Since the 1960s, British multi-media artist Peter Greenaway has shocked and intrigued audiences with his avant-garde approach to filmmaking and other artistic ventures. From early experimental films to provocative features, Greenaway has deployed strategies associated with structuralist cinema only to challenge or critique the very limits of that cinema, and of film in general.

In this collection of essays, scholars from a variety of disciplines explore various postmodern and post-structuralist aspects of Greenaway’s films, starting with his early shorts and delving into his feature-length works, including The Draughtsman’s Contract, The Belly of an Architect, A Zed and Two Noughts, The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, The Baby of Mâcon, and The Pillow Book. Other artistic productions, including his paintings and installations, are also discussed. These essays examine the filmmaker’s position within British and avant-garde cinema and his interest in constructing and deconstructing representational systems.

Since the first edition of this book, Greenaway has enjoyed continued success in creating hybridized media projects for the stage and screen, as evidenced by additional essays in this revised volume. A new chapter examines Greenaway’s most ambitious endeavor to date, The Tulse Luper Suitcases, which exists as four feature films, multiple websites, an online game, several books and installations, and a number of theatrical events. Also new to this collection is an essay that addresses how Dutch political events and Dutch art have been crucial in shaping Greenaway’s aesthetic, focusing on The Draughtsman’s Contract, the 1991 opera Writing to Vermeer, and Nightwatching, the audiovisual installation and film, both inspired by Rembrandt’s Night Watch.

Peter Greenaway’s Postmodern/Poststructuralist Cinema, Revised Edition explores the cultural, historical, and philosophical implications of this hybrid artist whose paintings, drawings, exhibitions, installations, and operatic productions are an intrinsic part of his work in film. This collection of diverse essays, which includes two texts by Greenaway, two interviews with the director, and a revised filmography, will interest students, teachers, critics, and lovers of both postmodern art and cinema.

Contributors
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A book is, by its very nature, a cooperative venture. A collection of essays by a cast of international contributors from various disciplines, such as the present volume, is a particularly cooperative enterprise. We would like to acknowledge all of our contributors and thank them for their dedication and patience in bringing this project to fruition.

The idea for a collection of essays by multiple authors on the British filmmaker and artist Peter Greenaway arose in 1995, in the aftermath of a special session, entitled “From Images of the Past to Visions for the Future: The Cinema of Peter Greenaway,” which I organized for the Society for Cinema Studies Conference (SCS) in New York City. In 1999, I organized a second special session for the SCS in West Palm Beach, Florida, devoted to Greenaway’s work, “Peter Greenaway’s Post-Cinematic Art-World.” Several of the essays in this collection are elaborations on the work presented at these two conferences. We would like to thank the Society for Cinema Studies for providing us with the opportunity to bring together a number of scholars dedicated to the work of Peter Greenaway and for being the catalyst for a project that culminates in this book. The suggestion that we undertake such a project came from Mary Alemany-Galway, one of the speakers at the 1995 conference and the co-editor of, as well as contributor to, the present volume.

Taking as our point of departure the papers presented at these conferences, we conceived of this collection as filling an important gap in cinema scholarship: at the time of the 1995 conference, no scholarly book-length study of Peter Greenaway’s cinema and other artistic productions had been published in English. Since that time, four such studies have appeared. Our study, rather than becoming redundant, has acquired, we believe, even greater significance and relevance. This collection of essays, focusing primarily, but not exclusively, on Greenaway’s cinematic output, departs from, while also nicely complementing, the studies that precede it. While bringing together
many voices, each offering a unique reading of Greenaway’s artistry, this book also unifies these voices under the theoretical umbrella of postmodernism. We address this book, therefore, not only to students and scholars of Peter Greenaway, but also to students of cinema, literature, architecture, the visual arts, and contemporary theory. It is our intention that the essays in this collection be a fruitful contribution to the ongoing application of theoretical discourse to the study of complex artistic expression, and to cultural and historical understanding. More particularly, our selection process was guided by the desire to reach a diverse audience and to produce a work that would be potentially useful in a number of academic contexts, including advanced undergraduate courses and graduate seminars.

We are indebted to a number of individuals and institutions for their intellectual and financial support. Foremost, we would like to thank Peter Greenaway himself, Eliza Poklewski Koziell, and Annabel Radermacher for their assistance and full cooperation. I am personally indebted to Eliza and Annabel for welcoming me so warmly at the VUE in London in the Summer of 1997 and for giving me access to the VUE’s collection of books, slides, and other materials. I thank Eliza, in particular, for including Indianapolis and Bloomington in Peter Greenaway’s U.S. tour, in April of 1997.

In conjunction with this latter event, I would like to acknowledge the generous support of Butler University with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Fredrick M. Ayres Fund. Thanks to this grant and to contributions from several academic programs and departments at Butler, we were able to organize and host a lecture by Peter Greenaway on the Butler campus, on April 27, 1997, as well as a week-long retrospective of his films, culminating with the screening of *The Pillow Book* at the Madame Walker Theatre in Indianapolis. The first interview in this volume was conducted during Greenaway’s visit to Indianapolis. I am equally grateful to Barbara Klinger and many other individuals and departments at Indiana University for their collaboration in bringing Peter Greenaway to Indiana, and for hosting a lecture by Greenaway and a screening of his films at the Indiana University campus in Bloomington.

Above all, we are grateful to Scarecrow Press for its enthusiasm toward the book.

Paula Willoquet-Maricondi
Indianapolis, December 2000
If, at the end of the 1980s, Peter Greenaway was a succès de scandale following the release of The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, it would appear that, at the turn of the century, he is a full-fledged, critically recognized seminal figure on the art-house cinema circuit and in avant-garde art. In addition to the four studies of Greenaway’s films and other productions that have recently been published in English (Alan Woods, Amy Lawrence, Bridget Elliott and Anthony Purdy, and David Pascoe), there have also been several book-length studies and numerous articles published in Italian, German, Spanish, Danish, French, and Portuguese. Greenaway’s recognition as an innovative, intellectually stimulating, and provocative artist is further confirmed by his having been inducted, in 1998, as an officer of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French cultural minister and having received the Premio Fiesole from the Mediateca Toscana, in Florence. Peter Wollen was, indeed, correct in including Greenaway’s films among what he called the “Last New Wave” of British cinema, a body of work produced by “original, oppositional, visually oriented modernist auteurs” (49).

There is, perhaps, in the very title of this collection of essays on Greenaway, one—and maybe two—incongruities. The first incongruity is the coupling of the terms poststructuralist and postmodern with the name Peter Greenaway. As Wollen’s comment suggests, the name “Greenaway” is undeniably associated with authorship, with the director as author, and with “signature” films; the terms poststructuralist and postmodern, on the other hand, are associated with the dissolution of the figure of the author. This book is not an auteur study per se, although we are focusing on the work of a filmmaker whose name on the credits is a commercially viable ploy that appeals to notions of the artist as visionary and to audience recognition. This book may well be an instance of what James Naremore calls the “paradoxical ‘survival of the author’ in contemporary film criticism” (14). However, as Naremore also points out, discussions that center on a particular director need not be
incompatible with theory, even if this theory is generally associated with the negation of the author as an all-determining force behind the work. This is a tension that other critics who have devoted entire studies to the work of one director have had to grapple with. Frank Burke, for instance, in his 1996 study of Federico Fellini, remarks that “the implications of death-of-the-author-theory point not to the elimination of all author-centered criticism but to its reorientation” (xiii).

Greenaway himself, like Fellini, has provided his own critique of authorship in his films. It is not surprising, then, that his newest film, *Eight and a Half Women*, is a homage to Fellini’s *8 1/2*, a film that marks Fellini’s self-conscious and direct engagement with the question of authorship. Greenaway not only demonstrates tolerance toward his films being “read” by audiences, but he has shown a genuine interest and curiosity about how they are read. “If you make something for public consumption—however small the audience—” he states, “it must be theirs to interpret as they wish. You cannot control it” (Hacker and Price, 216–217).

It is indisputable by now that the romantic vision of self-expression as aesthetic value would not fit those texts created in the context of Roland Barthes’s notion of “the death of the author.” However, if Barthes did not believe in the expressive genius whose world-vision we should venerate, he did see the author as a space where cultural discourses came together (211). This book undertakes to decipher the “variety of writings, none of the original,” that blend and clash in Greenaway’s texts. Greenaway himself both exploits and parodies traditional notions of authorship, as can be seen, for instance, in *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, where the artist is ridiculed—and killed—for his pretensions and vanities. As many critics have noted, this ironic attitude toward the function of the artist can often be seen in postmodern works. Rosanna Maule notes that “in the context of postmodern address, authorship may disengage the interplay between narrative instances, implicit author, and real author that has traditionally founded its authoritative address in the film text” (128).

The other incongruity suggested by the title of this volume is not at all obvious and might not have occurred to the reader, were it not for our raising the issue. We refer here to the identification of Greenaway as a filmmaker. While Greenaway is mostly, or best known, as an art cinema director, he is not just, or even primarily, a filmmaker. He does not describe himself as first and foremost a filmmaker, and his relationship to the medium has been, from its inception, rebellious and ambivalent. It is perhaps for this reason that Greenaway’s films are often difficult to categorize or classify. As Amy Lawrence notes, they are easy to recognize but difficult to describe (1) and are best approached as what Alan Woods calls a “hybrid” genre (17).
One of the objectives of this collection is to explore the “hybrid” nature of Greenaway’s films by situating them in the context of his other productions. Although the focus of this study remains the feature films, all of the contributors to this volume acknowledge that any understanding of Greenaway as a filmmaker necessitates a broader understanding of him as a hybrid artist whose paintings, drawings, exhibitions, installations, and operatic productions are intimately allied to and an intrinsic part of his work in cinema. To this end, we offer an introduction to some of Greenaway’s non-cinematic output in chapters 1 and 2, in the expectation that the subsequent chapters—dealing primarily with the feature films, but in an intertextual way that acknowledges the cross-overs and cross-fertilizations among Greenaway’s various art forms—will be read in light of these introductory remarks.

The overarching goals of this volume are: to elucidate our particular notion of Greenaway’s films and other artistic practices as being exemplary of a postmodernist sensibility; to offer readings of several of Greenaway’s feature films by critics in a number of disciplines—ranging from film studies to architecture—who have found various conceptions of postmodernism and Greenaway’s work to be mutually illuminating and enriching; and to place the reader in more direct contact with Peter Greenaway himself. To this end, we devote the last part of this study to Greenaway’s own writings and interviews.

This book is an attempt to understand and explicate Greenaway’s work in relation to the epistemology of his time, that is, the age of postmodernism. Postmodernism is a complex phenomena that can take many forms; some are manifested in popular film and some in the art cinema. In particular, we are interested in situating Greenaway’s films in relation to poststructuralist modes of thought since these inform postmodern works of art, such as his, that are critical of dominant ideologies. We are not arguing that Greenaway is a poststructuralist theorist, or even that he has read or is interested in discussing poststructuralist theory. Rather, we think that his work has been informed by a poststructuralist climate of thought that is prevalent in cultural circles.

Our introductory chapter seeks to establish the links among postmodern art forms, poststructuralist thought, and Greenaway’s cinema. All three, we maintain, share an attitude that puts all constructions of reality into question. Poststructuralist thought, while basing itself on the theories of structuralist thinkers such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss, also operates as a critique of these thinkers. This critique can be extended to include modernist forms of art and literature, since the concepts underlying modernism are linked to structuralist epistemologies. In the same way that poststructuralist thought is rooted in, and yet, critical of structuralism,
postmodern art forms, like those produced by Greenaway, are based on modernist ones while also going beyond them. This is particularly evident in Greenaway’s early experimental films. They deploy strategies associated with structuralist cinema (not to be confused with theoretical structuralism), only, in the end, to challenge or critique the very limits of that cinema—and of cinema in general, in effect. The essays in this collection carry this line of argumentation further, elucidating the deconstructive agenda of Greenaway’s feature films and exploring the various manifestations of Greenaway’s passion for constructing and deconstructing systems in his works.
Since the 2001 publication of the hardback edition of Peter Greenaway's Postmodern/Poststructuralist Cinema, the perspectives on this multi-media artist carried forth in the present volume have only been further substantiated by Greenaway’s continued success in creating hybridized media projects for the stage and screen, big and small. His most ambitious endeavor to date, The Tulse Luper Suitcases, was then only in its initial stages of planning and execution. While still impressive in scope in its current form, the original plans for the project underwent numerous revisions. The Tulse Luper Suitcases now exists as four feature films, multiple websites, an online game, several books and installations, multiple VJ performances, and a number of theatrical events inspired by some of the central elements structuring Luper’s life story: the number 92, suitcases, and uranium.

Given the self-proliferating nature of the Luper project, we felt it was appropriate to add to this revised edition a chapter explicating the structure and intent of such a daunting art work. Chapter 14, Heidi Peeters’s “The Tulse Luper Suitcases: Peter Greenaway’s Left Luggage,” approaches this labyrinthine work as a “network of historiographic metafiction.” Her essay is an expanded version of a study originally published in issue 12 of the online journal Image [&] Narrative, “Opening Peter Greenaway’s Tulse Luper Suitcases,” entirely devoted to The Tulse Luper Suitcases phenomenon. We thank the chief editors of the journal for their permission to reprint portions of the original essay.

A second new chapter, by David Pascoe, focuses our attention on the crucial function that Dutch political events and Dutch art have played in shaping Greenaway’s aesthetic in his films, installations, and operas. Pascoe, whose Museums and Moving Image (1997) offered a meticulous analysis of Greenaway’s paintings and allusions to the Old Masters as expressions of the artist’s own fascination with the effects of framing on the human body, turns in the present volume to a discussion of several elements that link Greenaway to the Netherlands, his adopted country: water, conspiracies, the artists Rembrandt and
Vermeer, and the character of van Hoyten. Pascoe’s essay begins by returning us to *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, where, in overt and tacit ways, these elements are introduced. Using Greenaway’s first feature-length film as a launching point, Pascoe explores the infusion of Dutch political and art history in Greenaway’s 1999 opera *Writing to Vermeer*, and in his most recent cinematic release, *Nightwatching* (2007), and the installation by the same name produced the previous year, both inspired by Rembrandt’s *Night Watch*.

In addition to the two new chapters, the introduction to the volume has been revised to account for the new material, the list of works by Greenaway at the end of the volume has been updated, and the index has been expanded.

We thank Scarecrow Press for taking the volume into a second edition and for giving us the opportunity to expand its scope. We also thank our original and new collaborators for their contributions in helping elucidate this, at times, most elusive of artists.
Let us inscribe and then challenge totality.

Linda Hutcheon

I’ve never been able to endure anything but contradiction.

Bertolt Brecht

When it was suggested to Peter Greenaway that he was a postmodern filmmaker, he responded by saying: “Well, I am deeply suspicious of the word, but yes, I suppose I am a creature of my times. I am trying to make a use of history fashioned for the present. I am very eclectic—I homage and borrow, quote and reprise. I am suspicious of so-called truths” (Sampson, 12). While postmodern art forms share this suspicion of “so-called truths” to which Greenaway is alluding, the term *postmodernism* itself is certainly one that has also inspired suspicion in artists and critics alike, that has been used and abused, but that does, nonetheless, refer to certain artistic practices and enable us to speak about these practices in ways that elucidate late-twentieth century art’s continuities with, as well as departures from, the past.

The term *postmodernism* has been used to refer to various types of cultural productions and aesthetic practices, ranging from architecture to music, literature, film, and video. It has been used to designate forms of thought, the historical period we are currently living in, and this period’s economic practices. Far from being a unified theory, postmodernism has alternatively been linked, on the one hand, to neoconservative politics and, on the other hand, to a politics of resistance. In its “resistant” manifestation, postmodernism concerns itself with a critical deconstruction of ideologies, while the “reactionary” brand of postmodernism tends toward the use of pseudo-historical forms to reaffirm conservative values. Critics
who have favored an oppositional and deconstructive view of postmodernism have linked the art produced under this label with poststructuralist thought. Hal Foster argues, for instance, that

as the importance of a Foucault, a Jacques Derrida or a Roland Barthes attests, postmodernism is hard to conceive without continental theory, structuralism and poststructuralism in particular. Both have led us to reflect upon culture as a corpus of codes or myths (Barthes), as a set of imaginary resolutions to real contradictions (Claude Lévi-Strauss). In this light, a poem or picture is not necessarily privileged, and the artifact is likely to be treated less as a work in modernist terms—unique, symbolic, visionary—than as text in a postmodernist sense—“already written,” allegorical, contingent. With this textual model, one postmodernist strategy becomes clear: to deconstruct modernism not in order to seal it in its own image but in order to open it, to rewrite it. (Anti-Aesthetic, x–xi; see also “(post)Modern Polemics,” 67–78)

Linda Hutcheon elaborates on this notion by reconfirming the links between postmodernist art and poststructuralist theory and by arguing that both represent willfully complicitous critiques of the very institutions that they are simultaneously associated with. For Hutcheon, postmodernist practices and poststructuralist theory are both implicated in the notion of center that they try to subvert (Politics, 4). Postmodernism is willfully duplicitous because “it knows it cannot escape implication in the economic (late capitalist) and ideological (liberal humanist) dominants of its time” (Poetics, xiii). The usefulness of Hutcheon’s understanding of postmodernism to the study of Peter Greenaway’s art is threefold: postmodernism is transgressive of the boundaries between practice and theory; it is a self-implicating critical discourse; and it is an inescapably political “problematizing force” that questions the “natural” within the social (Poetics, xi). All three of these aspects of postmodernism are characteristic of Greenaway’s artistic productions—of the feature films analyzed here, but also of his exhibitions, installations, and operas—which operate aesthetically as well as theoretically in a gesture of self-subversion. All of Greenaway’s productions are excessively stylized and theoretically self-deconstructive. This is particularly evident in Greenaway’s exploration of the possibilities afforded by a mega-cinema that might help explode the boundaries of cinema.

