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Dramatizing the Failure to Jump the Culture/Nature Gap: The Films of Peter Greenaway

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## Dramatizing the Failure to Jump the Culture/ Nature Gap: The Films of Peter Greenaway

Vernon Gras

PETER GREENAWAY'S FILMS share the absurdist premises of Beckett and Pinter but not their minimalist understatement and choked up silences. He likes to do "talkie" films and stuffs them as full of information and citations of past culture as the film's problem or conflict will allow. Similar to other postmodern artists whose works are informed by the current "loss of center," Greenaway's films are filled with quotes and allusions to the cultural monuments of the past in architecture, painting, sculpture, landscape, scientific theory, religion, and myth. He has been criticized by some as an elitist for the heavy load of intellectual freight his films carry. But many critical reactions to his work have been profuse in their admiration of its multilayered richness.<sup>1</sup> In an interview with Joel Siegel in *City Paper* (April 6, 1990), Greenaway argues that his many cultural allusions are not affectation. Rather, he feels, they help in the development of an introspective approach to film making. He grants that cinema must be realistic, that is, reproduce the external world, but it must also render a multilayer of metaphorical meaning. Thus, Greenaway's films are far richer in their *mise-en-scène* than in montage. More attention is given to how a particular scene is framed and shot than to fast cuts, changing camera angles, and the suspenseful development of a story line. The latter he contemptuously refers to as "the Hollywood cinema" and a "St. Vitus Dance use of the camera."<sup>2</sup> In defending his financially successful *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* from being a Hollywood sellout, Greenaway asserted that "this is a metaphorical film. There's no way that the American cinema ever deals in metaphor. The only decent metaphorical filmmaker you have here is David Lynch. Americans don't understand what metaphor in cinema is about. They're extremely good at making straightforward, linear narrative movies which entertain superbly. But they very rarely do anything else. The whole purpose of my cinematic effort is to explore metaphor and symbol."<sup>3</sup>

It is precisely this thick visual and verbal texture in his films that induces pleasurable anticipation in his followers and perhaps contributes more to the viewer's interpretive interest than do the storyline of his

characters. With confirmed regularity, Greenaway places his dramatic conflicts into a thick cultural tapestry whose allegorical meanings and oppositions, though enlivened by the surface activities of his characters, usually do more for his films than does the plot.

I'm looking for ways of structuring films that coexist with my thematic material but that also have their own identities and interest. In some ways my films are more satisfactorily explained by the esthetic one brings to painting than to movies. The sense of distance and contemplation they require has much more to do with painting. When you go into an art gallery you don't emote, by and large, like people do in the movies. I know my work is accused of being cool and intellectually exhibitionistic. But I'm determined to get away from that manipulated, emotional response that you're supposed to have to Hollywood cinema.<sup>4</sup>

The recurring allegory, metaphor, or subtext in all his films, underlying their more immediate and superficial action, is the inevitable failure of whatever ordering principles his protagonists engage in. The same self-awareness and reflexivity about their art found in writers like Borges, Calvino, Barth, and Pynchon, find thematic and cinematographic expression in Greenaway. On more than one occasion, Greenaway has admitted fondness for Borges, Calvino, Smollett, and their influence on his work.<sup>5</sup> Like many postmodern writers, Greenaway makes the creative process itself the main issue in his films. It is human creativity, the artistic activity itself—meaning giving—that functions *sub voce* as the hero. Excluding *Prospero's Books*, Greenaway's major films have depicted this theme as serious actions in a tragic mode. Beginning with *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982) and continuing unabated through *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985), *Belly of an Architect* (1987), *Drowning by Numbers* (1988), and even *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989), we witness the frustrated attempts of various male protagonists to achieve some lasting cultural achievement before their death. None accomplish this goal. Only *Prospero's Books* (1991) achieves both a happy ending and artistic self-justification for the protagonist.<sup>6</sup>

Just how far *Prospero's Books* reflects a change from Greenaway's earlier feature films, we will discuss in the last section. Most of this article will investigate the paradox of a filmmaker who, using cinematic codes brilliantly, undercuts the possibility of art (including film) to make any significant and lasting statement at all. We will discuss this paradox by taking a closer look at three films. In each we will detect an allegorical staging in which an artistic process or language game, momentarily and often laboriously imposed by the protagonist on an unruly world, fails because the world refuses to be contained and bursts the code's limits. Film, of course, is itself an interpretive code, so that Greenaway's own

artistic activities share in the tragic implications of his portrayals, often through a self-reflexive ploy.

## II

A survey of Greenaway's earlier films makes possible these generalizations: (1) a continuation of the metaphoric approach to drama already found in Beckett and Pinter which includes their use of place or site visually to figure forth or allegorize the human condition; (2) within this metaphoric mode, a thematic reiteration of a loss of center, of any continuity principle between nature and culture; (3) the motif of earth goddess with dying and replaceable consort repeatedly used to dramatize this cultural instability or lack of permanent union (the dying god or replaceable consort is always the artist or more generically, the interpretive function); (4) a privileging of nature over any cultural classification with the latter usually tied to some despicable and crass commercial interest which controls and subordinates the meaning-giving process.

