



From the Secret of Bodies to the Secret Body:  
Peter Greenaway's crypts.  
A reading of The Draughtsman's Contract

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Remy Michel, « From the Secret of Bodies to the Secret Body: Peter Greenaway's crypts. A reading of The Draughtsman's Contract », *Cycnos*, vol. 26.1 (Peter Greenaway), 2010, mis en ligne en janvier 2012.

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*revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice*

ISSN 1765-3118

ISSN papier 0992-1893

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**EPI-REVEL**

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

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Le désir conscient et délibéré de Neville de représenter, donc de circonscrire, la propriété de M. Herbert, en d'autres termes, sa tentative de s'appropriier la propriété de l'autre - but, avouons-le, de toute représentation - s'avère être un piège mortel pour lui. Au centre de cette illusion purement masculine - ne pourrait-on parler d'une tromperie à son propre égard qu'il orchestre lui-même ? - se cachent les profondes exigences irrépressibles du Corps qui court-circuitent tout contrat rationnel et logique conclu entre individus. A l'aube de son immense production filmique, Greenaway crypte le corps qu'il jouera ensuite à exhumer sur différents modes film après film, dans une irréductible conjonction d'Eros et Thanatos.

Neville's own headstrong desire to represent, i.e. circumscribe, Mr. Herbert's property, in other words his attempt at appropriating someone else's property - the aim, one will admit of any representation - proves to be a lethal trap for him. At the centre of this masculine delusion - should one speak of unwitting self-deception? - there lie the deep, free-wheeling exigencies of the Body, which counterbalances, or rather short-circuits, any rational, logical contract between individuals. At the threshold of his vast filmic production, Greenaway encrypts the Body, in its irreducible conjunction of Eros and Thanatos, which he will then play at unearthing film after film.

Any text, whether written, filmed, photographed or painted, is obviously representative, at least allegedly. It is in this basic assertion that there lies in fact the drama which Peter Greenaway stages in every one of his films, the tension between what is represented on the screen and what it is supposed

to represent, between the attempted ordering of the heterogeneous on the one hand and the resurgence and resilience of the same recalcitrant heterogeneous on the other hand, the split and confrontation between power and powerlessness. At the core of this insoluble conflict, there rises the body, whether the constituted, unified, whole body or the maimed, fragmented body, the body both submitted and revolted. All bodies in Peter Greenaway's films are *corpora delicti*. The problematics is indeed investigated and probed deep into, film after film, but it is inaugurally raised as early as *The Draughtsman's Contract*. As a matter of fact, the two titles of the film, we mean the titles of the English and the French versions (in French, *Meurtre dans un jardin anglais*) reveal the dichotomy at work: what is first and foremost a contract hides a murder, a murder hides a contract. Beneath the order and reason which control and frame the bodies involved, a crime – the ultimate act of disorder – is committed on the body, and this unhinges the frame catastrophically. It is also well known that the reason for being of an English garden is, indeed, its disorder – its rational, studied disorder.

Let us simply recall the main stages of the story from the point of view of the problematics centred on the body. The body in question is, before any other, that of Mr Neville, the landscape painter, the draughtsman. He is the body of authority, a narcissistic body which imposes its law and reason on the whole property in order to frame and imprison the reality he is asked to represent – drawings he will make of the property in the absence of its owner, thus becoming a kind of usurper as it is. Right from the start, and in order to fulfil the contract and complete the first six drawings, Neville reorganizes and redefines the order and nature of things: human and animal presence must fit in with the order wanted and decreed by him alone – only the whistling of birds cannot be controlled, thus constituting in a sense the first hint at the limits of his power over reality, contrary to the whistling of human beings, which he tries to catch in his drawings when asking Mr Talmann to puff his cheeks when he draws him. More important, for we reach here the spring of life, the body's sexual activity itself is put down into words and is part of the written contract, submitted to the sole desire of Neville, over which the other party in the contract, Mrs Herbert, has no power – hence the cold, mechanical, rational quality of their intercourse. Although a "codicil", it will prove to be the mainspring of the whole intrigue. The body is omnipresent, the body dominates, the body is always right, the body keeps the secret of its reason, unchallenged.

This being said, we know that Neville's domination over things and bodies cannot last. Once the first six drawings have been completed, the next six represent a challenge to such domination, insidiously and unbeknown to him. In each of them, details are introduced which gradually build and tell another story, a story within the story, which Neville cannot comprehend and dominate. While the drawings were supposed to celebrate and honour Mr Herbert's birthday, in other words, his life, they gradually trace his death. While the drawings were supposed to represent the buildings and certain parts of the property, there is no longer any property. Ownership is diffuse, dissolved, the drawings are cut off from, and disappropriated of, their objective; they slip away from themselves, while they were supposed to represent, in the strictest mimetic sense of the word, they open themselves to alterity and heterogeneity, against Neville's own will. Through quite a strange compulsion, which we will explain later, Neville accepts the situation and does his best to fit into it. While Neville thinks he repetitively deals with the Same, the body of the Same, i.e. with the perfect adequation of image and reality, that is to say, the perfect adequation between, on the one hand, the contract and, on the other hand, his drawing and lovemaking, he is little by little forced to accept and deal with otherness, in the guise of intrusive objects and garments. His tragedy is that he doesn't realize that the Other cannot be evacuated, and that he will be the worse for it. The other, in this case, is a body, that of Mr Herbert, which has been made radically other, i.e. dead, a secret Neville can only discover later, the secret he has no access to – only too late, almost at the very last second of his life.