James Park has argued that “behind all Greenaway’s work is a postmodernist sense that narrative structures of chronological succession and logical cause and effect are false to the essentially chaotic and problematic
nature of subjective experience, and that the patterns we discern in experience are wholly illusory” (88). What for us links postmodern art forms to poststructuralist thought, and both to Peter Greenaway, is an attitude that puts all constructions of reality into question. As Jean-François Lyotard has pointed out, human knowledge—mythic, religious, and scientific knowledge—tends to take the form of narratives, of stories. Cartesian science believed that it could furnish proof of its theories partly because it believed in the impossibility of the same referent supplying a plurality of contradictory proofs. The advent of quantum theory and microphysics, however, has weakened science’s belief in causal relationships—so basic to narrative construction—and its confidence in its explanatory powers, in favor of an acceptance of the value of paradox. “Postmodern science,” says Lyotard, “by concerning itself with such things as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, ‘fracta,’ catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes—is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical” (60). Science is losing its belief in the cause and effect logic that has also been the basis of narrative construction for the realist novel or the classical Hollywood film. Postmodern science, art forms, and thought have come to acknowledge the value of paradoxes, of self-contradictory statements. The forwarding of such contradictions is a fundamental component of postmodern narratives such as Greenaway’s films.

In arguing for a postmodernist sensibility in Greenaway, we would seem to be arguing, from a Jamesonian perspective, for Greenaway’s complicity with the logic of consumer capitalism and for his “pastiche” use of quotations from past styles.¹

In fact, we would seem to be arguing for precisely the kind of reactionary brand of postmodernism more readily associated with American popular films than with European art films. Rather, what we are arguing for, in effect, is a reading of Greenaway that takes into account precisely what Jameson has rejected, but what Linda Hutcheon, Craig Owens, and others have championed: a use of pastiche that deconstructs ideology through an ironic articulation and appropriation of the “already said,” as in the works of feminist artists Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine, and Cindy Sherman. We are arguing for a sensibility in Greenaway that is self-reflexive, parodic, rooted in the historical world, unresolvably contradictory; that problematizes history and knowledge; that is not nostalgic in its revisiting of the past; and that does not claim epistemological authority. Postmodernism, as we understand it here, strives to challenge totalizing systems, even those of mass culture, while deploying, for the ultimate purpose of deconstructing them, some of those
very systems. In Hutcheon’s words, words that perfectly characterize Greenaway’s films, “postmodernist contradictory art still installs that order, but it then uses it to demystify our everyday processes of structuring chaos, of imparting or assigning meaning” (Poetics, 7).

Greenaway’s films are undeniably obsessed with organizational systems and categories at the levels of form and content. Not only does Greenaway fully engage with the potentialities of such systems to structure and order his films, but he often makes the process of categorization itself a thematic concern. It is perhaps in our attempts to grapple with this seemingly modernist obsession that we become most aware of the underlying message of all his films: organizational systems are useful fictions that ultimately break down and collapse—come to naught, like the efforts to understand the process of decomposition of life by the brothers Deuce in A Zed and Two Noughts. Perhaps, Greenaway seems to be saying, the systems that we build to understand the functioning of life are like the house of cards that the young Smut builds in Drowning by Numbers: they are fun games to build and watch collapse. “I mock those universal systems like the alphabet and the number structures I use as an alternative and support to the narrative, because, again, they are only man–made devices, explains Greenaway” (Sampson, 12–13). It is no surprise that, in one way or another, Greenaway’s films are all about doings and undoings, makings and unmakings, constructions and deconstructions. They are elaborate and detailed constructions that ultimately seem to question the efficacy and durability of all our constructions—be they theoretical or practical. As Lyotard explains, since science has been delegitimized, it has become a language game with its own rules on par with other language games and, therefore, cannot legitimize them. This is an important current of postmodernity, affecting the very conception of the social subject, which itself “seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games. The social bond is linguistic, but it is not woven with a single thread. It is a fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality an indeterminate number) of language games, obeying different rules” (40). Likewise, Greenaway’s postmodern cinema will juxtapose various language games without privileging any one as the “true” one.

The questioning of “so-called truths” is inherent to postmodernist/poststructuralist thought. In The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard called for an abandonment of those “truths” or “metanarratives” that have guided Western thinking—such as the Enlightenment notion of human liberation or the Marxist totalizing account of history. “Simplifying to extreme,” says Lyotard, “I define postmodern, as incredulity towards metanarratives” (xxiv). It must be acknowledged, however, that the suspicion of the existence of an objective
and identifiable truth is already present in modernism. Modernism, with its focus on epistemological doubt, is characterized by the forwarding of a subjective point of view on reality. As David Bordwell noted, art cinema, for instance, was much influenced by modernist literature and thus has tended to forward ambiguity of meaning (205–233). The trend in modernist painting, from the Impressionists on, was also toward an increasing acknowledgment of the subjective character of knowledge. Nature was no longer taken as a model to be followed in an objective manner. This shift from an external, objective to an internal, subjective focus led to a succession of stylistic movements, each operating according to artificial, self-reflexive rules, which facilitated the deployment of a number of modes of synthetic abstraction. Art thus evolved in the direction of a non-objective pursuit (see Ziff).

Lyotard has stated that modern aesthetics is an aesthetics of the sublime because it puts forth unrepresentable concepts (such as God) through abstraction; that is, through an emphasis on form and an avoidance of content (81). With postmodernism, epistemological doubt gets pushed further toward an acceptance of contradictions and paradoxes. “Postmodern knowledge,” explains Lyotard, “is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert’s homology but the inventor’s paralogy” (xxv).

Postmodern narratives go beyond the ambiguous subjective point of view on reality adopted by modernism by juxtaposing different discourses on reality, so that we may become aware that no one discourse can exhaust the “truth.” Jim Collins, for instance, sheds further light on the transition from a modernist aesthetic to a postmodernist anti-aesthetic by arguing that postmodernist narratives are a reaction against the stylistic purity of modernism: “Where the narrative discourse[s] of the Modernist era define themselves over and against other forms of discourse as privileged modes of representation, the narrative of this Post-Modern-stage are founded on the recognition that no one discourse can be sufficient, whether pulp romance or Freudian theory” (75). Postmodernism replaces the “poetic” stylization of the modernist text with a bricolage of diverse forms of already well-established aesthetic discourses that, unlike the heteroglossia of realist nineteenth-century novels, coexist without merging.

Greenaway’s early works, leading up to The Draughtsman’s Contract, are exemplary of a “structuralist” and modernist aesthetics insofar as they foreground the filmmaker’s interest in systems of organization and in serial structures in order to disrupt classical narrative and conventional viewing expectations. This phase of Greenaway’s filmic production has often been linked
to the work of structuralist filmmakers of the 1970s, such as Hollis Frampton and Michael Snow. Like Frampton, Greenaway explores the potential of riddles, games, numbers, and letters as organizational devices. P. Adams Sitney remarks that both artists share “a predilection for long systemic films, a fascination with the intervention of chance in art, and an ironic curiosity about all claims of the limitations of language,” but that they also differ in relation to their attitudes toward narrative authority. While Frampton’s cinema “celebrates radical self-reliance and posits visionary schemes of perfected machines and idealized languages,” Greenaway mocks the visionary impulse and the wish for perfectibility and “puts into question the identities and claims of his characters and the authority of the narrative voice” (46). Greenaway’s cinema is at the service of doubt, not of certainty, and his use of modernist aesthetics is at the service of a postmodernist denunciation of visionary projects of mastery as “foolish and hubristic” (50). Sarah Street argues that while Greenaway’s interest in systems of categorization links him to modernist filmmakers and musicians, “his concern with bricolage and textual overspill invests his work with postmodernist qualities” (180).

In a similar manner to Greenaway, the French poststructuralists working in the 1960s and later, criticized structuralism’s drive toward systematism and confronted it with everything excluded and repressed by that systematism. Derrida, for instance, called for a decentering of structure, doing away with the notion of origin and end, and thus opening the work to a free play of meaning and active interpretation (292). As Diana Fuss points out, the very notion of contradiction gets fetishized in Derrida’s work and, by his own admission, it is the most frequently used word in his texts (18).

Because critical postmodernism incorporates modernist strategies, it has often been difficult to establish a hard-and-fast distinction between these two stylistic and philosophical approaches. For instance, both Peter Wollen and Alan Woods have labeled Greenaway’s films as “modernist.” However, in spite of Woods’s self-acknowledged resistance to applying the label “postmodern” to Greenaway, his linking of Greenaway to artists such as Andres Serrano, Alain Resnais, and Cindy Sherman and his insightful discussions of the role of ordering systems in Greenaway’s thinking and artistic production fully align him with our reading of Greenaway as a postmodernist.

While Greenaway has, without a doubt, been influenced by such modernist filmmakers as Ingmar Bergman and Jean-Luc Godard, his work is significantly different from the modernist narrative strategies that these filmmakers employ. Most of Godard’s cinema is a Brechtian deconstructive cinema, and Bergman’s films are characterized by the same ambiguity of meaning of modernist literature. Greenaway uses both these strategies while
going beyond them in his deployment of postmodern forms. While Greenaway continues to use many of the self-reflexive and politically critical modes of the Brechtian cinema, his self-reflexivity is taken up in the service of a more radical form of free play of meaning that does not lead to closure. Greenaway has also adopted the patterns of illogical narrative structures and spaces characteristic of the art cinema, as exemplified, for instance, by *Last Year at Marienbad.*

An understanding of the use of illogical and contradictory structures in postmodern/poststructuralist art forms necessitates a consideration of their uses in postmodern architecture. The trajectory from modernism to postmodernism in architecture, theorized by Charles Jencks, is characterized by the uses of pastiche but also, in its more radical manifestations, by a shift from the rational ordering of modernism to the irrational uses of space in postmodernism. Postmodern space, argues Jencks,

> is historically specific, rooted in conventions, unlimited or ambiguous in zoning and “irrational” or transformational in its relation of parts to whole. The boundaries are often left unclear, the space extended infinitely without apparent edge. Like the other aspects of Post-Modernism, it is[,] however[,] evolutionary not revolutionary, and thus it contains Modernist qualities—particularly the “layering” and “compaction” composition developed by Le Corbusier. (118)

Postmodern space in architecture is thus more an elaboration of the Cartesian grid than an organic ordering. In postmodern narratives, as in postmodern architecture, there is no revolution against the modernist form but an evolution from it. The postmodern, according to Jencks, can suspend “normal categories of time and space, social and rational categories which are built up in everyday architecture and behavior, to become ‘irrational’ or quite literally impossible to figure out” (133). This play with the illogicalities of time and space has made its way into Greenaway’s films, having first been established in cinema by *Last Year at Marienbad,* one of the films that most influenced Greenaway’s conception of cinema.

It is useful to see Greenaway as an artist who simultaneously develops and challenges certain aspects of modernist and avant-garde art. Greenaway does share with modernism an impulse toward self-reflexive experimentation and ironic ambiguity, as well as a contestatory stance in relation to realist representation. He claims to disagree, however, with “any modernist notion that there has to be a dramatic break from a historical continuity. It’s self evident that we are nothing without memory; though I acknowledge that
history is subjective. A general metaphor for the next film is that there is no such thing as history, there are only historians” (Elliott and Purdy, *Architecture and Allegory*, 123). Like the historical avant-garde, Greenaway may be critical of the dominant culture, but he is not alienated from it, for he finds himself unavoidably implicated in this culture.

While Greenaway could be said to promote the autonomy of art and its separation from life and history through idiosyncratic plots and an over-stylized aesthetics, he also consistently places his films in rather specific historical periods, makes constant references to past artistic modalities—such as Jacobean drama or Renaissance painting—and either is inspired by or makes references to contemporary political preoccupations in both his experimental and feature films. One need only recall that *Windows* was inspired by the appalling accounts of political prisoners in South Africa being pushed out of windows; that *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* is, by Greenaway’s own admission, at least partly a response to the Thatcherite government; and that *The Pillow Book* invites a number of correlations with the present. The symbolism suggested by the first birthday celebration of Nakigo’s child at the end of the latter film and by the death of her father’s publisher while the New Year/New Millennium—read New Era—is being celebrated outside seems designed to evoke the much-anticipated turning over of Hong Kong to China in 1997; the film’s many references to the contemporary environmental crisis are too explicit to be overlooked; and prominently displayed in the window of the publisher’s shop is a book called *China after Deng*, a title that acquires even more resonance today, after Deng Xiopeng’s death.

While many critics continue to accuse Greenaway of elitism and hostility toward mass culture, it must be noted that his pastiche borrowings are not limited to so-called high art but include contemporary forms of artistic expression deemed more “popular.” His incorporation, for instance, in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, of upper-class attire from seventeenth-century Holland and of contemporary punk fashion by Jean-Paul Gaultier; in *The Pillow Book*, of an MTV-like sequence to recount the amorous encounters between Nagiko and Jerome, using the music of the French popular singer Guesch Patti; and his plans to explore the uses of the Internet and of CD-ROM in a future project, *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*, would certainly argue against an adversarial position on the part of Greenaway toward mass culture. Greenaway may, in fact, be trying to close the gap between high and low culture, not by pandering to the spectators’ cultural values—be they “high” or “low”—but by scrutinizing and ironizing both of these values in characteristically postmodern fashion. As Bridget Elliott and Anthony Purdy rightly point out, the often-voiced contention that high culture is nostalgically reproduced by Greenaway needs to be reex-
amined for, in effect, “Greenaway tends to dwell on ‘high’ culture’s often crudely material underpinnings, particularly the sources of wealth and power that manipulate and control its production and circulation” (Architecture and Allegory, 20). Amy Lawrence implicitly makes a similar point when she compares The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover to other films of the 1980s “that re-vive the gangster genre as a metaphor for the brute capitalism espoused by the Conservative government throughout the decade” (166). She goes on to argue that the haute cuisine served by the restaurant Le Hollandais—owned by the “gangster,” Albert Spica, and operated by his French chef—is “inseparable from systematic killing” (172).

That Greenaway does not hide his relationship to consumer society in The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, but politicizes it, is most evident in the choice of setting and mise-en-scène of the film. That most of the film takes place inside the restaurant, and that the owner, the workers, and the clients all share this same space, suggest that there no longer is a position outside consumer society from which to interrogate this society. The most apt metaphor in Greenaway’s films for this process of parodic assimilation and repudiation—or subversion—of past and contemporary styles, which we are claiming here to be characteristic of postmodernism, is perhaps to be found in the many images Greenaway creates of voracious acts of consumption, dis-gorgement, and evacuation. Greenaway assimilates what he refers to as “two-thousand years of image-making,” only to give it back to his audience in an ironized form that casts a critical gaze not only at the present but also at the past, and at the continuities that exist between the two.

The incorporation into the mise-en-scène at the restaurant of Frans Hals’s painting The Banquet of the Officers of the St. George Civic Company (1616) and the modeling of Albert Spica’s and his cronies’ appearance on the charac-
ters in that painting, are such instances of the use of pastiche not as a mere du-
plication of a past forms to reinforce conventional ideologies, as Jameson would have it, but rather, as a self-conscious and self-implicating critique of a bourgeois ideology of consumption whose early manifestations Greenaway locates in the seventeenth century. What Linda Hutcheon has elucidated in relation to architecture is equally applicable to Greenaway’s films—although Hutcheon herself has identified his films as a “cas limite” of the postmodern” (Politics, 117), conceding elsewhere, however, that The Draughtsman’s Contract is a metafilmic historical movie that confronts the historical and political in a for-
mally parodic way (Poetics, 23). Hutcheon argues that

the looking to both the aesthetic and historical past in postmodernist ar-
chitecture is anything but what Jameson describes as pastiche, that is, “the
random cannibalization of all styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion” in the parodic recall and re-examination of the past by architects like Charles Moore or Ricardo Bofill. To include irony and play is never necessarily to exclude seriousness and purpose in postmodernist art. To misunderstand this is to misunderstand the nature of much contemporary aesthetic production—even if it does make for neater theorizing. (*Poetics, 26–27*)

That Greenaway problematizes history and self-critically acknowledges his own “cannibalization of styles of the past” is indicated by his use of cannibalism as a central theme and metaphor in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. That he turns this cannibalization into a critique of the “aristocratic” and decadent models of consumption illustrated by the restaurant’s specialization in refined cuisine and mirrored by the Hals painting—models of consumption that have come to define contemporary culture—is suggested by his own remark that “having eaten and raped the rest of the world, the next step is to eat one another” (Trucco, 17). The references to and depictions of the various cannibalistic acts in the film point to Greenaway’s own cannibalization of styles but also suggest that consumption is the dominant relationship in our society. Greenaway’s grotesque depictions of consumption capture the original meaning of the word *consume*, that is, “to take up, waste, spend, and devour” (Williams, 68–70). The cannibalistic act that closes the film is thus an appropriate metaphor for the “end” of consumerism—the end as logical conclusion and as final act of a culture that comes to regard everything, including its members, as grist for the mill. In sum, all representation—whether in the form of texts, images, or buildings—is “productive,” in Annette Kuhn’s sense of the term, for it constitutes objects for consumption, by the gaze as well as by purchase (19).

