

Communist Photosynthesis

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Neither the paradoxicality of what is happening, neither the scale of what has already happened, nor the perspective of what awaits the world to experience - can be grasped by a single consciousness.

We know firmly - ahead there will be victory over darkness.

Ahead - there is light.

But we are still not able to assimilate its rays, to examine the new life in these new rays, to move along the new paths illuminated by them.

We foresee, have a presentiment, and have a foreboding of it.

But this light is only now being born in the truly apocalyptic madness in which the universe is now enveloped.

Humanity is stretching out to it, toward this unknown light of the future.<sup>1</sup>

Sergei Eisenstein, 1942

Nel giallo de la rosa sempiterna,  
 Che si dignada e dilata e redole  
 Odor di lode al sol che sempre verna...<sup>2</sup>

Dante Alighieri, 1320

In the first part of *O somma luce* (2010), Straub leaves us in the dark for just over seven minutes (a couple of seconds longer in the Second Version of the film<sup>3</sup>), with a recording of the first performance of Varèse's *Déserts* (Paris, 1954). The first two and a half sections of *Déserts* are thereby spliced together with the second half of XXXIII, the last canto of *Paradiso* from Dante's *Comedia* (1320). The overall shape of the *Comedia* which is a long and gradual movement from darkness into light, is with Straub an irruption of light and words.

Varèse's piece brings together his ideas on how to organise sound and music (and therefore time) away from the classical tradition, through the concepts of duration, intensity, frequency and timbre. *Déserts* also features interpolated tape recordings of electronic sound which were played into the auditorium. It is this first Interpolation which produces the eruption of boos, abuse ('This is a scandal!') and hisses from the audience attending the premiere, adding another layer of sound. Straub brings these un/intentional forms into

<sup>1</sup> From the unpublished introduction to the English edition of *The Film Sense*, written in Alma-Ata, October 1942 in Sergei Eisenstein, *Nonindifferent Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 290

<sup>2</sup> 'In the yellow of the sempiternal rose, | Which unfolds by degrees and dilates and breathes back | The odour of praise to the sun which keeps perpetual spring.' *Comedia, Paradiso*, XXX: 124-6 in Robin Kirkpatrick, *Limitations of Modern Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 161

<sup>3</sup> The First Version is 17.50 min, the Second is 16.53 minutes long. There are multiple differences between them, as they are composed of different takes. The overall structure of the film is the same.

juxtaposition with Dante's strict metre and rhyme. He also honours Varèse's intention for *Déserts* to be experienced in company with a film<sup>4</sup>, one that would have to be:

... in opposition with the score. Only through opposition can one avoid paraphrase  
 [...] There will be no action. There will be no story. There will be images. Phenomena  
 of light, purely...<sup>5</sup>

With Straub, the opposition is almost absolute because music and video footage stand side-by-side, the two domains separated in space and time.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the atonal and athematic principles of the work, Varèse spoke of it in terms reminiscent of program music, by listing various physical deserts (earth, sea, sky, sand, snow, interstellar spaces), 'the deserts of great cities', 'but also those of the human spirit, of that distant inner space no telescope can reach, where one is alone.'<sup>7</sup> Here Varèse approaches Dante, since the poet is constantly engaged in a montage of the personal and the cosmic and exploring the tension between the subjective and the objective. Moreover, in his *Inferno*, deserts are a constant refrain: 'The sand caught fire, like tinder under flint'; 'Here is no hope of any comfort ever, neither of respite nor of lesser pain.'; 'Eyesight unaided – in that blackened air, through foggy, dense swirls – could not carry far.'; 'Here pity lives where pity's truth is dead.'<sup>8</sup> The simultaneous implosion and explosion of space finds clear expression in Nietzsche's verses which also concern the desert: 'Many suns circle in desert space: to all that is dark do they speak with their light—but to me they are silent.'<sup>9</sup> and 'The desert grows, and woe to him who conceals the desert within him!'<sup>10</sup> And finally, for Jean Genet, the desert is a wellspring, in this dare and advice: 'Put all the images in language in a place of safety and make use of them, for they are in the desert, and it's in the desert we must go and look for them.'<sup>11</sup> All this by way of posing a question the film does not answer: does the world presented by the music precede the text of *O somma luce*, or is it contemporaneous with it? In

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<sup>4</sup> This is ground which Straub and Huillet have already covered with Schönberg's *Begleitmusik* in 1973. Other filmmakers have answered Varèse's call, notably Bill Viola in *Déserts - on music by Edgard Varèse* (1994) and Alain Montesse in *Étude pour Déserts* (1987).

