

Acropolis Cinema  
presents:



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*Conversations in Sicily* (1941), though the film later departs from its source in significant ways—one’s attention is divided among the images of the hawker’s body, truncated in the manner of Bresson; the men’s strangely cadenced talk, delivered in the folk-stentorian mode of the directors’ late Italian films (“Shouting, always shouting!” one critic complained); and a seawall alcove in frame right, where a boy prepares his fishing line. In two subsequent shots of Silvestro’s back, the boy is first joined by some comrades and then vacates the frame altogether; a large boat abruptly appears docked at the quay, though only seventeen seconds of real time elapse between shots and no ship has been seen approaching (moreover, it will have disappeared by the third shot); and detritus has accumulated in the water, also indicating a passage of time far longer than that which transpired during the men’s conversation. The visually simultaneous events, contrary in their implied duration, confound our sense of temporality and, perhaps inadvertently, deny the “absolute continuity” that Straub deplored as a falsity of bourgeois cinema.

Straub-Huillet’s aesthetic abounds in such anomalies. One finds comfort, albeit austere, in encountering patented elements of the filmmakers’ approach in *Sicilia!*: a parody of the traditional establishing shot, in which the camera endlessly lingers on a railroad-station sign designating Catania; the disappearance of all diegetic sound for a long period as we gaze at the passing scenery from a train window (a sequence Huillet compares to Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu* [1953] in the Costa doc); jarringly mismatched cuts, such as the one that segues from the mother (a formidable Angela Nugara) standing three-quarters in frame to an abridged close-up of Silvestro’s head and shoulders, tamped into the lower half of the image; or the most familiar trope from their formal arsenal, the so-called *plan Straubien*, in which an extended panoramic shot slowly traverses a countryside. For good measure, the filmmakers here immediately repeat their languid semicircular pan across a Sicilian hillside, the second time in slightly brighter light, the camera suddenly swinging in reverse to fix on a distant village, and do it yet again about ten minutes before the movie’s end.

Most critics have placed the hour-long *Sicilia!* among Straub-Huillet’s peasants-declaming-in-a-landscape works, but in many ways it belongs with their musical films, such as *Von heute auf morgen* (*From Today Until Tomorrow*, 1997), their rendition of the eponymous Schönberg opera, made just prior to *Sicilia!* Like Schönberg’s comic one-act, the film is a *Kammerspiel* shot by legendary cinematographer William Lubtchansky in high-contrast black-and-white and centered on marital discord (Silvestro is visiting his mother to discover why she broke up with his father). Aside from a folk song and the Beethoven string quartet that introduces and ends *Sicilia!*, the film avoids nondiegetic music, but it is itself structured as a chamber work in four movements, and the idiosyncratic delivery of the baroque dialogue often hits the ear as discordant ariettas and semi-recitatives. Indeed, the rapid volleys of conversation on the train in the second “movement” suggest nothing so much as bug-eyed *buffa* roulades; and Silvestro’s frequent lists of foods and place names, and his exhilarating exchange in the finale with a knife sharpener—a vocation almost as obsolete as the harquebuses he mentions and the 1.37 aspect ratio that the directors employ—enumerating the joys and insults of life, resemble verismo variations on Leporello’s catalogue aria from *Don Giovanni*.