*The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* has been regarded as one of the strongest critical evaluations of our current modes of production and consumption, and, as attested by the public’s and critics’ outcry following the release of the film, it is not, to its credit, an easily consumable artifact (see MacNeill). Greenaway seems to be conceding his own duplicitous participation in this process by staging the production and consumption of food and then by drawing analogies between that and the production and consumption of visual representations. Like the production of food in the film, the production of aesthetic objects—such as the Frans Hals painting and the film itself—might be described as what Bertolt Brecht termed a “culinary practice,” that is, the preparation of a product for consumption and digestion
Brecht, 41). Gavin Smith has suggested that the film be read as being about the movie business, for it functions “as a metaphor about the conflict between creativity and consumption” (56). Greenaway agrees that this is a constant theme for him and that in many respects the same could be said about The Draughtsman’s Contract or The Belly of an Architect: “There’s a way in which the whole of Belly could be said to be not so much about putting on an exhibition as making a film” (Rodgers, 18). To drive the point home even further, Greenaway suggests that Richard, the cook, stands in for the filmmaker, “who invites the viewers to come into the cinema: this is the meal I’m going to prepare for you” (Smith, 56). The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover is but one instance in Greenaway’s corpus of art questioning itself as it questions the world.

Another powerful instance of this questioning is The Baby of Mâcon, Greenaway’s most controversial film thus far. When it was released in England in 1993, it generated a great deal of controversy and attacks, comparable to those launched against Stanley Kubrick’s A Clockwork Orange or Jean-Luc Godard’s “Je vous salue, Marie!” The attacks centered primarily on Greenaway’s treatment of the Church and on his rendition of the multiple rape scene, a scene that runs uninterruptedly for ten minutes and twenty-five seconds, the full length of a magazine. The film was not well received at Cannes, where it was excluded from the main competition (Macnab, 41). It was purchased by distributors in twenty-seven countries, but no American distributor would touch it. Ken Shulman has described the film as a “tale of propaganda and the exploitation of innocence,” and Greenaway’s own commentaries on the film suggest that he intended it as a critique of capitalism, which he sees as having replaced religion as the dispenser of consolations and easy solutions.

The Baby of Mâcon may be Greenaway’s most “spectacular” (in Guy Debord’s sense of the term), most theatrical, and most political film. It is closely linked to the two films that precede it—Prospero’s Books and The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover—for being emphatically theatrical, ritualistic, and profoundly concerned with issues of community and communion. It is, like most of Greenaway’s feature films, a revenge drama that also undertakes a political analysis of the economic, political, and religious structures of power that have fashioned our civilization. Its setting, like that of The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, has been compared to a theater of cruelty (see Elliott and Purdy, Architecture and Allegory), where the human body is metaphorically and literally cannibalized—that is, made into an object of commerce, abuse, and gluttony. While in The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover Greenaway merely suggests that the “cannibals” are the audience, in
The Baby of Mâcon he makes that more explicit by creating spectator figures within the film and by using these figures to mediate his own audience’s reactions—thereby fully implicating his audience as witnesses to and accomplices of the violent rape. By incriminating his own audience, not through emotional identification but through responsibility for the existence of the product being consumed—the rape, and the film itself—Greenaway implicates and incriminates himself, in typically postmodern fashion. It is this aspect of the artist as a self-consciously complicitous critic that positions Greenaway among the most challenging dissident postmodernists of our times.

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The first chapter in this collection helps situate Greenaway’s filmic production within the broader context of British cinema and that of Greenaway’s other artistic productions. Such an approach, we hope, will bring to light the British flavor of Greenaway’s cinema, as well as its multidisciplinary and multimedia character, and lay the ground for a more thorough understanding of Greenaway’s current relationship to the cinematic medium. Greenaway’s exhibitions and operatic productions are all “cinematic”—or rather, “mega-cinematic”—for not only do they import cinematic strategies, but they also reveal the limits of the very cinematic vocabulary they deploy. Given Greenaway’s avowed dissatisfaction with cinema, it is not surprising that he has been directing more and more of his energies toward the production of live performances. The museum and the stage have become, for Greenaway, the privileged settings in which to revel in the “physicality” afforded by live performances, but also the means through which he can grant his audience a great deal more control over spatiality and temporality than is permitted by the cinema. Greenaway’s mega-cinematic project must also be understood to include the relations between his films and his paintings, a little-explored aspect of Greenaway’s artistic output.

In “Peter Greenaway and the Failure of Cinema,” John Di Stefano, himself an artist, examines Greenaway’s non-cinematic visual productions further, elucidating the continuities that exist among all of Greenaway’s artworks and the existence of a consistent as well as radical overall artistic vision. Di Stefano approaches Greenaway as a “hybrid-filmmaker” who recognizes the limits of cinema while simultaneously attempting to enlarge its vocabulary. The greatest limitation of cinema, for Greenaway, is the absence of corporeality in the finished product. Greenaway tries to compensate for this absence in his public installations—such as Stairs—which, argues Di
Stephano, “represent a unifying work that best responds to Greenaway’s concerns with materiality, multiple viewpoints, and the desire to activate the audience in a much more substantial way with regards to spectatorship.”

In “Neo-Baroque Imaging in Peter Greenaway’s Cinema,” Cristina Degli-Esposti Reinert argues that Greenaway’s postmodern works are close in intent and form to those of the baroque style in painting. As in our postmodern times, the baroque era indulged in a self-conscious game of changing perspectives that seemed to evolve from a general feeling of epistemological crisis. Following Peter Wollen, Reinert gives the appellation of “neo-baroque” to Greenaway’s postmodern style—a style that draws from mannerist representation, parody, intertextuality, and contradiction to promote multiple interrelationships among the works, the artist, and the audience.

In “Tabula for a Catastrophe: Peter Greenaway’s The Falls and Foucault’s Heterotopia,” Bart Testa focuses on Greenaway’s experimental films, properly speaking, beginning with the early short films and culminating in a detailed analysis of the three-hour-long The Falls. In the first part of the essay, Testa examines Greenaway’s experimental productions of the 1970s in the context of British and American avant-garde cinema. Testa begins by investigating the various definitions and applications of the term structural film to Greenaway’s pre-Falls productions, and the relative usefulness of the term in distinguishing the two phases of Greenaway’s cinematic career. The second section of the essay offers a reading of The Falls through Michel Foucault’s The Order of Things, to show how “Foucault casts interpretive light on Greenaway, and enables us to discern a filmmaker who pursues a parallel analysis and critique, and does so with a clarity and playful inventiveness unique in the domain of cinema.”

The second part of the book opens with an essay on The Draughtsman’s Contract, a clearly pivotal film that marks Greenaway’s full entry into art cinema. Mary Alemany-Galway’s “Postmodernism and the French New Novel: The Influence of Last Year at Marienbad on The Draughtsman’s Contract” offers an analysis of the structural similarities between the two films, elucidating the influence of the narrative structures of the French New Novel on Greenaway’s cinema. This chapter explores how such structural strategies as the mise-en-abyme technique, serialism, self-reflexivity, the presentation of unsolvable enigmas, and the forwarding of multiple meanings and contradictions are used in both films to investigate questions of representation, knowledge, and morality. While the moods of the two films differ dramatically—serious, poetic, and incantatory in the case of Marienbad, and ironic, analytical, and exhibitionistic in the case of The
Draughtsman’s Contract—both films are characterized by a predilection for excess, ambiguity, and mystery, and by an appeal to interpretation and game playing. The connections between Marienbad and Greenaway’s film have also been explored by Amy Lawrence in her recent study; Alemany-Galway, however, focuses less on the baroque visual qualities of the film than on its narrational strategies.

Michael Ostwald’s essay “Rising from the Ruins: Interpreting the Missing Formal Device within The Belly of an Architect,” explores the gap that consistently exists between Greenaway’s published scripts and his finished films. Ostwald analyzes the role played by the absence of a structuring device originally planned and scripted for The Belly of an Architect but absent from the released film. What the film lacks, argues Ostwald, is Greenaway’s signature element: the formal structuring device that tends to work, in all of his films, as an alternative to a reliance on plot and narrative as means to unravel meaning and to mitigate “against misreading and the violence inherent in interpretation.” Ostwald’s essay is concerned with “reinstating” this missing structuring device, a series of eight time-lapse images originally planned and scripted but perhaps never shot. By doing so, Ostwald is able to elucidate what Greenaway has to say about architecture and the postmodern city. Once this missing device is reinstated, the film can be read as “an ironic warning regarding the decentralised nature of cities, and the breakdown of the urban fabric. Within Greenaway’s reconstructed film, the Enlightenment project of recording mankind’s greatest structure—the city—in its totality is seen as flawed. In this sense, Boullée and Kracklite represent, respectively, the beginning and the end of modernism.”

In “Z Is for Zebra, Zoo, Zed, and Zygote, or Is It Possible to Live with Ambivalence?” Jean Petrolle approaches postmodernism as an epistemological tendency and not as purely and simply a set of aesthetic practices. Petrolle assigns to postmodernism positive content, in the sense that a postmodern sensibility offers certain insights into the limits of knowing and into the dangers of totalizing thought and naive representation. Petrolle argues that A Zed and Two Noughts, along with Prospero’s Books, is Greenaway’s most characteristically postmodern film. To an even greater degree than The Draughtsman’s Contract, this film self-consciously seeks “maximum ambiguity,” while making its central preoccupations signification and interpretation. A Zed and Two Noughts’ self-conscious references to the seventeenth-century painter Jan Vermeer invite interpretations, while its “encyclopedic sprawl” of taxonomies and ambiguous clues frustrate all attempts at interpretation. The references to Vermeer also work as a signpost, encouraging the viewer to read the film allegorically: as an allegory of film. Petrolle shows that the main
protagonists’ search for meaning parallels the viewer’s search for textual details. The fact that the film elicits this craving for meaning and simultaneously fails to satisfy it, however, forces us to confront the limits of our ability to know the most profound and fundamental mysteries of the universe.

Dayana Stetco’s essay “The Crisis of Commentary: Tilting at Windmills in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*” is an attempt at finding a critical language with which to circumscribe the film’s paradoxical multi-leveled text. This is a difficult undertaking since, as Barthes put it, the readerly text is a plural text that places “normal” critical language and reasoning under suspicion. Also, Greenaway’s capacity for mapping concepts, places, objects, people, and names betrays his preference for encyclopedic structures that counter the usual narrative flow of cinema. According to Stetco, *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* looks like a map of the French Revolution: it is bloody and structured around a series of “journées.” However, the Revolution itself has become a modern fable that we ingest, just as Michael is fed the pages of his favorite book on the French Revolution. In this film, Greenaway accommodates a pluralistic reading of the Revolution within a larger project, which is to question history. Stetco’s essay also works as a postmodern meditation on the predicament of the critic, and of Greenaway’s critics in particular, who, in trying to address Greenaway’s entire multimedia artistic corpus, inevitably must fall short of reaching any totalizing explanatory system.

In “Prospero’s Books, Postmodernism, and the Reenchantment of the World,” Paula Willoquet-Maricondi explores Greenaway’s anti-illusionist style of filmmaking in *Prospero’s Books* to show how the film may be read as a “postmodernist visual essay” that investigates the hegemonic role of vision and the rise of transcendental reason in the seventeenth-century. *Prospero’s Books*, argues Willoquet-Maricondi, “offers a challenge to one of the major tenets of modernity—that is, that the acquisition and accumulation of knowledge about the world, and the subsequent use of this knowledge to affect changes in the world is a progressive endeavor.” Thus, while *A Zed and Two Noughts* invites its audience to confront the limits to knowledge, *Prospero’s Books* goes a step further in pointing out the arrogance and the dangers of ignoring such limits. The essay traces the role of vision in the seventeenth century in relation to the developments of perspectivism in the arts and of optics in the sciences, and to Descartes’ rejection of experiential vision and his displacement of the physical eye to the mind’s eye. The author also examines Prospero’s use of language as a tool of abstraction and control, and contrasts this to Caliban’s use of his own body to achieve a symbiotic relationship with his environment, a kind of “knowledge” that is participatory rather than confrontational.
In her essay “Theater, Ritual, and Materiality in Peter Greenaway’s The Baby of Mâcon,” Lia M. Hotchkiss argues that Prospero’s Books and The Baby of Mâcon represent a different aspect of theater and that in doing so they form a complementary pair. These films’ complementarity is also due to their different modes of internalization of those aspects of theater they explore and to the different treatments of the body that ensue. Hotchkiss explores the vulnerability of the body in Greenaway’s films as a recurrent motif and argues that the depredation of bodies and their concomitant horror are a function of the crossing or blurring of boundaries, such as those between representation and enactment, or signification and materiality.

Although Prospero’s Books is heavily peopled with naked bodies on display, the film’s portrayal of The Tempest has a curiously disembodied quality to it. And, whereas the exploitation of the body in The Baby of Mâcon is the subject of the play-within-the-film, in Prospero’s Books magic preserves the bodies of the characters from the supposed tempest and shipwreck, emphasizing the immateriality of illusion. These two materially different outcomes are interpreted by Hotchkiss to be symptomatic of the play’s plot and of the two ways in which the films internalize and re-present theater.

Bridget Elliott’s and Anthony Purdy’s “Skin Deep: Fins-de-siècle and New Beginnings in The Pillow Book,” examines how Greenaway’s 1996 release redistributes many of the familiar elements of Greenaway’s filmic universe, while also pointing in new directions. The authors identify two dominant structuring principles in Greenaway’s cinematic corpus: one that they define as “dramatic” or “theatrical,” and the other that is closer to his curatorial practices. Films in the later category, such as Prospero’s Books, Drowning by Numbers, and The Pillow Book, might be termed “museum films,” for they tend, “in their representation of the world, to subordinate narrative or dramatic structure (and audience identification) to the exploration of alternative logics, such as accumulation, saturation, seriality and taxonomy.” In The Pillow Book, for example, as in Prospero’s Books, the inset frames “serve as cinematic display cases for the exhibition of cultural objects and ‘scenes of everyday life.’”

The second half of the essay examines the question of “Japonisme” in Western art and explores the parallels and discontinuities between its manifestation at the end of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The authors note that Greenaway has rarely made reference to Japanese culture in his films and curatorial projects and ask: “Why does Greenaway want to revitalize a longstanding—and, in some respects, discredited—European tradition of looking at Japan and what does this signify in the late twentieth century?”
Chapter 12 is comprised of two texts by Greenaway. The first of these, *Body and Text*, is a portion of a lecture Greenaway delivered in England, shortly after the release of *The Pillow Book*. The content of the lecture centers on Greenaway’s own theories regarding the relationship between word and image, and how these theories are deployed in the manufacturing of the film *The Pillow Book*. We wanted to give Greenaway the last word on the matter, so to speak. The second text is a detailed treatment by Greenaway of *Eight and a Half Women*, shown at Cannes in 1999. Set in the Orient and in Europe, this film self-reflexively homages film itself, in a more direct manner, without the intermediary of other art forms such as painting or architecture. By Greenaway’s own account, it is “a self-conscious baroque fantasy of women influenced by the dream machine of cinema which so frequently engages in male sexual fantasy.” What follows these two texts are two interviews: one conducted in Indianapolis, on April 28, 1997, while Greenaway was touring the country immediately preceding the U.S. release of *The Pillow Book*; and a follow-up interview conducted in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on October 8, 1998, during the Latin American premiere of his opera *One Hundred Objects to Represent the World: A Prop-Opera*.

All of Greenaway’s artistic productions engage in an ironic dialogue, first with themselves as instances of art and artifact; second, with the history of art; and third, with society, past and present. Nicholas O. Pagan has suggested that Greenaway’s films do not present a continuous and coherent view of history but, rather, that they reveal that history is a process of piecing together (52). This piecing together of history is foregrounded in all of Greenaway’s artistic productions, which are at the same time self-reflexive, intertextual, and historically grounded. Consequently, if Greenaway seems to be playing with the “pieces of the past,” this play is not complacent but decidedly self-implicating.

The two additional essays included in this revised edition explore Greenaway’s appropriations of history to his own artistic self-implicating ends in several of his most recent works since the original publication of this volume. Greenaway’s various projects—which now include films, paintings, websites, games, exhibitions, installations, operas, VJ performances, books, and catalogues—simultaneously comment on the creation of the past and present through the mediated appropriation of historical “events” and, argues Heidi Peeters, work to “shape a reality.”

In chapter 14, Heidi Peeters’s essay, “*The Tulse Luper Suitcases*: Peter Greenaway’s Left Luggage,” investigates Greenaway’s self-reflexive use of new and old media languages in the creation of an always-in-progress multimedia work that is, itself, metafictional. *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*, says Peeters,
“dissects history as itself a mediated construct, while at the same time stressing the self-legitimizing truth value of art.” Taken as a whole, The Tulse Luper Suitcases project—encompassing several films, multiple websites, and an online game—“provides an investigation into the relation between history and media.”

The project’s main protagonist, Henry Purcell Tulse Luper, who has made appearances in Greenaway’s early films (The Falls, Vertical Features Remake, and A Walk through H), is described alternatively as a journalist, traveller, archivist, writer, professional prisoner, and Greenaway’s alter ego. In this latest project, Greenaway casts Tulse Luper as “the centre of the geographical, political, and artistic history of the twentieth century. As he travels from Wales through Utah, Antwerp, Turin, Budapest, Moscow, Shanghai, and Kyoto to Xanadu, his ‘story’ covers a substantial part of the twentieth century, from 1929 to 1989, or from the discovery of uranium to the break-up of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War.” Nuclear power and uranium are, thus, the thematic guides in this fictional journey laden with history, and the atomic number of uranium, 92, is the main cataloguing element and structuring device for the project.