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Varèse from *Modern Music and After*, Paul Griffiths, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2014

<sup>6</sup> The transition from music to voice does see a brief moment of overlap. Here it resembles the shifts between music and voice in Straub's beloved John Ford. These moments in *Cheyenne Autumn*: 00:33:29 or *The Searchers*: 00:39:14, build up tension musically and relay it to the voice, but by keeping the two separate with a brief pause in between. The two different Versions of *O somma luce* illustrate the different effects of tension and rhythm that can be accomplished by pauses between the music and the voice: almost 2 seconds in Version 1 and less than a second in Version 2. These approaches follow through in the two versions and predictably Version 2 is significantly shorter.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, (USA: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 140

<sup>8</sup> *Inferno*, XIV: 37; *Inferno*, V: 44; *Inferno*, IX: 5; *Inferno*, XX: 28 in *The Divine Comedy* trans. By Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), epub (all references to *The Divine Comedy* are from this translation, unless otherwise indicated)

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1883-85

<<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1998/1998-h/1998-h.htm>> [accessed 12 March 2021]

<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Dionysian-Dithyrambs*, 1888

<<http://www.thenietzschechannel.com/works-pub/dd/dd.htm>> [accessed 6 May 2021]

<sup>11</sup> Jean Genet, *Prisoner of Love*, (NYRB, 2003) p. vii

the same way we can ask: is the catastrophe which finds Passerone sitting on a dismembered and rusted excavator's arm over, or is it still unfolding?

Before I turn to the cinematic treatment of Dante's text, it is useful to look at the exact nature of the source material because it will inform our understanding of Straub's artistic decisions.

Dating back to 1320, the *Comedia* is one of the oldest texts which Huillet and Straub have worked with. It is written in a proud, rich and earthy vernacular, which Dante came to refer to as 'Volgare illustre' and whose standard he took up militantly against 'the detestable wretches of Italy who hold this precious vernacular cheap.'<sup>12</sup> In the enemies of the vernacular, Dante sees moral failings: vainglory, envy and avarice, and in the vernacular he sees the very origins of philosophical friendship between author and reader. The vernacular is associated with the reign of Love (rather than Latin's reign of Law), it is favoured by God because it is 'natural and naturally humble'<sup>13</sup>; he will go so far as to claim that 'in its power to arouse benevolence, the vernacular resembles God himself.'<sup>14</sup>

Dante's belief in the power of the word borders the mystical: he variously refers to the bone structure of the human face as inscribed with the letters 'omo' (spelling 'man' with the eyes standing in for the 'o's and the brows and nose for the 'm')<sup>15</sup> and of the Latin word 'aueio' ('author', one who can knot words with authority) as itself formed by knotting the standard sequence of vowels: A, E, I, O, U.<sup>16</sup> Here is a writer who takes his exploration of the power of words beyond the syllable to the molecular level of letters, yet never forgetting the syntactical, or narrative structure. It is hard to declaim or hear line 126 from *Paradiso* XXXIII: 'e intendente te ami e arridi!' without feeling the full force of a phrase in which there are more vowels than consonants.<sup>17</sup>

Taking up the cause of the vernacular and the problems of how to elevate it to Latin involved theory (two unfinished treatises) and practice (his poetry), which helped to bring about a revolution in syntax as part of a project 'to expand the philosophical capacities of Italian writing.'<sup>18</sup> This consisted partly of 'reclothing' the Latin in the vernacular, partly in seeking 'to bestow [on the vernacular] a permanence such as, by its nature, it is bound to

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<sup>12</sup> *Convivio*, Dante Alighieri in Robin Kirkpatrick, *Limitations of Modern Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 53

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 67 and p. 193

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 192

<sup>15</sup> *Purgatorio*, XXIII: 31

<sup>16</sup> From Dante's *Convivio* discussed by the author in Sergei Eisenstein, *Nonindifferent Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 275

<sup>17</sup> The full terzina runs like this: 'Eternal light, you sojourn in yourself alone. | Alone, you know yourself. Known to yourself, | you, knowing, love and smile on your own being.' The theatrical break of the line which someone like Vittorio Gassman makes (in *Legge una selezione di Canti della Divina Comedia*, Rubino Rubin, 1993 <[https://youtu.be/BkVmum51\\_3k](https://youtu.be/BkVmum51_3k)> [accessed 6 May 2021]) works against the relentless drive of this line. As different an artist from Straub as can be, Roberto Benigni (in *Roberto Benigni: Tutto Dante - L'ultimo del Paradiso*, 2002 <<https://youtu.be/sLxC56SjxHc>> [accessed 6 May 2021]), who has spent years performing Dante, comes to the same conclusion that it is the minority of consonants which suffice in tempering the otherwise unbroken flow of vowels, and that the line should be delivered in one expiration.

<sup>18</sup> Commentary on C. Segre in Robin Kirkpatrick, *Limitations of Modern Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 93

lack.<sup>19</sup> This permanence, or ‘stability of phrase’, Dante found through the language ‘binding itself with metre and rhyme’.

For the *Comedia* he devises the terzina - a new, three-line verse form (in a rhyming structure of ABA BCB CDC), elegant and propulsive (a prerequisite for a narrative poem) which can hold both reported speech and philosophical speculation. *Comedia*’s standard unit of metre is an eleven-syllable line, which concludes (almost) invariably with a stressed followed by an unstressed syllable.<sup>20</sup> Each canto is never more than a mere 160 lines long (much shorter than the traditional 600 lines of Virgil or Milton) which begs the question: why does Straub (who so often insists on the integrity of a text) decide to cut the first 66 lines of the last canto? This, we will return to. The *Comedia* is composed of three canticles (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*) for which some of the language, narrative devices and imagery are constant, while others are specific to the *Paradiso*. All of them come into play in *O somma luce* and I want to briefly touch on them below.

