peter Brueghel the Elder. Across the various connotations of Primitivism and

its Italian, Flemish or French flavors, it is supposed to mark the cornerstones of the passage from medieval to early modern art.

Erwin Panofsky prefers the term “ars nova” or new art, as it is used in music where it distinguishes a radically new form of music that appeared in the 14th century, in a break from the preceding “ars antiqua.”<sup>4</sup> He insists that a “nouvelle pratique” in painting emerged from a “fusion of sophistication and candor, worldliness and piety, brilliance and truthfulness.”<sup>5</sup> What is widely described as ‘primitive’ must be considered as an “undeniable revolution” that took place in painting in the years between 1406 and the 1420s.<sup>6</sup>

This revolution was international, and it had three main aspects. It introduced, perfected and spread new techniques of painting, such as the blending and mixing of pigments or superimposing layers of paint with different degrees of opacity, usually referred to as the “new oil technique.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the science of optical perspective resulting from “the encounter between painting and Euclidean optical geometry”<sup>8</sup> renders the artwork constructible as a “view through a window.”<sup>9</sup> Panofsky concludes, “Pictorial space is subject to the rules that govern empirical space.”<sup>10</sup> On the basis of these technical and technological innovations, large-scale projects could be carried out in parallel which both required and enabled the implementation of new divisions of artistic labor within a new setting: the workshop. Last but not least it prepared the ground for the exploration of new distribution channels: painting, formerly immobile, gained mobility as a profane object no longer tied to the architecture of a sacred premise but, instead, beginning its transformation into a secularized commodity form.

It is not by chance that Karl Marx described a similar unease with the term ‘primitive’ when, in his response to Adam Smith’s “previous accumulation”<sup>11</sup> in Part VII of *Das Kapital*, he elaborates on “so-called primitive accumulation.”<sup>12</sup> Here, the ‘primitive,’ rather than deriving from an earlier process, points to its metaphysical function as a “legend of theological original sin”<sup>13</sup> and exposes its tautology: How can the new come into being while it is still governed by the very conditions it is about to overcome?

454

4

Erwin Panofsky,  
*Early Netherlandish  
Painting, Its Origins and  
Character*, vol. 1  
(Cambridge: Harvard  
University Press, 1953),  
150.

5

Panofsky,  
*Early Netherlandish  
Painting*, 150.

6

Otto Pächt, *Van Eyck:  
And the Founders of Early  
Netherlandish Painting*,  
trans. David Britt  
(London: Harvey Miller,  
1994), 20.

7

Panofsky, 151.

8

Jim Hillier et al., *Cahiers  
du cinéma: Volume Four,  
1973–1978 : History,  
Ideology, Cultural Struggle:  
An Anthology from Cahiers  
du cinéma, Nos 248–292,  
September 1973–September  
1978* (London: Routledge,  
2000), 197.

9

Panofsky, 4.

10

Panofsky, 141.

11

Adam Smith, *An Inquiry  
into the Nature and Causes  
of the Wealth of Nations*  
(Nashville: Thomas  
Nelson, 1843), 111.

12

Karl Marx,  
*Capital: A Critical Analysis  
of Capitalist Production*,  
trans. Samuel Moore and  
Edward B. Averling  
(London: Swan  
Sonnenschein, 1889), 736.

13

Marx, *Capital*, 736.

455

14

Marx, 738.

15

Ivan Illich,  
“Vernacular Values,”  
*Philosophica* 26 (1980), 47.

16

Marx, 775.