Using history and media as guiding threads, Greenaway leads the willing explorer of his mediatic labyrinthine universe into an ambitious mosaic of events and experiences. Peeters shows how the Luper project unfolds at two different levels: a macro level that expands over a network of different media, and a micro level in which each medium is characterized by a hybridity that questions the very notion of medium specificity. “The story of Tulse Luper could hence be said to constitute its own network of historiographic metafiction through a maze of media.” The inspiration for the project’s structure is said to be Scheherazade’s 1001 tales: “like the tales, all media refer to the others, overlapping in their use of materials, reworking them or taking over a thread that has been left dangling somewhere else. The work hence cannot be contained within one medium, but spreads over an archive of different locations and different media.”

Peeters also notes that the parodic and Brechtian mechanisms at work in the Tulse Luper project are instances of a critical engagement with discursiveness, and with history as a discursive practice: “Whenever viewers risk being absorbed into the reality of the staged events, the medium will throw them back to the surface, distancing them emotionally from the story world. [. . .] In this way, it becomes quite impossible to forget that what one is looking at is a mediated series of events and a mediated exhibition of so-called historical material.” On the other hand, and paradoxically in an anti-Brechtian gesture, the Tulse Luper network becomes its own closed universe, one
“We need virtual unreality, not virtual reality.”

Peter Greenaway
In their book-length study of Peter Greenaway, Bridget Elliott and Anthony Purdy ask, “What sort of filmmaking niche does Greenaway occupy and why do his films tend to polarise audiences?” (7). This is an important question whose answer is complex and entails an exploration of Greenaway’s relationship not only to the cinematic medium but also to other artistic forms of expression—ranging from painting to writing, music, dance, theater, architecture, photography, and video. Greenaway’s preoccupation with art history and his deployment and representation of other media in his films, particularly painting, have been well-documented, most recently by David Pascoe in *Peter Greenaway: Museums and Moving Images*. Greenaway is regularly described, and describes himself, as a painter who works in cinema, or, as he puts it, “a film-maker trained as a painter” (*Flying over Water*, 9). His goals and methods, he explains, are closely tied to the history of painting:

I wanted to make a cinema of ideas, not plots, and to try to use the same aesthetics as painting which has always paid great attention to formal devices of structure, composition and framing, and most important, insisted on attention to metaphor. Since film is not painting—and not simply because one moves and the other doesn’t—I wanted to explore their connections and differences—stretching the formal interests to questions of editing, pacing, studying the formal properties of time intervals, repetitions, variations on a theme, and so on. (Woods, 18)

Greenaway’s films have been described as “animated paintings” (Street, 180), and his numerous visual citations of famous artists have received a great deal of critical attention. William Van Wert, for instance, unravels the veritable “art-gallery” contained within *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* and shows that Greenaway’s homage to Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, or
Archimboldo goes beyond “an intellectual’s game of citational hide-and-seek” (47). Greenaway explores, through a system of citations deployed in postmodern fashion, not only aesthetic and art-historical questions of perspective and depth but also ideological and political questions of relevance to the historical period in which his films are made.

Only recently has the critical investigation of Greenaway’s references to art history been broadened to include the study of Greenaway’s personal exploration of art-producing institutions, such as the museum, and of the relationship among various artistic forms of expression (see Elliott and Purdy, and Pascoe). Also under scrutiny is Greenaway’s use of high-tech media in the creation of films such as *Prospero’s Books* and *The Pillow Book*, and of videos, such as *A TV Dante* and *Death in the Seine* (see Nancy Vickers, and Nigel Wheale).

Greenaway’s relationship to film history and to the British film industry is complex, even ambivalent. He is a British filmmaker, Welsh by birth, whose films do not fit neatly into a typically British production practice, however diverse and dynamic that practice may be defined.¹

His filmic output straddles four decades and two significantly different modes of production: the avant-garde experimental films of the ’60s and ’70s, and the art-cinema feature films of the ’80s and ’90s. As Michael Walsh has noted, one key difference between the experimental and the feature films is the funding used: from the independently funded films to the international co-productions, “with the British Film Institute financing of *A Walk through H*, *The Falls*, and *The Draughtsman’s Contract* marking the passage from one regime to the other” (255). Another often noted difference between these two phases is the introduction of actors with speaking parts in the feature films, marked as well by *The Draughtsman’s Contract*.

However, to stress the differences between the early experimental films and the feature films is to obscure the important continuities that exist between these two phases. Most critics have, indeed, rightly focused on these continuities. The feature films remain experimental to the extent that Greenaway is constantly pushing the limits of cinema with his exploration of new technologies and introducing innovative approaches to dealing with both narrative and image. Walsh discusses Greenaway’s attitude toward narration, commenting that in both types of films the narrative is shaped according to structural principles (256). There is overwhelming consensus among Greenaway’s critics regarding the existence of continuities in Greenaway’s *oeuvre* at the levels of both theme and imagery: landscape, water, death, sex, language, the body, and flight, for instance, are visual and thematic elements that occur with such frequency that they are best described as signa-
ture elements. As Elliott and Purdy put it, the “early films of the sixties and seventies already bore the Greenaway signature: a fondness for landscape; a fascination with lists, grids, taxonomies, catalogues, counting games and aleatory sequences; a parodic use of the documentary voice-over; and, above all, a quirky sense of humour that constantly reminded the viewer not to take things too seriously” (6).

Can one speak of “Englishness” in relation to Greenaway? At a certain level, quite decidedly yes. His films display a brand of humor and witticism that is often characterized as “English”; a predilection for the murder-mystery plot one associates with Agatha Christie; and a delight in and emotional attachment to the English landscape, as attested to by short experimental films such as *H Is for House* or *Windows*, but also by feature films such as *The Draughtsman’s Contract* and *Drowning by Numbers*. Walsh notes that Greenaway’s emphasis throughout his films on the transformation of landscape by humans is “peculiarly English.” As Walsh explains,

> the long obsession of the national culture with the countryside and the country house is the trace of a social history in which an agrarian gentry accumulated the capital for the world’s first industrial revolution and then ensured both that Britain would become the first European society to economically minimize agriculture and that industry would remain subordinate to finance capital and empire. (257)

Greenaway himself has attempted to define the English aspect of his identity: “I suppose the characteristics of irony, black humour, a pronounced interest in words and landscape and game-playing are English. My films perhaps relate to an English literary tradition that also includes Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, and to English landscape painting” (Hacker and Price, 212). Elsewhere, Greenaway describes the characteristics of his filmic production as a whole as being about “statistics, the notion of a bitter sweet sense of black humour, extreme violence paired with often extraordinary beauty, English interest in text, and English understatement” (Patterson and Katnelson, online). He also notes, however, that his films “work in a tradition of art cinema which is not English” (Hacker and Price, 212).

The British film renaissance of the 1980s, of which Greenaway was a part, and the state of the British film industry in general have been the focus of a number of publications in the ‘90s by film scholars and historians attempting to revisit the history and prophesy the future of the British film industry. Erik Hedling and others, for example, have argued that this film renaissance gave Britain its own unique brand of art cinema.
Until the emergence of filmmakers like Greenaway and Derek Jarman, critics have argued, Britain did not have an internationally well-known art cinema: “What had happened was that art cinema had finally established itself as a prominent and critically acknowledged mode in British cinema” (184). Hedling also links the new cinema of the ’80s to the British art cinema of the ’60s, singling out Greenaway and Jarman as evidences of this link. Hedling compares Greenaway’s first feature, *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, to Lindsay Anderson’s 1968 *If*, and also to Anderson’s 1973 box office failure *O Lucky Man!*, on the basis of these films’ theatrical stylization, multiple layers of symbolism, self-conscious artificiality, labyrinthine plots, and an investment in an acting style “within ‘quotation marks’” (184). Peter Wollen agrees that Britain had finally succeeded in producing what he called the “Last New Wave,” a series of uncompromising films made by original, oppositional, visually oriented modernist auteurs (“Last New Wave,” 49). For Wollen, however, the early films of Greenaway and Jarman owed more to the emergence of a political modernism modeled on Godardian aesthetics than to a ’60s British art cinema and also reflected a shift “toward the visual arts as a source for cinema,” as well as a “theoretical and practical consolidation of a film avant-garde in the IFA and at the BFI” (49).

To say that Britain developed a genuine art cinema tradition in the ’80s raises other questions, however. For instance, critics propose competing definitions, or versions, of art cinema. In “British Cinema as National Cinema: Production, Audience and Representation,” John Hill agrees that art cinema becomes the main model for British filmmaking, but he also points out that the art cinema of the ’80s and ’90s displays a rather wide range of textual strategies. This cinema is thus a more diverse phenomenon than the definitions offered by David Bordwell and Steve Neale suggest.²

For Hill, this art cinema includes, at one extreme, the “heritage” films of Merchant-Ivory that appeal to an aesthetically conservative audience; at the other extreme, the postmodern experimentations of Greenaway or Jarman—who in themselves also appeal to somewhat distinct audiences; and, somewhere in between, it also includes directors like Ken Loach and Mike Leigh who work along traditions of “realism” and social critique (“British Cinema,” 247).

What is revealed by these recent studies is that the British film industry and British cinema continue to be fraught with paradoaxes and ironies. There is simply not one easy way to define the “British film” so as to accommodate the multiplicity of thematic concerns, aesthetic practices, and financing opportunities. To the extent that there is a British national cinema,
and to the extent that this cinema is reflective of a national identity, this cinema, argues Hill, is not necessarily nationalistic and uncritical, nor does it posit “the existence of a unique or unchanging ‘national culture’” (“The Issue of National Cinema,” 16).

It is necessarily difficult to define Greenaway’s position along the wide and varied spectrum that characterizes the British film culture and the British art cinema. How are we to define the “British film”? In financial, cultural, thematic, or aesthetic terms? Is a British film one where the bulk of the budget is spent on British resources? Is a British film necessarily set in Britain and addressing British themes or concerns? Is a British film one intended for the British market? Is a British film one that is well received by that market? The Draughtsman’s Contract, Greenaway’s first commercial feature and a great success, is a British film insofar as it fits these categories. Released in 1982, the film was funded by the British Film Institute and Channel 4, and became the most widely seen British avant-garde film. According to the New York Times, it was the third biggest draw in England in that year, after Ghandi and E.T. (Trucco, 27). Greenaway’s next three features also enjoyed the government’s financial backing: A Zed and Two Noughts was funded by the British Film Institute and Film Four International; The Belly of an Architect was co-produced by Film Four, British Screen, and Sacis and Hemdale; and Drowning by Numbers, Britain’s second contender at Cannes, received almost half of its budget from Channel 4 (Summers, 32).

However, Greenaway’s films, after The Draughtsman’s Contract, also began reflecting, more and more, the absence of a homogeneous standard of Britishness in cinema—financially, aesthetically, and thematically. Moreover, in spite of The Draughtsman’s Contract’s critical and commercial success, Channel 4 was eventually compelled to stop funding Greenaway. The consensus was that his features, notably The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, could no longer be aired comfortably on television in the political and ideological climate in Britain at the time. While Greenaway was still operating under the financial auspices of Channel 4 and other state funding institutions, he met his future and loyal Dutch producer, Kees Kasander. Kasander, a former director of the Rotterdam Film Festival, helped finance A Zed and Two Noughts and has continued to put together creative international funding packages for Greenaway’s features since 1987, as well as for his operas and for his new multi-media project, The Tulse Luper Suitcases.

Greenaway’s films of the ’90s are illustrations of the financial trends for the funding of British films. The Baby of Mâcon was a United Kingdom/Netherlands/France/Germany co-production. The Pillow Book received funding from Channel 4, Studio Canal +, Delux Productions, Euroimages, the Fund
of the Council of Europe, and Nederlands Fonds Voor de Film. His latest film, *Eight and a Half Women*, is also a multi-national production filmed, in part, in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg for financial reasons and in Japan. Greenaway has increasingly chosen to shoot outside England. His last two films were shot in Luxembourg because the tax exemptions the filmmaker receives there enable him to save approximately 20 percent of a film's budget (Orlinski, online).

With the decline of film production in Britain in the latter part of the '80s, due partly to the reduction in state support and partly to the cutbacks by North American distribution companies, “the obvious place to look in the '90s,” critics argue, “is continental Europe, and to the co-production possibilities afforded by various EC schemes and directives” (Petrie, 5). Moreover, as Leonard Quart notes, even when the British government was more committed to supporting the film industry, its support rarely matched the more generous subsidies received by film industries in Western European countries, like Sweden, for instance. The problems facing what Quart calls “a historically sick industry” were only compounded by the policies of the Thatcher government (“Religion of the Market,” 24).

Greenaway’s situation, described previously, is illustrative of two facts: first, that television played a key role in the rebirth of the British film industry; second, that this rebirth gave rise to a diverse and complex British film practice. In the first half of the '80s, the British film industry grew thanks to the intervention of television, in particular to the creation of Channel 4 and its Film on Four slot. Jeremy Isaacs, chief executive of Channel 4, undertook to restore the film industry by commissioning and investing in independent producers. When Channel 4 went on the air, in November of 1982, it committed itself to funding a number of features that would get a theatrical release, or a “window,” before being aired on TV. Twenty films were produced in the first year of Film on Four, and during the most lucrative phase of this relationship Channel 4 contributed funding to more than half of all features produced in the UK (Petrie, 4). In addition to *The Draughtsman's Contract*, Channel 4 helped finance a number of other landmark films of the decade, including *My Beautiful Launderette, Letter to Brezhnev,* and *A Room with a View.* Between 1981 and 1990, Channel 4 helped fund approximately 170 films by independent companies and was awarded the Rossellini Award at Cannes for its contributions to filmmaking (Giles, 75).

Channel 4’s involvement in the revival of the British film industry was not only financial but also cultural: the cooperation between the two industries established a climate conducive to the emergence of new forms of independent productions. As Duncan Petrie points out, in *New Questions of British Cinema,* “Channel 4 also enabled new voices to be heard nationwide,
reflecting the diversity of the culture back at itself” (4). Indeed, note Jonathan Hacker and David Price, not only did television money help “stem the decline of indigenous British film,” but “a British film without any television money at all has become the exception rather than the rule” (11).

In spite of their arguably “British flavor,” Greenaway’s films are a testament to the fact that there is no single satisfactory way of defining the British film so as to fit Greenaway’s films squarely within this definition. Hacker and Price define Greenaway’s films as “oppositional,” as opposed to those British films that, on the one hand, emulate Hollywood and those that, on the other hand, remain “traditional.” By traditional, the authors mean those films that are rooted in British film history, reveal the world through British eyes and attitudes, retain a strong sense of narrative, and have a broad appeal both domestically and abroad. Sarah Street situates Greenaway’s films within what she perceives to be the fourth and latest phase of a British experimental film practice, one that began with the early modernist films in the inter-war period. She goes on to argue that during this latest phase, “there appears to have been a fusion of most previous strands of experimental activity, producing some of the most exciting British cinema by Sally Potter, Peter Greenaway, Derek Jarman, Terence Davies and Bill Douglas” (149). For Street and others, this fourth moment in British experimental filmmaking was characterized by a “politicisation of art cinema under the impetus of opposition to a long period of Conservative government and particularly to Thatcherism” (149). Quart agrees that, while creating for the British film industry an unfavorable financial climate, the Thatcher period provided many directors with fertile subject matter for their films. Although most British directors in the ’80s did not undertake explicit critiques of Thatcherism, “the ethos she created seemed to become the implicit or explicit subject of many of the period’s best films” (“Religion of the Market,” 25).

Greenaway’s emergence into commercial cinema in the early ’80s coincided with the beginning of the Thatcher period, of which the director is explicitly critical in The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, his allegory of unbridled consumption. It has often been noted that Greenaway’s first feature, The Draughtsman’s Contract, and his most financially successful film of the ’80s, The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, mark, respectively, the beginning and the end of the Thatcher period. Walsh comments on the fact that “Greenaway’s passage from the relative deprivation of the avant-garde to the relative luxury of art cinema coincides closely with the beginning of the Thatcher period of 1979” (259), but also that “these two films parenthesize the entire history of the oldest continuously existing bourgeois state in the world, covering the ground
from its establishment in the Glorious Revolution of 1688 to the present” (260).

The “Thatcher Era” gave rise to two ideologically polar types of films: the socially engaged film and the nostalgia film. A lingering anticinematic bias on the part of a politically and artistically conservative audience insured the success in the ’80s of what Andrew Higson refers to as the “heritage film.” These were films that retained a kind of “literary legitimization,” films that Greenaway likes to denounce as “illustrated text.” Such films as Chariots of Fire or A Room with a View offered up images of Britain and Britishness that appealed to a national art cinema audience preoccupied with Britain’s declining economic strength. These films invite their audience to cast a nostalgic gaze onto an idealized past and contrast with other British productions of the time, like My Beautiful Launderette or The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, that are more fully grounded in the present, offer more direct social commentary, and are more commercially risky.