The ‘modest voice’ is typical of the *Comedia* and is a response to the ineffable nature of the poet’s experiences. It is also an acknowledgment of the natural limits of the mind, of memory, imagination and speech.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the *Comedia*, Dante acknowledges that to speak is one thing and to remember is quite another. As Robin Kirkpatrick has commented:

Though speech may be possible only where memory is active, the action of the memory cannot, it seems, automatically ensure that speech should follow.<sup>22</sup>

It is in our nature not to see clearly (when we do see), also not to see ‘divine counsel’<sup>23</sup>. It follows that it is difficult to make reliable statements, so we should proceed with ‘leaden-footed’<sup>24</sup> caution. The eyes fail, the body quivers under the weight of the theme<sup>25</sup> and often Dante falters and withdraws: ‘my pen leaps and I do not write it.’<sup>26</sup>

Speech is counterposed to sight. For Dante the most fundamental act of the mind is that of seeing,<sup>27</sup> and for much of the poem ‘what is thought and what is seen are profoundly inextricable.’<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, in the last canto of *Paradiso*, his experience is revealed as greater than its recounting: ‘from that point on my seeing was greater than my speaking.’<sup>29</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 85

<sup>20</sup> From Robin Kirkpatrick’s introduction to his translation in *The Divine Comedy* (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), epub

<sup>21</sup> A. Jacomuzzi, *L’imago al cerchio* in Robin Kirkpatrick, *Limitations of Modern Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 37

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 38

<sup>23</sup> *Paradiso*, XIII: 141, Ibid., p. 30

<sup>24</sup> *Paradiso*, XIII: 112, Ibid., p. 43

<sup>25</sup> *Paradiso*, XXIII: 64-66

<sup>26</sup> *Paradiso*, XXIV: 25 in Robin Kirkpatrick, *Limitations of Modern Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 43

<sup>27</sup> From Robin Kirkpatrick’s introduction to his translation in *The Divine Comedy* (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), epub

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> *Paradiso*, XXXIII: 55 in Robin Kirkpatrick, *Limitations of Modern Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p.39

A courtesy which Dante seeks to foster between reader and poet is a joint intellectual and spiritual endeavour akin to the bond that Dante describes between himself and Virgil, his guide through *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*.<sup>30</sup> Throughout the *Paradiso*, Dante invites the reader into collaborative endeavour seeking to engage the full exercise of all their faculties – rational, discursive, emotional, perceptual and imaginative. Even though an anatomical and static description of heavenly order is one of his main concerns, dogma is not offered as a replacement for living faith and experience. *Paradiso* has a tendency to isolate statements and for the poet to interrupt himself in what Kirkpatrick has identified as self-possessed ‘didactic pauses’. Contrary to the previous two canticles, here the pause is not primarily an ‘agent of emotion’, but of understanding.<sup>31</sup>

In the *Paradiso*, having left Virgil in Purgatory, the poet must face tests of faith and demonstrate on his own the independent virtue of his art<sup>32</sup>. These tests are presented without suspense or a possibility that he might fail<sup>33</sup> because the journey of the soul is complete. The poet has been completely exposed to the truth, having come face to face with the Light of God. It is telling that Straub excises all explicit references to the Virgin, St Bernard or Beatrice, which feature in the first part of the canto. While *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* teem with many voices and characters, several of *Paradiso*’s cantos are Dante’s arias. Straub’s script features only the poet’s voice, thereby achieving maximum concentration as well as a partly de-christianised character through a focus on natural imagery, without the allegorical scaffolding which an otherwise integral reading of the canto would impose.

The natural imagery is presented through the encounter of the poet with the variously ‘simple’, ‘living’, ‘lofty’, ‘eternal’ and ‘supreme’ light and three rainbows. This light, which moves everything, ‘self-loving’ and ‘self-known’ (124-6), ‘always what it was before’ (111), an ‘infinite value’ (81) which gives ‘abundant grace’ (82) without receiving. However, it does receive itself as reflected in us, and it receives our ‘odours of praise’ (as in the verses which open this text). The poet sees the face of God ‘painted with our likeness’ (131), and feeling himself photosynthetically changing (114) knows it is impossible to turn away from this light (100-2)<sup>34</sup>. In this glow he sees the rainbow of the Holy Trinity, which should also remind us of the Rainbow of the Covenant: the earth (‘commune madre’<sup>35</sup>) is for humans and other creatures to inhabit<sup>36</sup>.

The whole text of *O somma luce*’s personal revelation is framed as another one of Straub/Huillet’s ‘To those who follow in our wake’<sup>37</sup>, like the philosopher’s final speech in *The Death of Empedocles* (1987), which addresses the People which that film does not

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<sup>30</sup> Robin Kirkpatrick, *Limitations of Modern Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 75

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 155

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 82

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 123

<sup>34</sup> The translations of these phrases come from Longfellow, the Hollanders and Mandelbaum respectively.

<sup>35</sup> *Purgatorio*, XI: 63

<sup>36</sup> *Paradiso*, XII: 16-18 and Genesis 9

<sup>37</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *An die Nachgeborenen*, poem, 1934-38

show<sup>38</sup>. The last line of the second terzina (72) in Straub's script addresses the usefulness of the poet's illumination to 'a future people' or 'the people yet to come'<sup>39</sup>. This line is isolated in Straub's instructions with a caesura before and after, which is not often found with other performers of Dante, who are keen to complete the sentence which runs on for another terzina. We should not see this as a distortion of Dante, who set out to aid 'the world that lives all wrong'<sup>40</sup> by writing a public poem which 'aims to explore the political and ethical principles on which a successful society must always depend.'<sup>41</sup> We should also note that, rather than sinking into quietism, the final lines set in motion the dynamic and world-changing forces of will and desire.