Smith had argued that capital evolved naturally from increasing specialization, due to division of labor, which allowed for hoarding and stockpiling, but Marx rejects his attempt to explain capitalism’s starting point. Instead, he conceived of it as “the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production”<sup>14</sup>—or, in the words of Ivan Illich, it becomes “a war against subsistence.”<sup>15</sup> But privatizing the means of production, which enabled the idea of capital and surplus value, was preceded by the exploitation of natural resources in the colonies and a system of slavery that “signaled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.”<sup>16</sup>

The subtlety or even complexity of Marx’s relies on (and reveals) a use of the term ‘primitive’ that is technical, not judgmental. If there were something like a critique of the political economy of creative practices, Primitivism would indeed function as a “so-called primitive accumulation” within modernity. As a metaphorical device it links the origins of a process of emancipation of artistic work from earlier regimes to its instrumentalization under a new command; and it reframes the urgencies of the Old as outdated, compared to the sophisticated character of what is considered as New.

Rather than a distinct moment in history or a peculiar style, Primitivism refers to a process that insinuates the revolving patterns of consumption of Otherness and the subsumption of difference under a regime of supremacy. Inasmuch as it involves the appropriation of first and foremost exocitized practices ranging from the Spanish Netherlands to French Polynesia, it is the founding myth of modern art as we know it—or as we may take it for granted. But we should take nothing for granted.

*Une visite au Louvre* starts with a 270-degree panning shot across the southern facade of the Louvre, filmed from the bridge across the Seine. Just as the camera passes the museum building, it suddenly turns back, without the slightest hesitation. The noise of the street, with all its contemporary sounds, accompanies the image as it re-centers the museum in a proper frontal perspective. Then, just as suddenly, a black screen, and the voice-over by Julie Koltai begins.



Jean Marie Straub met Koltai on the streets of Paris. He knew her from a neighborhood bar where she “used to make speeches all the time.”<sup>17</sup> Until their random encounter, Straub had considered asking the prolific French actor Michel Piccoli to read Cézanne’s commentaries, but he was persuaded by Koltai because, “she spoke with a vocabulary not at all up to date.” Straub called her “a pearl, a ruby.”<sup>18</sup>

As in many other films by Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, the division between professional and nonprofessional actors is at stake; and questioning it was a key part of a systematic revaluation of the purpose and meaning of enactment. Rather than optimizing the illusion of authenticity to encourage empathy and immersion, Huillet and Straub adopted a counter-intuitive method: recognizing ordinary people as experts while treating professionals as if they were lay people.<sup>19</sup>

“I don’t like the primitives.” The screen remains black while Julie Koltai recounts Cézanne’s reservations about what is not even seen, “It’s not my kind of painting,” before concluding with the verdict that, “there’s no flesh on those ideas.”<sup>20</sup>

At first glance, it might seem to be nothing more than a bit of sarcasm. Cézanne repeatedly referred to his technical failings, labeling himself more or less ironically as a Primitive. In a conversation with his student Bernard, he described himself as, “no more than the primitive of the way he had discovered.”<sup>21</sup> Also, Cézanne’s young friend and admirer Joachim Gasquet was a young Provençal poet who recorded his conversations with the painter from his memories. He happened to be involved in a literary group that operated under the slogan: “We are without doubt the Primitives of a future race.”<sup>22</sup>

In this spirit, *Une visite au Louvre* could easily be understood as the kindred meeting of artists who seem equally modest, unrecognized by their contemporaries. Despite the shades of bitterness and self-doubt, they nevertheless believe—strongly—in their art and their ways of working with and in it, no matter what others might think. But even this understanding of the artist being fully immersed into and absorbed by his or her artistic practice,<sup>23</sup> falls short