The first two generalizations continue the tradition of Absurd Theater. Time is incorporated and compressed by allusion. It is made both heavy and trivial in that past and present failures to account for the world coalesce to nullify any hope for amelioration of the human condition in the future. Spatial and visual images dominate the temporal flow of events. The site exfoliates metaphorically to incorporate time so that its multiple layers resonate with historical and cultural allusions which illustrate the futility of ever jumping the culture/nature gap. This central opposition of culture/nature is already involved in the sites and their associated activity. The country house and gardens with its derisive green man versus the twelve different views through which the draughtsman wishes to render them (*The Draughtsman's Contract*); L'Escargot, the muckland home of Alba Berwick and the lowly snail versus the zoo with its scientific constraints and experimentation (*A Zed and Two Noughts*); the two bellies or gestations of Kracklite and his wife, of art and nature, against the backdrop of Rome, whose present corruption aborts the former while it co-opts the latter (*Belly of an Architect*); the tidal river plain with its three river goddesses versus the ceaseless efforts to coerce and tame the river in games and water towers along its shore (*Drowning by Numbers*); the restaurant where the raw is turned into the cooked, where the kitchen with its French haute cuisine mediates between a shambles of raw and rotting meat out back and an expensive front dining room of plush red velvet, gold gilded decorations, formal set tables, and oil paintings on the wall (*The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*). Reverberating outward from these metaphoric

situations with rather obsessive reiteration is the tragic failure in each case of some signifying effort to classify or endow with meaning, via image or narrative, the presented world. This tragic (sometimes black comic) outcome is costumed and staged with great historical variety. But underneath all this variety, like an archetype or musical configuration, exists the earth goddess with her dying consort. Whatever transient biological coupling happens between these representatives of the world and its idea, nature usually renews herself while the artist dies.

To support these generalizations, let us examine some Greenaway films. As we can't do them all or even those selected with the same detail, let us take the earliest, *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), and the later, *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989), with one from the middle, *Drowning by Numbers* (1988). This leaves out *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985) and *Belly of an Architect* (1987), while reserving *Prospero's Books* (1991) for separate treatment. When possible, appropriate short citations to those films left out will be included.

### III

In *The Draughtsman's Contract*, whose action takes place circa 1694, twelve drawings of an English estate are to be made by a draughtsman, Mr. Neville, under contract to Lady Herbert so that her husband, Lord Herbert, will be confirmed in his proud possession and reconciled to both it and his wife (to whom the land belonged). Mr. Neville, popular, self-assured, and arrogant in his representational abilities to render "what is there," has agreed to do thirteen drawings—allowing the option of one refusal to arrive at a final twelve—for Lady Herbert. He has agreed to do these drawings only after much beseeching from Lady Herbert and her daughter, Sarah Talmann, and only if Lady Herbert will submit to his daily sexual demands. This she agrees to, in a contract written and witnessed by Mr. Noyes.

Six drawings of house and gardens are begun, with the locations changing every two hours from morning to evening. Furthermore, the drawings of the house and gardens are rendered on paper measured off in squares by looking through two viewers whose superimposed grids guarantee a single perspective with controlled and precise ratios and proportions between drawings and the original. The draughtsman prides himself on his neutral eye and on rendering only what the eye sees. By the end of the film, these "objective" drawings undergo diverse interpretations so that they conceivably could be allegorized so that the first six drawings indicate that a conspiracy had existed to murder the owner, Lord Herbert, whose body is found in the moat, and the last six

to reveal that the next in line to inherit the estate, Mr. Talmann, had been cuckolded. These possible interpretations cause the draughtsman to be killed and his "incriminating" drawings burnt.<sup>7</sup> Meantime, the daughter of the murdered owner has used the draughtsman to get pregnant and to insure a successor to the estate because her husband, Mr. Talmann, is impotent. Thus, instead of the draughtsman imposing his will and design upon Lady Herbert and her estate, mother and daughter have skillfully manipulated, seduced, and deceived him into regenerating their lineage and power. Such wry irony reappears frequently in Greenaway films to become almost a trademark.<sup>8</sup> Women protagonists, in Greenaway's early films, always represent nature's reproductive, renewing force; men protagonists either engage in the futile cultural effort to order nature's changing ways or interfere in this civilizing and spiritualizing process by exploiting it commercially. In *The Draughtsman's Contract*, Greenaway appropriates the fertility ritual of the dying and resurrected god to symbolize the inevitable passing away of cultural understandings now viewed as transient and historical. Originally, the myths of dying and resurrecting gods focused on the life/death opposition. The widespread and profound reaction of humans to the cycle of summer and winter, with its concomitant birth and death of vegetation, culminated in fertility rituals of the Year Spirit, whose death and resurrection was celebrated annually at agricultural festivals under various names as Adonis, Tammuz, Attis, or Dionysus. As part of this fertility ritual, an agon or fight between life, food, and fertility on one side, with death, famine, and barrenness on the other, took place. At this recurrent festival, the advent of a new god, for example, Dio (god) nysus (new), ushered in a new age while the old god, weak and decrepit, was relinquished and expelled. The mother goddess, who abides as consort followed consort, is always on the side of the young against the old. The Eniautos-Daimon, through its expiation, redeems the world from the pollution of the past, thus relieving his suffering mother and bringing about the rebirth of green woods and fields.<sup>9</sup>

That the fate of the Eniautos-Daimon functions as the central metaphor for the transience and death of the artist can be corroborated with other details. For example, Mr. Neville is to deliver twelve drawings which happen to coincide with the twelve months of the year. The first six drawings show him in sexual ascendancy over Lady Herbert. He controls the activities and views of house and garden. However, anomalies begin to appear in the shape of Lord Herbert's clothing strewn over the property like the sparagmos of the former lord. Mr. Neville incorporates these into his drawings and suddenly finds himself blackmailed by their possible interpretation. They seem to indicate foreknowledge of a conspiracy to murder Lord Herbert. Using these six drawings with Lord

Herbert's clothing strewn over lawn and bushes as leverage, Sarah Talmann arranges a separate contract with the draughtsman for sexual favors. But now it is she who dictates the terms, who gains sexual ascendancy, and who controls the activities and views of the house and garden. That mother and daughter together replicate the earth goddess as Fortuna is almost palpable. When Neville returns to the estate one week after he left to take on another job, he offers to finish the thirteenth drawing, not finished because it happened to be the site where Lord Herbert's body was found. Though still August, the climate has suddenly changed from summer to fall. Leaves are blowing, rubbish fires are burning, smoke is in the air. He brings pomegranates to Lady Herbert which she eats while retelling the Demeter/Persephone myth and which we have heard the nurse recounting in German to Talmann's nephew at the beginning of the film. The Demeter and Persephone myth, as James Frazer points out, is just another variation on the birth and death of the year.<sup>10</sup> As she squeezes out the pomegranate, Lady Herbert explicitly compares the color of the juice to blood: that of birth and death (murder), the inevitable process of nature's cycle.

