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THE FILMS OF PETER GREENAWAY: A TISSUE OF LIES BY NOREEN CASEY

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INTRODUCTION

My interest in the work of Peter Greenaway comes from a sense of delight in his work, a feeling that here is a new individual, intelligent and articulate, whose work has much in common with European art cinema in that it appeals to the mind as much as to the emotions, but who is different in that the surface qualities of the films evoke a sense of sheer pleasure for their own sake. Given that my interest grew stronger with each new film, which I perceived to be getting better and better, I was puzzled by the obvious waning of enthusiasm in the critical reception accorded to them.

His first feature film, produced for a general audience - *The Draughtsman's Contract* - was greeted with acclaim. It was seen as a sophisticated detective story of murder and intrigue, with witty embellishments for the knowledgeable cinema-goer. In fact, it was full of non-sequiturs and had no real denouement of plot, which somehow, while being prominent enough, seemed to play a minor role. The true excitement of the work lay elsewhere. This is also true of all the subsequent films, though from *The Belly of an Architect* on, the plot, though episodic, has a beginning, a middle and an end. But still there is a sense in which the characters and their doings are somehow insubstantial, even ciphers perhaps. There is no revealing moment in any of the plots. Instead, Greenaway seems to act as a sort of telescope (or should it be microscope?), homing in on a disaffected, strange life-form, showing it as it is, in a detached manner, with no interest in how it came to be that way nor in the motivation of its actions.

On seeing some of his earlier smaller pieces, I felt that the real interest lay in the way in which visual language and verbal language interacted. At times (*Dear Phone*) the script simply provides a dead-pan echo to the richer visual material; at times (*Water Wrackets*) the obviously arbitrary juxtaposition of the real images and fictional commentary is gently mocking; at times (*A Walk Through H*) the commentary gives meaning to and concentrates the attention on the visual images. I felt that these early works set the pace for the subsequent feature-length films where, I believed, the main concentration is

on the visual element. The question I asked was whether the relationship between the visual and verbal material represents an imbalance which constitutes a serious artistic flaw, or whether the dialogue serves to give clues as to how the visual element should be interpreted, or whether it plays a more vitally integrated role in the work.

Greenaway has stated that his "initial enthusiasm for becoming a film-maker arose from a dual interest in the manipulation of images and the manipulation of words". However, he continued: "I hope by now that what I am endeavouring to do as a film-maker is considerably more than the sum of those two parts and cannot be satisfactorily made manifest in any other way." (Omnibus interview) As my research progressed and as I looked more carefully at the films I came to realise that there was indeed much more to his work than a simple play of language against image.

The work of Greenaway is like a tapestry of flickering light and sound. There are the major threads which provide the initial attraction - those which weave the 'story' together. But once our attention has been attracted, we are pulled further and further into the fabric of the film so that the plot dissolves and the motifs of style and technique, which play against each other in an endless variety of ways, push themselves forward for consideration. The sheer magic of the films resides in the awareness that we are being led a merry dance by the director who is always in control of what is to be seen and heard at any time.

Concentrating my attention on the feature films, it is my intention in this essay first to examine the frustrations felt by the critics with the films of Peter Greenaway. Secondly, to back up his claims to being an artistic voice, I will establish that nothing in the films is outside the control of the director - that these films constitute the utterance of one voice only. In the third chapter, I will examine the possible sources that Greenaway looked to for his guiding principles and how he has adapted those sources to suit his own purposes. I will examine the text of the films to establish the complexity of the interplay between the visual images and the script and will briefly allude to the many

other techniques used by Greenaway. This will constitute chapter four. Finally, I will discuss the position of Greenaway's work *vis-à-vis* present-day art practice.

CHAPTER ONE

The Critical Reception of Peter Greenaway's Films

There has been a distinct change in the way in which the films of Peter Greeenaway have been received since the early days of his experimental work which was funded by the British Film Institute. Then, the driving thrust of his enquiring intelligence and his sophisticated humour was clearly recognised. More recently, criticism has been characterised by a bewildering polarity of opinion ranging from outright vituperation to glowing adulation.

Many critics of his feature films find them cold and unemotional, yet, paradoxically, this frequently arouses the critics to paroxysms of anger. In 1989, when *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* was shown at a press preview in America, several people walked out in protest. In Frankfurt in the same year, John Walsh reports, beer bottles were thrown at the screen and the projectionist was beaten up. In 1993, when *The Baby of Mâcon* was shown at Cannes, a goodly proportion of the critics did not wait to see the end. Gilbert Adair is quoted as saying that he felt the baby "was the only living thing in that film and ... it was somehow demeaned by having to take part." (Walsh, p18) Walsh goes on to say that "Boredom and outrage, contradictorily, are what Greenaway often offers his audiences. Turn and turn about he confronts an audience with shock effects... and mesmerises them with the repetitions and monotony of ritual." (Ibid, p22) His attack is not confined to Greenaway's ideas but is extended to the director himself:

> He favours black suits with startling red shirts and knitted ties. And he talks a blue streak. Possessing, in the words of the poet Kit Wright, 'one of those languid, abrasive, smiling, fuck-you voices they give out at certain political seminaries.', ...he talks in perfect sentences, delivered with an upward cadence at the end of each phrase, as though everything he says is a) rehearsed and b) self-evident to anyone but a complete numbskull." (Ibid, p20)

Usually personal attacks such as this indicate that some fundamental beliefs (in this case, about the nature of cinema) of the attacker are being challenged by the victim. Jeanne Silverthorne proposes one explanation for the wide-spread animosity towards Greenaway: "as an audience we buy the illusion and fret about

being gulled". The fear seems to be that the director is subtly but deliberately mocking his audience: "Ariel's pissing, for example, begins as an interesting Freudian comment on the infantile roots of the desire to unleash a storm, yet recurs so often that it comes to suggest no more than the director's own puerile urge to violate the viewer." (Collins, Amy Fine & Bradley)[1]

Those critics who are not so personally vulnerable but whose cinematic value system is nevertheless challenged are probably represented by Pauline Kael's summary dismissal of The Draughtsman's Contract::

> "What's beneath him from beginning to end is, apparently, the whole idea of motivation... he ducks out on solving the murder mystery... and of who hatched the plot against the draughtsman. ... With Greenaway, you have to contend with so many kinds of abstraction that there's no human comedy left in the material; he has deliberately squeezed it dry." (Kael, pp33/34)

Gavin Millar has an explanation for this when he says that Greenaway "is using the cinema not to tell stories but to ask questions" (But Millar thinks that the questions are best left unasked.) Others agree that Greenaway has no real interest in story telling but believe that his films constitute an examination of the human predicament but, quite clearly, many of them want answers to that predicament and furthermore want hopeful answers.[2] Hence the dismay of many of his critics who, while acknowledging that his work is very beautiful in aesthetic terms, berate if for being essentially empty of emotion and of valid or coherent ideas.

> "In fact, Greenaway's primary purpose in The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover seems to be to make a film which is an exercise in style - albeit a virtuoso one... His work, however, never gets beyond its coolly exhilarating surfaces to truly disturb a viewer's moral vision... Greenaway has made a film that gives a great deal of aesthetic pleasure while being essentially empty at its core." (Quart, p47)

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[1] This ignores Greenaway's penchant for quotation and the fact that the urinating putto is a favourite motif in 17th century statuary.

[2] Challenged about the lack of hope in his work, Greenaway expressed surprise that anyone should consider it to be the rôle of the cinema to offer hope. He suggested instead that it should contribute to debate and acknowledged that his own contribution is deeply pessimistic. (Appendix I, p44)

The fulcrum of the range of opinions is situated precisely at the point at which the critic lets go of the requirement that all films should conform to a set standard (that they should either move or entertain the audience and that they should not deviate too far from accepted norms of storytelling) and accepts Peter Greenaway's own statement that "cinema is far too rich and capable a medium to be merely left to the storyteller." (Quoted in Rayns, "Of Natural History and Mythology Born")

Mike von Joel and Adam Barker both suggest that an appreciation of what Greenaway is about depends on the viewer's willingness to play his game. The difficulty of this 'game' is acknowledged by Rayns who suggests that hard-pressed reviewers need the assistance of Greenaway's press releases in order to be able to follow him into the world of eclectic visual imagery which, as the director himself sadly acknowledges, is rapidly becoming a lost world.

Among the critics who are willing to go some way towards meeting Peter Greenaway in his demands on them, there are still many who recognise the difficulty of the work and, for most of them, this difficulty seems to centre around the relationship between the ideas or narrative, the visual imagery and the spoken language.

