



Peter Greenaway, the arch-defenestrator A preface

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The February 2009 symposium on Peter Greenaway's films at the University of Nice and this publication – a volume of essays – could never have materialized, had it not been for Peter Greenaway's great friendliness and generosity, among which his permission to print the four-hour talk which he gave to packed houses at the Cinémathèque in Nice on two successive evenings, with crowds of fans standing outside for want of available seating – a real performance it was, in all senses of the word.

All our warmest thanks are obviously due, at this stage, to Odile Chapel, Director of the Cinémathèque, who strove to get Peter Greenaway's appearance in Nice funded by the Cultural Affairs of the City, and, of course, to the Cultural Attaché of the City of Nice and the Mayor himself. This event was only made possible thanks to the collective efforts of generous minds and this was definitely and strongly felt throughout the duration of the symposium. Undoubtedly, Peter Greenaway has left indelible traces of his presence in Nice. His generous willingness to share his experience as a filmmaker extended to his being a most active participant in a round table, whose subject was the subtitling of his films, organized for, and with the students of the Diploma of Film Subtitling and Dubbing of the University of Nice under the guidance of Professor Martine Monacelli. Those three hours on the morning of February the 14th were intense, full of humour, wit and dense technical considerations.

Peter Greenaway's cinema has consistently defied classification or definition, soliciting commentaries that attempt, each in its turn, to define the undefinable and explain the unexplainable. This volume is no exception to that established tradition. Greenaway's cinema is a cinema of nonsense, in the sense Deleuze gave to the word: not an absence of meaning but a plurality of meanings – a multilayered cinema whose strata of meanings interact, overlap, disrupt, contradict and confirm one another. We are all after these strata.

Peter Greenaway's films are articulated around a void or a blank. Their organizing principle is always already to come. Greenaway's films are not, they *will be*. This permanent in-the-making quality, this permanent construction, can only take place *elsewhere*, in what we could call a rigorous deconstruction, in the Derridean sense. When watching his films, we are never *there* because we are constantly required to be elsewhere. We are not in the cook's kitchen, we are in Rembrandt's painting. We are not watching animals in cages in a zoo, we are skipping rope.

In Greenaway's lecture, as well as in his films, there is a kind of restlessness raised to the level of a system of thought, a ruthless restlessness which requires a kind of neural leap every fraction of a second. Indeed, one may unhesitatingly comment on his virtuosity as he gave his lectures on those two evenings exactly as one would comment on any of his films, the panache and steady unfolding, the elegance and general tenor of his cinema emerging superbly and flamboyantly in his discussion. Listening to him was watching one of his films.

A sense of the theatrical. What is more operatic than *Prospero's Books* or *The Pillow Book*, however different the "little music" and glissandos we hear in them may be? The way images and words develop a choreography of bodies, movements, settings, long shots and close-ups – is evocative of a seven-veil dance of seduction, of love, power and death, each image uncovering, vying with and exposing the other in both a microcosmic and macrocosmic dance. Peter Greenaway, we are sure, must have already lived in Shakespeare's time, when only rare, refined souls could hear the music of the spheres inaudible to corrupt ears..."If music be the food of love..."

A Joycean sense of the eventual absence of a one and only sense. Not a single image, not a single statement by Peter Greenaway fails to offer a proliferation of possibilities and this is true of all his films, starting with the interplay of text and image in *The Draughtsman's Contract* up to the new technological languages used in *Tulse Luper Suitcases*. None of them manages to dispel the cloud of mystery lying at their core. This dangling position in which he puts the spectator – to the latter's greatest pleasure – derives from the subtle blending of the real and the virtual and the crossfertilization of the classical and the digital. For all Greenaway's obsessive affirmation that the cinema is dead, the story does go on, but not in linear fashion, rather at different layers. Anyone wanting to become a good Greenaway scholar needs to be first of all a palaeontologist. Peter Greenaway is a Ulysses who

contemplates his own inability to navigate except magnetically drawn towards Scylla and Charybdis yet simultaneously repelled from both.

An imp of the perverse, that is what Greenaway is, both the filmmaker and the lecturer. Sowing signs, sewing signs, suing signs, sidetracking us after putting us on the right (?) track, making us deserve our status as listeners and watchers, making us “with windlasses and with assays of bias/ By indirections find directions out” – which, when we find them, prove that we have already been redirected elsewhere, or misdirected. The cinema goes back to its primeval function, that of the kaleidoscope, the epitome of trompe-l’oeil, the essence of delight caused by imitation and its subsequent sense of frustration.

A flamboyant magnificent sense of the *baroque* inhabits Greenaway, the filmmaker and the man. It is a healthy, heady and disquieting exuberance, that of life and that of death, intricately interwoven, the paradoxical deleterious exuberance of Michelangelo embarking on the painting of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Any movement does secrete its own energy, its intrinsic liberty. In Peter Greenaway’s films, images are secreted by a primordial, almost telluric, energy, each one being a trace of that energy before being identified as a sign, each one literally making love with the others and begetting itself simultaneously. A vertigo of images within images telescoping immanence and transcendence into a secret self-engendering *logic*.

The experience of watching a Peter Greenaway film, as of listening to him, is like being gently, almost imperceptibly, somehow magnetically pushed out of a window...