456	457
17 Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet: <i>Writings</i> , ed. Sally Shafto (New York: Sequence Press, 2016), 489.	24 Gasquet, <i>Cézanne</i> , 130.
18 <i>Writings</i> , 489.	25 Sally Shafto, “On Straub-Huillet’s <i>Une visite au Louvre</i> ,” <i>Senses of Cinema</i> , no. 53 (2009).
19 See also Harun Farocki’s film, <i>Jean-Marie Straub und Danièle Huillet bei der Arbeit an einem Film nach Franz Kafkas Romanfragment “Amerika”</i> (1983).	26 See Heinrich Wölfflin, Evonne Levy, and Tristan Weddigen, <i>Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Early Modern Art: One Hundredth Anniversary Edition</i> , trans. Jonathan Blower, Texts & Documents (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2015).
20 Gasquet, <i>Cézanne</i> , 176.	27 “We have to see anew, see better, really see canvases that we do not know...” Translated from a French typescript at Fondo Straub-Huillet, Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna.
21 Michael Doran et al., <i>Conversations with Cézanne</i> , trans. Julie Lawrence Cochran (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), XXV.	28 Serge Daney and Jean Narboni, “De La Nuée À La Résistance: Entretien Avec Jean- Marie Straub Et Danièle Huillet,” <i>Cahiers du cinéma</i> , no. 305 (1979): 19.
22 Doran et al., <i>Conversations</i> , XXV.	
23 See the announcement of the television broad- cast by 3sat in 2013: “Ihre Beziehung zu Paul Cézanne ist eine geistige Verwandtschaft. So wie Cézanne sich restlos in seiner Malerei realisierte, so gehen Straub/Huillet in ihrer filmkünstleri- schen Arbeit auf.” 3sat, “Ein Besuch Im Louvre,” programm.ard.de.	

of grasping what is really at stake. Right before Cézanne expressed his reluctance to sympathize with the early Renaissance Primitives, he told Gasquet, “But look, see how complicated everything is, life and realism are far greater in the 15th and in the 16th centuries than the elongations of the primitives.”<sup>24</sup>

So what is it that could account for, as Cézanne himself saw it, such a surplus of life and realism in the High Renaissance? One possibility would be to attribute it to what Sally Shafto called the “reflection of an age-old debate in the history of art between the followers of Poussin and the followers of Rubens, between the painters of Florence and those of Venice.”<sup>25</sup> But that might be misleading, again. Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub show no interest in reducing *Une visite au Louvre* to just another round of illustrating the artificial dichotomies of art history’s desire for binary periodization. They withdraw from the epic battle of style: Renaissance versus Baroque or Classicism versus Romanticism—oppositions according to the criteria that Heinrich Wölfflin identified as the means of art criticism: linear or painterly, closed or open form, multiplicity or unity, and absolute or relative clarity.<sup>26</sup>

By emphasizing color and light, Cézanne argues for a different way of seeing that is more synthetic than idiosyncratic. His “penetrative gaze” is supposed to help us “to see anew, to see better, to really see canvases that we do not know well.” “Il nous faudra revoir, voir mieux, voir vraiment, des toiles que nous connaissons mal,” as Huillet wrote in a letter proposing the film project to possible supporters under the working title “I am Cézanne.”<sup>27</sup>

“People who expect cinema to make them feel do not interest us; I do not consider myself Cézanne, but in front of a Cézanne painting, the sensations are not provoked in you, but you see them there, materialized.”<sup>28</sup> Although Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub do not dare to seduce the spectators to empathize with Gasquet and Cézanne, their film creates an urge to constantly reframe what one assumes as self-evident and might have taken for granted. In 1548, Francisco de Hollanda retells a conversation by Michelangelo and Vittoria Colonna about the main difference between Italian and Flemish Renaissance:

The painting of Flanders, Madam, will generally satisfy any devout person more than the painting of Italy, which will never cause him to drop a single tear, but that of Flanders will cause him to shed many; this is not owing to the vigour and goodness of that painting, but to the goodness of such devout person.<sup>29</sup>

Empathy and immersion in a work of art—or maybe with or within it—relies on a process of identification. The viewer identifies with what is depicted, in large part by suspending disbelief based on a tacit, mutual agreement that is informed by the experienced degree of proficiency, acquaintance, or relative familiarity. Rather than regarding the artwork in terms of its supposed quality, rather than endowing “things with substantiality,”<sup>30</sup> it pleases the narcissism of the viewer to project a sufficiently developed self onto a commodified image as an object diverse from and yet not its own. This proliferation of the pleasures of representation is, according to Guy Debord, the secularized, “specious form of the sacred.”<sup>31</sup> Endlessly played out across society, the spectacle becomes “the normative form of visual experience in modern life.”<sup>32</sup>