Greenaway likes to claim that he is not a political filmmaker; nonetheless, he systematically injects into his films issues that are fundamentally political. While not pushing a particular political agenda, Greenaway admits in interviews that The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover was partly motivated by his “anger and passion about the current British political situation” (Smith, 55). In a recent interview in Luxembourg at the set of his new film, Eight and a Half Women, Greenaway states, on the one hand, that he does not “intend to change political opinion” and that “maybe the only political film I ever made was The Cook, which started as a diatribe against Thatcherite Britain, but my interest is in aesthetics, not politics” (Orlinski, online). On the other hand, however, he continues to find sources of inspiration both in England and around politically charged issues—if not always in relation to economic politics, certainly in relation to social politics. Greenaway explains that the subject matter of his new film is inspired by what he perceives to be a common phenomenon in England today, that of “men behaving badly.”

Eight and a Half Women is, in part, about politically incorrect male sexual fantasies. As he explains in an interview, this behavior “is a backlash against the feminism of the eighties. Men behave sexually badly in an extravagant and exhibitionist way, in order to take revenge on all the extremes of feminism” (Orlinski, online). This new film promises to be a further exploration of the role of women in society—past and present—a theme that has been present in all of Greenaway’s features since The Draughtsman’s Contract but that has received practically no attention from critics. A notable exception is Amy Lawrence who, in addition to being one of the few critics to explore Greenaway’s treatment of women, particularly their association with
nature, is also the first to offer a deeper exploration of *Drowning by Numbers*, the only film by Greenaway, thus far, where the women seem to be in control of their destinies, from beginning to end.

A final paradox of the British film industry is the fact that, in the final analysis, the single most important factor in establishing a film’s credentials as “British” is the success that the film has abroad and not primarily whether it explores British concerns, employs British actors, or receives British funding. Hill points out that *Chariots of Fire*, while signaling the rebirth of British national sentiment, was mostly funded from foreign sources, including Hollywood (“British Cinema,” 244). The film enjoyed great success domestically, but, most important, it helped bring international attention to the British industry and thus initiated a trend in defining the future success of that industry. Increasingly, what comes to be identified as a “successful British film” is a film that gains its notoriety outside England. Hill notes that it is now often commercially advantageous to open a film abroad, particularly in the United States, before releasing it in Britain (“British Cinema,” 247).

The successful British film is thus “British” because of the attraction it holds abroad but also because of the need for critics and for the market to find convenient means of labeling films. Greenaway’s films are a case in point. Greenaway is internationally recognized as one of the most important and innovative British filmmakers, even though his films are better received in Continental Europe, South America, and Asia than in Britain; even though they depend on international funding; even though they are produced by an international cast of actors, artists, and technicians; even though they are increasingly not shot in England; and even though they do not always deal primarily with specifically British subjects. However, as we have seen, what also adds to the “British quality” of Greenaway’s films is their link to the new British art cinema, a “genre” that arose during this decade of rebirth and that came to be regarded as an instance of national cinema partly because it explicitly sought to differentiate itself from Hollywood.

It is this new and multiple British art cinema that now houses the avant-garde film movement of the 1970s, a movement that, like its counterparts in the United States and abroad, also offered itself as a response to and an attack on Hollywood. If an experimental film practice continues to exist in Britain, argues Michael O’Pray, “it is as often as not in the form of something which looks like an art film” (“The British Avant-Garde,” 190). Greenaway’s films come close to what Paul Willemen calls the “avant-garde of the ’90s,” that is, to films that do more than address “a theory of discourse or of representation,” but that offer “an understanding of history, of social change” (155). If I say “come close to,” it is because Greenaway’s films do not
offer an understanding of history *per se*, as much as they offer an understanding of how history is constructed and interpreted. To do so, they must necessarily continue to address theories of discourse and of narrative construction. Greenaway’s films might best be described as “avant-garde experimental art cinema.”

Greenaway’s films have been linked to two important traditions of experimental cinema in Britain: the Documentary Movement of the late ’20s and ’30s, and the British Structural film of the ’60s and ’70s. As Street argues,

> Greenaway’s work connects with many traditions of experimental cinema. One of the most striking is his link with the modernists of the Documentary Movement in his subversion of classic documentary traditions. His films question the notion of truth in the cinema and present the viewer with the pleasures and difficulties of the counter-cinematic possibilities offered by pluralist narratives and complex structures. (177–178)

While Greenaway may share this interest in experimentation and questioning, he has explicitly rejected any affinities with the aspects of these traditions that appeal to realism: “my sort of cinema,” he explains, “does not tap into the British film traditions of Grierson, Cavalcanti, or Jennings—traditions of realism” (Hacker and Price, 212).

Nonetheless, Greenaway gained much of his cinematic training while working within the British film industry. His eight-month-long stint at the British Film Institute’s distribution department and his ten years as a helper, then a cutter, and finally as editor at the Central Office of Information (COI, a branch of the Foreign Office) were extremely formative. This is where, in the ’70s and early ’80s, Greenaway directed a number of informational films on the British way of life, addressed to Third World countries for the *Insight Series* and *This Week in Britain*. Not only did Greenaway acquire an insider’s perspective on the industry during the ’60s and ’70s, but this is where he developed the critical and ironical vocabulary with which he revisits the documentary tradition in films such as *Vertical Features Remake*, *The Falls*, *Act of God*, *The Sea in Their Blood: Beside the Sea*, and also *26 Bathrooms* and *Death in the Seine.*

While Greenaway’s incorporation of the documentary tradition is revisionist, ironical, and subversive, he nonetheless shares with the Documentary Movement a similar theoretical interest in the kind of aesthetic experimentations associated with the historical avant-garde. Both Greenaway and John Grierson, for instance, have paid tribute to Eisenstein’s development of tech-
niques of montage. Grierson’s *Drifters* draws much of its inspiration from Eisenstein’s montage techniques in *The Battleship Potemkin*, and the two films were reportedly shown together at the Film Society screening (Street, 157). Greenaway named his first art exhibit, at the Lord’s Gallery, in 1964, *Eisenstein at the Winter Palace*. He also refers to Eisenstein as the “only one truly great film-maker who made cultural landmarks that stand comparison without embarrassment in this company [referring to Shakespeare and Rembrandt]. All his films have this self-knowledge” (Hacker and Price, 214–215). In an article on Eisenstein written for *The Independent*, Greenaway describes *Potemkin* as “a brilliant story about a piece of stinking meat” (13) by a filmmaker whom, elsewhere, he hails as one of the three “conspirators” of cinema, the other two being Orson Welles and Jean-Luc Godard. For Greenaway, Eisenstein was the creator of the language of cinema, Welles the consolidator, and Godard the destroyer, the one who “threw it all away,” who “rang the death knell” of cinema.4

Alan Woods, who draws many connections between Greenaway and Eisenstein, states that while Eisenstein “looked to disrupt bourgeois cinema from a Marxist-Leninist standpoint, Greenaway disrupts narrative and character from a Darwinian standpoint” (65). Woods also notes that the opening sequence of *The Belly of an Architect* uses techniques of montage that owe much to Eisenstein’s theorizing of the dialectical juxtaposition of shots: the montage “combines views from within the couple’s sleeping compartment, views from the speeding train, and shots of the border town through which they pass and its station, linking fertility (the verdant landscape) and death (a tracking shot in a graveyard)” (73). Much more could be said, of course, about Eisenstein’s formative influence on Greenaway. Such an investigation might examine a number of areas, ranging from the directors’ investment in shock effects, in exaggerated stylization, in the exploration of multisensory experience in the cinema, to their contrapuntal use of sound, and even their particular theorizings about cinema’s potential as a site for the synthesis of the arts and about the correspondences between film language and the ideogram.

Greenaway’s deployment of the documentary mode is more often discussed in relation to the perceived affinities between his films and structural cinema. The term *structural film* is frequently used to describe Greenaway’s early films, up to and including *The Falls*. In discussing *Dear Phone*, for instance, Street argues that the film is “ultimately dependent on film form and [that] by the end the viewer will have acquired means of deconstructing it which depend more on images than on verbal information. Greenaway’s making the familiar strange by the act of filming also connects with other
structural film-makers of the 1970s who similarly made the spectator aware of the impact of the mechanics of film-making” (178). As Bart Testa rightly explains in his contribution to the present volume, the term *structural* is, initially, a useful generalization to distinguish the two phases of Greenaway’s filmic career, to the extent that these early films tend to foreground formal systems as constructs. This label, however, can also be misleading, warns Testa. While Greenaway does deploy structural strategies readily associated with Hollis Frampton, Michael Snow, or even Malcolm Le Grice, he does so with great irony, skepticism, and playfulness. He could be said to deconstruct structuralist practices the way he deconstructs documentary practices. Fundamentally, Greenaway trusts no system and is suspicious of any structure’s potential to become hegemonic, even when a particular system is deployed with a counter-hegemonic intent. Although he makes no investment in characters and deliberately prevents his audience from forming emotional bonds with the characters, Greenaway loves story-telling too much fully to identify with—and be accepted by—structuralist filmmakers, particular the British avant-garde of the ’60s and ’70s associated with the London Film-Makers Co-Op. “I was much too cynical about structuralism,” he explains, “to be a good, down-the-line structuralist as *Vertical Features Remake*, I hope, indicates” (Lawrence, 18).

Certain features of the structuralist movement—such as its exploration of formal obtrusiveness, the foregrounding of the projection aspect of cinema, and an interest in landscape (Street, 170)—are present in Greenaway’s work, particularly if one takes accounts of his non-filmic productions. But these features generally appear in considerably modified form, leading Testa to argue that, “unlike Gidal, or Le Grice, or Snow, Greenaway never attempted to exfoliate the material basics of film in his work. Nor did he originate the formal systems he soon deployed, including the alphabet, mathematical formulas, and narrative shell-formulas. In fact, as his filmmaking project grew more definite through the 1970s, Greenaway became less, not more, formally inventive.” Moreover, Greenaway unabashedly draws from found sources, and his interest in image-content is by no means displaced in favor of image-production: a narrative of sorts, however tenuous, is always an important feature of Greenaway’s films, as is a foregrounding of mise-en-scène. In the short films in particular, there is not a lack but an excess of narration, an overinvestment in a multiplicity of narrational systems that overload the film and destabilize meaning. Often, then, meaning is lost not because of a lack of story, but because there is too much story: “Greenaway’s strategy is not to exclude story, but to have it implode upon itself through sheer baroque excess” (Elliott and Purdy, 29).
Greenaway’s influences are multiple and diverse, straddling temporal and generic boundaries. For him not to acknowledge these influences freely, openly, cheerfully even, would be a denial of his own identity as a culturally and historically shaped artist and person—a composite, to use a postmodern notion, or a palimpsest, to use a premodern notion. Like one of his most admired authors, Jorge Luis Borges, Greenaway recognizes that he is the sum total of the artistic, literary, and philosophical heritage he has chosen for himself. To study Greenaway is thus to embark on an open-ended exploration of a culture’s aesthetic and intellectual heritage. Since Greenaway himself continues this exploration, re-inventing himself as he discovers new sources of inspiration, the quest of the critic is quite endless and boundless—an ever-expanding encyclopedia of references and influences. At the same time, Greenaway’s niche is also uniquely and deliberately his. His individuality as an artist lies in his particular chosen context of influences. He is not a filmmaker; rather, he is a “Greenaway,” as his cinematographer, Sacha Vierny, calls him (Pilard, 110). Harlan Kennedy put it best when he identified Greenaway’s niche as a “territory.” “While battles rage in the world of movie form, and structuralism and narrative filmmaking fire at each other from either side of a Big Divide, Greenaway is perhaps the one moviemaker working today who is happily colonizing and cultivating the fertile territory in between (Kennedy, 18); or, as Greenaway himself put it: “I’d like to think my cinema is somewhere between Resnais and Hollis Frampton, if that’s possible. Sort of to the left of field of Resnais but still slightly to the right of Frampton” (Lawrence, 3).

Although it was while working for the COI that Greenaway began elaborating his own theories about documentaries, structural filmmaking, and non-narrative cinema and producing 16-mm experimental films on a more regular basis, his interest in film as a serious artistic, intellectual, and personal pursuit was awakened much earlier, while he was a student at Walthamstow Art School. Greenaway stumbled—quite by accident, he claims—on Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*, a film he watched for five consecutive days, two screenings a day, and from which he learned of the metaphorical and allegorical possibilities of cinema. Bergman’s film represented for Greenaway the ideal fusion of narrative, symbolic, and metaphysical meaning and a historical sense (*Sight and Sound Supplement*, 15). “That film really changed everything,” he explains (Hacker and Price, 208).

Well, here was a film that really did knock me over. All of the movies I’d seen previously were a way to pass the time of day and were social. But here was a film about faith, about asking existential questions, it had an
extraordinarily strong narrative so you wanted to know what happened next, it also had a great sense of history, and I’ve always been a sucker for history films. It also had this extraordinary metaphor, the notion of a man playing chess with death. Previously I had some idea that I wanted to be associated with painting but didn’t know how, now I wanted to be associated with film but didn’t know how. (Patterson and Katnelson, online)

From this point on, Greenaway undertook a self-taught crash course in cinema, bought a 16-mm Bolex, applied to the Royal College of Art film school (and failed to be admitted), tried to be a critic, and, between 1959 and 1962, shot his first film, *Death of Sentiment*, while he was a student at the Walthamstow College of Art. Practically nothing is known about this first foray into cinema by the British artist, except the few details he himself has revealed in interviews. This “work of juvenilia,” as Greenaway calls it (see the first interview in this volume), has never been made available for private or public viewing. Like Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*, *Death of Sentiment* explores death in metaphorical, symbolic, and literal terms. By Greenaway’s own account, the film is an exploration of the figurative language of funeral architecture and of the rituals associated with the burial of a person. Albeit short, this description is telling, for it reveals the presence, already in Greenaway’s first cinematic experimentation, of two fundamental thematic preoccupations of the artist: death—the inevitable mortality of the human body—and architecture.

Death is, of course, literally and allegorically central to all of Greenaway’s films and is the ultimate fate of almost all his male protagonists. Architecture represents, perhaps, the antithesis of mortality or, at least, humanity’s attempt to compensate for this mortality by erecting monuments that will outlast their creators. Greenaway’s enthusiasm for architecture is evidenced by his own writings on the matter and by his making architecture itself a “character” in the film *The Belly of an Architect*, in his light and sound extravaganza in Rome’s Piazza del Pololo, and in his city-installations *Stairs*, in Geneva and in Munich.5

As he once put it, “I have, on more than one occasion, been accused of wasting actors in the interests of praising architecture” (“Just Place,” 79). When there are no actors, or when they are dead, then this predicament is resolved.

I find it interesting that the title of Greenaway’s first film, *Death of Sentiment*, seems also already suggestive of Greenaway’s rejection, in all his subsequent films, of the sentimental or emotional manipulation of the viewer by mainstream cinema. A common complaint on the part of viewers and crit-
ics is that Greenaway’s treatment of his human characters often leaves the audience emotionally distant in relation to the plight of the characters, although it does not leave this audience “reactionless.” The kind of reaction that Greenaway has been trying to bring to the cinema is what he calls “a reaction with a thought process as opposed to an immediate emotional reaction” (in Wells, 27, my emphasis). By subverting the established cinematic codes designed to elicit automatic, sentimentalized reactions—codes that we have been taught and to which we respond without thinking or feeling—Greenaway opens up a space in which an authentic, rather than conventionalized, emotional response may arise, one that is more aware, more conscious, and perhaps more profound.

After discovering Bergman, Greenaway undertook a self-designed apprenticeship in cinema that brought him into frequent contact with the films of other European directors, such Antonioni, Pasolini, Fellini, Godard, and Resnais. Greenaway continues to pay tribute to these early modernist auteurs in his own films, most recently in *Eight and a Half Women,* but also as early as *The Draughtsman’s Contract.* Before making the latter, Greenaway insisted that his crew watch films by Fellini, Bertolucci, Rohmer, Straub, and Resnais (Wollen, 47). Greenaway repeatedly cites Resnais’s *Last Year at Marienbad* as a film “of true cinematic intelligence,” “a rare film-film that cannot be anything else” and as one that had a tremendous influence on his own film-making (*Sight and Sound Supplement,* 15).

He also cites Eric Rohmer’s *The Marquise von O* and Fellini’s *Casanova* as having contributed to the “temperament” of *The Draughtsman’s Contract:* “these were all films that related back to the, if you will, genre of the film—so much so that a cinema in Bristol put on a season of films called “The Draughtsman’s Context,” which included all those films that by accident or design, unconsciously or quite consciously influenced the film” (Jaehne, 13).