Straub sets the text up in an alternating rhythm between mobile (panning) landscape shots and static shots of the speaker sitting 'in love's palm'<sup>42</sup>. The division of the text creates an irregular rhythm, as the shots feature between 1 and 4 terzine (Fig. 1). You can see an overview in the following grid, where 'P' stands for the shots of Passerone and 'L' stands for the shots of landscape:

P - 3, L - 2, P - 1, L - 4, P - 1, L - 2, P - 3, L - 2, P - 4, L - 2, P - 2

The landscape shots are of varying durations and cover more or less ground depending on the speed of the pans. The widescreen frame<sup>43</sup> allows Straub to cover twice the angle in roughly the same time while keeping a stately character to the unfurling landscape. The first and fourth pan cover half the span (the first being the only one which Straub cuts into with the movement still ongoing), the remaining three pans complete the full arc, and the last one is the only one which also reverses back to the opening position. The three full arcs invite a parallel with the three rainbows in Dante's text. The cuts strictly correspond to ends of sentences in the *Comedia* (as set in the printed modern editions), mostly featuring one sentence and sometimes two, apart from the last cut which falls on a semi-colon (this last shot matches a change in mood, with the poet's powers faltering as the vision slips through his fingers). Straub thereby explicitly underscores Dante's didactic pauses, matching them with static shots of the landscape or the performer sitting silently between one verse and another.

When it comes to Passerone's performance, we have 4 records to draw on: the two Versions of the film (shot over a period of 4 days) and two performances at the communal

<sup>38</sup> Straub's models for the ending of *Empedocles* are the final sequences of *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), and *The Great Dictator* (1940), all of which feature voices addressing the People. See Charles Tesson, *L'heure de vérité*, Cahiers du Cinéma, n394, April 1987  
<http://www.rastko.co.uk/images/verite.pdf> [accessed 1 May 2021]

<sup>39</sup> Cf. 'la vita futura' from *Inferno*, VI: 102. These two phrases are respectively translated by Longfellow <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/paradiso/paradiso-33/> [accessed 1 May 2021] and by Robert and Jean Hollander [https://dante.princeton.edu/cgi-bin/dante/campuscgi/mpb/GetCantoSection.pl?LANG=2&INP\\_POEM=Par&INP\\_SECT=33&INP\\_START=52&INP\\_LEN=90](https://dante.princeton.edu/cgi-bin/dante/campuscgi/mpb/GetCantoSection.pl?LANG=2&INP_POEM=Par&INP_SECT=33&INP_START=52&INP_LEN=90) [accessed 1 May 2021]

<sup>40</sup> *Purgatorio*, XXXII: 103

<sup>41</sup> From Robin Kirkpatrick's introduction to his translation in *The Divine Comedy* (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), epub

<sup>42</sup> *Inferno*, V: 127

<sup>43</sup> After 5 decades of filmmaking, this is the first time Straub explored the potential of a widescreen frame.

theatre in Buti which took place on the same night and were subsequently broadcast<sup>44</sup> on Rai3. The duration of each speech (from first to last line of speech) varies with Buti 1 and Buti 2 being 7.30 and 7.00 minutes in duration, and Version 1 and Version 2 of the film being 9.11 and 9.04 in duration. The film presentation is obviously significantly slower and the pauses are given more prominence. In the theatre, the speaker faces the audience head-on and in the film he is at  $\frac{3}{4}$  profile. The Buti performance therefore continues the long popular tradition of Dante being performed to the community (and helping it think and feel through its life together), affirming it in an uncomplicated manner.<sup>45</sup>

The complication arises elsewhere: '[f]or instance, a man would be seen struggling with a text, its material nature: meter, scansion, sound and sense.'<sup>46</sup>, Jean-André Fieschi wrote about the films of Straub and Huillet in 1976. We have seen how much concentration Dante has expended on all of the aspects which Fieschi lists. Straub and Passerone often follow the strongholds of Dante's design. The statements, as sentences or not, are respected with pauses. Inserted phrases and asides (such as 'of what I still remember', in line 107) are grouped together and treated as incisions into larger statements. Pauses for breathing are leisurely, often before the last line in a terzina and rarely are they short hesitations (cf. *Une visite au Louvre*). The Rai3 Buti recording shows Passerone and Straub agreeing on the necessity of breathing in fully after the aforementioned line 126 - it ends up clearly marked with an exclamation in Passerone's script 'Respirare!' (see Fig. 1). Often the last word in the line is stressed, as designed by Dante's rhyme and end-of-line stresses. Words are mostly separated, especially when one ends on a vowel and the other begins with one. In the Buti rehearsals, Straub is seen fixing Passerone's pronunciation of 'secoli' and 'foco', concerned that they sound too French and that the first vowel in each word should be longer, more true to the gait of Italian. Straub is also concerned that line 123, which is another example of Dante's modest voice and relates how feeble the poet's speech is, is delivered by Passerone in 'too prosaic' a manner. It is clear that our equivalent modern statement 'My words fail me' is off the mark when attending to Dante's intentions for the reader and his venerable distance from the Light Supreme. Likewise, the didactic, post-factum aspect must not be sacrificed to the immediate and experiential.