In contrast, Maurice Merleau-Ponty considers Cézanne’s people as “strange, as if viewed by a creature of another species. Nature itself is stripped of the attributes, which make it ready for animistic communions... It is an unfamiliar world in which it is uncomfortable and which forbids all human effusiveness.”<sup>33</sup> Almost a century before Debord finished *The Society of the Spectacle*, Cézanne seems to have struggled with the question of how creativity and artistic innovation could subsist in an environment that was increasingly defined by the reification of visual experience—a disruptive experience and profound transition whose beginning he and his contemporaries were witnessing. Cézanne, by making the familiar unfamiliar, anticipated the concept of aesthetic estrangement. More than that, he applied it to nature in ways that emphasize subsistence in the Stoics’ notion of a “derivative mode of reality”<sup>34</sup> and gives sensory account to immaterial entities: “Look at the mountain. Once it was fire.”

458

29  
Charles Holroyd,  
*Michael Angelo  
Buonarroti* (Project  
Gutenberg, 2006), 280.

30  
Paul Smith, “Cézanne’s  
‘Primitive’ Perspective,  
or the ‘View from  
Everywhere,’” *Art Bulletin*  
1, no. 95 (2013): 116.

31  
Guy Debord,  
*The Society of the Spectacle*,  
trans. Donald Nicholson-  
Smith (New York:  
Zone Books, 1994), 20.

32  
Smith, “Cézanne’s  
‘Primitive’ Perspective,”  
116.

33  
Maurice Merleau-Ponty  
and Galen A. Johnson,  
*The Merleau-Ponty  
Aesthetics Reader:  
Philosophy and Painting*,  
trans. Michael B. Smith  
(Evanston, IL:  
Northwestern University  
Press, 1993), 66.

34  
Vanessa de Harven,  
“The Coherence of Stoic  
Ontology” (PhD diss.,  
University of California,  
Berkeley, 2012), 1.

459

35  
Doran et al.,  
*Conversations*, 130.

36  
Paul Cézanne,  
*Letters*, ed. John Rewald,  
trans. Marguerite Kay  
(Oxford: B. Cassirer,  
1946), 129.

37  
Smith, “Cézanne’s  
‘Primitive’ Perspective,”  
102.

38  
Ulrike Becks-Malorny,  
*Paul Cézanne, 1839–1906:  
Pioneer of Modernism*  
(Cologne: Taschen, 2001),  
47–48.

39  
Gasquet, *Cézanne*, 176.

40  
Gasquet, 176.

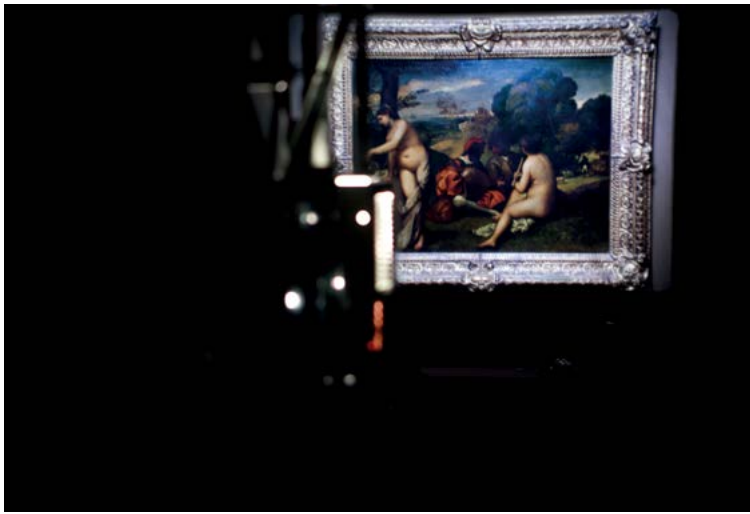
*Une visite au Louvre* begins, after a half-minute of black screen, with two complementary views of a masterpiece of Hellenistic sculpture, the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*. There is no doubt about the extraordinary status of this artwork, but at an earlier point in his conversation with Gasquet, Cézanne had already concluded, “I would like to be classical, but that bores me.”<sup>35</sup> And, in a brief, almost cryptic remark, he said enviously of the Primitives that they were “looking at the present without being bothered by a past.”