Jillian Burt, writing about *The Belly of an Architect* says:

> Throughout the film Greenaway uses the settings to further themes and elucidate meaning, straying from mainstream film practice in which those functions would be provided by dialogue or facial close-ups. The visual elements of *The Belly of an Architect* constitute the dialogue and the close-ups for Greenaway." (Burt, p46)

She feels that in *The Draughtsman's Contract* "language itself has become a kind of decoration". This is true also for Pauline Kael, but she sees value in neither the images nor the language: "But Greenaway's impishness congeals, because there's no dramatic motor in the sequences. A movie for him is a set of theorems to be demonstrated by tableaux. His mind may be active but his camera is dead, and so are his actors." (Kael, p32/33) Adam Mars Jones feels that "His dialogue tends to be stiff (and for a director

who will live or die by his images he writes rather a lot of it)..."[3] Jerôme Coignard writes that Greenaway gives equal value to all aspects of film: "Painting, writing and cinematic effects intertwine, mutually nourishing each other... Greenaway is above all a manipulator of images and of words... "(my translation)[4] (p100) Many critics point out that the story is the least of what the film is about. Some see the concentration on the formal qualities of film in a positive light, others, such as Iannis Katsahnias writes of "The excess of formalism of a Greenaway, where the authority of the sign triumphs over the desire to tell a story (as it used to be in the good old days.)" (my translation)[5]

Neither is there any consensus about the final effect or validity of Greenaway's unsettling approach to cinema. On the one hand we have Stephen Sarrazin who writes: "But look, Peter Greenaway does not make cinema, and by dint of forcing as he does the parameters of the cinematographic concept, something slackens" (my translation)[6] (p45) On the other hand, Robert Brown sees a positive value in Greenaway's manipulations: "Thus, Greenaway's apparently playful games with image and sound conceal some pressing questions about, no less, the metaphysics of knowledge (that is subject-object relations)" Earlier Brown had claimed that "...the precise subtlety of the film is predicated on our culturally acquired knowledge that sight is as much constituted by systems of thought as language." (Brown, "Water Wrackets")

It would be very easy for a reader to become totally mired in the controversial and contradictory opinions on the work of Peter Greenaway. Having seen much of the work and having found it both stimulating and challenging, I would be inclined to agree with Sian Griffiths when she allows that "perhaps the truth is that it belongs to very different (and more Academic) traditions". A way forward for looking at the work can be found

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3 He feels that "the stiffness fits when the period suggests brocade rather than lycra" (as in *The Baby of Mâcon*).
4 Peinture, écriture et cinéma s'entremêlent, se nourrissent mutuellement... Greenaway est avant tout un manipulateur d'images et de mots...
5 "l'excès du formalisme d'un Greenaway, où l'empire des signes triomphe du désir de raconter une histoire (comme cela se faisait au bon vieux temps)."
6 "Mais voilà, Peter Greenaway ne fait pas du cinéma, et à force de tendre comme is se fait les paramètres du concept cinématographique, il y a quelque chose qui lâche."

in the writings of Tony Rayns on *The Draughtsman's Contract:* "Both the film and its central mystery hinge on the space between what is seen (or shown) and what is understood (or interpreted)." Charles Hagen agrees: "In the end it is Greenaway's carefully modulated structure and direction that give the film its allure - both knowing and impassioned - allowing viewers to recognize the constructed nature of the film and thus freeing them to accept it on many levels." (Hagen, p73)

CHAPTER TWO

Summary of *Auteur* Theory

In his condensed history of the development of the *auteur* theory, John Caughie defines the *auteur* as someone who, almost in spite of himself and of the commercial film world, puts his own distinctive mark on his films. He says:

> A firm distinction was made between, on the one hand, the *auteur* who expresses himself consistently, from film to film, continually returning to the same preoccupations despite the variability of his raw material, and, on the other hand, the mere *metteur-en-scene* who may be a highly skilled film-maker but who simply works to assignment, leaving no continuous thread of obsession running through his work. (Caughie, "The Director Comes of Age", p1787)

Implicit in this hierarchy of artistic merit is the romantic idea of the artist as one who "follows the [often obsessive] dictates of his or her own - often unruly - nature at the expense of the precise craftsman who observes the proprieties of style and rhetoric." (Caughie, "The Director Comes of Age", p1788)

As classical *auteurism* came under attack, Peter Wollen modified it and suggests that the *auteur* can work unconsciously "as a catalyst in the complex compound of meanings and relationships of a film. The author brings them together in a structure of which he himself cannot be claimed as the fully intentional source: rather than the artist creating the film, an *idea* of the author is constructed out of an analysis of his films." (Caughie, "The Director Comes of Age", p1789)

Announcing the death of *auteurism*, other writers concentrated on the effects that working within particular genres and within the film industry had on the freedom of action of the author. At the same time, psychoanalysis and semiotics "undermined the very notion of the free and unified individual who controlled language, posing the individual as the subject of language rather than its creator." (Caughie, "The Director Comes of Age", p1789) In fact, for Wollen, this analysis is of vital importance, but he insists that "since there is no true essential meaning there can therefore be no exhaustive criticism, which settles the interpretation of a film once and for all." (Wollen,

p603) In Wollen's value system the most valuable and powerful work is the one "which challenges codes, overthrows established ways of reading or looking, not simply to establish new ones, but to compel an unending dialogue, not at random but productively..." (Wollen, p605)

Wollen holds that in examining a film the critic must concentrate only on the work of the director and must ignore the "separate texts" of the actors, the cameramen etc. which he sees as "noise". Should these separate texts force themselves into consciousness, the result is an indecipherable film. He sees also a conflict between the *auteur* theory and "art" cinema which "is rooted in the idea of creativity and the film as the expression of an individual vision" (Wollen, p602). Instead, the *auteur* theory finds meaning in "a network of different statements, crossing and contradicting each other, elaborated into a final 'coherent' vision." (Ibid) In fact, Wollen's idea is that the *auteur* theory is based on unconscious rather than conscious meaning.

The next two 'moves', identified by John Caughie, in the development of the concept of the *auteur* seem to have been designed to foreground the critic. Barthes posits a 'reader' in whom the meaning of a film comes together, but this reader "is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the text is constituted..." (Barthes, quoted in Caughie, 1993, p3) As Caughie continues:

> "This move removes the question of meaning from the domain of both the intentional author and the personal reader and places it in the space of readership (spectatorship).... It poses reading as the production of meaning, rather than merely consumption, and it allows 'partial' readings - both in the sense of 'not final', 'not exhaustive'; and in the sense of 'not impartial', 'not objective'."

Foucault, in what Caughie calls 'The Power Move', makes a return to the notion of the directorial subject. "But the subject should not be entirely abandoned. It should be reconsidered, not to restore the theme of an originating subject, but to seize its functions, its intervention in discourse, and its system of dependencies." (Foucault, quoted in Caughie, 1993, p3) We are back to the *auteur* but this time we are dealing

with an anonymous construct of society in which lies the real authority for the meaning. Of course, for both these approaches, it is the critic who is the mediator of meaning between the constructs 'The Reader' and 'The Author' and the real flesh-and-blood viewers.

Caughie, in the final paragraph of his analysis, expresses a dissatisfaction with this depersonalisation of the *auteur* when he says: "At the same time, some directors do seem to some people to be 'better' - more interesting, more visually exciting, more imaginative, more daring, more surprising, more progressive, tell better stories or tell stories better - than others...) (Caughie, 1993, p4) Even Peter Wollen seems to give more emphasis to the creative individual when, in considering the problem of the director whose work is based on a pre-existing text, he claims that the *auteur* will use the text simply as a catalyst. "The director does not subordinate himself to another author; his source is only a pretext, which provides catalysts, scenes which fuse with his own preoccupations to produce a radically new work. Thus the manifest process of performance, the treatment of a subject, conceals the latent production of a quite new text, the production of the director as an auteur." ... In this case the director "can deliberately concentrate entirely on the stylistic and expressive dimensions of the cinema." (Wollen, p601)

Greenaway as conscious *auteur*

The problem of having to deal with a pre-existing script does not, for the most part, arise since Greenaway usually writes his own scripts.[1] The question must be posed whether Greenaway is the conscious architect of the films or whether he is simply an orchestrator of the many contributions made by his actors and crew or, indeed, a disembodied voice for the society in which he lives. Greenaway, himself, would seem to

[1]The two notable exceptions are *A TV Dante* and *Prospero's Books*. In both cases, there is no doubt that Greenaway certainly made his own of the originals while remaining true to them at the same time.

come down in favour of the idea of himself as *auteur* who is in dialogue with his real viewers. The very practice of attending the opening night in order to discuss his films with the viewers would suggest this. At the opening night, in Dublin, of *The Baby of Mâcon,* he was quite assertive in claiming full responsibility for what appears on the screen. (Appendix I, p43)

That he recognises the need for freedom in the work of his collaborators is clear when he says of Sacha Vierney: "The more he is encouraged to be experimental, the more excited he becomes." (Hacker & Price, p12) Of his work with Michael Nyman, he says: "Michael Nyman and I, before a word of the script is written, discuss structures in terms of musical perception. ...my concern is to find musical structures and ideas to spread and widen the cinematic vocabulary." (McBride, p57) However, it is clear that Greenaway exercises the ultimate control over how the music is to be used. Nyman, records feelings of both satisfaction and frustration at Greenaway's methods. He speaks approvingly of the director's "habit of having [me] compose the key musical scores before the scene is shot, rather than after it is filmed and edited...", (Dwyer, "Film's Top Scorer") which he finds very satisfying, but then "You start out with those wonderful intentions of his and you write this very complete music. Then, when he gets into the cutting room he gets a bee in his bonnet and the film goes in another direction and instead of a five-minute sequence having five minutes of music designed for that sequence, you suddenly hear just 30 seconds on the finished work." (Ibid)[2]

