

Makoto Mochida

I is an-other...

Eroticism in Marhöfer and Lylov's film *Soils_Habit_Plants*

The embers in the 'irori' fireplace were redder than nuclear fire

Masanobu Fukuoka¹

1

In the essay *A Tomb for the Eye* (1975),² Serge Daney uses the term eroticism in his discussion of the short film *Introduction to Arnold Schoenberg's "Accompaniment to a Cinematographic Scene"* (1972) by Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub. The eroticism Daney detects in this film, is represented by an ankle of Straub or a knee of Huillet that protrude into the screen. When Daney evokes eroticism in the Huillet and Straub film, he thinks of "the most neutral parts of the body, the less spectacularly consumable." According to Daney, eroticism in the film has nothing to do with the naked body as a commodity that has exchange value on the market.

2

More than thirty-eight years after the publication of Daney's *A Tomb for the Eye*, Jean-Marie Straub is interviewed by Elke Marhöfer and Mikhail Lylov and talks about eroticism in the following way:

ML: So then the camera position is strategic?

JMS: I don't like strategy because strategy comes from *strategos*, the Greek for "the general." The term applies to conquerors or to armies, but it does not apply to the film. A film has nothing whatsoever to do with war. One doesn't want to conquer the earth, one wants to caress it. A film has to do with eroticism and not with strategy. It has more to do with geology, with

¹ Masanobu Fukuoka, *Wara ippon no kakumei (The One-Straw Revolution)* (Tokyo: Shunjusha, 1983), 171.

² Serge Daney, "A tomb for the Eye (Straubian pedagogy)," published on the blog *Serge Daney in English*, September 15, 2014. <http://sergedaney.blogspot.com/2014/09/a-tomb-for-eye-straubian-pedagogy.html>

geology and geography. That is related to *geo*, Greek for the earth.³

For Huillet and Straub, filmmaking is intimately connected to the desire to caress the earth. Perhaps Jean-Marie Straub intuitively understood that the three of them shared this desire. In fact, four years after the interview with Straub, Marhöfer and Lylov created a film in Japan that looks like the crystallization of that desire of caressing the earth. In *Soils_Habit_Plants* (2017), Japanese plants, namely wild millet, Japanese knotweed, Sugi (Japanese cedar) and Hinoki (Japanese cypress), along with the soil from which they absorb nutrients, are the main protagonists.

The most characteristic quality of the film are close-up images which are hardly ever entirely in focus, and even if they are, it only happens for a brief moment. Close to two thirds of the less than twelve-minute-long film are spent on out of focus close-up movements.

In 2016, Elke Marhöfer was interviewed by Martin Grennberger for the online journal of contemporary art, *Kunstkritikk*. When asked about the short film *Shape Shifting* (2015), which she had created together with Lylov in Japan, she explained the camera work in the following way: “If it (the camera) wants to get closer, it doesn’t zoom in, it really gets closer.”⁴ Marhöfer explains the refusal to use a zoom lens and wish to approach a subject as a shared desire that dwells inside the actual camera as much as in the person holding it. While speaking of the camera in such a way, Marhöfer refers to *living cameras*, a term used by the visual anthropologist Jean Rouch.

3

Rouch discusses the term *living camera* in his text *The Camera and Man* (1973)⁵. He explains that *living cameras* differ from cameras that are fixed on a tripod and approach the subject with the aid of a zoom lens (which, in Rouch’s words, leads to a kind of “involuntary arrogance”). A “living camera” instead can only be in the hands of a filmmaker for whom the only way to film is

3 Jean-Marie Straub, Elke Marhöfer and Mikhail Lylov, “A Thousand Cliffs,” in *Der Standpunkt der Aufnahme — Point of View: Perspectives of political film and video work*, ed. Tobias Hering (Berlin: Archive Books, 2014), 349.

4 Martin Grennberger, “Ten Questions: Elke Marhöfer,” *Kunstkritikk* (August 31, 2016).
<https://kunstkritikk.com/ten-questions-elke-marhofer>

5 <https://www.der.org/jean-rouch/pdf/CameraandMan-JRouch.pdf>

“to walk with the camera, taking it where it is most effective and improvising another type of ballet with it, trying to make it as alive as the people it is filming.”

A filmmaker holding a camera is, in Rouch’s words, not a human being but a “mechanical eye” accompanied by an “electronic ear.” Rouch calls “this strange state of transformation” *cine-trance*.

In the *Kunstkritikk* interview, Marhöfer further explains that the term *cine-trance* does not only mean that the filmmaker and the camera are in trance, but that the “other-than-human” or the “more-than-human” environment must be included. She defines her understanding of the term “more-than-human” as “not human-centered”: “I think this trance is not only the trance of the filmmaker, but also that of the camera together with the environment.”