Occasionally, terzine/statements/sentences are brought together, such as in lines 93 and 94, keeping momentum without a pause. This is an interesting passage since it is one of the most arcane, and is often failed by translation. The first terzina speaks of how clearly the poet saw the all-present order of things within the light, the second terzina contradicts this by saying that this one moment brings more forgetfulness than 25 centuries since Neptune<sup>47</sup> was startled by the ship Argo on its great endeavour to find the Golden Fleece. In this paradox, Dante uses the amount of oblivion (measured in centuries and relating to a myth that persists

<sup>44</sup> In all their Buti work, Huillet and Straub would start with the theatre performance and then proceed to the film shoot a few weeks later; this is the one case where the sequence was reversed.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Carmelo Bene's reading of Dante to commemorate the first anniversary of the Bologna massacre in 1981.

<sup>46</sup> Jean-André Fieschi, 'Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet' on Andy Rector's KINO SLANG blog

<<https://kinoslang.blogspot.com/2019/07/jean-marie-saub-daniele-huillet-by-j.html>> [accessed 8 March 2021]

<sup>47</sup> Of course, Neptune was not around at the time - it would have been the Greek god Poseidon. This is just one of many examples of Dante's passion for the layers and palimpsests of history, shared by Straub and Huillet.

even 7 centuries after the *Comedia*) to speak about the amount that was revealed to him in an instant.<sup>48</sup> Presence is described through absence. By bringing the two terzine together, Straub keeps the contradictions close to each other, rather than treating the second terzina as a commentary on the first. By stressing two of the three rhymes (modo/nodo/godo and largo/letargo/Argo), Straub keeps the statements joined. The third, weak, emerging rhyme of impresa/sospesa/accessa naturally proceeds in the following statement (which is also a different shot) without any stresses on the rhyme. This is a general organising principle of keeping the sections in the grid above contained.

Straub, so fond of irregular rhythms, ignores the commas within lines (which, after all were introduced into Dante's verses by the printing press), preferring instead to group words and phrases using tone of voice or equal rhythm, rather than have hesitations standing in for commas. There is a general tendency to avoid the invitation to sing the text through strict control of ascending and descending words<sup>49</sup>, and a few tremolo lines, such as 96 and 108 (this line is noted for its modesty, Dante stating that his words are as weak as the baby-talk of a suckling: it lends itself to a reduction to melody over sense).

Passerone's gestures flow through all the four performances and play on the relationship between speech and memory, reading and reciting, since the division in the grid above is also one between Passerone speaking (P) and him reading from a few fluttering pages (L) - see Fig. 2. All the landscape shots are preceded by him opening the script, sometimes lifting it off the ground, straightening the pages. There is thus a strict separation between the speaker's sightline and the moving camera which performs a reverence akin to which Simone Weil writes of:

To see a landscape as it is when I am not there... [...] When I am in any place, I disturb the silence of heaven and earth by my breathing and the beating of my heart.<sup>50</sup>

The unfailing sight of the gaze into heavenly light and the struggle to remember which Dante writes of are underscored by the gestures featuring spectacles and the fragility of the pages and the words they contain. Passerone even uses a rock to keep the pages from flying away. The modest voice finds form in a modest gesture.

In contrast stand the opening and closing shots of the film which both start with Passerone gazing out intently. The last shot also features two quickly succeeding gestures of poise, the first which precedes the line 'not for this were my wings' (139) with the speaker leaning forward as if ready to stand up, the second with him leaning back, chest out, as if bracing for a gust of wind. Here, then, is the beginning of the work of will and desire which has to be done after the heavenly vision has passed. Both Versions of the film end with a shot with distinctly overcast light - the passing of the vision is palpable, and in Version 1

<sup>48</sup> See *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy, Volume 3*, eds. George Corbett and Heather Webb (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2017), p. 67-68 <<http://dx.doi.org/10.11647/OPB.0119>> [accessed 8 March 2021]

<sup>49</sup> For indications of ascending words see the arrows before and after the first line of Passerone's annotated script, and the end of line 76 for an indication of a descending enunciation in Fig 1.

<sup>50</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 42

Passerone sits poised for almost a full minute, the tension unrelaxing. We would do well to remember that for Dante, the cause of Lucifer's fall was that he would not wait for light to progressively reveal itself.<sup>51</sup>

When it comes to costume, long gone are the sandals of *Othon* (1969) or *Empedocles* (1986);<sup>52</sup> the performer is dressed in an everyday pale shirt and trousers which catch every change in the light, just as his scarf is caught by the wind. The unpatterned fabrics stand out against the burnt grass of late summer and the rust of the excavator's arm. The red scarf teases our eye as a banner or standard would.

*O somma luce* emerges out of the tension between these different elements: costume, setting, props, camera work, music, editing, actor's gestures and actor's speech. Despite Straub's stated departure from Brecht in recent years, this approach has parallels with what Brecht wrote about the theatre in 1930: 'Words, music and setting must become more independent of one another.'<sup>53</sup> Two decades later, he would restate this by inviting the sister arts of the drama to 'alienate' each other, rather than losing themselves in an 'integrated work of art'.<sup>54</sup> This attitude whereby contradiction and friction help to maintain freedom and integrity of various elements which enrich each other, is one shared by Straub, Huillet, Dante and Brecht. Similarly, every question on a pure definition of 'the political' is for Straub to be answered only prismatically. To paraphrase him: there can be no political film without morality, theology, mysticism and memory.<sup>55</sup> He might well have been talking about the *Comedia*.