John Calhoun's discussions with Greenaway's production designers, Ben Van Os and Jan Roelfs, make it quite clear that the ideas come from Greenaway and that their function as designers is to approximate as closely as possible what Greenaway has in his head which "is unlike the contents of any other filmmaker's" (Calhoun, p14) Clearly,

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2 In this interview Nyman made it clear that, overall, he found the approach very satisfactory and no less frustrating than his work with other filmmakers such as Patrice Leconte. However, in an interview with Mike Murphy, broadcast on RTE 1 on Thursday, January 20th, 1994, he explained that a rift occured between himself and Greenaway and colaboration ceased when Greenaway overstepped the mark by unilaterally changing the music in *Prospero's Books.*

too, they find this a very satisfactory arrangement. "With Peter you're doing things that have never been done before", says Van Os. (Ibid)

A similar feeling of excitement, satisfaction and admiration can be detected in the comments of many of the actors who have worked with Greenaway. In John Gielgud's account of working on *Prospero's Books,* he writes with great affection for and admiration of Greenaway and the way in which his imagination can quickly incorporate suggested ideas into his own work. "We were in great sympathy over everything and the few times I did suggest or alter something he immediately understood what I was driving at." (Gielgud, p26) This sentiment is echoed by others who have worked with him. Indeed, Greenaway seems to have the true flexibility of an artist who starts out with an idea but allows it to develop freely, trusting to his instinct and to inspiration as he goes along. Van Os tells us that: "What makes it different to work with Peter is that he is always toying with all the images in the film."

The impression one gets from the interviews with Greenaway is of a quicksilver mind teeming with ideas, of a person who really wants to put his ideas across without compromising them, and of an enthusiasm which belies the common conception of him as a cold fish. Asked if there is a central theme in his work, Greenaway says there "is a whole series of themes." (von Joel, p49) On one occasion, he describes himself in terms of the Cook, "the man who observes and watches, nudges people, divides up the space properly, creates the denouement of the film". (Hagan, p74)

Meaning in the films of Peter Greenaway

In "Greenaway, L'Art, Le Cinéma, et Le Dessin", Jérôme Coignard writes: "Greenaway suffers from the cumbersome business of the shooting, from the constraints imposed by having to direct a crew, from the inevitable dilution which takes place between the

project and its cinematographic resolution." (my translation)[3] (p100) Clearly Coignard regards Greenaway as an artist who has to work with the ponderous machinery of the cinema and filmmaking and who, perhaps, thereby loses out in the transfer from his initial ideas and drawings to the finished film. What he regrets on Greenaway's behalf is the loss, in film, of the ability which one has to return again and again to a drawing in order to add to it or to rework it in some way.

There is a sense in which Coignard's concern is justified. Greenaway has said: "I always regret stopping on a film - there's always so much more to say..." (McBride, p57) Indeed, many of his film projects developed out of a desire to continue the exploration of ideas which were raised by during the shooting of the current one. He also has resorted to painting, drawing and writing to further the thread of his ideas. For example, after *Prospero's Books*, he wrote a novel which imagines the voyage back to Naples during which Miranda irritates the courtiers by her virginal behaviour and the unconventional ideas drummed into her by her father. (Barker, p30)

However, there is also a sense in which he accepts the power of the unconscious to extend the meaning of his films. When asked to explain his films, Greenaway does not have any clear-cut answers. In fact, he gives different explanations at each interview.[4] For instance, when asked about the starting point of his film *A Zed & Two Noughts*, he told Adam Barker that it was "a film made to consider how man, the superior species of the world, has subjugated the rest of animal life to his credo, his attitudes." (Barker, p29) To Jonathan Hacker and David Price he explained that

> Taking *A Zed & Two Noughts*, it began as a fascination with twinship. Being a twin is perhaps the nearest you can come to meeting yourself. Many world

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3 "Greenaway souffre de la lourdeur des tournages, des contraintes qu'impose la direction d'une équipe, de l'inévitable dilution qui s'opère entre un projet et sa réalisation cinématographique."

4 Tony Rayns tells us that "Greenaway was reluctant to give an orthodox interview about *A Zed & Two Noughts*. He expressed distaste for having his words transcribed verbatim, fixed on the page like specimens pinned in a museum." (Rayns, "Of Natural History and Mythology born")

> mythologies share a theory that we are born as twins and in most cases the second twin dies in the womb leaving us incomplete, always looking for the lost half. We compensate by trying hard all our lives to pair with a stranger. ...
>
> Berlin zoo gave me the idea of putting these and other speculations into a film. The main characters would be twins who work in a zoo as animal behaviourists: How do animal behaviourists think about their subject - how do they relate their anxieties with their studies? ... The greatest loss I could imagine would be the death of my wife. So kill the twins' wives in a car crash - the most possible and yet most gratuitous of events. Grief-stricken, the twins try to use what they know best - natural history - to comprehend the event. To complete the circle, the crash is caused by an animal - a swan. We now have the beginnings of a plot to explore many things: the absence of meaning in gratuitous death; is death pre-determined; how do religion and science deal with the problem; is Genesis or Darwin the most likely myth; what other myth systems try to answer the question? ... To fit all this together the zoo is staffed by the equivalents of the characters from Mount Olympus - Venus de Milo is the zoo prostitute, Pluto, God of the Underworld, is the Keeper of Reptiles who makes an alternative animal collection of black-and-white animals. (Hacker and Price, p12)

As part of his exhibition at the Palazzo Fortuny in Venice, in 1993, Greenaway compiled a video in which the procession of Prospero from the bath-house (at the beginning of *Prospero's Books*) is repeated over and over again and the dense texture of the scene is examined many times by means of a commentary which changes with each showing of the various groupings. In the post-production work of *Prospero's Books*, he edited three separate versions of the film "which run in parallel and will ultimately be mixed together into a single two-hour narrative." (Barker, p28)

There are two possible explanations for this continuous undermining of any attempt to allocate a fixed meaning to his work.. The malign one would be that Greenaway is toying with his audience, laughing up his sleeve - especially at the critics. That he finds such attempts academic and, as such, amusing or at least worthy of comment, is evident in his film *Vertical Features Remake* the content of which is:

> the collecting and collating of humble verticals - posts, poles, tree-trunks - in a threatened, domesticated rural landscape. The verticals are collated in four different ways by a group of argumentative film academics who believe that they are remaking a lost film. (Greenaway, Papers, p10)

A more benign interpretation would be that no one explanation is ever enough for his films. In the light of Greenaway's enquiring nature, this would seem to be more likely (though we must acknowledge also his love of games). Speaking to Stuart Morgan who

asked: "So in your film *Vertical Features Remake,* 1978, the debates between the characters Castonager, Gang Lion, and the others about editing and re-editing Tulse Luper's *Vertical Features* will never be settled?" Greenaway replies:

> Put it this way. ...another plan is for a film called *The Cartographers,* about 20 different mapmakers who all approach one specific bit of landscape and map it in their own fashions. Map 1 will be the merest outline indicating mountains, marsh, and a plain through which a river runs. In Map 2 other, quite idiosyncratic features like passages of deadly nightshade and areas of peacock are much more significant than towns. So each cartographer perceives the landscape in a different way according to his particular interests. (Ibid.)

Greenaway is clearly aware that there is never a one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified . However, unlike Coignard, he does not regard this as a real difficulty. He simply accepts the range of meanings within the work. It is as if, once the work is finished, Greenaway becomes as much a spectator as anybody else.

CHAPTER THREE

Greenaway and Brecht

As we have seen, the problem posed by Peter Greenaway's work to its viewers comes mainly from a difficulty in understanding its narrative form, in coming to terms with the style and formal elements used by Greenaway, and in placing the work within accepted cinematic forms.. Having established also that Greenaway is fully responsible for all the elements in his films, we now look to see what those elements are and where they fit into cinematic history.