The draughtsman's attitude to Lady Herbert has changed. He feels she has been humiliated by their contract and the loss of her husband. He wishes now to be her lover and suitor. She seems to acquiesce and offers the possibility of a new contract, much to his delight. But it is too late. Already, there is a new draughtsman on the premises whose plans will be impressed on the landscape next spring under Sarah Talmann's supervision. Lady Herbert briefly deludes him into playing the role of lover, gives him a pineapple (symbol of hospitality) in return for the pomegranates, reveals that in getting her daughter pregnant she has fulfilled her aim, and sends him to draw his last picture, unaware it is to be a memento mori of his own death.<sup>11</sup>

Though Mr. Neville is guilty of coercing nature (house and garden) into his simplified landscape views, the violence done to him and his drawings has other baser causes: greed and profit from the possession or sale of the estate. Though he is innocent of all the perverted motivations ascribed to him and though he claims none of the interpretations given his drawings can be substantiated, he is murdered and his art destroyed because the world is motivated less by aesthetics than by wealth, possessions, and envy. In the last contract imposed on him by his murderers, his eyes, and thereby his powers of observation, are first removed, his shirt then torn from his back, to serve as a scarecrow against the birds or "strewn about the estate as an obscure allegory" about a draughtsman of mediocre talent whose presence and disappearance hold little consequence. Then he is thrown into the moat to reprise

the death and sparagmos of his predecessor, who also had naive thoughts of domination and control.

Next there is the green man. Greenaway has given some historical explanations for his presence but not for what he does or why he is green.<sup>12</sup> John Fowles, in an essay on trees, which also serves as his personal poetics, has this to say about the prevalence of the green man in myth and folklore:

Ordinary experience . . . is in fact highly synthetic (in the sense of combinative or constructive), and made of a complexity of strands, past memories and present perceptions, times and places, private and public history, hopelessly beyond science's powers to analyze. It is quintessentially "wild," one might say unphilosophical, irrational, uncontrollable, incalculable. In fact, it corresponds very closely . . . to wild nature. . . . This notion of the green man . . . seen as emblem of the close connection between the actuality of present consciousness (not least in its habitual flight into a mental greenwood) and what seems to me lost by science in man's attitude toward nature—that is, the "wild" side of his own, his inner feeling as opposed to the outer, fact-bound, conforming face imposed by fashion—helped me question my old pseudoscientist self.<sup>13</sup>

Fowles went on to achieve the insight that "nature as names and facts and nature as internal feeling" need not conflict. These two modes of seeing or knowing could in fact marry and "take place almost simultaneously and enrich each other."<sup>14</sup> They have never done so in Greenaway, though *Prospero's Books* may indeed be a pivotal work in celebrating just such a marriage. We investigate it below. But the opposition of nature to culture remains insuperable in all the films discussed here. The green man is green because he belongs to the colorful house and grounds which we look at through the viewing grid of the draughtsman as he seeks to reduce their rich multiteity into black and white squares. (This reduction to measurable, black and white squares is repeated in *A Zed and Two Noughts* with the same failure on the side of naming [the alphabet] and scientific measurement of various kinds. Darwin's eight stages of evolution end as "a dreary fiction," a metanarrative just as dubious as Genesis.)

The two actions performed by the green man in *The Draughtsman's Contract* are derisive of human interpretive hubris. He removes a commemorative obelisk from its pedestal in order to stand there himself. Then he urinates, a mocking commentary on what he has displaced. At the end of the film, with the draughtsman killed and disposed of like his predecessor, the green man dismounts from the saddle of a horse's statue, leaving the statue as funeral motif for the now absent rider—the artist himself. During the last sequence of the film,



this riderless statue is seen framed through the square grids of the draughtsman's viewer, a self-reflexive inclusion of the film in the transience of all codes. The green man then reappears, bites into the pineapple provided by the allegorical Demeter, looks derisively at the viewer, and spits out the pineapple into the moat where lies the body of the artist.

#### IV

Perhaps the most appropriate site to stage the recurring tragic conflict between nature and culture is on the shore of a tidal river. Rivers, quite early in literature, have symbolized temporal loss, change, and renewal. The tidal river in *Drowning by Numbers* has an attendant goddess, Cissy, who is personified in three women with the same name: Cissy I, II, III. They are grandmother, mother, and daughter, respectively, and have husbands symbolizing the historical stages of civilization from agricultural, mercantile-business, to present-day consumerism. Each husband is drowned in historical order by his wife, and when each wife disposes of the ashes, she also disposes of his emblem: a garden fork, typewriter, and radio. Madgett, a coroner, is asked to provide a legitimating reason after each death. He does so. As a coroner, Madgett is obsessed with death, or rather with providing a story or meaningful pattern when it occurs. He is helped in this project by his son, Smut, who numbers and records violent deaths, as well as leaves on a tree and hairs on his dog. They both continually indulge in playing games, willfully imposing patterns on actions and events which parody the insecure nongrounded relation of any human interpretation to what it seeks to understand.

Providing a legitimating reason for death (a former theological and now scientific endeavor) degenerates in *Drowning by Numbers* into "language games": in fact, into the ghoulish black humor of Smut's commemorative rituals "honoring" the unexpected violent departures. He shoots off rockets at the death spot and paints the spot either red or yellow depending on the day of the week death occurred. Tuesdays and Saturdays are the two best days for violent deaths (mostly highway casualties of small animals). After painting the spot and setting off rockets, the place is marked with a stake, and time and place are also marked on a map. Smut and Madgett call this The Great Death Game. Obliquely, Greenaway reminds us of our own funeral rituals which try to impose significance and pomp over our transition into nonbeing. Note the lowering into "scientific" banality and trivial ghoulish humor what in earlier times had attracted high seriousness and even ostentatious solemnity.