For Cézanne, painting is a “means of expressing sensation,” as he wrote in a letter to Émile Zola in 1878.<sup>36</sup> It results from a “personal way of seeing,” and, as Paul Smith pointed out, “it shows him what this was like.”<sup>37</sup> Cézanne reframes immediate visual experience with a self-critical reflection on (or perhaps of) the means of visual production: “The re-forming process which a painter carries out as a result of his own personal way of seeing things gives a new interest to the depiction of nature. As a painter, he is revealing something which no one has ever seen before and translating it into absolute concepts of painting. That is, into something other than reality.”<sup>38</sup>

Although the *Winged Victory of Samothrace* has been partly reconstructed, it still lacks its head. But, for Cézanne, it was the absence of the head, its invisibility, that rendered it perfectly present: “I don’t need the head to imagine the expression, because all the blood that pulses, circulates, sings in the legs, the thighs, the whole body, has poured into the brain and risen to the heart. It is in motion, the motion of the whole woman, of the whole statue, of Greece. When the head came off, the marble must have bled.”<sup>39</sup> In comparison, if the martyrs of the Primitives were decapitated, “A little vermilion, some drops of blood. They fly straight off bloodlessly to heaven. You don’t paint souls.”<sup>40</sup>

Nearly two minutes into *Une visite au Louvre*, one begins to get a sharper idea of what Cézanne might have intended when he spoke of a surplus of life and realism: it reverberates with what the art patron and theorist Konrad Fiedler has identified as “seeing in the sense of the artist.” Unlike scientific evidence, this surplus only begins where “any possibility of language to name and to describe has come





to an end.”<sup>41</sup> More than merely translating and transposing sensations from one register to another, the artists’ way of seeing—original, unconventional, and even radically different—appropriates and creates abstract concepts rather than representing or augmenting reality.

Cézanne’s new way of seeing, as much as it consciously brings together and contains multiple projection systems within the same image, also refers back to what is widely recognized as the pre-Renaissance Primitives’ inability to fully conform to the rules of perspective. Paul Smith acclaims Cézanne for reinventing “primitive perspective” and connects it to what he, with Merleau-Ponty, calls a “view from everywhere.”<sup>42</sup> It rejects the scopic regime of individualized, linear perspective by combining spatially and chronologically disconnected aspects of sensation juxtaposed within one frame. In doing so, Cézanne counters impressionism, which privileges a subjective point of view and, as it were, outsources the production of sensation to the mind of the beholder. This quasi-objective “view from everywhere,” in contrast, paves the way for what later came to be called Cubism. Ultimately, Picasso and Matisse declared Cézanne “the father of us all.”

However, despite the best efforts of generations of art historians to persuade themselves otherwise, the histories of art do not follow linear genealogies according to logical, dialectical progressions based on hoarding and stockpiling formal assets and features of style. Instead, they seem to go in circles, sometimes vicious, sometimes virtuous,

41

Konrad Fiedler,  
*Der Ursprung Der Künstlerischen Thätigkeit*  
(Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1887),  
95. “Das Kunstwerk wird  
unwillkürlich mit demselben  
wissenschaftlichen Interesse betrachtet,  
wie das Naturding;  
man meint ihm gerecht  
werden zu können, wenn  
man das in ihm wieder  
zu finden sucht, was man  
als sichtbar in der Natur  
vorhanden benennen  
und konstatieren kann,  
und begreift nicht, dass  
das Sehen im Sinne des  
Künstlers erst da anfängt,  
wo alle Möglichkeit des  
Benennens und Konstatierens  
im wissenschaftlichen Sinne  
aufhört.”