Greenaway himself has cited Brecht as an influence on his approach to film-making. Roland Barthes sums up the equally complicated problems presented by Brecht:

> On the one hand, he had ... an acute awareness of the techniques of meaning...; he was familiar with total responsibility for the slightest signifiers, such as the color of a costume or the position of a spotlight; and you know how fascinated he was by the theaters of the East, in which signification is very codified - it would be better to say: coded - and consequently not very analogical; finally, we have seen the meticulousness with which he worked, and with which he wanted others to work, on the semantic responsibility of 'syntagms' (epic art, which he championed, is moreover a strongly syntagmatic art); and naturally, all this technique was thought of in terms of a political meaning. *In terms of*, but perhaps not *with a view to*; and its here that we touch on the second aspect of Brechtian ambiguity; I wonder if this *committed* meaning of Brecht's oeuvre isn't , after all, in its way a *suspended* meaning, a meaning *withheld*; you remember that his dramatic theory includes a sort of functional division of the stage and the auditorium: the work must ask the questions (in terms obviously chosen by the author: this is a responsible art), it is left to the public to find the answers (what Brecht called the *issue*); meaning (in the positive sense of the term) moved from the stage to the audience; to sum up, there is in fact, in Brecht's theater, a meaning, and a very strong meaning, but it is always a question. (Barthes, pp19-20)

Quite clearly Greenaway is in tune with much of Brecht's way of thinking. Even if he had not spoken about it, the care with which he sets up each shot is abundantly clear. One can be absolutely sure that everything in the film was either carefully planned or, in the case of happy accidental events, carefully considered before it was included. He has repeatedly insisted that while he is interested in telling a story, it is only in order to make people think. His intention is neither to give people hope nor answers to the questions raised by the actions of his characters. What he does is simply to set down

his own rather bleak view of the society thrown up by western civilisation in which "human relationships are considerably harder and harsher, and much more to do with contracts than with any glossy ideas that are so much in the current media package".[1] Alongside it, he juxtaposes the beauties of the world created by that society. Interestingly, each of his films takes one of what are generally seen as the civilising forces in our world and examines its inability to either save or ennoble mankind. (Art in The Draughtsman's Contract; Science in A Zed & Two Noughts; Architecture in The Belly of an Architect; Games including the game of 'love' in Drowning By Numbers; Cuisine in The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover; Literature in Prospero's Books; Religion in The Baby of Mâcon.) Each in turn is found wanting. In this Greenaway has moved away from Brecht who wanted to use beauty in order to beguile his audience while he presented his arguments for the betterment of mankind. For Greenaway, the beauty is another strand in the picture to be juxtaposed with the ugliness of man: "The rich sensuousness of the film represents the beautiful world we live in, the awful story represents the way man is fucking up that world." (Appendix I, p42)

Brecht's commitment to the 'ordinary man in the street' does not figure in Peter Greenaway's calculations either. Among the qualities admired by Greenaway in the work of R.B. Kitaj (the only modern painter quoted by him as an influence) was his unselfconscious use of all forms of élitist and arcane knowledge. (Omnibus interview) Asked by Adam Barker what draws him back to Jacobean drama, he answered: "The masque is basically an élite private entertainment, very much to do with symbols and emblems and allegories." (Barker, p29) When challenged about his élitism by Stephanie McBride, he answered:

> "Well, it's a risk I have to take. I would make no apology for élitism, because if we don't somehow encompass other areas of human experience, we are going to end up with a very bland culture which just repeats the same genres, the

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[1] Making the point that his works can not begin to really reflect the violence of the real world, Greenaway points out that while he was making The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover there was the assassination of the Ceaucesceaus [which the world watched on television] and the Noriega affair. (McBride, p56)

same opinions, in a masturbatory way, which is totally unsuccessful and completely unfulfilling." (McBride, p56)

He would, no doubt, agree with Noel Burch's apologia for élitism: "And why shouldn't the eye exercise itself? Why should filmmakers not address themselves to an élite, just as composers have always done at different periods? We define 'élite' as those people willing to take the trouble to see and resee films (many films) as one must listen and relisten to a lot of music in order to appreciate the last quartets of Beethoven or the work of Webern." (Quoted in Bordwell, Narration in the Fiction Film, p283) But Greenaway allows that "if you don't care to do that, you're still free to engage with them on a more superficial, exclusively narrative level". (Adair, p41)

Among the innovations introduced by Brecht in his notion of epic theatre, John Willett lists the following: the human being is the object of its enquiry rather than being taken for granted; it turns the spectator into an observer rather than implicating him/her - it presents a picture of the world rather than an emotional experience; the audience is not invited to become involved but is made to face something, to stand outside and study; it concentrates the attention on the course of the work rather than on the dénouement; each scene stands on its own rather than being a preparation for the next one. Willett continues to tell us that: the introduction of epic theatre resulted in "the *separation of elements*. The great struggle for supremacy between words, music and production." (Willett, p37)

Indeed, it is in the separation of elements into individual strands, which can be traced through the fabric of the work, that the fascination and delight of the work of Greenaway lies. It does not lie so much in the 'meaning' of the work. He is concerned that all the languages involved in film should be equally noted - music, lighting, editing, imagery, dialogue etc. He wants the audience to see the language of film. Keeping a distance from the subject matter is part of the film's vocabulary. (Appendix I, p43) (Here, I think, he uses the term 'subject matter' to mean 'story', but, of course, the story is only one strand among many.)

Parametric Narration

This brings us to a consideration of precisely how a Greenaway film is put together. Quite clearly, it most closely reflects Bordwell's description of parametric narration. (Bordwell, Narration in the Fiction Film, pp274-301) Looking at any film in its entirety, we see that the style is of equal value to the narrative, but there is a play between them that gives now one, now the other supremacy; it contains stylistic elements that have no function in promoting the plot but are used for their own sake; it contains elements that may be knowable only by the director; but have to be searched for by the audience or may even be unknowable. Bordwell concludes his discussion of parametric narration thus:

> But one reason to hold on to the possibility of parametric narration is that it points up the limits upon the art film's extrinsic norms - limits, we have seen of insipidity and banality - and lets us acknowledge a richness of texture that resists interpretation. (Bordwell, Narration in the Fiction Film, p289)

So, we must ask ourselves, what are the parameters of Peter Greenaway's work?

Describing and commenting on a piece of work entitled "If only Film Could Do the Same", Greenaway writes:

> A diptych full of incident... The paint and the colour effortlessly hold the contents together - ... Time and shaving, going to school and bondage...a list of Ds and a text of madness and Death Valley... the dim and the sharp, the flat and the faded, the assertive and the self-effacing... if only film could do the same... but we expect content and narrative continuity of film and could never conceive of shape and colour being responsible enough to provide coherence." (Greenaway, Papers, p36)

This point is one of the constants in Peter Greenaway's explanation of his intentions. He would like his films to work like paintings do. This is a conundrum that Greenaway is constantly struggling to resolve: he is interested in narrative, but not simple narrative and not in cinema as an "illustrated nineteenth century novel" which sees imagery solely in terms of furthering the story. The response that he is looking for from his audience is the response that a viewer gives to a painting in a gallery:

> If you go to the National Gallery, you don't laugh, scream, jump about or cry. It's not essentially an emotional response, though it could be one, if you are looking at a Rembrandt, but is to do with all sorts of other areas of appreciation: intellectual, sensual, sheer delight in the picture's surface and subject, the way the man has gone about making the image, its sense of history, all these things (Truss Interview)

There is a sense in which Greenaway wants to bring cinema up to the standard of painting which he still considers the supreme visual art, with cinema limping fifteen or twenty years behind. The painting that attracts him though is not modern abstraction but the painting of 17th century Netherlands, under whose realistic narrative surface lies a highly moral, symbolic content.[2]

He has said that he finds abstract cinema boring. He certainly would not be interested in taking up Stan Brakhage's invitation to "Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before the 'beginning was the word'." (quoted in Mast, Cohen and Braudy, p71) Having been trained as a painter, he was initially drawn to film-making by "a dual interest in the manipulation of images and the manipulation of words." (Greenaway, Papers, p7) (He has also claimed Jacobean Theatre as a strong influence on his work.) Speaking to Stephanie McBride about the problems of translating his films from cinema to television, Greenaway expressed worry equally about the loss of soundtrack information and the loss of visual information. (McBride, p52)

This duality is hardly anything new - in spite of Rudolph Arnheim's lament at the introduction of sound into film, very few film-makers have failed to exploit it for their purposes. However, there is a feeling in Greenaway's work that sound is used differently, that it is not always strictly necessary for the progression of the narrative, that, at times, it undermines the message of the visual image, or that it exists on its own, independent of the pictures. Because the whole thing is so seamlessly woven together it is often difficult to separate the various strands while viewing the film. One

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2 The extent and significance of the symbolic elements in Dutch art are the subject of debate in historical circles, with historians such as Simon Schama (The Embarrassment of Riches, Fontana Press, 1987) giving more weight to the symbolism while others such as Svetlana Alpers (The Art of Describing, London, Penguin, 1983), challenge this view and argue that the descriptive qualities of the art were far more important than any symbolic content.

is left at the end with the sense of delight at the layers of meaning that assail one during the showing and at the richness of the texture, both visual and aural of the works.

Curiously, we can return to Dutch art for the prototype for Greenaway's treatment of text in his films.