Binding all these elements together is the longue durée of remembrance, moved by will and desire to fulfill our human destiny. Cornel West, speaking of the relevance of Dante to the catastrophe experienced by African-Americans in the last 4 centuries, centres:

[...] a notion of temporality and historicity that cannot be snuffed out even in hell, and [...] the conception of the possibilities of transformation in the face of whatever kind of catastrophe is coming your way.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Paradiso*, IX: 46

<sup>52</sup> Huillet and Straub have spoken about the many aspects of this shift away from period dress between their early and late treatment of Pavese in Emmanuel Burdeau and Jean-Michel Frodon, 'Encounter with Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. Quei loro incontri', *Cahiers du cinéma*, n° 616, October, 2006 translated by Ted Fendt for

<[http://www.elumiere.net/exclusivo\\_web/internacional\\_straub/textos/interview\\_quei\\_loro\\_incontri.php](http://www.elumiere.net/exclusivo_web/internacional_straub/textos/interview_quei_loro_incontri.php)> [accessed 8 March 2021]

<sup>53</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre', *Brecht on Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1978), p. 38

<sup>54</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', *Brecht on Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1978), p. 204

<sup>55</sup> Ted Fendt (ed.), *Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet*, (Vienna: FilmmuseumSynemaPublikationen, 2016), pp. 109-111

<sup>56</sup> *African-American Interpretations of Dante's Divine Comedy*, hosted by Trinity College, held via Zoom on October 4, 2020  
<[https://cdnapisec.kaltura.com/index.php/extwidget/preview/partner\\_id/2366381/uiconf\\_id/42684261/entry\\_id/1\\_op4pdmee/embed/dynamic](https://cdnapisec.kaltura.com/index.php/extwidget/preview/partner_id/2366381/uiconf_id/42684261/entry_id/1_op4pdmee/embed/dynamic)> [accessed 10 March 2021]

In growing deserts and among ever-multiplying catastrophes of ‘death, dogma and domination’<sup>57</sup>, there will also be revelation. Here, the fate of the collective is bound to individual illumination, to knowledge which the individual brings to the collective and to works of art. However, as Eisenstein wrote in the depths of World War II (in the lines which open this text), the paradox and scale of the catastrophe transcends individual consciousness, and can only be grasped collectively. This connection between the individual and the collective is found in the content of what is revealed in the experience of illumination. Often (like in *O somma luce*), the experience of ecstasy, rapture or apocalypse is represented through a tension between the raw experience and its content, be it christian, pantheist, humanist, communist etc. Here I want to draw on Sergei Eisenstein and Walter Benjamin (both of whom Straub has repeatedly returned to). I believe they will also help us to reconcile the gradual and painstaking perfection of the soul (of the poet and the reader) which is integral to the design of the *Comedia* (told in a stratified manner through the longue durée of lives dating back to Ancient Greece) with Straub’s gesture in *O somma luce*: a tiger leap, a sudden, almost blasphemous, short, heavenly torrent.

In *Nonindifferent Nature*, Eisenstein’s study of ecstasy, as human experience and organised re-presentation in various artforms, we can find a passage recounting the visions of Saint Ignatius, based on a notebook he forgot to burn.<sup>58</sup> Sometimes ‘a symbolic image accompanies his vision, for example the image of the sun, but it is evidently only an accessory [...]’ The passage then goes on to report Loyola’s words about the experience of the divine Being or Essence in these terms:

[...] at first I saw the Being and then the Father, and my prayer ended with the Essence before arriving at the Father.<sup>59</sup>

Eisenstein is fascinated that a zealot and master of psychotechnics such as Loyola would acknowledge the primacy of the universal form of ecstasy without binding it to its Christian content. This passage is mirrored by Dante’s lines 124-138 in *O somma luce* where he relates how gradually, deep in itself, the eternal light seemed to show him our human face. From here, it is but one small step to Benjamin’s 4th Thesis on history:

Class struggle, which for a historian schooled in Marx is always in evidence, is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist. But these latter things, which are present in class struggle, are not present as a vision of spoils that fall to the victor. They are alive in this struggle as confidence, courage, humour, cunning and fortitude, and have effects that reach far back into the past. They constantly call into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers. As flowers turn towards the sun, what has been strives to turn – by dint of a secret

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> See the rest of the chapter *Superconcreteness* ff. 165 and pp. 181-183 in Sergei Eisenstein, *Nonindifferent Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987)

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. pp.172-174

heliotropism – towards that sun which is rising in the sky of history. The historical materialist must be aware of this most inconspicuous of all transformations.<sup>60</sup>