This volume, then, is an attempt to map out Peter Greenaway’s thematics and problematics from renewed angles, drawn/inspired as we are by his latest experiments with the Finneganian *Tulse Luper Suitcases*.

From a merely hermeneutic standpoint, the obsession with the secret of the body as a place of resistance to the dictatorship of the rational mind is seen as the recurrent factor of all Greenaway’s films, at least this is what Michel Remy (University of Nice) contends. This is for him the key to the thematics as established by and in *The Draughtsman’s Contract*. At no moment in the film is there any fall in the tension which supports it throughout, between domination and seduction, power and powerlessness, illusion and delusion, ordering and disordering forces, the masculine and the feminine, the Same and the Other. The tension is never resolved, the solution brought at the end solves nothing, except at the superficial level of the story, in the strict, limited sense of the word, and the obsession remains with the quest for the secret, ever absent body which, if found, would throw all levels of reading into darkness, as would the shutter of a camera.

The other articles in this volume tackle the formality and aesthetic dimension of the composition of the films, a crucial, seminal issue if one turns towards the future and realizes what Greenaway is embarking on with his *Tulse Luper Suitcases*, creating irremediable havoc in the visual and mental habits of the *homo spectator*.

First the angle of perception and perceptual processes. Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard (University of Toulouse) shows how *Z.O.O.* conjures up, and ties in with, Henri Bergson’s theory in *Matter and Memory*, according to which perception is essentially a matter of exchanges between the perceived object and the perceiver. She demonstrates that the treatment of chiaroscuro, sequencing movement and visual anamorphosis lies at the very basis of Greenawayan aesthetics and could be easily assimilated to an appropriation of the Renaissance visual apparatus.

Anne Combarous (University of Pau) goes a little further and sees Greenaway’s approach to the cinema as an allegory of photography. The central enigma of *The Draughtsman’s Contract* revolves, she says, on the relationship between images and reality and not only raises the issue of the author’s stance – the draughtsman is also the film director – but also evokes Roland Barthes’ “return of death” in photography. This is another obsessive thematics which Anne Combarous detects, especially in Greenaway’s use of still shots. This leads her to suggest that Greenaway’s allegory of photography, which appears and reappears in his films, is in actual fact the allegory of his own cinematography.

Greenaway’s questioning of our perceptual habits is also dealt with by Zeenat Saleh (University of Besançon), who sees Greenaway as someone working away from the tradition of realism in the English cinema. An outsider, she says, he is first and foremost a European filmmaker, situating himself at the crossroads of many cultural influences from all over Europe, especially in the way he

prevents the spectators from any kind of identification with his characters, keeping them at bay so to speak. In that respect, the attempt to reach out for a sense of eternity, if not immortality, is repeatedly celebrated.

From the problematics of perception, the contributions in this volume pass on to the issue of representation. Lawrence Gasquet (University of Bordeaux III), through her extremely perceptive essay on *The Belly of an Architect*, explores the way representation makes the world more intelligible rather than merely reproducing it. This is achieved, she demonstrates, by the disclosure of the various possible operations upon which the act of representing is founded. One could say that Peter Greenaway's representational agenda is centred on the deconstruction of representation itself, through the exposure of models of vision and schemas, in the psychological sense, of perception. In that sense, she proves, architecture has to be seen as the primordial, fundamental form of art which includes all others, since "it is the least ephemeral" and, we'd like to add, the most "organicistic". Architecture gives sense to space and matter. It literally makes sense. In other words, Greenaway shows that sense does come from the eye, a lesson which Neville understands too late in *The Draughtsman's Contract*, and which Rembrandt is taught, just in time, in *The Nightwatch*. As Lawrence Gasquet sums up, we are confronted with "our own ignorance in matters of representation, as we are at the same time the originators of our cunning visual stratagems and the victims of our own perceptual entrapments."

According to Terence Blake's own analysis (University of Nice), the key to Greenaway's aesthetics is given by a reconsideration of *The Falls*, one of his earliest films, but in this case, to throw as much light as possible on the process, a Deleuzian approach has to be adopted and Greenaway's strange narrational processes have to be seen in terms of "rhizomatics". The image can no longer be seen from a *dogmatic* point of view, but as the locus of the subversion of the dogma, or the *doxa*, and the opening onto *networks* of meanings, what Deleuze aptly calls a rhizome. This is why Greenaway's films constitute a subversion of documentary truth by pushing the spectator away from fixed identities into his own becoming, and this is eventually seen by Terence Blake as founding "a post-modern, post-identity ethic".

This double bind finds its purely cinematographic, technical equivalence in Patrick Louguet's contribution (University of Paris VIII Vincennes à Saint-Denis). Louguet positions himself behind the camera and follows its manipulation by the cameraman as it films bodies coming in and out. Through references and echoes of Muybridge, Méliès and Marey, Louguet sees Greenaway's films, especially *Prospero's Books*, as filmic palimpsests of superimposed and constantly displaced points of view. Travelling, he emphasizes, becomes a source, a matrix – the word most appropriately recurs - of unstoppable *becoming*.

No conclusion was drawn from those two intense days, as intense as they were. The only rhetorically conclusive statement one could make is that Greenaway is the master of this strange alchemy which turns the ocular into the spectacular, and the spectacular into the ocular, all this being a matter of *specularity*, unless it be speculation.