> Dutch paintings... are at ease with inscribed words. There are inscriptions in painted books whose pages are often quite legible, on papers, on maps, woven into cloth, on boards or tablets, on virginals, on walls. The words can have been previously inscribed on a surface that is depicted - as in books or virginals - or they may be presented as added labels, or frankly inscribed by the artist with his signature. But in each case a continuity is demonstrated between rendering the visible world and reading words. These inscribed texts, rather than existing prior to the work as motives for picturing - a story to be evoked, a theme to be presented - are themselves made part of the picture. Vermeer's *Art of Painting*, ... is the supreme example of a common phenomenon." (Alpers, p169)

In other words, text and images form part of a complex composition each part of which has its own contribution to make. We have already seen how Kitaj's unselfconscious use of all forms of élitist and arcane knowledge attracted him, but he also admired the way in which he used text, and his tendency to present his images in catalogue form. The ways in which Greenaway weaves text into his picture are varied within each film and from film to film, but the overall result is to create an effect of the layering of meaning and significance. I mean by this that sometimes the text strengthens and underlines the accompanying image; sometimes it breaks away from it to distance the viewer from the image and make him question it; sometimes it is purely whimsical, introducing a lighter note into the proceedings; sometimes it is used by the *auteur* to propose his own view of events or to inject philosophical musings. Lighting and colour, too, move far away from a realistic presentation of the scene. Music serves both the mood and to connect different elements of the film

CHAPTER FOUR

Textual analysis

There are three main elements in each of Greenaway's films which, in turn, merge with each other, play against each other or run parallel to each other - the narrative, the abstract ideas and the exuberance of the style.

Looking briefly at what Bordwell calls the *fabula* (the elementary story) of the films, I think it could be said, basically, that all of Greenaway's films are about sexual politics in which the urge to recreate is the driving force behind woman, with man as a pawn in the game of procreation, expendable after his task of engendering the next generation is done.[1] There is a central scene in *Drowning by Numbers* which, I think encapsulates the Greenaway approach very well. (Clip 1) In it, the three Cissies and all the main male protagonists play a game in which the men end up in 'the winding sheet' (thus neatly presenting a summary of the fabula) while the women blithely continue to play. Appendix II gives Greenaway's thoughts on this scene. Quite clearly, his main interest lies in the elaborate construct which he builds on top of the simple fabula of three women who murder their husbands and their male protector. The birth scene in *The Baby of Mâcon* (Clip 2) is just one more of many examples of the richness of the texture of the films - the birth itself is prolonged while the characters raise all sorts of questions and the cameras dwell lovingly on the sumptuous *mis-en-scéne*.

The style changes from film to film, each new approach being based on a different organisational structure. At times, Greenaway invents his own style and finds a structuring motif around which to spin his ideas and images. In *A Zed & Two Noughts*, he creates an episodic style in which quite diverse images and ideas are collaged together in a rhythmic pattern to form a whole; in the almost surreal *Drowning By*

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[1] This theme is dealt with in different ways - at times humourously, at times blackly. Sometimes both women and men are seen as innocent players, sometimes man is seen as the more sinister partner, but more often woman takes on this role.

Numbers, the search for the sequence of numbers from one to one hundred gives a structure to the film (which moves back and forth between the narrative and the games of Madgett and Smut), much as a repeating colour would in a painting; colour itself forms the connecting link between the sequences in *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover.* Sometimes Greenaway borrows from existing genres such as the detective film for *The Draughtsman's Contract,* the melodramatic narrative for *The Belly of an Architect,* or the opera for the recent *The Baby of Mâcon.* One of the excitements of a new Greenaway film lies in seeing which particular style he will use and how he will play with the original genre in order to pursue his own quite different aims.

At this point, it is time to examine the films in some detail to see how the interweaving of elements works. It is my intention to concentrate particularly on the relationship between the images and the dialogue in order to examine my original thesis. However, I will also briefly consider the other elements such as music, lighting and colour.

Greenaway's opening scenes are never less than powerful - sometimes overwhelming. They carry in them the seeds of most of the ideas with which the film will concern itself. In the initial scenes of the first sequence in *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (Clip 3), the visual images dominate, not to tell a story but to create an atmosphere in which the story can be begun. (The actual story does not begin until well into the third sequence, which takes place in the dining room of the restaurant. The main theme of the film centres around the boorishness of Spica and it is against this boorishness that the story unfolds episodically.) The hungry, wild dogs (shown in slow-motion while the sounds of barking and yelping in the background is played at normal speed) bring with them a bleak sense of a wild, uncivilised place. The regular sound of heavy machinery, that accompanies the barking, is oppressive. The music, when it begins, adds a plaintive note.

Already, at this point, we are reminded that the reality of what we are about to see is in question when the camera executes a slow pan upwards, through scaffolding, to two

figures, dressed in red with white gloves, who are clearly on a stage and who open the curtains onto the 'real' world (a vast open space lit in eerie blues and greens) to let the play begin. The idea of theatricality is continued in the way the vans are parked symmetrically with the car centred between them. Greenaway, in all his films, is at pains to remind us that what we are seeing is not reality but a construct of his imagination. He encourages us to remain outside the emotions of the work, the better to be able to contemplate the ideas put forward. The techniques used to this end include the formality of the language spoken by the characters; the way in which, over and over again in all the films, symmetry is a predominant force; the lingering of the camera over elements that are extraneous to both the narrative and the abstract ideas. Greenaway also makes frequent use of long takes, during which the characters move in and out of the setting, as they would in the theatre. For example, the scene in *The Belly of an Architect* in which Kracklite tries to force Louisa to eat a fig lasts for two-and-a-half minutes. (Clip 4)

Going back to *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, (Clip 5) when the characters take over in the first sequence, images and dialogue act together to introduce us to Albert Spica and to depict his obnoxious, bullying character in broad stylised strokes. While all this is happening, we are also introduced (or re-introduced if we have seen Greenaway's other films) to some of the director's personal motifs: the 'still-life' shots of the contents of the open vans, reminiscent of the 17th century delight in the realistic depiction of food; the two children looking on (In each of Greenaway's films there is at least one child - representative perhaps of innocence. In *Prospero's Books* and *The Baby of Mâcon* the child wears a coral necklace which, in Renaissance times, was traditionally used to ward off evil.).

Spica urinating in an arc is an example of another image that appears in many of the films and may have its source in the use made by 17th century sculptors of such figures, though some critics have seen it as a direct assault on the sensibilities of the audience. In *The Baby of Mâcon*, the arc of water is produced by a syringe-like kitchen

implement (Clip 6), indicating that Greenaway may simply like the image for its own sake. Bordwell allows that in parametric narration it is common to have images and ideas whose significance may be knowable only to the director. Because there is a drive in the viewer to seek for meaning, the inclusion of such motifs helps to set up a barrier between the audience and the narrative thread in that they force a debate that takes the mind outside the story. As an audience becomes familiar with the director's work, distancing is effected purely by the act of recognition of a familiar motif - the viewer becomes aware of the guiding consciousness of a particular film-maker.

Sometimes, the task of creating distance is passed on to the script as, for example, in *A Zed & Two Noughts* when Alba tells one of the Deuce twins that the details of the crash could be used to produce completely different stories; or the scene in *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* when Michael tells Georgina about the film in which the main character spoiled the mystery and expectation by speaking after a half-hour. When she asks if that will happen to them now that they have finally spoken, he answers: "It was only a film.". The audience draws back from the intimacy of the scene to wonder if some sense of expectation or mystery has gone now that they have spoken. In *The Draughtsman's Contract*, Greenaway gently mocks any attempts at constructing a narrative when Mr. Neville asks Mrs. Talmann: "Do you see a narrative in those unrelated episodes?" Later, she asks: "Is my father in Southampton? Perhaps you have taken a great deal on trust." We realise that we too have taken a great deal of what the film has presented us with on trust.

The questioning of our acceptance of the idea of realism in cinema becomes the central abstract theme of *The Baby of Mâcon* where it is handled with stunning complexity. In this film, there are four levels - the actors who put on the medieval mystery play, Cosimo di Medici and his entourage who are on the stage but outside the curtain, the main audience in the body of the church where the play is being staged, and, finally, the cinema audience. Visually the action moves back and forth between the three internal levels in a seemingly arbitrary way - it rains on stage and the actors run into the body of

the church to avoid the rain (Clip 7); the auction of the child's body fluids takes place in the body of the church with the main audience taking part; the actors in the play now ignore Cosimo's interventions, now include them in the proceedings. Having been treated to this to-ing and fro-ing, there is a sense of shock when Cosimo and his group just stand watching the murder of the child. (Clip 8) This is dispelled when, weeping, Cosimo asks if God was so impatient that he had to have the child so soon and is consoled by being told: "It is only a play with music." (He reacts indignantly to this idea.) This Pirandellian questioning of reality is not new but, perhaps Greenaway can be forgiven for thinking that the idea has bypassed many of his critics who insist, as did Cosimo, on taking the stories he tells as reality.[2]

The films are sprinkled with verbal jokes. Asked by Mr. Neville whether she considered his innocence or arrogance weighed heaviest, Mrs. Talmann replied: "Your innocence, Mr. Neville, is always sinister. So, I will say that the right one is the heaviest." - one of the many delightful word plays to be found in all of Greenaway's work. In *A Zed & Two Noughts*, when van Meegeren attempts to kiss Alba, she says: "Get off, van Meegeren, you fake." (The audience needs to be familiar with art history to get that one.) In *Drowning By Numbers*, Madgett says to the apprehensive Cissie One: "Have some heart.", offering her a piece of cooked offal to eat. A few minutes later, when Madgett tells Smutt to get some tea for Gregory and Teigan, Cissie asks: "What about the sheep?" Madgett replies: "Oh, they need to be thirsty." (Clip 9) In *The Baby of Mâcon* when Cosimo and his courtiers, dressed in shaggy white costumes, crowd around the virgin we hear a single "baa". (Clip 10) These are just a few examples of the jokes that serve to lighten the atmosphere but which also have the function of bringing us back to the surface of the words, in all their ambiguity. They could be seen as the verbal equivalent of Greenaway's diversions to examine the visual surface of things - the soap bubbles that slide off the soap after Cissie One has killed Jake; the recurring play of

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[2] During a discussion on The Late Show, Derek Malcolm, critic for The Guardian, criticised the rape scene on the basis that there is no evidence that the church ever used mass rape as an instrument of punishment. Greenaway, justifiably, could hardly keep a straight face.

water on the wall; the white snow-like showers, now of paper, now of feathers; the human bodies both beautiful and ugly.