Given such proliferation of influences, or as Wollen puts it, such “strangely contradictory background” (47), Greenaway should, indeed, best be understood as an “international auteur” (Elliott and Purdy, 101), who has not only been influenced by an international cast of filmmakers—from the historical to the ’60s avant-garde, to political modernism—but also by an equally international cast of artists working in areas as diverse as painting, theater, music, and land art; and in periods ranging from mannerism, to modernism, to postmodernism. A full plotting out of Greenaway’s territory would also have to include a discussion of Greenaway’s relationship to contemporary postmodern visual artists. In fact, what may, to some critics, appear as an acute case of eccentricity, elitism, or nostalgia in Greenaway, is, in effect, what links him most profoundly to the “dissident” or “critical” branch of postmodernism in literature and the visual arts.
Woods, for instance, although he firmly resists applying the term *post-modern* to Greenaway, nonetheless situates him within “the mainstream of contemporary art practice” (12), naming an impressive array of artists who fit similar niches: “What is most individual about his [Greenaway’s] work in this context is the range of artists by whom he has been influenced or to whom he might usefully be compared” (12). Woods goes on to name R. B. Kitaj, Francis Bacon, Tom Phillips (with whom Greenaway has collaborated in *A TV Dante*), Joel-Peter Witkin, Andres Serrano, Cindy Sherman, Gilbert and George, the Boyle family, Richard Long, and Christo and Jeanne Claude as fruitful comparisons. Points of contact can also be established with the Brothers Quay, about whom Greenaway has written; with John Cage, Meridith Monk, Robert Ashley, and Philip Glass, about whom he made a four-part documentary; and with Michael Nyman, Louis Andriessen, Jean-Baptiste Barrière, and Patrick Mimram, who have all been Greenaway’s collaborators. Greenaway’s partnership with Nyman lasted from 1967 until their “falling out” after *Prospero’s Books*. The other three composers have worked with Greenaway in the operas *Rosa: A Horse Drama*, in *One Hundred Objects to Represent the World: A Prop-Opera*, and in the exhibit *Stairs*, respectively. Andriessen has collaborated again with Greenaway and his co-director, Saskia Boddeke, in the opera *Writing to Vermeer*, which opened in Amsterdam in December 1999. A more systematic and in-depth exploration of Greenaway’s work in relation to the contemporary art world is still to be undertaken; critics have only begun to scratch the surface of this multi-dimensional œuvre. As Greenaway comes to be more widely recognized as an eclectic and protean artist who “happens” to be working in cinema a lot of the time, his artistic production will necessarily continue to attract the attention of scholars and critics in all of the arts.

An aspect of Greenaway’s work that has not sufficiently been explored is the relationship between his own paintings and his films. This is an interesting absence since the intimate connection between Greenaway’s paintings and films is among the strongest evidence of self-reflexivity and intertextuality in his work. Moreover, given that critics rarely fail to point out that Greenaway was trained as a painter and to acknowledge the influence his training in art history and painting has had on his composition of the cinematic image, it is surprising that Greenaway’s paintings themselves have not received more critical attention.8

This gap may partly be due to the fact that his paintings are not always as easily available for viewing as his films. Since a concerted effort is currently being made to remedy this situation, it is likely that Greenaway’s paintings will become a greater focus of critical investigation. Critics agree, nonethe-
less, that the hybrid nature of Greenaway’s art demands that the British artist be studied and understood as a “total artist” who challenges generic boundaries in a Wagnerian search for the total-work-of-art—a Gesamtkunstwerk informed by a Brechtian aesthetic as reformulated by Godard’s counter-cinema.9

It is to this complex cross-fertilization among Greenaway’s artistic means of expression to which I now turn, in the second half of this chapter.

**GREENAWAY’S MEGA-CINEMA: PAINTINGS, FILMS, INSTALLATIONS, AND OPERAS**

In the catalogue for the 1996 exhibition at the Mylos Art Gallery, Greenaway describes his paintings as “speculative investigations” tightly associated with the production of his films (5). He breaks down the corpus of his paintings, executed over the past twenty years, into several categories, each category defining the paintings according to the function they serve in relation to his films. Most of Greenaway’s paintings either provide evidence of the process undertaken in the making of a film or constitute a search for a solution to an artistic impasse. The first category of paintings and drawings includes those that are the “objects” used in putting together a film, as is the case with the draughtsman’s drawings in The Draughtsman’s Contract. These drawings were executed by Greenaway, and it is, in fact, his own gloved hand that appears rendering the drawings in the film.

Another example of paintings that become the objects for the manufacturing of a film are the paintings that double as ninety-two maps to guide the ornithologist traveler on his search for reincarnation in A Walk through H. The film itself is made by filming Greenaway’s paintings, which are hanging on the walls of a gallery. A Walk through H is a fictional account of a fictional character’s journey through a fictional landscape; it is also the record of a journey undertaken by a viewer in an art gallery and by the filmmaker’s camera within each canvas. The film could be taken to be a road map guiding the viewer through his or her own journey from painting to painting and within individual paintings.

There is an element in these paintings, and therefore in the film, that not only acquires particular allegorical and metaphorical significance within the diegesis of the film but that also serves to illustrate the cross-referential aspect of Greenaway’s work. This element is the mark, or sign, shaped like an “X”; it links the film and the paintings that went into the production of the film to other paintings and films by Greenaway. Intended, within the
diegesis of the film, to signal the genuineness of the maps used by the ornithologist, this X also reminds us of a four-pointed signpost and a windmill. In fact, the icon resurfaces in other works by Greenaway as a windmill, becoming the central motif of a series of paintings entitled *100 Windmills* (1978), which Greenaway describes as “100 variations on the theme of windmill-ness.” In defining the significance of this sign in the film and its impact on his overall artistic sensibility, Greenaway states:

The windmill also occasionally looked like a four (or more) pointed signpost—and indeed the four vanes of the windmill might well point to the cardinal points of the origins of the winds, and of the compass.
Though the original windmill-totem was simple enough in the construction of the film—I became fascinated enough to want to develop the theme. This series—completed after the film—is the result. (Some Organising Principles, 17)

In the catalogue from which these remarks are taken, a catalogue for one of Greenaway’s early installations, there is also a reproduction of a photograph of modern wind turbines among the reproductions of several of these windmill
paintings. The juxtaposition of the explanatory text by Greenaway, with the reproductions of the paintings and of the photograph, invites the viewer to draw further connections, not only among Greenaway’s works—the paintings, the films, the installation, and the catalogue—but between his works and “real” objects in the world. The windmill becomes a multivalent icon: originally designating authenticity (of the maps used by the ornithologist), it comes to refer by means of an associative logic to signposts, to the four cardinal directions, to wind itself, to wind as renewable energy, to the technology of wind harnessing, and even perhaps, as Dayana Stetco suggests in her essay, to Quixotic folly. The figure of the windmill continues to “evolve” within Greenaway’s works and reappears in modified form as huge “extractor-fans—like gigantic aircraft propellers—made in dull silver, milled metal,” in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (*The Cook*, 15). As an element, such as the windmill, slips from one work into subsequent works, it metamorphoses, acquiring new meanings and forging new correspondences among the various works. Thus, a road sign becomes a windmill, which becomes a propeller, which may become a set of wings, which in turn may become a reference to Icarus, one of Greenaway’s favorite mythological figures and, like Don Quixote, another example of human folly.10

While Greenaway has used his own paintings in the manufacturing of films, the converse is also true: Greenaway produced an immense series of 200 paintings, or collages more properly speaking, out of pages from the script to one of his films, *Drowning by Numbers*. When exhibited, these collages are arranged in a sequential order designed to evoke film frames. Since they are, literally, pages out of a film script—pages that have been extracted from the original script and glossed over with commentaries, drawings, or clippings from newspapers—they also dramatize one of Greenaway’s chief concerns regarding the manufacturing of cinema, that is, cinema’s dependence on text. This series of collages also becomes a visual rendition of the process through which words become text, and text becomes image, thus referencing another of Greenaway’s theoretical preoccupations.

A second category of paintings includes those that are the remains of unrealized projects or embryos of projects in gestation. The *Tulse Luper Suitcase Series*, executed in 1990, is an example of the latter. These paintings are designed to contribute to the elaboration of the script for one of Greenaway’s future projects, *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*, and also serve as an aid to the art department in composing the sets for the film. According to Greenaway, this series consists of “the evidence of a film that tells of the adventures of a suitcase that is lost at the outbreak of World War II, and that later is held as a work of art in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The man who
packed the suitcase, Tulse Luper, has gradually disappeared . . . in successive prisons” (quoted in Arriola, 23; translations from the original Spanish are mine). We might speculate, for instance, that Greenaway’s painting *Bathroom Literature* (1990) is the prototype for one of the sets of the film: a white bathroom that, according to Greenaway, is one of the many prisons to which Tulse Luper will be consigned in the course of the film.11

If all that remains of this man who disappears after being held in “successive prisons” is his suitcase, it is ironic that his only legacy would itself end up in a prison of sorts—the museum.

A third category of paintings comprises those that are extensions of already completed films that the artist could not leave behind. These paintings provide continuity and open-endedness to the films. This is the case with the *100 Windmills* series already mentioned in relation to *A Walk through H*, and also of “Proportional Representation” (1989), a painting associated with the film *Prospero’s Books*. The latter painting was executed while the film was being edited. Greenaway describes it as “a consideration, constantly adjusted in shape and colour [. . .] to evaluate the different influences of each book” (*Papers*, 92). This painting is an abstract rendition of Prospero’s books, done in mixed media on paper in tones of lilac, aqua, green, and red. It consists of a series of colored rectangles, some of which are divided into other geometrical figures. The frame of the painting itself acts as an outer rectangle, divided into smaller inner rectangles. Three of these inner rectangles, on the upper left-hand corner of the frame, are themselves further divided into triangles. The splitting up of these rectangles into triangles generates diagonal lines, or rather, vectors of energy that break out of the rectangles, releasing the energy enframed by and contained in the rectangles. These vectors seem to be projecting this energy outward, toward and through the frame of the painting itself. Interestingly, the effect created by the diagonal lines in this painting refers us to the image of the signpost, or windmill, in the works discussed earlier. This painting is also evocative of paintings in other series that feature rectangles as their primary subject matter—a subject matter that operates as both content and form joined into one (see for instance, *Twenty-Three Corpses* (1989), *Sixteen Reds* (1989), *Frame Catalogue* (1989), and *55 Men on Horseback* (1990).

Another example of paintings that are extensions of already completed films is *Child Actor* (1996), which is a collage of words and images from Greenaway’s own cinematic corpus and from that of other artists. In this case, Greenaway juxtaposes photographs of Kracklite (*The Belly of an Architect*) and of Nagiko (*The Pillow Book*) with photographs of portraits of children, including one of Princess Margarita painted by Velásquez. Among this collage
of Franz Hals’s portraits is also a fragment from Frans Hals’s painting *The Banquet of the Officers of the St. George Civic Company*, which is featured in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. Such juxtapositions invite us to link seemingly disparate films and different media and also position Greenaway within a pictorial tradition that straddles several centuries. Magali Arriola, who reads the Hals painting as an allegory of masculine power, suggests that in *Child Actor* Greenaway investigates both the persistence in time and the transformation of emblems and iconographic elements that allow us to identify characters, or rather, archetypes (22).

There are also paintings that seem, at first glance, to refer only to themselves but that on closer inspection are visual essays, or speculations, on themes that have informed all of Greenaway’s undertakings. The *In the Dark* series (1996), for instance, is a meta–cinematic reflection on certain basic components of cinema—text, illusion, actors, and audience—components that Greenaway has explored and plans to continue to explore in his city installations. *The Framed Life*, executed in 1989 while *A TV Dante* was under production, like the painting *Proportional Representation* already mentioned, explores the possibilities and the limitations of the frame, in art and in life, a preoccupation or theme that informs all of Greenaway’s films. As Greenaway explains:

> painting, the theatre, and as like as not, opera and ballet, and certainly the cinema, and certainly television, exist disciplined within a fixed frame. And the frame is a visual straightjacket [sic][. . . ] Since all the plastic art and performance art and art–of–the–moving–image possibilities are so confined, then let that also be the case for reality. The series “The Framed Life” was to do just that; squeeze a life into a frame. Conception, birth, childhood, puberty, sex, love, marriage, adultery, maturity, illness, senility, death—all held together in a fixed rectangle. (Steinmetz, 84)

Another example of paintings that do not directly reference a particular film but that, nonetheless, explore a theoretical concern also under investigation in Greenaway’s films, exhibitions, and operas is *The Audience Series* (1993). The theoretical concern in question is the “Audience,” which Greenaway has not only thematized but also made into a “character” in films such as *The Baby of Mâcon* and *M is for Man, Music and Mozart*. As Greenaway notes:

> I have silently pursued audiences in the cinema without being too much aware of the obsession until very recently. There was an audience of murderers in *The Draughtsman’s Contract* and an audience of dilettanti architects who clapped the Pantheon in *The Belly of an Architect*. There was an
audience of avengers in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, a whole body of audience performers in *M is for Music* and certainly now very consciously—a wandering audience in *The Baby of Mâcon*. What constitutes an audience—who are they, what do they want, how can they be entertained? How will they sit or stand? I took to picturing them in their company groups—a group of artisans, a group of priests, a gang of thieves, a company of cooks, a solipsism of scholars. (Steinmetz, 122–123)

Greenaway’s fictionalization of the audience is an invitation to his own audience to contemplate its participatory role as “actors” in the illusion staged by the artist. By raising the question of who is actor and who is audience, Greenaway blurs the boundaries between the fictional and the “real” worlds and implicates his audience in the creation of, and therefore in the responsibility for, the representation. This deliberate thematization and involvement of the audience represents, according to Pascoe, “a new kind of interactive cinematic activity” (194).

Not only are Greenaway’s paintings intimately connected to and in dialogical relation with his films, but his exhibitions, installations, and other operatic productions are meta-and-mega-cinematic “events” that cross-fertilize one another in intricate ways and exist in multiple versions. Greenaway’s artistic productions are open-ended and unfinished—or rather, they are always works-in-progress. “The incomplete or the non-definite work of art will always be more fascinating,” states Greenaway (Lecture, October 8, 1998). A work may exist in multiple versions in different media that, rather than superceding one another, ask to be considered, read, and pondered upon simultaneously, in their diverse manifestations. Greenaway’s films exist in more than one version, not only because of their interrelationship with the paintings, but also because his finished films always differ from their published script versions. Acknowledging this important intra- and intertextual characteristic of Greenaway’s artistic productions, most of the contributors to this collection draw from both script and film in their analyses. In fact, the relationship between the script version and the film version of *The Belly of an Architect* is the explicit focus of Michael Ostwald’s essay in this volume.

To illustrate Greenaway’s tendency to blur the boundaries among the various media he deploys, I would like to cite but two examples: his first opera, *Rosa: A Horse Drama*, and his installation and prop-opera *One Hundred Objects to Represent the World*. The opera *Rosa* currently exists in two versions. It was, “originally,” a published “novel” recounting the death of a Brazilian composer, Rosa, in the 1950s, who was gaining a reputation and amassing a small fortune for composing music for Hollywood Westerns. This text is not
so much a novel, in the traditional sense, as a fictionalized account of the murder of this composer, recounted as if it were to be staged and told through music—as an opera. It is, perhaps, a characteristically postmodern novel—and a virtual opera—that interweaves the plot and dialogue with the author’s own commentaries and musings on both the subject and the staging of it.

As a live performance, Rosa was first staged in Amsterdam in 1994, and again in 1998, and was co-directed with Saskia Boddeke, Greenaway’s co-director in all subsequent operas. Like his other operas, Rosa is part of Greenaway’s ongoing search for a “mega-cinema” (Merry, 69). To this end, it incorporates cinematic techniques on the operatic stage, making references to B-grade Western movies as well as liberal use of cinematic projections. The images are projected not on movie screens but on the stained bed sheets belonging to the main characters, Rosa and his fiancée Esmeralda, which descend upon the stage and double as screens. A third version of Rosa has also been produced, a film version. Seventy hours of film shot in six days using three cameras have been edited into a film by a Dutch television station. The filming of an opera is perhaps a compromise on the part of Greenaway, who, while wanting to reach the largest possible audience, also maintains that opera is, by its very nature, unfilmable: “There is something about the opera that renders it unfilmable. To film an opera is to try, through editing, to impose your own vision of the work on the spectator. In the theatre you have different perceptions. The opera flows on stage, as a whole” (De Almeida, 4; my translation).12

Greenaway’s second opera, One Hundred Objects to Represent the World: A Prop-Opera, which opened in Salzburg in August 1997 and subsequently traveled to other European and South American cities, is another consummate example of a work that exists in many forms and crosses generic boundaries. The “original” Salzburg production was staged as the last of a trilogy of artistic productions that began in 1993 as part of the Zeitfluss Festival (taking place within the context of the Salzburg Festival).13

This opera—or rather, prop-opera, as Greenaway calls it—doubles as an installation where the props and other elements used in the opera are put on display for the audience to view before and after the performance. As Greenaway explains in the catalogue produced to accompany the Salzburg opera:

When the members of the audience have been encouraged to take their seats, the performance will begin. The 100 objects will be presented in a sequential narrative that has its organiser Thrope, the misanthrope, delivering his subjective list by way of the original Earth innocents, Adam & Eve, who are impersonated by two naked mute actors who initially act as
go-betweens or a silent chorus. Thrope’s purpose is to educate these two innocents in what the Earth, and mankind upon the Earth, have achieved in the last millennium [. . .] This educative journey is to be travelled in approximately 65 minutes, structured by Thrope’s spoken discourse. His vocal dramatic performance has been interpreted musically to make him variously a teacher, an ogre, a pedant, a magician, a persuader, a charlatan, a sage and a preacher. This voice-music structure is interpreted and accompanied by a soundtrack of musical and acoustic effects created by Jean-Baptiste Barrière and engineered at IRCAM in Paris, to be assisted and reinterpreted onstage by the percussionist Robyn Schulkowky.