Let us go a little further into all the implications of this. While representing, Neville, as a body, is part of his own representation of bodies and things. Just like any other author, filmmaker, painter or photographer, he is unwittingly at the heart of the representation he is engaged in. By directing and staging people – as he does with the servants who rake the gravel in front of the house, or with Mr Talmann, whom he orders to whistle - the director also stages himself, stepping into the space of his own representation, splitting himself into two, so to speak. This is why, as the film moves on, Peter Greenaway shows Neville coming towards us from the background in the depth of field axis, seen at the centre of the image and through his own framing device in a strongly delimited field. In addition to this, the frame he uses is exceeded by out-of-field shots which emphasize its derisory, illusory power. The episode in which Neville comments upon the Queen of Night painting in Mrs Talmann's bedroom by insisting on its multi-layered significance, clearly indicates that he knows that a representation can

only be plural but it also reveals, that, simultaneously, he is blind to the plurivocity of his own representation and to his being both its author and its object. This episode is obviously a *mise-en-abyme* of his own blindness, of a body – his own – made to circulate in close relationship and reference to another, but hidden, one.

Quite understandably, Neville is, right from the outset, the object of the contract proposed to him. He is an integral part of it and of its fiction – and what is a contract if not a not-yet-achieved representation, a story yet to be effectuated, a fiction ? – imposed on him and on reality, as is emphasized by the voice over which keeps on repeating the terms of the contract, the voice of fate, the voice of the inevitability and categorical imperiousness of fate. In the act of representation, the body-subject is always already a body-object.

The rest of the film confirms all this. The second contract signed with Mrs Herbert's daughter, Mrs Talmann, which constitutes the background plot of the second half of the film and the six remaining drawings, definitively transforms Neville into an object. The manipulator is manipulated and the instrument of manipulation is his body. The lovemaking at the centre of the second contract, which duplicates the lovemaking of the first contract, except that Neville's partner is now Mrs Herbert's daughter, is in fact a stratagem to make him give a child to her, whose husband is impotent. Neville is doubly deceived: by the two contracts, one which hides death, the other which hides life. In the two situations, the dominating, contractualized, rationalized body, that of Neville, is short-circuited, exceeded by the physicality, the pure corporeality which escapes all kinds of contract or rational project. He has never realized that, by framing the outside reality, he was transforming nature into signs, including himself. Framing reality implies framing oneself. Neville becomes a sign, even abdicating his power as when he leaves the interpretation of his drawings to his masters. Neville enters the irrational, directionless movement of signs and bodies. He is being put on the side, he is no longer at the centre of the circle. It is now made evident that representation – like all representations, we would like to add – is organized around a central invisibility, an absent body, a central blank, a blind spot, unbeknownst to the one who represents. From the absent body of Mr Herbert, present in his absence through his traces, one passes on to the present body of Neville, present in his absence-to-come. The drawings intended for Mrs Herbert's husband tell the fate of her legitimate husband but also the fate of her illegitimate husband, Neville. Bodies escape all categories of legitimacy or illegitimacy and thrive at their margins.

Indeed, representation is a central preoccupation in Peter Greenaway's works. It corresponds to the attempt to discover what it is exceeded and short-circuited by. Representation can only be exceeded by the Other, repetition can only be exceeded by the difference which is ineluctably introduced into it. The thirteenth drawing Neville wants to make clearly shows the way representation fosters its own undermining: Neville is not obliged to add a thirteenth drawing to the first twelve which he has completed, it stands outside the contract, but Neville comes back to the property, compulsively, prompted by the irresistible urge to "rape" reality again and again. This is why, moved by a kind of provocation, tempted indeed by "the imp of the perverse", he chooses to sit at a particularly symbolic spot, under the statue of a horse – the statufied "embodiment" of Mr Herbert's horse which came back from Southampton without its rider, a statue now ridden by a living statue, the statue of Hermes, the holder of the secrets of life and death. But from that spot he will be precipitated into blindness and death, both radical kinds of alterity. Thrown into the stagnant ditch from which Mr Herbert's body was retrieved, he will die precisely where Mr Herbert's body is found. Neville's body is precipitated into a representation which has overcome him because it has gradually included him, reifying him. The two bodies coalesce. Why does he come back, then? He comes back because he still believes in the power he had over representation and thinks he can find out its secret in total impunity. But this secret de-authorizes him definitively. Neville is the one by whom the secret was let out and he dies because the secret must remain crypted – crypted as he is himself, literally, exactly as the (secret) other of his representation, Mr Herbert, has been crypted throughout the film in cryptic details left here and there, disjointedly.