Many of the images used in the films also take us outside the arena of the cinema and back to history. Examples include the laying out of Cissie Two's husband to recall Mantegna's *Dead Christ*, the views through small doorways into lighted areas beyond in *The Belly of an Architect* which are reminiscent of Vermeer, the woman drinking from the long wine glass in *The Baby of Mâcon*, reminiscent of 17th century Dutch genre pictures in general; the three women in the car at night in *Drowning By Numbers* who evoke the conspiracy of Shakespeare's 'three sisters'. Nyman's music frequently takes us back to 17th century composers such as Purcell.[3] History is recalled by the dialogue, as for example in *The Baby of Mâcon*, when the priest paraphrases Henry VIII's famous dictum when he says: "Who shall rid us of this turbulent whore?"

Frequently words are used in direct authorial intervention to pose questions or to suggest ideas, as we have already seen in Clips 1 & 2. Most of the dialogue in *A Zed & Two Noughts* is very formal and artificial and is used to raise questions (sometimes frivolous, sometimes of a philosophical nature) and to give statistical information. Greenaway has talked about being taught in art college the old dictum of drawing what can be seen rather than what is known. In *The Draughtsman's Contract*, he questions this when he has Mrs Talmann tell Mr. Neville that an intelligent man cannot be a good painter because he knows more than he sees. (Clip 11) In *A Zed & Two Noughts*, nobody questions Alba when she declares that one should never throw a key away. Why? Earlier Oliver had declared that he was trying to separate the clues from the red herrings. Taken together, these comments can be seen as teasing directives from the director to his audience. In *The Belly of an Architect*, Kracklite, as yet in control of his situation, looking at an English pound note with the image of Newton on it, says of him that: "By fixing us firmly on earth, he enables us to keep our heads in the clouds." This

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[3]Some of the musical themes for the films are taken directly from Purcell's *King Arthur*

notion proves treacherous because, by not being sufficiently aware of events, he ensures his own downfall. After his fall from the window to his death, the pound note falls out of his hand. In the same film, the vulnerability of Kracklite to the much more 'clever' Italians is expressed at the beginning by the conversation between the Italians about the readiness of his wife for an affair (Clip 12), and towards the end visually when he sees, in Flavia's studio, photographs of episodes in the film that she should not be expected to have witnessed. (Clip 13) (This, of course, also serves to question the 'reality' of events.)

This elegant echoing of word with image to complete an argument or develop an idea is repeated many times in the films. Sometimes they are more closely tied together such as in the sad, emaciated figure of famine at the beginning of *The Baby of Mâcon,* his swollen tongue preventing him from fluent expression. (Clip 14) The character of Cosimo in the same film was a brilliant invention, allowing Greenaway, as we have seen, to move us in and out of the 'play', the naivity of his white, artificial face echoed by the naivity of his comments. At the beginning, his ignorance is lightly stressed when the crowd correct his pronunciation. (Clip 15)

Images, often set adrift from the script, in their turn play similar roles in distancing and informing as we have seen, but also in delighting, in undermining the message, in recalling images from the past. In *The Belly of an Architect,* Kracklite's insistent photocopying of the stomachs of Augustus and Boullée raises the idea of the futility of using art to solve our problems. *Prospero's Books* is one of the richest of the films in terms of images (though mainly because of the possibility provided by *Quantel Paintbox* for filling the screen with multiple images). What are the white horses, Renaissance symbols of lust, doing at the chaste exchange of vows between Miranda and Ferdinand? (Clip 16) How beautiful is that single drop of water on a leaf so lovingly dwelt on by the camera, but, like the soap bubbles, soon to slide back into the pool. What a wonderful visual manipulation of the scene where Miranda sees the Milanese nobles for the first time - the image gradually, almost imperceptibly, dissolves to an underwater (?) scene,

framed by a procession and, just as gradually, is reconstituted. (Clip 17) Greenaway is nothing if not inventive. In the final image, when Prospero beckons us to draw near, we do so by means of a camera zoom, his face growing larger until it almost fills the frame. When the contrary movement is called for, the face remains the same size relative to its frame but the whole is pulled back by computer manipulation - Prospero has visually become a talking picture.

Music, colour and light all add their richness to the images presented to us by Greenaway; all are employed in many different ways. *The Baby of Mâcon* is dramatically opened to the sound of the powerful rhythmic pounding of staves. (Clip 18) There is the sad horn theme which always plays when Georgina and Michael are together, fading to a whisper when he dies. In *The Belly of an Architect*, the excitement of the music is kept for the architecture implying questions about the connections between the older classicism and the classicism of Fascism. Image and music complement each other in *A Zed & Two Noughts* when the recurring speeded up images of decaying things is accompanied by agitated music. (Clip 19) Colour is never used naturalistically but is intended to make a statement or to enhance the visual beauty of the scene. At the beginning of *The Draughtsman's Contract*, Mr. Neville appears dressed in white (of innocence?) between two black-clothed men - at the end he is dressed in black (of death?) between two men in white. For the birth in *The Baby of Mâcon*, Cosimo and his entourage wear white; during the death scene, they wear black. Van Hoyten keeps a private zoo of black-and-white animals because there are no colours in hell. But all is not hell and colour does play a part in *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* - to separate and make artificial all the arenas of the action. Green is left out of the palette for *The Belly of an Architect* because green is the colour of nature and this film is about the artificial environment of architecture. The only time green makes its appearance is during the photocopying scene when Kracklite's face catches the light and turns the green of decay. Changing light plays a large part in all the films - in *The Baby of Mâcon*, contrary what one would expect, when the people come to be blessed by the baby the light is bright, but during the blessing, darkness descends, thus

contradicting the idea of blessing. (Clip 20) Light also plays a very great part in *A Zed & Two Noughts* where one of the themes has to do with black and white, light and dark, twinship and completion. Light filtering through venetian blinds throws black-and-white reflections on the wall. The flashing cameras at the laboratory in the zoo are compared by Oliver to lighthouses "each giving you a bearing on lost spaces of time".

The scene in *The Baby of Mâcon* in which disaster is foretold is a beautiful example of how the various elements work together in a Greenaway film - in this case to create a bridge between the triumphant first part and the beginning of disaster. (Clip 21) The device of using an off-stage voice for the child, the visual beauty, the quality of the acting, and the words that almost echo each other, but not quite, are powerfully affective.

The complexity of Greenaway's films is such that I feel that I have only been able to scrape the surface in this analysis of them. Yet, it should be clear by now that in the work of Peter Greenaway, the fabula is only part of the story. Floating above it, constantly keeping us from falling into it, is a web of sound, light and image, creating its own pattern but not so densely woven as to prevent us from seeing it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Greenaway and Godard

When watching Greenaway's films, one can hardly help being reminded of that other film-maker who set out to undermine the standards of classical narrative cinema - Jean-Luc Godard. Among Godard's ideas, shared by Greenaway,1 are a refusal to give the viewer packaged solutions to the questions raised; a refusal to allow the viewer to take cinema at face value - Godard sees cinema as "the most beautiful fraud in the world". (Hardwick, p251) Both of them question the role of art in solving the problems of life; both stray constantly from the narrative into the investigation of abstract ideas. What Jean-Louis Camolli said of Godard could equally be said of Greenaway: Pointing out that Godard's films are intended to make people uncomfortable, he says that the very purpose of his style "is not just to challenge the language of cinema, but to challenge the world through that language and the language of that world through cinema. The form irritates some people because it runs contrary to their usual experience of cinema and especially to their comfortable view of the world." (Hillier, p104) (Speaking of the criticism levelled at his political views in *Le Petit Soldat*, in an interview in Cahiers du Cinéma in December 1962, Godard said that others were free to do it in their own way but that the concerns of his films were those of himself -

> a Parisian in 1960, belonging to no party. And what concerned me was the problem of war and its moral repercussions. So I showed a man who poses himself a lot of problems. He can't resolve them. but to pose them even confusedly, is already an attempt at a solution.' (Milne, p178)

This is the point where Greenaway begins to pull away from Godard. Godard was politically-minded; Greenaway is not actively so - except insofar as every human intervention has a political aspect to it. Godard believed that by asking questions we could come up with solutions; Greenaway does not. Greenaway's films are, rather, musings on Darwinnian theory and the contemporary situation as he sees it, with no suggestion of intervention or solution. As we have seen, the subject of these musings is

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1 Greenaway has acknowledged that Godard had a strong influence on his way of thinking about film.

the physical world in all its beauty and all its ugliness and the relationships of the humans who inhabit that world, increasingly in all their ugliness. Godard was a man of his times in which utopian hopes and ideas still had some credibility. Greenaway is also a man of his times in which those hopes and ideals are believed to have failed. Is Greenaway then a post-modernist where Godard was a modernist?