Fig. 1. The three amoral Cissies, in *Drawing by Numbers*. From left to right: Cissie Colpitts Three (Joely Richardson), Cissie Colpitts Two (Juliet Stevenson), and Cissie Colpitts One (Joan Plowright).

Miramax Films

Madgett's other favorite game, Deadman's Catch, seems also to be Greenaway's. It appears in all his films: "The players throw an object around in a circle. If a player drops it, the next time he or she must catch it with one hand, then on one knee, then on two knees, then in his or her lap . . . if this fails the player is out. Madgett's game starts by throwing a red skittle, which is joined by two more red skittles and then a black one. The out or 'dead' players lie on a sheet on the ground in the centre of the circle."<sup>15</sup> The way the characters drop out of this game foretells their departures from life: Hardy, Bellamy, Smut, and Madgett. In the meantime, the three Cissies "play on strongly . . . with two skittles—one red and one black (*DN* 33). Recognizably, Greenaway's grand theme receives another allegorical variation in this futile contest of the protagonists with nature's representatives.

Two other games add playful commentary to this leitmotif: the paperchase game of Hare and Hounds in which a single runner with a mailpouch throws out paper streamers as clues for a group of runners to follow; and the film narrative itself whose title reveals that the frames are organized by having the numbers one to 100 appear consecutively. Self-reflexively, the film is included as just another effort to organize human behavior into some meaningful pattern. In the first game, many of the VUEs (violent unexpected events) have coincided with the paper streamers left by the hare as clues for the hounds to follow. Two-thirds of the way through the film, the water-tower conspirators (relatives and friends of the dead husbands) join the hounds in tracking down the clues. Led by those two redoubtable victors over water, Moses and Jonah, the water-tower faction desire nature's amoral life force, represented by the Cissies, to be contained and controlled. No untamed rivers for them; water belongs in towers, domesticated for civilized consumption. In Greenaway's films, nature's chief representative is female. Thus, what Moses and Jonah do with Nancy (that is, subdue her into utter dependency), they also want to do with the Cissies. But the Cissies escape them, and they also elude Madgett and Smut.

In the film, now recognized as a game, the numbering scheme supposedly organizing the action is arbitrary and contingent. Right at the start, the girl skipping rope enumerates stars by name up to 100 and indicates the point of the film. In answer to the query—"Why did you stop?"—she says, "A hundred is enough. Once you have counted one hundred, all other hundreds are the same" (*DN* 4). Most of the games introduced into this film illustrate the philosophical point that an indefinite number of theories, principles, systems fit the observed facts more than adequately. The film is as good an illustration of the underdetermination of theory by empirical data as W. V. Quine could want.<sup>16</sup> Like numbering the stars, there is little point in using more

numbers than 100 to begin and end this story because other ordering principles will do just as well. Meaningful transhistorical categorization goes down in defeat. Any principle of order will be equally adequate (or inadequate) to the task and destined for replacement amid a weary acceptance of futility as the river bears everything away. Thus, the three Cissies share a tolerant amusement for Madgett as well as an indifferent amorality toward their husbands. They each reproduce a new generation and do whatever it takes to bring it about. Ordinary values or attachments become matters of complete indifference or at best a stoic acceptance of inevitable loss. Through their indifference, Greenaway wants to subvert any possible comfort in whatever pattern (trivialized throughout *Drowning by Numbers* as just games) human imagination could possibly engender.

Madgett, whose name suggests both magic and maggot, the two poles of imaginative construction and ceaseless decay he struggles to mediate, has grown weary of game playing. As a last gesture, he offers a tug of war to settle "good and evil." Depending on the outcome, he will do the behest of nature's life force or culture's law and decorum. The Hare arrives to be the judge of this contest. But there is no decision. Smut pulls out of the game. He has been informed that his romantic interest, the skipping girl, following his advice, had ventured out into the street to skip on the safest day of the week and had been killed by an automobile. As punishment to himself, Smut leaves to play *The Endgame*: "The object of this game is to dare to fall with a noose around your neck from a place sufficiently off the ground such that a fall will hang you. The object of the game is to punish those who have caused great unhappiness by their selfish actions. This is the best game of all because the winner is also the loser and the judge's decision is always final" (*DN* 111). Smut falls but breaks his neck in the Y-fork of two branches. The skipping rope is still slack so he violently departs under no game description. His death escapes classification, and so ultimately do life's contingencies.<sup>17</sup>

This leaves Madgett out in a row boat taken there by the three Cissies after Smut's defection. As the consummate game player, the one who could imaginatively construct any pattern or narration for the events around him, Madgett had unsuccessfully tried sexual union with each Cissie. They were not to be had. In his automobile, Madgett had taken one after the other to his "trysting field"—with its beautiful pun on romantic hope and tragic disappointment—only to be played with coquettishly and then refused. He had wistfully told Cissy I, "I've loved you for years. May I see what I've always wanted to see? . . . You without any clothes on" (*DN* 66). Using the sexual act as an analogy for overcoming the subject/object, culture/nature polarities has a long

epistemological history in Western literature. As the Cissies enter the river from the scuttled boat, they invite Madgett into their element, to resolve, finally, the enigma motivating his game playing. They tell Madgett to take *his* clothes off. His ultimate desire will shortly be fulfilled: to jump the culture/nature gap. He is going to drown.

## V

The mythic pattern of the great mother with her dying and resurrecting consort underlies the conflicts in both films described above. But in myth, the life and death enigma finds its resolution in a god who dies and returns to life. Greenaway borrows this recurring pattern from the mythic past but superimposes the artist (or rather the meaning-giving function) into the god's role where he (it) undergoes the god's death, but without any religious transcendence. The defeated "artist" has no resurrection but is merely replaced by a successor. So far we have encountered no progress in the interpretive efforts of Greenaway's protagonists. Both their efforts and their lives end absurdly.