The river-like virtues which Benjamin lists (confidence, courage, humour, cunning, fortitude) flowing from the past, are products and refinements of Dante's forces of desire and will, with which the poet concludes his poem, and starts again. Benjamin's virtues of class struggle are what remains after a battle lost or won: in strata, across generations. With Eisenstein (writing two years later, in 1942), there is an understanding that a catastrophe can only be met through communion with forces which are larger than a single consciousness, but which also manifest in the individual. And just as the individual can photosynthetically change through illumination or struggle, so can 'what has been' heliotropically grow in response to an illumination by the virtues of class struggle or christianity. The past can turn to the future anew; to it, it is of little relevance whether its future is our present or if it is our future. We find this framework in Dante, who encounters in *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* various virtuous proto-christians who lived before Christ - for him they are imbued with the forces which follow Christ and which seem to have prepared the world for his coming. We can be illuminated differently by worlds which have ended. For Eisenstein it is the present which is stretching itself out towards the light, for Benjamin it is the past (alive in all of us), which is turning towards the sun. This is the same sun which we find in one of the poems which accompanied Babeuf's failed Conspiracy of the Equals in 1796: 'People, take hold of your rights, | The sun shines for all.'<sup>61</sup> Just as the sun gives to all, so should the earth, and learning from the sun we can redeem the earth and ourselves in paradise on earth or communism. The personal illumination which sets this movement in motion could be called communist photosynthesis.

If, however, we find ourselves in dark times - 'Here, too, dead poetry will rise again.'<sup>62</sup> Within us dwells our illustrious vernacular language, the mover of body and spirit:

[...] something that illuminates, and being itself illuminated casts forth its light... And this vernacular of which we speak is raised aloft in authority and power and raises its own followers in honour and glory.<sup>63</sup>

This is the attitude which permeates every line of Dante's poetry (and which has made it so beloved and desirable by all factions and projects). Straub, who has devoted his life to the voicing of German, French, Italian and English words (and their relationship to place), must be a fellow traveller. One cannot induce divine or communist photosynthesis, but one can put

<sup>60</sup> From 'Thesis IV' of Benjamin's 'Theses on History' in Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm - Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*, (London: Verso, 2005) epub

<sup>61</sup> Germain, *Song of the Equals*, 1796 at webpage 'French Revolution and the Conspiracy of the Equals 1796' <<https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/conspiracy-equals/1796/song.htm>> [accessed 11 March 2021]

<sup>62</sup> *Purgatorio, I: 7*

<sup>63</sup> Dante Alighieri, *De vulgari eloquentia* in Robin Kirkpatrick, *Limitations of Modern Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 64

words into motion. Modestly and with maximum attention, that is what Passerone and Straub did with some verses. For a few minutes they dwell on the supreme moment of illumination, asking us to match the concentration of the poet and of the speaker. This is the courtesy which Dante invited.

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– Partition II-récitant

69 → O somma luce che tanto ti levi → v Respirare  
 da' concetti mortali, a la mia mente → R  
 ripresta un poco di quel che parevi.

72 (e fa la lingua mia tanto possente, v breve  
 ch' una favilla sol de la tua gloria → R  
 possa lasciare a la futura gente; → R R)

75 ché, per tornare alquanto a mia memoria → v  
 e per sonare un poco in questi versi, → R → teso  
 più si conceperà di tua vittoria. → R

78 Io credo per l'acume ch'io soffersi → v  
 del vivo raggio, ch' i sarei smarrito, → R  
 se li occhi miei da lui fossero avversi. v →

82 E' mi ricorda ch'io fui più ardito → v (soffro)  
 per questo a sostener, tanto ch' i giunsi → R  
 l'aspetto mio col valore infinito. → R

85 Oh abbondante grazia ond'io presunsi v  
 ficcar lo viso per la luce eterna → R ↑ salire  
↓ scendete  
 tanto che la veduta vi consunsi! → R

87 Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna, v Respirate (plein d'air)  
 legato con amore in un volume,  
 ciò che per l'universo si squaderna.

90 sustanze e accidenti e lor costume v (voix - discours)  
 quasi conflati insieme, per tal modo → R.C. plein d'air  
 che ciò ch' i dico è un semplice lume. → R capture

93 La forma universal di questo nodo → R → teso  
 credo ch' i yidi, perché più di largo v  
 dicendo questo, mi sento ch' i godo. v o aperto forte senza tronfo