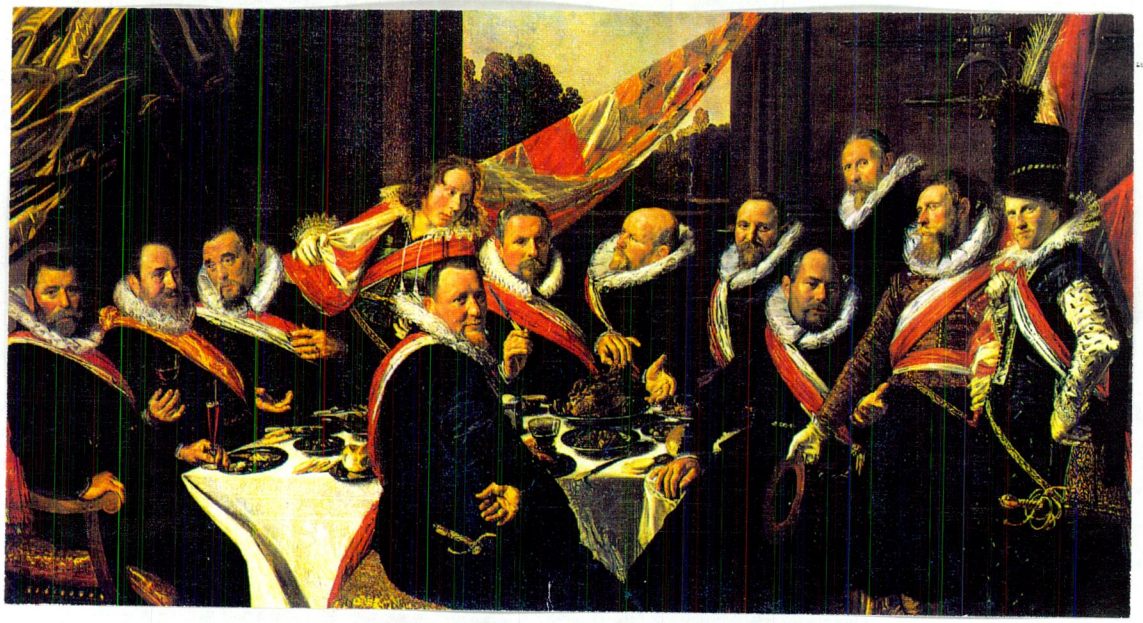
Post Modernism

Richard Kearney defines post-modern culture as

> "one which attempts to portray what is without presuming to know what it is, to analyse reflexively where we are now without automatically deferring to a possible future or proclaiming the present to be an advance on the past." (Kearney, p5)

Paul Crowther suggests that what has happened is that utopian hopes have been replaced by uncertainty and that there are two main attitudes to this shift - that of J.F. Lyotard who urges us to celebrate the new complexity and pluralism; and that of Peter Fuller, Roger Scruton and Daniel Bell who urge us to return to the more spiritual values of the past. (Crowther, p ix).

Though Greenaway does appear to look back to earlier times it is interesting to note exactly what he is looking back to. His favourite historical period is the 17th century generally, but he has a particular interest in Netherlandish art of that time. While religion did play a large part in Dutch society of the 17th century, it would seem that it was a religion of moral social control rather than a religion that promoted transcendent spiritual values. It is generally accepted that *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* is the most political of his films. He, indeed, has attributed part of its motivation to the excesses of the Thatcher regime, and as a critique of the overriding materialism and self-indulgent hedonism of Thatcher's political philosophy, it is savage and black indeed. However, it makes an interesting exercise to look the painting which dominates the diningroom of the restaurant. It is *The Banquet of the Officers of the St George Civic Guard Company,* painted by Franz Hals in 1616.



Franz Hals, Banquet of the Officers of St George Civic Guard Company, 1616
Canvas, 69 x 127.5 in., Haarlem Franz Hals Museum

Could Greenaway be urging us to take a lesson from a better, more spiritual era? A clear connection between the officers and Spica and his henchmen is set up by the sashes being worn by all. The Dutch banquet was traditionally held to celebrate the end of the Officers' tour of duty. In 1621, a new regulation was introduced to limit the celebration to three or four days (Nash, p20) which suggests that prior to that it must have been quite a rambunctious event. Hals is a superb portrait painter, catching the character of each of his sitters. These are men who are used to the good life and whose faces exhibit a canniness and a worldliness that is open to interpretation. One thing is certain - these are not spiritual ascetics. Is Greenaway saying: "Plus ça change..."?

There is much more to suggest that Greenaway has chosen Lyotard's way. His return to 17th century Dutch art is more likely to stem from its delight in the material qualities of the world. Svetlana Alpers described the aim of Dutch art (and even those historians who see a strong allegorical layer in the pictures would agree with her) as: "to capture on a surface a great range of knowledge and information about the world."

"Theirs", she says "was not a window on the Italian model of art but rather, like a map, a surface on which is laid out an assemblage of the world." (Alpers, p122). Though Greenaway frequently talks about his intentions in relation to the content of his movies, even more frequently he draws attention to the over-riding importance of the surface qualities of the works:

> I'm also dubious about content - content also atrophies. The focus of our culture shifts. In over 2,000 years of European painting, those forms of visual content do indicate evaporation so that the actual form of the work becomes the only point of contact. All these delightful things about painting which concern surface are highly legitimate tools and should not be debunked. The delight of a Rembrandt painting is often in its surface. I try to get those things into the cinema - much to the great irritation of some people." (McBride, p54)

or again:

> I hadn't realised how personal that film [The Belly of an Architect] is on lots of different levels - the older I get the more personal I find that movie - about immortality, posterity, the significances of reproduction, both artistic and genetic. I suppose I do feel a certain optimism for art itself. Small pieces of jade form an ancient 5,000-year-old Chinese tomb: we don't understand their political significance, we don't understand their religious significance, but they are able somehow to communicate to us in other ways. There seems to be some clue here, a search for doing something which in a cosmic sense would be totally and absolutely useless, but in a human sense - if we are allotted a certain amount of time on earth - we need to engage with unless we all want to go and commit mass suicide. But if you take the other, more pragmatic view, in a Darwinian sense my purpose on earth is entirely over. I have engendered two daughters, I have passed on the genetic material, so what I do now, between their birth and my death, is just embellishing the nest a little. The spark, that piece of electricity from God to Adam, has passed on, and I am merely engaged - in a cosmic sense - in decoration. (Barker, p30)

In this sense, Greenaway could be said to be decidedly post-modern in his approach.

However, Crowther, Kearney and O'Brien all draw attention to a recent theme in relation to Post-modernism, namely that it represents the end of art and the dominance of market forces in the development of an idea of entertainment so impoverished that it can be said to have been reduced to the lowest common denominator of human understanding. Quite clearly this is where Greenaway breaks away from post-modernism. He does not buy into the general post-modern value of the total and easy accessibility of the text. As we have seen in chapter one, a major stumbling block for critics is the awareness of a level of quotation from the past in both the images and

script which demands attention and even research. In this approach, Greenaway has been compared to James Joyce. Speaking to Marcia Pally, he says:

> "I get a kick out of the pursuit of knowledge. The sheer garnering of information, the collecting and collating, the finding, reading, and research is of great interest to me. I enjoy it and it's the stuff I want to use to make my movie."

There are problems relating to this in that films are usually only seen once therefore there is a real danger that much of the detail of the surface richness will escape the conscious attention, leaving only a sense of frustration at something not grasped. Greenaway is aware of this and proposes that his films be treated like paintings to which the viewer returns again and again for the sheer pleasure of looking and listening. He seems to be proposing a cinema of contemplation rather than of entertainment and easy answers. [2]

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[2] The problem here is that, at present, video is the only means of returning again and again to a film. We have seen that, in translation to video, film loses out on precisely those surface qualities that are the essence of Greenaway's films. Until video quality is improved, this will continue to be problematic.