Undoubtedly, the most shocking use of the dying god myth occurs in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. The film savagely critiques the values of our present consumer society. Greenaway despised Thatcher's England and the general trend of capitalism. He stated,

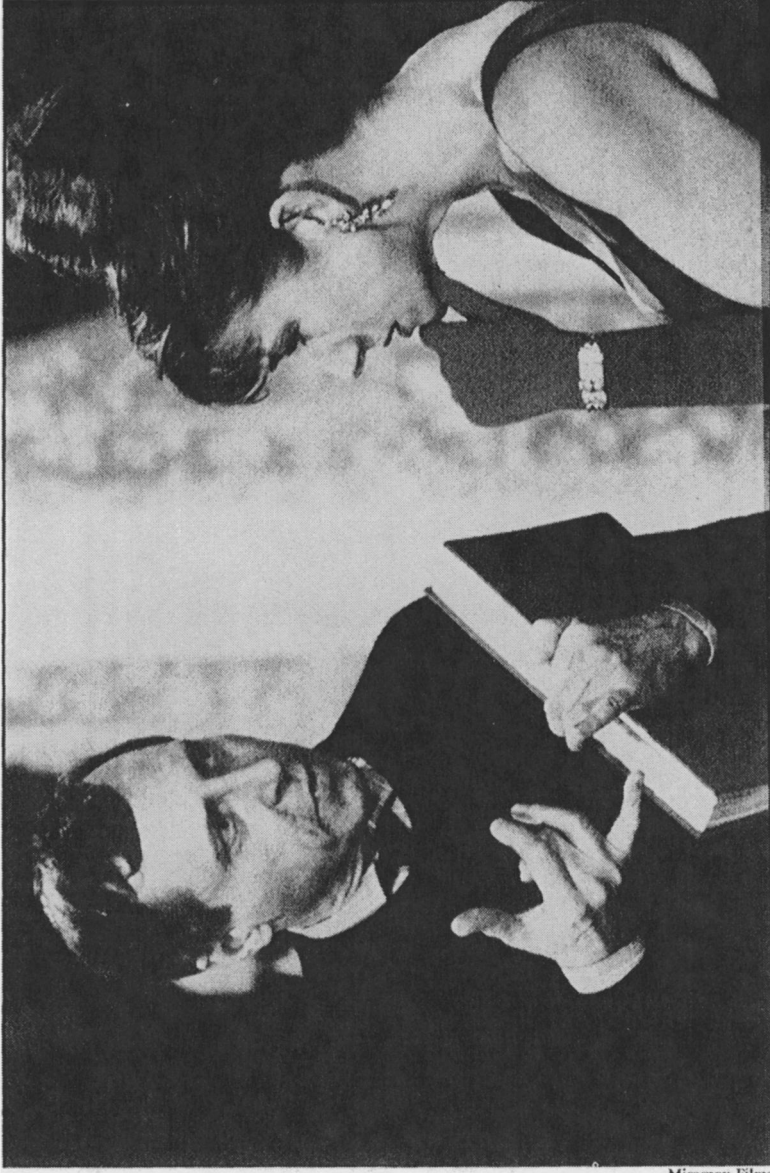
*The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* is a passionate and angry dissertation for me on the rich, vulgarian, Philistine, anti-intellectual stance of the present cultural situation in Great Britain, supported by the wretched woman who is raping the country, destroying the welfare state, the health system, mucking up the educational system, and creating havoc everywhere. But still she remains in there. There's a lull in the film where Spica says to the lover who is reading, "Does this book make money?" That line really sums up this theme. In England now there seems to be only one currency, as indeed one might say about the whole capitalist world.<sup>18</sup>

The restaurant, Le Hollandais, provides yet another rendering of the nature/culture conflict. A great variety of flesh, vegetables, fruits, a virtual cornucopia, surrounds one in the kitchen. All the cooks, waiters, washers, and so on, under the direction of the chef transform the raw into the cooked, nature into culture. Each day of the week has its own menu on which is listed the transformations of that day. Turning raw flesh and produce into haute cuisine becomes a shorthand reference to the civilizing transformation of brute material. The restaurant's back end is a shambles filled with putrid flesh, rotting garbage, and scavenging dogs. The front end is red velvet, heavy carpets, gold gilt furniture,



Fig. 2. Albert Spica, with his cohorts, dominating his wife, her lover, and the cook—visible in the background is the Franz Hals painting—in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. From left to right: Alan Howard, Richard Bohringer, Helen Mirren, and Michael Gambon.

Miramax Films



Miramax Films

Fig. 3. Peter Greenaway making clear a point to Helen Mirren, in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. Director Greenaway with Helen Mirren.

formal table settings, paintings on the wall, especially one huge painting by Franz Hals, *Banquet of the Officers of the St George Civic Guard Company* (1614). In between the front and back of the restaurant lies a cathedral-like kitchen where we watch the ritual processes which turn the raw into the cooked, accompanied by the innocent song of a boy whose religious obligato spiritualizes his physical task of dishwashing into the petition "wash me clean, make me holy" (Psalm 51). Albert Spica, the thief, wishes to possess the restaurant and everything in it. He deposes the former owner (Roy or king), coerces the restaurant personnel to submit to his domination, and drastically interrupts the transforming process. He usurps through extortion what is not his to control. He interferes with the kitchen help, tells the boy not to sing, eventually even buttons his lip, tries to intimidate the chef, and suggests that he could increase profit margins by providing the chef with cheaper raw materials.<sup>19</sup> He and his cohorts dress like the Dutch merchants in the Franz Hals group portrait but the happy coexistence between commerce and culture found there has undergone an extreme perversion. Spica denies all transubstantiation or spiritualization of matter. Instead, his greed turns haute cuisine, art, manners, style, even love into secondary effects of the alimentary canal. Meaning giving takes on a very low status in the mouth-to-anus worldview of Spica. He denies any spiritual communication and translation. Books have no place in a restaurant, he tells Michael. Albert can't even read. Refined distinctions of palette and mind have no importance for "they all turn into shit, anyway."