42

Smith, “Cézanne’s  
‘Primitive’  
Perspective,” 112.

43

Holland Cotter,  
“First, They Came for the  
Art,” *The New York Times*,  
March 13, 2014.

44

Wilhelm Worringer,  
*Abstraction and  
Empathy: A Contribution  
to the Psychology of Style*,  
trans. Michael Bullock  
(Chicago: Ivan R. Dee,  
1997), 5.

45

Worringer,  
*Abstraction and  
Empathy*, 15.



but always reframing what had already been framed. This is what is at stake with Primitivism: whether it is understood as a primal scene or, conversely, as the indicator of a certain “degeneration”—as it was during the Fascists’ attempt to purify German culture. In promoting purportedly classical ideals, they sought to exterminate what they claimed to disdain and ridicule as ‘primitive’—“a category that included, along with the mentally and physically deformed, avant-garde modernism, Bolshevism, and Jewish culture.”<sup>43</sup> Such hatred and contempt for Primitivism does not come out of the blue.

Two years after Cézanne’s death in 1906, Wilhelm Worringer summarized the psychology of art by Theodor Lipps: “Aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment. To enjoy aesthetically means to enjoy myself in a sensuous object diverse from myself, to empathize myself into it.”<sup>44</sup> In “Abstraction and Empathy,” his doctoral thesis from 1908, Worringer argued that empathy and abstraction respond to opposing relationships between human beings and the external world. He claims, “Whereas the precondition of the urge to empathy is a happy, pantheistic relationship of confidence between man and the external world, the urge to abstraction is the outcome of great unrest inspired in man by the phenomena of the outside world.”<sup>45</sup>

Remarkably, Worringer suggests that we understand the urge for abstraction as a feature of ‘primitive’ cultures in contrast to the sophisticated technologies of empathy, mimesis and identification (*Einfühlung*), which he assigns to

While Worringer's views had had immense influence on a large number of contemporary artists he later branded as "Expressionists," such as Kandinsky, Marc, or Klee, he also met fierce opposition. The writer and art theorist Carl Einstein argues in his seminal study "Negro Sculpture" from 1915 against the predominant conception of Primitivism among his contemporaries. He sets out to expose the sentiments regarding what is rendered 'primitive'—whether inspiring or derogatory—as ignorance that rests on prejudice: "In all of his judgments the European proceeds from one assumption, namely that of his own absolute, indeed fantastic, superiority."<sup>49</sup> In opposition to Worringer's claims, the abstract conception of space where the artist's work stands "at an immeasurable distance" proves to be "the strongest realism."<sup>50</sup> It allows for a simultaneity of different views, or in Merleau-Ponty's terms, "a view from everywhere."

When Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub visit the Louvre, they re-enact a guided tour by a painter, whose statements and judgments are already framed by the words of his young friend and admirer who recounts the conversations they had in front of the paintings, years before. But the act of reframing what is already framed gains yet another meaning, this time in the most literal sense.

Rather than representing a collection of artworks and their systematic order in terms of form or content, Huillet and Straub risk a collision of frames—the result of two different image-making processes that are genuinely incompatible,

462

46  
Worringer, 4.

47  
Worringer, 45.

48  
Worringer, 16.

49  
Carl Einstein,  
Charles W. Haxthausen,  
and Sebastian Zeidler,  
"Negro Sculpture,"  
*October* 107 (2004): 124.

50  
Einstein, Haxthausen,  
Zeidler,  
“Negro Sculpture,” 129.

463

51  
See Gilles Deleuze,  
*Cinema 1:  
The Movement Image*  
(London: Continuum,  
2001), 19.

52  
Doran et al.,  
*Conversations*, 130.

the pictorial frame of the canvas, and the cinematic frame of the camera. Conventionally, a reframing of irreconcilable frames runs the risk of a recursive paradox, an image within an image, a state within a state, so to speak. Because of this, most filmmakers try to de-frame the frame of the painting by zooming in on details and more or less imitating the movement of the eyes in order to direct the attention toward selected, partial views. When they do so, the artwork as a whole exists only as a relation, outside of the frame of the film.