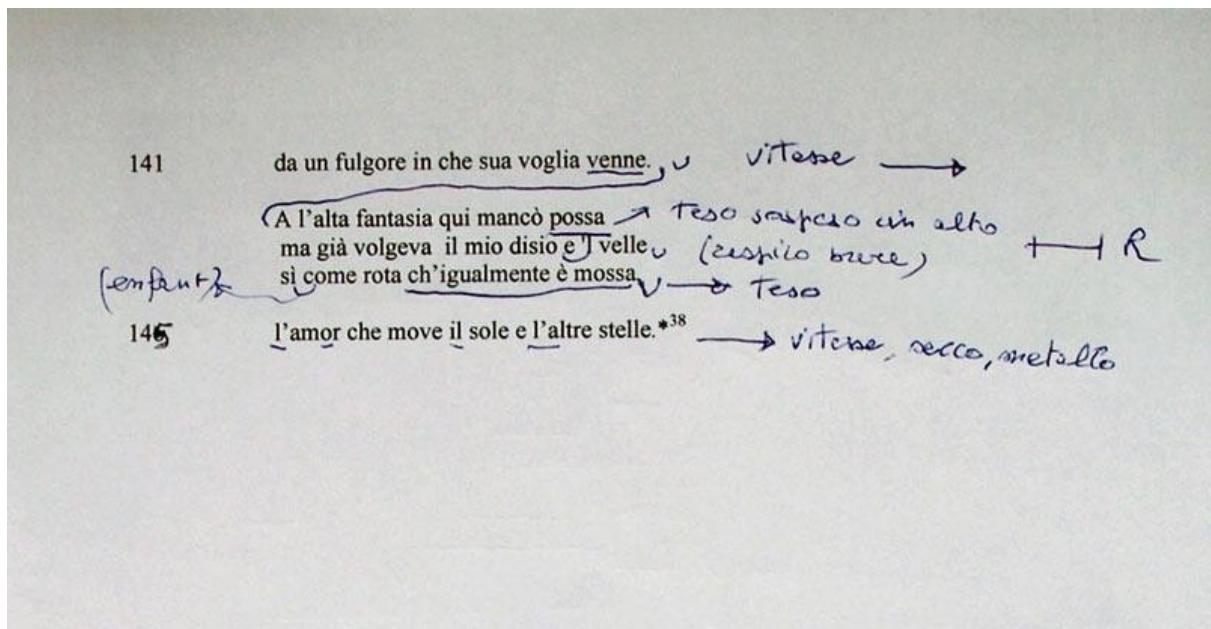
96 Un punto solo m'è maggior letargo → R  
 che venticinque secoli a la 'mpresa v pause courte  
 che f' Nettuno ammirar l'ombra d'Argo. tesa verso salire

99 Così la mente mia, tutta sospesa, → R  
 mirava fissa, immobile e attenta  
 e sempre di mirar faceasi accessa. → Tesa

103 A quella luce cotal si diventa. → v  
 che volgersi da lei per altro aspetto v →  
 è impossibil che mai si consenta v →

[Fig. 1 - Passerone's annotated script of *O somma luce*]

- però che 'l ben, gh'è del volere obietto,  $\nearrow \downarrow$   
 tutto s'accoglie in lei, e fuor di quella  $\rightarrow$   $\text{R}$  (tenebre)  
 è defettivo ciò ch'è lì perfetto.  $\text{H} \text{R}$  tranché, sans plus (fendresse...)
- Omai sarà più corta mia favella,  
 pur a quel ch'io ricordo, che d'un fante  $\rightarrow$   $\text{R}$  (plein d'air)  
 che bagni ancor la lingua a la mammella.  $\text{H} \text{R}$  tremor
- Non perché più ch'un semplice sembiante  $\nearrow \downarrow$   
 fosse nel vivo lume ch'io mirava,  $\nearrow \downarrow$   
 che tal è sempre qual s'era davante;  $\rightarrow \text{R}$  (plein d'air)
- ma per la vista che s'avvalorava  $\nearrow \downarrow$   
 in me guardando, una sola parvenza,  
 mutandom'io, a me si travagliava.  $\text{H} \text{R} \rightarrow$  teso, duro
- Ne la profonda e chiara sussistenza  $\downarrow$   
 de l'alto lume parvermi tre giri  $\rightarrow \text{R}$  foet, duv, "Sogno"  
 di tre colori e d'una contenenza
- e l'un da l'altro come iri da iri  $\rightarrow \text{R}$  teso  
 parea reflesso, e l' terzo parea fogg  $\downarrow$   
 che quinci e quindi ugualmente si spiri.  $\rightarrow$  teso duro  
 (legato e contrasto)
- Oh quanto è corto il dire e come fioco  $\downarrow$  duro, discendente, "o" ascendente  
 al mio concetto  $\text{H}$  e questo, a quel ch'i vidi,  $\rightarrow \text{R}$  (plein d'air)  
 è tanto, che non basta a dicer 'poco'.  $\text{H}$  (legato, contrasto)  
 (Fendresse?)
- ▲ O luce eterna che sola in te sidi,  
 sola t'intendi, e da te intelletta  $\downarrow$   
 e intende te lami e arridi !  $\rightarrow \text{R}$  densissimo  
 (legato, contrasto) Respirare !
- Quella circulazion che si concetta  $\downarrow$  (rotture)  
 pareva in te come lume reflesso  $\text{H}$ . punto  
 da li occhi miei alquanto circunspetta,  $\rightarrow \text{R}$  punto più fermo
- dentro da sé, del suo colore stesso  $\rightarrow$  teso  
 mi parve pinta de la nostra effige :  $\rightarrow \text{R}$  (senza trionfo)  
 per che l' mio viso in lei tutto era messo.  $\rightarrow$  teso
- Qual è l' geomètra che tutto s'affige  $\downarrow$   
 per misurar lo cerchio, e non ritrova,  $\rightarrow$  teso in giù - drâme  $\rightarrow \text{R}$   
 pensando quel principio, ond'elli indigeno
- tal era io a quella vista nova :  $\rightarrow \text{R}$  (femme)  
 veder voleva come si convenne  $\downarrow$   
 l'imago al cerchio e come vi s'indova ;  $\rightarrow$  (quelque)
- ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne :  $\rightarrow \text{R}$  (constat)  
 se non che la mia mente fu percossa  $\downarrow$   
 contraste - - - esplosione



[Fig. 2 - Passerone's gestures, all from Version 1]