This slow, progressive sliding into the Other, which goes way beyond the Manichaeism which one may be tempted to postulate when considering the body which exceeds and the body which is exceeded, is neither more nor less than the slow, progressive passage from repetition to difference, a sliding of the latter into the former. Articles abound about Peter Greenaway's obsession with counting, series, the arithmetical reading of reality and taxonomies. But what one has to realize is that these taxonomic series are always already challenged and questioned by what escapes them, by what slips away from arithmetical order : evidence of this is provided by the thirteenth drawing which in itself

gathers and sums up the traces of otherness contained, but hidden, in the preceding twelve drawings, or by the alphabet by which children are taught to name things (as in *The Draughtsman's Contract* the little boy who is taught the names of trees in German). Other examples are easily found: the hundred chapters in *Drowning by Numbers*, another title which combines order and disorder, rationality and irrationality, life and death, the 26 letters of the alphabet in *ZOO* which become 23 in the Greek alphabet and correspond to the 26 paintings by Vermeer which still exist in the world – except that 3 of them are dubious, that makes 23! Let us add to this the references to Greek, Roman and Biblical antiquity which all reveal the obsession to go back to the origin of things and beings, to regress to the maternal womb ( *The Belly of an Architect* is a case in point), to return to the Garden of Eden, a place devoid of any categorizing, castrating and imperialistic ordering of things. But such desire is pure fiction and each film shows both its attractiveness and its subversiveness.

At the very core of this problematics, there lies the eternal process of creation which we can neither fix nor master. In *The Draughtsman's Contract*, Neville dies at the moment when a child is about to come to life, in *ZOO* the spectator's fascination derives from the refrained power of the imprisoned body and the powerlessness of the always already decaying body – in both cases, one is led beyond the limits of corporeality. In *ZOO* and *Pillow Books*, the incessant return to the origin of life, to the origin of creation and the world, is inseparable from the quest for sexual fulfilment. In *The Baby of Macon*, birth itself is a challenge to the laws of the land. In *The Belly of an Architect*, pregnancy and delivery are fused with the architect's death-provoking obsession with the round and rotund shapes of Boullée's architectural fantasy. In *The Draughtsman's Contract*, Neville believes he is creation itself but this creation is of the mind, it brings about death, getting frozen, so to speak, in the framing device which crystallizes the contrast with biological creation, actually its ironical counterpoint which Neville is deceived into.

At this stage it is easy to understand the importance of sexuality, bestiality, scatology and sadistic violence in practically all his films, as in the long scene of the rape in *The Baby of Macon*. All that slips out of the body, vomit, sperm, blood, excrements ... is the *expression* – literally speaking - of libidinality, of pure corporeality, of a flux which one irresistibly tries to control but these fluxes belong to the organic which underlies the inorganic, like a rhizome, emerging and reemerging here and there, unexpectedly. This is what is meant in the first tableaux which punctuate the credits in *The Draughtsman's Contract*; all of them refer to physiological and bodily activities, in the image of the two hundred buckets of water and urine under the stairs. These images indicate the leading thematic and symbolic thread of the film from the very beginning, and they will be “conjugated” in different tenses and modes. This physicality is Peter Greenaway's obsession and he clearly wants to emphasize the blindness of man to his dead-end no-way-out situation, between instinctuality and intellectuality, his blindness to his own arrogance and animality and to his own illusory knowledge of the secrets of his body.

Eventually the representation of bodies and their secrets is a crime against the body and Peter Greenaway finds himself struggling with this issue. As a painter and filmmaker, he, too, represents and in this repeated, continuous activity of representation, he tries to exorcise his own guilt at attempting to control the body. Greenaway is Neville, he is Kracklite, he is the two twins in *ZOO*. Greenaway knows that to represent is to play the game of death but he represents because he also knows that the body will short-circuit the representation which aims at controlling it sooner or later.

To represent is to pretend one can control. To represent is a flight forward, lest one might encounter the Other, the hidden, crypted body; to represent is to deal with what will always deconstruct, in the hope that one will be extenuated from the guilt inherent in the repeated attempt at stopping that deconstructive impulse. The Greenawayan body affirms itself in its very decaying process, inseparably from its degradation, for any present body can only be deconstructed by the absent body, which is also the body to come and which reestablishes the present body in its pure physicality, that is in a radical *becoming*. Mr Herbert's absent body is to be found in the elusive and illusory body of Hermes, the statue which rides Mr Herbert's horse and having witnessed the conclusion brought to its secret workings – the blinding and death of Neville - slips away from the horse's back, alighting near the water of the moat: a body between the two men who were thrown into that water, a body which unites *and* separates them, a body never to be found, endlessly *differed*, enigmatic.