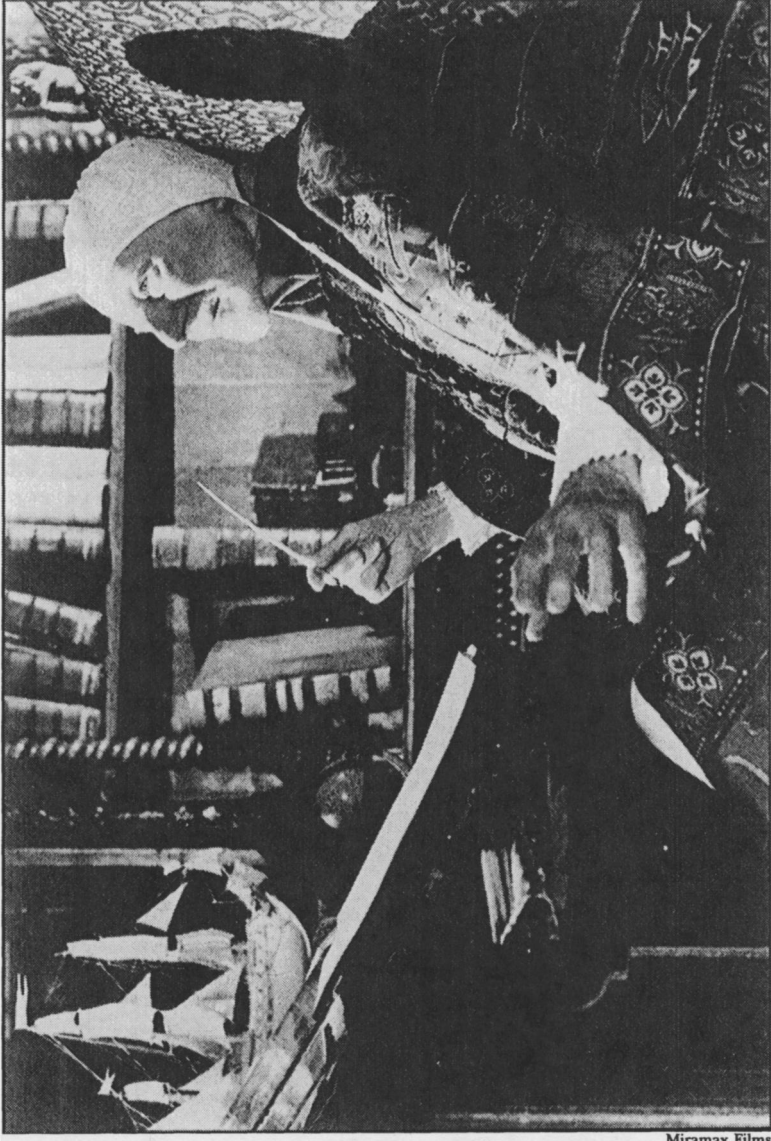
Georgina, Albert's wife, has had three miscarriages. No regeneration seems possible under the Spica regime, nor does she seem able to free herself from him. Michael, the intellectual lender of books, calls himself a gynecologist who could help her escape her present sterile condition. They become lovers, but Spica discovers the affair and murders Michael. Like Ishtar weeping for Tammuz, Georgina inconsolably weeps for Michael. Greenaway augments the wailing acoustically so that it resonates in a cavernous vault magnifying this moment to enclose that ageless grief which announces that Tammuz, Adonis, Dionysus is dead—that ageless weeping for the lover who cannot stay. But in the archetypal ritual, laments turn to joy as the god is reborn, as the earth goddess brings forth new life. In all his earlier films, Greenaway with great irony and mordant wit has sacrificed the consort, usually at the hands of the goddess who having become pregnant now finds the consort inadequate or superfluous. This pattern can be observed in *The Draughtsman's Contract*, *Belly of an Architect*, *Drowning by Numbers*, and somewhat in *A Zed and Two Noughts*. *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* differs from all these in that the goddess remains sterile and fails to generate new life.<sup>20</sup> Georgina's sterility has its source in her present consort, Albert Spica.



When Albert kills Michael before he can deliver on his promise, Georgina is left desolate. So, under the modern perversion of all values to consumerism, she offers her husband an inverted mass and then shoots him. Eating the god in “the American age” can no longer function as a rite of transformation but only literally, as a cannibalistic feast. Yet, unlike his earlier films, Georgina, nature’s representative, is not pregnant and does not figure in any symbolical renewal. *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, though more explicitly political, critical, and angry in its variation of the central theme, seems bleaker and more pessimistic in its tragic denouement. Nor did it seem likely that Greenaway was going to change his tune in the near future. In his 1990 interview, his last words were these: “I suppose I have a concern for this extraordinary, beautiful, amazing, exciting, taxonomically brilliant world that we live in, but we keep fucking it up all the time. That’s hardly an original message, but maybe that accounts for my misanthropic attitude toward the characters in my films. At their best, they’re mediocre, and at their worse, at their very worst, they are appalling, evil, horrible people. I can’t really see that changing either.”<sup>21</sup>

## VI

But, hopefully, Greenaway’s attitude has changed. As we have already indicated, *Prospero’s Books* does not fit into the above generalized pattern. It differs significantly. For the first time we find comedy, not tragedy. The artist hero does not die. Instead, he succeeds in imposing his will upon nature (the island with its nymphs, fauns, spirits, beasts, witches, and so on). The Antonios, Sebastians, Alonzos of this world are also defeated. The philistine world of money, politics, trade, and self-interest has always won in Greenaway’s earlier films. Here its power is neutralized and absorbed in the general amnesty of the “brave new world” brought on by the Miranda/Ferdinand marriage. In the earlier films, self-reflexivity deliberately foregrounded the ephemerality and lack of staying power of art, the gap between culture and nature. The excess of nature ultimately cancelled out every cultural representation. In *Prospero’s Books*, the ubiquitous self-reflexivity has been increased—if that’s possible. But now it serves a different purpose. The focus is no longer on art’s duration but on the artistic process. The Greenaway/Shakespeare *Tempest* shows Prospero in the author/magus role of creating Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* with, of course, Greenaway revisions. The title of Greenaway’s film refers to the books Prospero so loved (and which cost him his dukedom), some of which Gonzago had placed in the boat on which Prospero and Miranda had been cast away. These books gave Prospero