CONCLUSION

Writing of Gerhard Richter's work, Birgit Pelzer says that it "explores malaise - that void, that gap, that speck of death, that violence we carry inside us - reality as a screen compared to an unbearable real." (Pelzer, p71)

She could have been writing of Greenaway. We have seen that Greenaway's view of human existence is bleak indeed: his stories express his much-repeated "sincere if pessimistic belief" that, in the world we inhabit, "the good rarely get rewarded, and the bad rarely get punished and the innocent are always abused." (Omnibus Interview) However, his pessimism does not stop him from looking around at the surface of life and recognising the beauty, the humour, the intellectual stimulus with which we are surrounded and which help us to forget, for a while, the essential pointlessness (for the individual) of the game of genetic selection which, in Darwin's terms, is the essence of existence.

I propose then that Greenaway has taken back for himself the role of conscious *auteur* and that, while indulging in a 'Modernist' delight in the quality of materials, he introduces a new sumptuous style (particularly in the more recent films). However, he is suggesting, in the spirit of Post-Modernism, that it is all a beguiling tissue of lies.

APPENDIX I

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION WITH PETER GREENAWAY AFTER THE SHOWING OF *THE BABY OF MÂCON* AT THE IRISH FILM CENTRE. ON FRIDAY, DECEMBER 3, 1993

INTRODUCTION

In his introduction, before the film was shown, he said that he had three concerns in mind when making the film:

1. he wanted to make a contribution to the debate about the exploitation of children;

2. he wanted to further explore the language of cinema;

3. he wanted to explore the relationship between the film and the audience.

His personal appearances to discuss his films with audiences derived from the idea he had of cinema as a contributor to debate about relevant issues.

QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SESSION AFTER THE FILM

Asked whether this is an 'exploitation film', he answered that he wishes to be provocative and challenging but not gratuitously sensational and shocking. In his opinion, mature cinema must take on and explore the taboos and controversial issues of society. This must be done with an awareness of the inherent voyeuristic nature of cinema. Being aware of this, he also wishes to carry out a serious examination of the content and language of the cinematic process.

Asked whether he would study Islam in the same way, he simply said that it had been proposed to him that *The Baby of Mâcon* was the *Satanic Verses* of the Catholic church. He believes that the element of fundamentalism does not exist in the modern church and doesn't expect any *fatwahs* to be taken out against him.

Asked what he believes to be the power of cinema, he answered that cinema is a popular medium which can create a sense of illusionism as no other medium can.. Being aware of this, he is deeply suspicious of cinema and feels that he, as a film-maker, has a responsibility to the idea of cinema as a language. Equating the painter with the film-maker, and seeing cinema as another art form, he feels that the director should be free to pursue personal ideas and to express intense personal experiences. In his own case the film is more completely the product of his imagination because he is director, script writer and film editor. (He drew attention to his training in editing at the BFI.) He is concerned that all the languages involved in film should be equally noted e.g. music, lighting, editing etc. He wants the audience to see the language of the film. Keeping a distance from the subject matter is part of the film's vocabulary.

Asked about the historical basis for his film, he said that Cosimo di Medici was a real person, that the film was set in 1658 when Cosimo was 17 years old, that his mother had foisted religion on him and that he had gone to extraordinary extremes of sexual prudery as he got older. Mâcon was the main town associated with the children's crusade which sent thousands of children off to be slaughtered. This particular tale had no direct source but there is a rich fund of such tales of miraculous events to be found in historical documents.

Asked whether the visual bombardment does not eventually weary the audience, he replied that he does not believe so, that he feels that the content and the language marry in a satisfactory way to him. He pointed to the operatic structure of the film

- 3 acts
- 2 intervals
- prologue and epilogue

The medium is the message for him. Speaking about the baroque nature of the film, he said that it is not possible to film history - we film our idea of history e.g. people wear costume rather than clothing.

Someone suggested that his earlier films such as *Water* were more optimistic. He laughed and pointed out that that was made a long time ago and that he had become older and more pessimistic since.

Speaking about audience reaction, he said that the audience reaction is part of the performance and that he wanted to show this. He pointed out that the audience within the film reacted like *The Rocky Horror* audiences of today. He believes that a change is coming about in the requirements of cinema audiences - that the 'Nintendo kids' of today will demand a more interactive role in cinema. This change will be akin to a second Gutenburg revolution.

Asked whether cinema was the 'new religion', he agreed that both film and faith require a suspension of disbelief and he equated the audience with the congregation at a religious ceremony.

Challenged that there may not be any depth in his work, that he was offering no hope, he expressed surprise that anyone should believe that the role of cinema is to give hope. He said he has three personal ideas to get across:

- we never learn from history - this is reinforced by the figure of *Famine* at the beginning and end of the film;
- the rich sensuousness of the film represents the beautiful world we live in, the awful story represents the way man is fucking up that world;
- exploitation and humiliation is always wrong - exploitation of children and sexual humiliation of women of today's world.

Asked whether the emotional engagement of the audience is not important, he said that in his work, character and narrative are not to the fore as in Hollywood films. It is no accident that the Hollywood system is dominated by actors, who become stars. He as director operates a sense of passionate distance (here he used the analogy of the nursing profession who must keep their emotions in check in order to benefit the

patient.) He feels there are many ways to tell a story. He likes to play the Hollywood game by giving the illusion and then taking it away again e.g. the reality of the rape in the scene at the end of the film is moved one step outwards towards the cinema audience when the soldier/actors tell the girl that the rape is going to be real and that no one (in the 16th century audience) will suspect; at the end of the film when the actors come on stage to take their bows, the two main characters who had been killed in the play are brought on still dead. He likes to examine the edges of human behaviour and to throw more light on the middle ground.

Death and sex are the fascinations of the modern world of the visual media - they are everywhere. He is aware that this is what audiences want - he gives it but ensures that the audience knows that it is not real.

I suggested to him that each of his films had examined in turn the various fields of activity which man sees as the civilising forces in our society (e.g. science in *A Zed and Two Noughts*, art in *The Draughtsman's Contract*, architecture in *The Belly of an Architect* etc.) and had found them all wanting. I asked if this was deliberate on his part. In his reply, he simply stated that *Prospero's Books* was about the uses and abuses of knowledge, *The Baby of Mâcon* was about the uses and abuses of religion and that his next film will be about the uses and abuses of the idea of the glory of war.

When I asked if he would agree that of all the cinematic languages used by him, that the spoken language was the least important, he disagreed. He said he took great care to make the spoken language complement the style and message of the films. For example, in *The Baby of Mâcon* the language was deliberately artificial to link it to opera - he used repetitions, declamation of the words, and resonating phrases and lines for this purpose. Language is equated with excess. In *The Cook, The Thief...* he used vulgar witticisms for the same purpose. He agreed that there is no conversational language in his work.

APPENDIX II

"Deadman's Catch. 'If a player in the game of Deadman's Catch drops a skittle, he is obliged to suffer a succession of handicaps. First to catch using one hand, then to catch kneeling on one knee, then on two knees, then with one eye closed. If a player finally drops a catch with both eyes closed, then he is out and must take his place in the winding-sheet.'

Consider that there are seven people playing the game - a game which is essentially the children's game of handicap-catch. They play it on a lawn in the late afternoon sun. A coffin containing someone they all know passes behind them on its way to a hearse parked nearby. The widow of the man in the coffin is one of the game-players. In deference to the widow's feelings, all the characters unite in pretending that the coffin is not there. The seven players play anti-clockwise in a circle throwing three skittles - two red and one black. The coffin-carriers pass, making a diagonal line outside the circle. The whole plan of the action works succinctly as a flat geometric design and composition.

On the horizon of the landscape that stretches a mile or more away from the lawn across the marsh and sunlit water of the estuary - is a building - a tower - it creates the apex of an invisible triangle of which one side is the trajectory of the coffin carriers. The flat-plain triangle that works in the same plan as the cinema screen now can also be seen as a three-dimensional shape stretching back to the horizon - a triangle leant backwards over the landscape. Inside the triangle and the circle is a white square - the winding sheet - in which players ousted from the game are obliged to lie - making a square within a circle within a triangle.

The building on the horizon could be a church-tower, but is in fact a water-tower - thus by implication - all the players - due to the elegant compositional device - are contained

in the water-tower conspiracy which is soon to make itself felt in the narrative. The seven players are hung in a geometrical cage of the triangle, the circle and the square which is hung on the nail of the water-tower.

The game-players are three females and four men. Consider three as female and four as male numbers - consider the configuration they make on a dice - three make a diagonal and four make a square. The game is played such that the four men are losers. All the male protagonists in the film die - they meet unnatural deaths - largely due to their own inadequacy or incompetence and they lose in the game on the sunlit lawn in the order in wich[sic] they will eventually succumb - Hardy, Bellamy, Smut, Madgett. The fifth male - Jake, Cissie One's husband is already dead - in the coffin on its way to the crematorium where soon all the others will follow.

When the men have lost and are lying in the sheet - the women - never dropping a catch - come closer and form a triangle - they become an inner triangle pressing closer around the square.

All this takes many clumsy and inexact word-descriptions to describe - but if we read paintings like we read books - it would not be such a hidden language for painting can effortlessly produce such elegant solutions." (Greenaway, Fear of Drowning by Numbers, pp93/95)

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