When Grennberger asks Marhöfer – “Could one even talk about the becoming animal of the camera?,” she replies: “One can say the camera can become animal, but also plant, or microbe...” The camera can become an animal, a plant, a microbe, or soil because the camera, the person, and the environment in which they are entangled overlap each other on the same plane. They become “companions,” and thereby “heterogeneities”⁶

“Free indirect discourse” refers to the fact that the subordinate clause that forms the indirect discourse is constructed independently from the subject and verb of the main clause. As an example, Deleuze mentions a passage of *Canticle to St. Eulalie* that is quoted by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929):

“She gathers her strength: *better that she undergo tortures than lose her virginity.*”⁷

The following passage from *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* helps to understand the concept of “free indirect discourse” as used by Deleuze:

*The narrator's speech is just as individualized, colorful, and nonauthoritative as is the speech of the characters. The narrator's position is fluid, and in the majority of cases he uses the language of the personages depicted in the work. He cannot bring to bear against their subjective position a more authoritative and objective world.*⁸

6 In *A Tomb for the Eye*, the word “heterogeneity” is used by Daney in order to describe Huillet and Straub’s way of making films: [...] taking seriously the cinematic *heterogeneity*.”

7 V. N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), 150.

8 *Ibid.*, 121.

If we use Deleuze's words instead of Bakhtin's, the phrase "the narrator's position is fluid" translates into "the Ego=Ego form of identity ceases to be valid," and "the narrator uses the language of the personages depicted in the work" translates into "the filmmaker declares that I is another."

When Deleuze speaks of "free indirect discourse," he probably has Rimbaud's words "I is another," or "I is an-other" in mind. In *Moi un Noir* (1959), one of Rouch's most representative works, Deleuze observes that the main characters, who come from Niger, have adopted white people's names such as Dorothy Lamour and Lemmy Caution. Their Egos as black people are making their own "free indirect discourse" by becoming "an-other" as white people. According to Deleuze, however, not only the depicted characters are making a "free indirect discourse." When the filmmaker Rouch shoots a film with black characters, his Ego as a white man makes his own "free indirect discourse" by becoming "an/-other."

Like other contemporary filmmakers, Marhöfer and Lylov have been influenced by Rouch. And like Rouch, they construct their own "free indirect discourse" by becoming "an-other" when they film their characters. However, Marhöfer and Lylov are not visual anthropologists. They rather understand their work as "not human-centered." Therefore, when they make their own "free indirect discourse," their Egos as human beings become not someone but something, that is, "an-other" as the "other-than-human" and the "more-than-human."

5

As if to justify André Bazin's statement in *What Is Cinema* – "The human being is all-important in the theater. The drama on the screen can exist without actors,"⁹ the main characters in Marhöfer and Lylov's *Soils-Habit-Plants* are not human beings but wild millet, Japanese knotweed, Sugi and Hinoki trees, and their soils.

The human body does not appear at all, not even partially. The most artificial thing that is shown, is a photograph of a forest, placed on the Sugi cedar forest floor. As Marhöfer and Lylov explain in an accompanying text¹⁰ the photograph shows a forest in Sarawak, Malaysia, and was taken when the area was still a British Colony. The shooting of the photograph calls to mind the

9 André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?* trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 102.

10 Elke Marhöfer and Mikhail Lylov, "Soils-Habit-Plants," mikhailylov.com, <http://mikhailylov.com/index.php?/films/soils-habit-plants/>

historical fact that the Sugi cedars and Hinoki cypresses appearing in the film are not completely “natural,” but actually they are trees of the monoculture forest plantation promotion that was uniformly carried out in the past to meet the demand for timber as construction material in Japan. Later, when cheaper wood became available for import from Malaysia and South East Asia, the value of these plantations decreased rapidly. As a result, the plantations lost their commercial interest, and today, many of these forests are neglected.

Another artificial thing drawing special attention is a container that looks like a scientific test instrument. From the above-mentioned text we learn that the container is a micro test plate used to examine soil microbial diversity. The conducted soil tests show that soil in which a diverse range of vegetables, weeds and wild millet grow contains the highest microbial diversity.

Like the forest plantations, the wild millet and the Japanese knotweed, that are part of the film, are not simply “natural.” Wild millet is considered a “pest” in rice monoculture fields and the endless target of weeding, while Japanese knotweed is an “invasive species” and a target of extermination in the UK. Generally speaking, they are both considered to be harmful plants. However, as the soil tests indicate, these plants are not at all harmful but rather helpful from the point of the view of soil microbial diversity.

6

In *A Tomb for the Eye*, Daney describes Huillet and Straub’s way of making films as “the stubborn refusal of all the forces of *homogenization*.”¹¹ Following this idea, we could describe Marhöfer and Lylov’s way of making films as “the stubborn refusal of all the forces of *monoculture*.” However, that refusal is also affirmative. The filmmakers’ NO is a NO that is actually at the same time a YES. When Huillet and Straub stubbornly refuse all forces of *homogenization*, and when Marhöfer and Lylov stubbornly refuse all forces of *monoculture*, at the same time they fully affirm the desire to caress the earth.

“A film has nothing whatsoever to do with war. One doesn’t want to conquer the earth, one wants to caress it. A film has to do with eroticism and not with strategy.”¹²

If Marhöfer and Lylov’s *Soils-Habit-Plants* is filled with eroticism, then that is why: *I am a wild millet, a Japanese knotweed, a Sugi cedar, a Hinoki cypress, soil....*

11 Op. cit.

12 Jean-Marie Straub, Elke Marhöfer and Mikhail Lylov, “A Thousand Cliffs,” 349.