Miramax Films

Fig. 4. John Gielgud/Prospero in his study writing the Shakespeare/Greenaway *Tempest*, in *Prospero's Books*.

the power to subjugate the island as well as his civilized enemies (the philistine world of power and wealth). Greenaway selected (invented) these books (twenty-four in number because film travels at twenty-four frames a second) and made them a compendium of Renaissance knowledge.<sup>22</sup> They suffer the fate of all cultural ephemeralities and must undergo eventual destruction (by fire and water). Greenaway made a special trip to Japan to use their high resolution computerized TV laboratories to illustrate the contents of these twenty-four books. He animates the contents, makes geometrical forms move, turns biological sketches into real organisms, and changes architectural designs (like Michelangelo's Laurentian library) into actual pop-up buildings. The books' contents often have thematic relevance to the story. Either the illustrated designs become a "real" setting in *Prospero's Books* (like Michelangelo's stairway) or provide a relevant context for characters and actions, for example, *The Book of Earth* for Caliban, *The Book of Love* for Miranda and Ferdinand, and *The Book of Mythologies* for the marriage masque reflecting the three aspects of the earth goddess (Iris, Ceres, Juno). But the purpose of all these collages and superimpositions is to call attention to a past "dead" culture. None of these books has currency now except as a historical document and curiosity. Thus, they undergo the inevitable destruction brought on by history and the indefatigable human imagination (spirit). Embedded in this rich textured Renaissance culture, Prospero/Shakespeare, quill in hand, scratches out the script of *The Tempest* while Gielgud/Prospero reads all the lines as they are being written. His words in turn evoke the filmic staging of the story as it is being written/told/created. We watch as a better world emerges right before our eyes.

If worlds and selves are a product of human imagination and desiring, they are open to change and new directions. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is a celebration of art and its possibility of renewing the fallen world. Greenaway embellishes Shakespeare's script so that at the end it is Caliban who saves Shakespeare's thirty-five plays and the just completed Shakespeare/Greenaway *Tempest* from drowning. Compare this self-reflexive gesture with the ending of *The Draughtsman's Contract*. Particularly, keep in mind that it was this same Caliban who earlier in the film urinated on, vomited over, and befouled books, who would not take learning from Prospero, who wanted to rape Miranda, and who beseeched Stephano and Trinculo vehemently that they should first of all destroy Prospero's books. If this obdurate thing of earth reverently bears these works of art to safety from water and fire at the end, it could be assumed that even he has come to realize that without the transforming/forgiving power of imagination, we are lost, left in the shit, so to speak, in the world of Albert Spica. Unfortunately, this doesn't seem to

be Greenaway's last word. He seems unable to commit to a dialogical conception of art, even when it means saving his own film making.

Postmodern art has gone in two main directions: either embracing the liberating, debunking deconstructive mode or assuming a more positive dialogical posture. Up to *Prospero's Books*, Greenaway was totally in the deconstructive mode, insisting on the disjunction between art and reality. Each film could be interpreted as calling in question the very activity that brought the film into existence.<sup>23</sup> In *Prospero's Books*, for the first time we have a dialogical overcoming initiated by the imagination (Ariel) of love over hatred, forgiveness over revenge, benevolence over egotism, knowledge over ignorance, and civilization over usurpation.

Julian Barnes, in his *History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, records a chronology of failure quite similar to those found in Greenaway's early films. But in his half chapter entitled "Parentheses," Barnes states:

Love and truth, yes, that's the prime connection. We all know objective truth is not obtainable, that when some event occurs we shall have a multiplicity of subjective truths which we assess and then fabulate into history, into some God-eyed version of what "really" happened. This God-eyed version is a fake—a charming, impossible fake. . . . But while we know this, we must still believe that objective truth is obtainable. . . . We must do so, because if we don't we're lost, we fall into beguiling relativity, we value one liar's version as much as another liar's, we throw up our hands at the puzzle of it all, we admit that the victor has the right not just to the spoils but also to the truth. . . . And so it is with love. We must believe in it, or we're lost. We may not obtain it, or we may obtain it and find it renders us unhappy; we must still believe in it. If we don't, then we merely surrender to the history of the world and to someone else's truth.<sup>24</sup>

A similar parentheses occurs in *Prospero's Books* when Ariel (in three embodiments) takes over writing the script to encourage Prospero into imaginative empathy with the victims suffering from his wrath. He relents and forgives his enemies, even his traitorous brother. But Barnes's admittedly lopsided inclusion of one short half chapter balanced against ten chapters showing how horribly ludicrous the world goes finds no echo in Greenaway's vision. He follows Shakespeare's script and allows the possibility of imaginative amelioration to the extent that Shakespeare's artistic works and his own film find grateful preservation by Caliban. But in later interviews on *Prospero's Books* and in his last film, *The Baby of Macon* (1993), Greenaway downplays any lasting or significant influence to art (and his films). In *The Baby of Macon* he returns to the excoriating tone of *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. Selfish greed and human perversity once again interrupt nature's life force, induce famine and infertility, and make escape hopeless.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, when asked about the staying power of art evident at the

end of *Prospero's Books*, Greenaway concedes the Caliban gesture as optimistic but points out that what we hear on the soundtrack at the end is "this huge splash and we're right back again at the beginning of the play, which began with those single drips. So—the final release of the spirit (Ariel jumping out of the film frame) when you've thrown the knowledge away." To the interviewer's query whether "our civilizing projects, art and so on, are worth doing," the ever skeptical Greenaway replies: "Well, there's a way in which maybe that's only merely decorating the nest."<sup>26</sup>