(One Hundred Objects to Represent the World: A Prop-Opera, no page numbers)

Greenaway describes the prop-opera as a “shopping list” motivated by the notion that the end of a century is a time for taking stock of our deeds, failures, and conquests. “It is a work that speaks of humanity’s dreams and ambitions, of its aggressions and oppressions. The opera represents an image of humanity that is little optimistic, of the human condition at the end of this century” (De Almeida, 4; my translation). It is a multi-media spectacle that unites live actors on stage; pre-recorded music, sound effects, and dialogue; light show; cinematic projections on four screens; and lots of objects on stage. The screens, on which are projected a varied array of black and white images and words, function as the frames of this three dimensional rectangle—the stage (Greenaway has called it an “aquarium of screens,” in a lecture given on August 10, 1998). The drama being acted out on this stage is thus contained within—and perhaps made possible by—the projected images. These images comment on the action by creating temporal and spatial links between the present and Greenaway’s own rendition of the history of Western Judeo-Christian civilization.

As the title of the opera indicates, this project evokes, quotes, or simply gives renewed expression to Greenaway’s exhibition by the same name, held in Vienna in 1992; the opera, itself, also doubles as an installation of props. The Salzburg catalogue for the prop-opera is highly intertextual and self-reflexive and might be described as a catalogue—or encyclopedia—of Greenaway’s own artistic oeuvre. It is a book in its own right, a record of the Salzburg event, and a collage of words, photographs, and drawings created by Greenaway, or appropriated by him, in his films, exhibitions, and installations.

The catalogue begins by recalling the 1992 exhibition in Vienna and reprints the introduction, which originally appeared in the catalogue to
accompany the exhibition. Each of the 100 items listed in the catalogue, appropriately starting with “Adam and Eve” and ending with “Ice” (or “The End of the Sun,” “Universal Death”), is illustrated by reproductions of stills from Greenaway’s films, of his paintings and drawings, and of photographs taken at the 1992 exhibition. The content, or written commentaries that accompany each item are, as would be expected of Greenaway, playfully ironic and sharply witty. With the help of Stephen Coates, the same designer for the catalogue *Flying over Water*, Greenaway also indulges in the playful manipulation of form, varying font style and size within a page or even a paragraph. Thus, he continues to explore, now in book format, the relationship between image and text and the possibilities of text as image afforded by computer technology—a topic that has fascinated him in the cinema, notably in *Prospero’s Books* and in *The Pillow Book*.

Greenaway’s multi-media approach to executing multiple versions of a single work calls attention to his own predicament as an artist, and as a human being, caught between his experience of the world and his inability to fully represent that experience or, for that matter, the world. If the artist cannot represent reality in its multiplicity and fluidity, if reality, as postmodernism reminds us, is never in a fixed state but always in process, the best he can do is acknowledge the ungraspable, slippery, or multiple nature of reality. The constant becoming of reality is thus reflected in the constant becoming of Greenaway’s images and texts. When considered together, the various versions of a single work by Greenaway offer us a richer and fuller view of the work, and of the world, but they also frustrate us in a typically postmodern fashion by forcing us to confront the plurality and multiplicity of the world around us. Echoing Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Greenaway has said, in relation to the audience’s customarily fixed and frontal position: “but the world is all around us—not just before us” (*Stairs/Munich*, 23).

While Greenaway is a postmodern artist who systematically shows that our systems of ordering and representing the world are limited human constructs, and who erects and then questions or destroys these systems, he remains a “modern” to the extent that he rarely seems to question our impulse to systematize. In fact, the impulse to organize and systematize is irresistible to Greenaway. His 1993 exhibition in Wales, *Some Organising Principles*, has as its subject matter organization, itself. In this exhibit, Greenaway compares organizational approaches across periods and comments on the phenomenon of the museum as an institution that legitimates knowledge by organizing information into separate categories. The didactic taxonomical approach of the exhibit is deliberate. Greenaway displays, for instance, the back side of paintings in order to subvert the conventions of the traditional exhibit but,
more important, to reveal the classification and categorization of art objects. Thus exhibited, the paintings themselves disappear, revealing the labels, tags, identification numbers, and other archivist markings that “have sometimes almost drowned an artifact in its own classifications” (Some Organising Principles, 7). Museums, like all institutions, are shown to be great catalogues, and the neutrality behind such systems of classification is questioned.

This is also evident in the 1992 exhibition One Hundred Objects to Represent the World, undertaken partly as a personal, subjective response to the launching into space, in the ’70s, of the Voyager spacecraft filled with objects to represent Earth. Greenaway set out to select, order, and display 100 different objects—ranging from the most material to the most ephemeral—to suggest that “a collection of artifacts assembled in one space, with one idea, one heading, from one curator . . . is a sort of representation of the world” (no page numbers).

The launching of the spacecraft is, for Greenaway, a historical event that raises a number of questions of great ideological and political import, such as: What do we consider important, and therefore what shall be included? What do we want to be remembered by? How will the objects be interpreted? The exhibition he organized attempted to address the problem of representation at both ends of the spectrum by asking: How do we represent ourselves, and how do we assure that our representations will be interpreted as we wish? More important, it questioned the accuracy or validity of any representation: “What sort of representative picture would any extraterrestrial have of men, women, and animals,” asks Greenaway, if the world’s men were represented by one’s father, the world’s women by one’s mother, and the world’s animals by one’s pet? One Hundred Objects to Represent the World mocked human endeavor, on the one hand, by not wanting to leave anything out, and, on the other hand, by acknowledging the impossibility of being all-inclusive.

Greenaway makes visible in his exhibits, as in his films, the conventions of representation and of viewershup, and scrutinizes the very institutions that deal in these conventions. In his many exhibits and installations, and in his curatorial work at the Louvre, Flying Out of This World (1992), Greenaway shows that museums, too, are fashioned by subjectivities, a fact he feels is not always sufficiently acknowledged and contemplated. Just as his films seem to question the conventions of cinema, all of his exhibitions question the art gallery as a dominant cultural institution by breaking with the conventions of what is appropriate exhibit material and by inviting the viewer to ponder on what is proper behavior toward the exhibited material. For example, rather than merely placing representations of nudes in the form of paintings
or sculptures in his exhibits, Greenaway displays, inside glass cases, the real naked reality of the human body itself. The museum’s customary exhortation *not* to touch any of the works on display is also ironically referenced and challenged by Greenaway’s display of Marcel Duchamps’s *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, whose cover shows the image of a female breast made of foam, with a push-button nipple and the words “*prière de toucher*” (please touch) inscribed (*The Physical Self*, 27).

Greenaway’s exhibits and installations can be taken as a large scale elaboration on Duchamps’s practice of the “*objet trouvé*.” Greenaway enlarges the context to include, in addition to human-made objects such as chairs, typewriters, books, and gloves, “natural” objects such as grass and a fallen tree, as well as unrepresentable notions, such as the notion of “God.” Greenaway represents the latter by means of three questions written in calligraphy on a large wall: “Who are we?; Where are we going?; What is it all about?” These questions, which neither mythology, religion, nor science has yet been able to answer, are meant to suggest that some things are unrepresentable, not only by the arts, but also by all of our systems of knowledge.

Attempts to represent the unrepresentable had previously been mocked by Greenaway in his 1981 Thames Television film *Act of God*, a documentary that combines Greenaway’s avant-garde strategies and the TV documentary genre in an attempt to classify and explain an event that remains elusive: the experience of being struck by lighting, and surviving. As Steve Jenkins shows in his review of the film, the stories retold by live witnesses and survivors “exist only to demonstrate the gulf between an ‘act of God’ and its telling. Language here is inadequate, absurd and incongruous, slipping from the grasp of the speaker and separating him from his own experience” (254). As Jean Petrolle argues in her essay, *A Zed and Two Noughts* also explores the pain, anger, and frustration at our inability to explain certain events, particularly when these events are deemed irrational, absurd, and accidental—conceived as products of chance, or of malice.

While Greenaway’s works are often meditations on the limits of knowledge and on the incomprehensible nature of some of our most profound and scarring experiences—such as death—they are also warnings against our abstract explanatory and organizational systems’ ability to alienate us from experience and even to eradicate reality. Greenaway regards his exhibitions as three-dimensional films that are more experientially satisfying than the cinema because they are more capable of stimulating all five senses and of engaging the viewer physically, not simply mentally. The audience of an exhibition is not subjected to a linear and finite narrative, or to a passive seated position. The viewer is expected and encouraged to walk and is even able to
“touch the objects he is viewing and certainly have a more physical-visual relationship with them” (Some Organising Principles, 4).

Greenaway’s exhibitions and films also enable him to explore an important preoccupation of artists, art-historians, critics, and museum curators: the preoccupation with the question of the “aura” of the work of art—to use Walter Benjamin’s term—with its authenticity and uniqueness, and with its relationship to commerce and technology. This tension between the original work of art and its copy—be it in the form of a reproduction or of a fake, a forgery—has surfaced implicitly as well as explicitly in a number of Greenaway’s films. *A Zed and Two Noughts*, for instance, makes repeated references to Vermeer’s unauthenticated works; and, in *The Belly of an Architect*, Kracklite, the architect, is obsessed with reproducing blown-up photocopies of Augustus’s belly—these photocopies are, themselves, taken from a reproduction of a statue of Augustus on a postcard. The authenticity of a work of art, its popular dissemination by means of mass reproduction, and its incorporation into new works of art through citations—be they pastiches or parodies—are extensively debated issues in postmodernist discourse and art. Greenaway is thus clearly engaging with these debates, rendering them almost tangible in his exhibits and films by deliberately calling attention to his own conscious display of quotations, of fakes, and of reproductions.

![Figure 1.3](image)

*Figure 1.3 One Hundred Objects to Represent the World. Photo Tilde de Tullio. Courtesy of Peter Greenaway.*
NOTES

1. Sarah Street, in *British National Cinema*, discusses the range and diversity of British films from the silent era to the present. For a discussion of Greenaway’s position within British cinema, see in particular 177–181.

2. For Bordwell, art films share a set of formal conventions and demand similar viewing practices. They explicitly define themselves in opposition to classical narrative, deploy a certain “realism” by showing real locations and psychologically complex characters, and foreground the author figure in a self-conscious, self-reflexive way. Neale agrees with many of Bordwell’s assertions but adds that “art cinema is by no means simply a question of films with particular textual characteristics” (“Art Cinema as Institution,” 13). If we were to limit ourselves to Bordwell’s assessment of what art cinema is, Greenaway’s films would only problematically fit this category. Most of Greenaway’s films, for instance, are shot in studio and not on location. Although the authorial stamp is clearly felt in his films, the filmmaker prides himself in creating characters that are more often “coat hangers” for ideas than believable complex personalities.

3. Greenaway started working at the COI in 1965, two years after graduating from art school. The exact number of films he directed for the *Insight Series* and *This Week in Britain* is unknown. He claims about four documentaries—or, as he called them, “soft porn propaganda”—a week were made (Patterson and Katnelson, online). Recently, a number of these films, ranging from five to thirty minutes long, have been made available for viewing by Film Images, a commercial stock footage library in London representing a number of film libraries, including the COI footage library. Some of these, such as the one on the furniture designer Terence Conran (*Terence Conran*, 1981), might be called disguised “infomercials.” Others, such as the documentary on the fashion stylist Zandra Rhodes (*Zandra Rhodes*, 1981), and the thirty-minute-long celebration of the British coastline *The Sea in Their Blood: Beside the Sea* (1983), have a distinctive Greenaway tone. Other films in this series directed by Greenaway include: *Eddie Kid* (1978), *Cut above the Rest* (1978), *Woman Artist* (1979), *Leeds Castle* (1979), *Country Diary* (1980), and *Lalock Village* (1980).

*The Sea in Their Blood: Beside the Sea* is little known and therefore little discussed. According to the narration, it purports to be “an impression of what it means to be beside the sea in Britain.” For brief commentaries on it, see *Peter Greenaway* by Giovanni Bogani and *Peter Greenaway: Il Cinema Delle Idee* by Alessandro Bencivenni and Anna Samueli. *The Sea in Their Blood* has its origins in 1976 when the COI commissioned Greenaway to do a documentary on the English coastline. The final product, released in 1983, is a quasi-exhaustive catalogue of statistics, ranging from the number of waves per tide in a particular coastal region, to the number of photographs taken of the English coast, to the various types of seaweed that can be found. Gio-
vanni Bogani describes the data as both reassuring and ambiguous (41). The title of the film also has significance beyond its relation to England. It evokes the similarities in the composition of blood and sea water, and thus connects with Greenaway’s ongoing exploration of the close ties between humans and water, perhaps suggesting both our own origins in water, and water as the source of all life and the site of death. Water plays an important role, both literally and metaphorically, in almost every feature-length film but also in a number of short and medium-length films and videos such as Erosion (not available), Water (not available), Water Wrackets, Making a Splash, 26 Bathrooms, and Death in the Seine. It is also worth pointing out that the opening image of The Sea in Their Blood is a still shot of waves, an image strikingly reminiscent of the final shot in Michael Snow’s Wavelength. Given Greenaway’s documented acknowledgment of debt to avant-garde filmmakers, such as the structuralist Hollis Frampton, one is justified in assuming that this similarity is more than a coincidence. In fact, Lawrence reports that Greenaway has explicitly named Frampton, Brakhage, and Snow as powerful inspirations: “the sense of freedom [from narrative] the liberation that all their work indicated was powerful stuff,” admits Greenaway (Lawrence, 10).

4. For more details, see the online interview with Christopher Hawthorne for Salon Magazine, June 6, 1997.

5. David Pascoe offers a brief account of the event that took place in the Piazza del Popolo in June 1996. See pages 193–194, in particular.

6. The connections between Last Year at Marienbad and The Draughtsman’s Contract have been discussed by Amy Lawrence in The Films of Peter Greenaway and are furthered explored by Mary Alemany-Galway in the present volume.

7. My use of the terms dissident and critical postmodernism refers, respectively, to the studies done on contestatory postmodern means of expression and artists by Paul Maltby and Linda Hutcheon.

8. The relationship between Greenaway’s paintings and films is discussed to some extent in Leon Steinmetz and Peter Greenaway, The World of Peter Greenaway; in David Pascoe’s study; and in Magali Arriola’s “Peter Greenaway, cine y pintura, ubicuidades y artificios,” published in Spanish in the catalogue for an exhibit of Greenaway’s paintings held at the Museo Rufino Tamayo in Mexico, 17 June–28 Sept, 1997. Arriola’s essay has been translated into Portuguese and English and reprinted in the catalogue which accompanied Greenaway’s production of One Hundred Objects to Represent the World: A Prop-Opera, in Brazil, in August 1998. Unfortunately, neither catalogue is easily available.

The best sources for reproductions of Greenaway’s paintings are The World of Peter Greenaway and Papers. For reproductions of Greenaway’s most recent works, see Paul Melia and Alan Woods, Peter Greenaway. Artworks: 63–98 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), which includes an interview with the director and over 100
reproductions of his work. Some of the most recent exhibitions of Greenaway’s paintings have been in Rio de Janeiro, July 10–September 20, 1998; São Paulo, July 15–August 17, 1998; Cornerhouse, Manchester, October 17–December 6, 1998, and Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, January 20–February 20, 1999.

9. I have previously used the term *total artist* to describe Greenaway in my review of Alan Woods’s *Being Naked, Playing Dead: The Art of Peter Greenaway*, *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 6.2 (1997): 92–94. Woods, Street, and Elliott and Purdy discuss, to differing degrees, the Brechtian and Godardian aspects of Greenaway’s cinema. While Woods explores some of the resonances of Godard’s *Les Carabiniers* in Greenaway’s films, Sarah Street links, more specifically, Greenaway’s strategies for disrupting conventional narrative and viewing expectations to counter-cinema.

10. For a treatment of the “windmill” as a motif in Greenaway, see Dayana Stetco’s essay in the present volume. For reproductions of some of the paintings in the “100 Windmills” series, see Peter Greenaway, *Papers* (68–71). For a treatment of the theme of flight and of the figure of Icarus, see Peter Greenaway’s *Flying out of this World* (originally published as *Le bruit des Nuages*, the catalogue for Greenaway’s curatorial exhibit at the Louvre, Paris, in 1992), and *Flying over Water*, the catalogue for the exhibition at the Joan Miró Foundation, Barcelona, 1997.

11. This is an educated speculation, based on Greenaway’s private correspondence where he suggests that since his new film, *Tulse Luper Suitcases*, will include a torture scene in a white bathroom, he has composed a number of paintings of “blood spattered walls” to help the art department in composing the set. This suggestion seems confirmed by the text that accompanies the painting *Bathroom Literature* and that reads: “Arresting Tulse Luper was not going to stop him writing. When he had exhausted the supply of given paper, he proceeded to write on the white painted walls of the bathroom which remained his prison for seven weeks. When he had covered the walls from as high as he could reach whilst standing on the floor, he stood on the bathroom chair and reached higher” (*Papers*, 110). According to a video interview of Greenaway by André Klopmann, this is a project that has been in germination for a long time and that was inspired by Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved the lives of many Hungarian Jews at the end of the war.

12. There is also a film called *Rosa*, made in 1992, which has no relation to the opera or to the published novel version of the opera, except for the fact that it is about a performance and that it uses the music of a well-known composer, Béla Bartók. It is a dance performance shot in black and white and choreographed by Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker.

13. According to Tomas Zierhofer-Kin and Markus Hinterhäuser, members of the production team, this trilogy had as its philosophical and artistic aims to “discover and experience important artistic expressions from the final years of the twentieth century and to show a broad public their relevance in defining the po-
sition of our society.” The first production, “The Aesthetics of Resistance” (1993), sought to investigate the extent to which a work of art can change our perception, our view of the world. The leading figure in this project was Luigi Nono. The second production, “Commemorative Year” (1995), explored the understanding of art in border situations, “as a possibility for condemning the threats made against people and against humanity.” Greenaway’s contribution to this project has been described by its production team as “art as an expression of transcendency, spirituality and the breaking down of borders”; as a “critical and ironic assessment of our cultural, social and intellectual history” (One Hundred Objects to Represent the World: A Prop-Opera). For Greenaway’s own commentaries on the opera, see the August 9 interview in chapter 12.