It should come as no surprise that Huillet and Straub refuse this temptation as well. In their film, paintings are shot from fixed camera angles, which—despite its apparent simplicity—gives rise to both an immediate as well as abstracted conception of space: in their physical frames, contexts, backgrounds and natural light. The intense colors of the walls reflect the daylight with different intensities, which further reveals material structures and patterns. According to the frame ratio of the artworks, the filmmakers technically and conceptually reframe the paintings—as transpositions of images that are re-synchronised with Cézanne's unconventional, subjective evaluation of their relevance and qualities, notably from an *hors-champ* that is absolute and not relative.<sup>51</sup>

Rather than representing the artworks by the means of filmmaking, the fourteen paintings that follow the *Victory of Samothrace* actualize sensations which subsist in both their materiality and totality. More than the sum of their parts, they exceed their subjects and ingredients far beyond what could be measured and reduced to information. They become too strange to be merely legible or simply visible. In this context it is remarkable, that Huillet and Straub shot two takes of each artwork, resulting in two different versions of *Une visite au Louvre* which are supposed to be projected back-to-back. While hardly distinguishable, the two versions nevertheless, differ in the time that has passed between the takes which mainly becomes manifest in the changing lighting conditions.

“And yet, it seems to me that there is everything in the Louvre, that one can learn and love everything in the Louvre,”<sup>52</sup> Cézanne says. Rather than seeing an exhibition of

artworks as the outcome of a learning process, it should be seen as the very environment in which learning takes place.

While Cézanne is often credited with the reconciliation of classicism and romanticism that is supposed to have prepared the ground for modernism, the learning experience of *Une visite au Louvre* makes clear that this tension was not, indeed cannot be resolved, neatly summed up, or reduced. More than that, the continuous framing of what is assumed and consequently consumed as ‘primitive’ is, ultimately, what constitutes modern art, and, more specifically, the complications of modernism in the 20th century or maybe even beyond it.

But the lesson to be learned—especially for a “society *after* the spectacle”—is about confidence and trust in the power of abstraction to create a community<sup>53</sup> out of field or *hors champ*. That community does not exist on the basis of shared preferences in terms of style, or identification with one’s contemporaries, let alone through mediation by technologies of empathy or immersion. Instead, such a community subsists on—and must insist on—its ability to reframe what is already framed.

53  
See Antonio Negri,  
*Art and Multitude*, trans.  
Ed Emery (London:  
Wiley Blackwell, 2011),  
11. “The abstract is our  
nature. The abstract  
is the quality of our  
labour. The abstract  
is the sole community in  
which we exist.”

*Burial at Ornans* by Gustave Courbet, the painter of the Paris Commune, is the last artwork that Cézanne presents: “We’ve got a masterpiece like this in France and we hide it. Let them set fire to the Louvre right away. If they’re afraid of something beautiful.”<sup>54</sup> *Une visite au Louvre* ends with a long, slow panning shot across ferns and trees in a wooded area near Buti, a small town in Tuscany. Birds are singing, a babbling brook—maybe it is the same place where Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub shot *Operai, contadini* three years before, in summer 2000. When the camera takes a turn in the wood, the greens of the leaves alternate in a harsh, nearly artificial polarity of shadows and bright daylight that seems to exceed the contrast range the film stock is able to handle. Together with the film credits Bach’s cantata starts, *Ein unbegreiflich Licht erfüllt den ganzen Kreis der Erden*—an incomprehensible light fills the entire circle of the earth.

54  
Gasquet, *Cézanne*,  
204.