To conclude: The saving of the Shakespeare/Greenaway *Tempest* arose from distinguishing the *process* of creating an artwork (which, after all, is what *Prospero's Books* is all about) from its limited but necessary historical embodiment. Thus, Shakespeare's loving farewell to art could have been taken as Greenaway's decorous and warm hello. But this was not to be. In place of an ongoing dialogical reciprocity between culture and nature, there remains an insuperable gap. The American age, which equates with the "selling of everything to everyone," proves an implacable and unregenerate foe.<sup>27</sup> We find no balm in Greenaway, no possible alternative vision. His films remain agnostic, even nihilistic about any possible cultural improvement, while they continue scathingly to censure our animal rapacity to "fuck things up." Paradoxically, his trenchant critique works self-reflexively so that it effectively undercuts its own existence and, one fears, his ongoing viability as artist. One cannot remain fixated on self-doubt and register the same note continually like an organ with a faulty stop unless one little cares whether the audience is still listening.

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NOTES

1 For a fine sampling of both positive and negative reviews, see the survey of Peter Greenaway's life and work in *Current Biography* (February, 1991), p. 26ff.

2 Karen Jaehne, "The Draughtsman's Contract: An Interview with Peter Greenaway," *Cineaste*, 13, no. 2 (1984), 14.

3 Gavin Smith, "Food for Thought," *Film Comment* (May/June, 1990), 59.

4 Marcia Pally, "Cinema as the Total Art Form: An Interview with Peter Greenaway," *Cineaste*, 18, no. 3 (1991), 8.

5 See Smith, "Food for Thought," 59, who quotes Greenaway on his self-reflexive interests in the making of *The Falls* (1975–78). See also *Peter Greenaway*, ed. Daniel Caux (Paris, 1987), p. 116.

6 Howard Rodman, "Anatomy of a Wizard," *American Film* (Nov./Dec., 1991): "For me . . . *The Tempest* is extremely self-referential, and I always tend to feel the most sympathy for those works of art which do have that sort of self-knowledge, that say, basically, 'I am an artifice.' I very much like the idea that when somebody sits in the cinema and watches a film of mine, it's *not* a slice of life, it's *not* a window on the world. It's a constant concern of mine to bring the audience back to this realization" (38).

7 Of course, these interpretations are motivated by the wealth and power that goes with the estate. Greenaway detests the commercial pursuit of money and profit that traduces, sullies, and abrogates the meaning-giving process. Material greed functions as the spoiler in many of his films, for example, *Belly of an Architect*, *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, and *The Draughtsman's Contract*. It functions only slightly less balefully in the philistinism of the "watertower conspirators" of *Drowning by Numbers* and in the exploitation of the animals by the zoo administrations in *A Zed and Two Noughts*.

8 See, for example, *A Zed and Two Noughts* and *Drowning by Numbers*.

9 See James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, abridged ed. (1922; New York, 1963), pp. 344–462.

10 See Frazer, p. 456ff.

11 I was informed that the pineapple is a symbol of hospitality by one of the guides at the George Mason estate where it can be found as an architectural ornament. However, it is also an emblem of Cybele, the Great Mother. See J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols* (London, 1978), p. 132.

12 See Jaehne, "The Draughtsman's Contract," 15.

13 John Fowles, "Seeing Nature Whole," *Harper's Magazine*, 259 (1979), 53.

14 Fowles, 54.

15 Peter Greenaway, *Drowning by Numbers* (London, 1988), p. 30; hereafter cited in text as *DN*.

16 W. V. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York, 1969). See also Richard Rorty's discussion of Quine in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979), p. 192ff.

17 The script calls for this irony, but the film shows him hanging from the rope. See Greenaway, *Drowning by Numbers*, p. 112. While his death did not happen as planned in *The Endgame*, yet the last number in his notebook—99—fits the chronological ordering of the film. Order and contingency overlap in a dark funny way.

18 Joel E. Siegel, "Greenaway by the Numbers," *City Paper* (April 6, 1990), p. 22.

19 Greenaway literalizes the metaphor, a kind of visual pun. But a boy forced to eat his own excised belly button could work out into a splendid new metaphor, viz., that without meaning giving (transformation), no continuance of human life is possible. The message finds reiteration in Georgina's barrenness. She also reminds Albert—who on seeing the human repast prepared for him shouts "Jesus, God!"—that it's not God, but *only* the dead Michael.

20 Not only does Georgina remain sterile but the Franz Hals picture reflecting a more harmonious marriage between art and commerce shows up soiled and stained like a bit of refuse in the rear alley.

21 Siegel, "Greenaway by the Numbers," p. 26.

22 Marlene Rodgers, "Prospero's Books—Word and Spectacle: An Interview with Peter Greenaway," *Film Quarterly* (Winder, 1991–92), 11–16.

23 Often basic orientations or themes of great artists can be seen more clearly in early works. Greenaway's deconstructive orientation, in the debunking and absurd comic vein and somewhat Swiftian in temperament, can be seen especially well in *A Walk Thru H* (1978) and *The Falls* (1980).

24 Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (New York, 1989), pp. 243–44.

25 No American distributor picked up the option to show *The Baby of Macon* in the United States so, as of my writing, the film has only been seen in Europe. My comments are based on a review in *The New York Times* (6 February 1994) and the review of Geoffrey MacNab, "The Baby of Macon," in *Sight and Sound* (September, 1993).

26 Rodgers, "Prospero's Books," 16.

27 The quotation comes from Dennis Potter whose *Singing Detective* (Boston, 1986) does provide an alternative vision after he had written a long series of excoriating TV plays about present Western values. His loathing of the Reagan/Thatcher era matches Greenaway's.