When considering Peter Greenaway’s work, it is important to distinguish between the practice of making a film and the persistence of his “cinematic vision” across celluloid and various other visual media and practices. It is useful also to define this cinematic vision as one that, although tied to moving images, has, for Greenaway, roots in the history of Western art, with a particular emphasis on painting. By examining Greenaway’s visual art-related exhibitions and projects and some of the leitmotifs that surface in his films and in these projects, we may find keys to understanding both the consistency and the radical nature of his vision. This essay will consider these works in light of larger issues and notions of expanded cinema.

Peter Greenaway’s cinema is a cinema of excess, characterized by a very particular visceral sense that permeates almost all aspects of his films. Many of his films are so visually and conceptually dense as to suggest that the medium of film itself is not adequately able to “contain” the articulation of his vision. This “density” is partially due to Greenaway’s traditional training as a painter and a student of Western art history. Greenaway trained initially to be a mural painter, a genre of figurative and metaphorical painting that itself has a specific tradition of illustrating, illuminating, or commenting on history or on the historical in some way. Because murals are “fixed” into the architecture of a specific place, and thus literally become the material of that site, they are intimately connected to the history of that place. Due to their distinct relationship to architecture, and by extension to a practice of conceiving, activating, and creating (a) space, muralists are trained to consider scale in a particular way. Given this relationship to materiality, scale, architecture, and history, it is no surprise that mural paintings have, almost by definition, been epic. Consequently, mural painting is meant to be viewed and understood differently from other types of painting, such as portraiture, for example, because viewing a mural entails entering into a space—a depicted
space and a three-dimensional space that are one and the same. The visual depiction on a mural is created in relation to the three-dimensional space in which it is meant to be viewed. Murals are, thus, materially fixed, bound to and by history in a way that other genres of painting are not.

Although Greenaway’s way of seeing, making, and understanding art is not limited solely by his experience as a mural painter, this background and training do, however, substantially inform and shape his visual culture—a visual vocabulary of images and signs and a way of reading and understanding them that is tied to the history of Western art and Western culture. For Greenaway, the filmmaker, however, the two practices and ways of thinking—painting and filmmaking—are not mutually exclusive and together may provide an important key to understanding the “eccentricities” and “excesses” of his oeuvre, an oeuvre that consists of films, drawings, paintings, curatorial projects, installations, public artworks, and writings. It is Greenaway’s rootedness in more than one medium that marks him as a type of hybrid-filmmaker: a filmmaker whose practice is certainly not limited to film but is, rather, often limited by film.

The space between Greenaway’s filmmaking and visual art, as defined and delineated by his visual art-related projects, suggests the nature of Greenaway’s investment in cinema by uncovering the limits of the cinematic medium itself. Indeed, Greenaway asks us to look at how these art-related, meta-cinematic projects overlap, expand, and attempt to form a continuum between film and more traditional forms and vocabularies of visual art and culture. It is these projects, and Greenaway’s future plans to produce related CD-ROMs and Internet sites, that beg the larger question: What exactly is the relationship between art-making, filmmaking, and the history of visual culture?

**THE QUESTION (OF) REALISM**

For almost ten years, Peter Greenaway has been involved in creating meta-cinematic art projects in the form of museum curatorial exhibitions and public artworks. The most successful of these is a multi-faceted public installation project entitled *The Stairs*. This project challenges much of what Greenaway has found problematic about film and film’s relationship to images, time, and space, by suggesting new relationships between how and what we experience filmically. Prior to *The Stairs*, Greenaway created several exhibitions in various museums and sites that developed some of the important groundwork for *The Stairs*. The central thematic concern of all these
works was the conflict Greenaway identifies between the limits of the medium of film and the nature of film viewership. When Greenaway began to make films, his ambition was to see if he could make films that acknowledged the artifices and illusions of cinema itself. In films such as *Intervals* (1968–1973), his wish was to create a cinema that was not primarily interested in narrative, as most feature filmmaking is, but to create a cinema that used the same relationship to aesthetics as painting did. These aesthetic considerations included formal devices of structure, composition, framing, and, most important for Greenaway, attention to metaphor and allegory (Woods; Elliott and Purdy). Greenaway wished to explore these relationships between painting and cinema by examining their connections and differences through editing and pacing, and by studying the formal properties of time intervals, repetitions, and variations on a theme. These structural explorations of film made up not only the conceptual discourse that Greenaway wished to engage with but were very much the “content” of the films Greenaway aspired to make.

These structuralist pursuits had a somewhat oppositional relationship to ideas of realism in the cinema, a topic that many filmmakers and film theorists before Greenaway had attempted to articulate, define, and otherwise negotiate in some form or another. Because of its ability to represent three-dimensional objects “realistically,” film, like photography before it, has been plagued with the responsibility of “representing reality.” Many photographers and filmmakers, however, have resisted what they perceive to be a false responsibility and have endeavored to create a vocabulary for film and photography that is not dependent on the assumption that the camera’s “true” function is to “record the world.” Much of this new vocabulary was developed with particular attention to new ways of thinking about materiality, with the goal of liberating film from a unilateral relationship to “reality.”

**CORPOREALITY AS HISTORY**

However complex the debates around film’s form and realism may be, Greenaway has always maintained a strong relationship to a sense of history. This commitment to history is, at least partially, rooted in his traditional training in (historical) mural painting; his visual vocabulary is grounded in Western art history as well, but this is also the site where a fundamental conflict arises for Greenaway. Peter Greenaway is an artist who is profoundly rooted in a tradition of image-making and image-viewing informed by the traditional canon of Western art, and who also, as a contemporary filmmaker,
embraces a practice and theory of postmodern art that, in substantial and fundamental ways, defines itself in opposition to the very canon of art in which Greenaway was trained. For Greenaway, much of this conflict is concentrated on the idea of material and materiality as a type of fundamental and foundational prerequisite for the “validity” of an artwork. This “validity” is what guarantees for Greenaway that an artwork has a “history.” This notion causes Greenaway to question the very ephemerality of the medium of film, its “materialess-ness.” For Greenaway the “non-materiality” of film not only contradicts his notion of, and investment, in history but also seems to lessen film’s “cultural currency”:

For me it is a frustration that cinema has no substance in the way that, for example, architecture and sculpture—even painting—have substance. As a consequence, I doubt whether cinema has any real history in the world. The passage of history effects inevitable material changes in an artifact. In that sense, cinema, or film, cannot profitably age, and it can have no intimacy with history. Even a very short history permits an object to attain provenance, heritage and cultural power. Even attain cultural magic, certainly cultural currency and usage. The physical touch of history[,] which is not necessarily inimical to the well-being of a cultural artifact, can “improve” its substance and enhance its significance. Without exception material changes in film are irredeemably disadvantageous. Film will not sustain aging processes or be made profitably resonant by them. (Stairs/Geneva, 3)

This view of “authenticity” certainly owes much to Walter Benjamin’s discussions and formulations, but it also helps us in understanding Greenaway’s choice of using the body as a “material” substitute for what he refers to as “substance.” It is because Greenaway considers the medium of film somewhat impoverished, because of its “lack” of physicality, of substance, that he turns to the body as a way of counter-acting this “lack” and of compensating for it by activating the body as a type of articulation of history. The visual and aural “excessiveness” Greenaway gives to his films is what gives them body, so to speak, and history. This entails heightening how he represents three-dimensional reality to the viewer, and in turn, how the viewer engages with his films. Greenaway fills his films with depictions of often naked bodies of different types, sizes, and ethnicities, and with references to the body’s functions, from different perspectives. The naked bodies on screen act as stand-ins for the materiality and the physicality that are so important to Greenaway and that are lost in film, but not in architecture, for instance.
We recognize these representations of bodies as bodies partly because they are naked, partly because Greenaway does not give much psychological depth to his characters. These naked-bodies-as-bodies are intended to be read as “material,” as “physicality,” and not so much as the bodies of specific people or characters. These naked-bodies-as-bodies have a different currency, function, and relief than those bodies-as-people that are often more involved with narrative and function as elements to drive and animate these narratives. In order for Greenaway adequately to (re)create such “physicality” on celluloid, he must resort to elaborate, perhaps excessive, even hyper-filmic “(re)constructions.” Every frame, line, and sound in a film such as *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989), for example, either literally depicts or else implies corporeality. Greenaway has constructed, indeed, crafted his films so meticulously and “excessively” that they seem almost to breathe—and at some points, gasp. In films such as *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* bodies seem to be ever-present, lit, and dynamically photographed—indeed, the film’s plot ends with a cannibalistic finale. In these films, Greenaway uses the body both literally and metaphorically as a means of creating a type of visceral, as well as intellectual, experience that is as close as film can truly come to a “reality” that is inescapably dependent on “materiality.” This practice of hyper-reproduction becomes a surrogate for the materiality that the cinema allegedly “lacks.” Greenaway’s use of the body also anchors the viewer to something of a “human scale”—something that acts as a meter and, by extension, as a bridge between the actual world that the viewer inhabits and the filmic representation of time and space s/he engages with. By making films that are such intricately woven bodies of “recorded” images and sounds, Greenaway achieves a level of viscerality that may be the highest that film, as a medium, can hope to reach.

Greenaway’s way of seeing and using the body as a conceptual, visual, and visceral manifestation of physicality bridges his relation to film as a product—as something that is distributed, and projected in theaters—and as a process, of writing, rehearsing, acting. The space between the material and physical experience of objects, actors, and sets as they appear before the camera during filming, and the immaterial experience of the apparatus reproducing a non-material “record” of that physicality in a theater, is where Greenaway chooses to situate himself, precisely because he feels uncomfortable with, and troubled by, this gap. Indeed, Greenaway has felt the need to dramatize the schism between making and viewing films by attempting to recreate for the audience the excitement he feels on the set. This “in between” place of filmmaking, which is a process of conceiving and manifesting “material” (scripts, actors, sets, etc.) into a type of fluid and fluctuating
spectacle (with its changes, rehearsals, ad-libs, etc.) recorded by a camera, is what Greenaway finds most interesting and rewarding. He states:

I feel, on perusal of [my completed film], that I . . . want the illusion of the moving cinematic image, but I also want the delights of the original ideas, formats, strategies and texts, the excitements of the enterprise of the collaborators, the reality of the props and the sets. And as a consequence I would wish to find ways and means of communicating to others and recommunicating to myself these fascinations. (Stairs/Geneva, 9)

In this acknowledgment, Greenaway reconciles somewhat his conflict with filmmaking. We might now begin to discern how this attachment to materiality—and by extension, to reality and history—functions not only as a means to activate film viewership but also as a key to the crucial moment and process of filmmaking.

THE EXHIBITIONS

Despite these attempts at using the body to articulate the relationships among materiality, reality, history, and cinema, Greenaway nevertheless remains frustrated with the mimetic ephemerality of his filmic bodies—the shadows of light and dark that cannot be physically held, that have, by definition, no weight and are mere “traces” of the physical. If the depiction of the body within his films are “failed” attempts at grounding and literally giving his films body, then Greenaway’s museum exhibitions, which display and have as their theme the physical, are an extension, in the real world, of the same idea. It was Greenaway’s intention that these museum projects herald a type of mega-cinema that would attempt to reclaim the poverty of cinema.

In 1990, Greenaway was invited to curate an exhibition entitled The Physical Self (27 October, 1991–12 January, 1992), using the resources of the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam. With no other parameters than those of using the collection of the museum, Greenaway found a perfect vehicle to explore some of his ideas about film’s “lack” through an exploration of viewership. The exhibition focused on the body and included objects and artifacts that were originally designed to be used by the body, such as “bicycle-seats molded for the comfort of the buttocks, spectacle frames molded for the fragility of the nose.” The exhibition also included objects and images that demonstrated the intimate touch of the human body, such as a piece of fourteenth-century pottery that has a thumb-print em-
bedded in it, and paintings by Salvador Dalí with his own thumb-prints (Stairs/Geneva, 11). In the introduction to the catalogue, Greenaway describes the exhibition as being made up of objects that “comment upon the physical human predicament”:

It is an exhibition that addresses the human body, portraying its normal mortal physical condition, its nakedness and its nudity, its various conditions according to youth, maturity, health and aging, its de-sexualised state (if that is possible), the anticipation of its future intimate presence by those objects especially designed for its comfort and safety, and, with mingled sense of humour, surprise and some nostalgia, those intimate mortal traces that consciously and unconsciously, it has left behind. (The Physical Self, 6)

Not only were these “corporeal” objects arranged and displayed throughout the gallery but, at pivotal locations in this arrangement, naked bodies, or live “nudes,” were included, seating, standing, or lying inside glass cases. These live bodies provided a very present and real reference-point and focus for all the objects in the exhibition, which drew on the body as their source of inspiration, fascination, use, and utility. The historical objects that were fashioned by and for the body and exhibited here were given relief by the live bodies that also were on display. This recontextualization made the objects more real, more relevant, while providing the audience with a unique, if perhaps uncomfortable, opportunity—and permission—to look legitimately at, ponder, scrutinize, and think about the body without fear of censure.

These bodies behind glass offered the audience still another dimension to spectatorship by providing the audience members with a way of reevaluating their own “bodi-ness.” By having the opportunity to look at and examine a body that was expressly put there for that purpose, the viewer was forced to relate that body behind the glass to her/his own (clothed) body. In addition, the body of another audience member standing nearby, also viewing the body behind glass, held possibilities for interactions in curiosity, observation, and commentary among audience members. The bodies that Greenaway put on display not only recontextualized the inanimate objects on display in the museum but also (re)contextualized the many bodies of the viewers as they moved around the museum. The bodies behind glass became a pivotal element in an exhibition that transformed the experience and space of the museum and its collection. These displayed bodies activated the historical significance of the collection by providing a bridge between the
objects and the audience, and in so doing further explored the concepts and relationships between physicality and history that so interest Greenaway.

With this first of many exhibitions, Greenaway would begin to formulate and articulate some of the deeply rooted impossibilities of the cinema that for him were problematic. Later exhibitions allowed Greenaway to reference cinema more directly by employing some of the devices particular to film to transform the space and the experience of museum viewership more dramatically:

I was aware that if . . . [an] exhibition was to be a film, notions of sequence that were important—in so far as a journey was being made by a visitor from one section of the exhibition to another—would have to be made slave to a narrative. But only a connecting sense of sequence was necessary here. Why has the cinema associated itself with the business of story-telling? Could it not profitably exist without it? My cinema experiments with numerical systems, alphabetical sequence, color-coding, have all been attempts to dislodge this apparently unquestioned presumption that narrative is necessary and essential for cinema to convey its preoccupations. (Stairs/Geneva, 12–13)

Greenaway likened the trajectory of moving from one artifact to another in an exhibition to the principle of montage; that is, the exhibition space offered many isolated “frames,” “views,” or “images” that were ultimately seen in (various) “sequence(s).” The speed, repetition, and juxtaposition of these “images” were left up to the individual viewer to plot out. The idea that the trajectory through an exhibition amounts to a montage was further articulated in an exhibition Greenaway curated in 1993 in Swansea, Wales, aptly entitled Some Organising Principles. Greenaway hoped the exhibition would work as a “Wunderkammern,” “a room of marvels that collected together in one place, all manner of finds—natural and man-made—and juxtaposed them in such a way as to evoke wonder” (Some Organising Principles, 2). Here, the exhibited objects, or “images”—artifacts borrowed from the museums, a collection of “fake books” from the film Prospero’s Books, and Greenaway’s own paintings—were randomly ordered by a system of illumination that was constantly changing. Different objects, or groups of objects, were thus highlighted and favored over others at different times. This changing lighting suggested an order, sequence, and timeframe to the viewing of seemingly fragmented objects/images. In highlighting and separating out this act of “sequencing images” and making it a more self-conscious activity for the museum viewer, Greenaway questioned not only the subjective nature of “montage” but also problematized the idea of neutrality and
objectivity that is implied both in museum display and in the “objectivity” of the camera. This act of “montaging” objects/images and constructing “sequences” also made the viewer more conscious of the all-too-easy slippage between experiencing an object as physically present in the world and reading it as an object-as-image, further questioning the objectivity of constructions and representations of reality.

In 1992, Peter Greenaway curated a much more ambitious exhibition entitled One Hundred Objects to Represent the World, at three different sites in

Figure 2.1 Stairs/Geneva. Courtesy of Peter Greenaway.
Vienna. In true Greenawayesque encyclopedic fervor, the exhibition proposed 100 objects that would, as the title suggests, represent the world in both the physical and conceptual realms. The exhibition included a variety of inanimate museum pieces and everyday objects such as machinery, teeth, and the Willendorf Venus, for instance, but also presented, and “made physical” such things as the phallus, the kiss, the soul, sleep, a cloud, wind, and God. The scale and conceptual framework of the exhibition was grander, more epic, and more comprehensive than Greenaway’s previous exhibitions and made a much more overt comparison between cinematic and exhibition languages and modes of viewership. One of the ways Greenaway accomplished this was by turning to some of the illusionistic devices of filmmaking in order to display some of the less tangible of the 100 objects. For example, “A Cloud” was “displayed”—staged and given form—by a large-scale light and sound (for the thunder) show and other props that suggested what one might find on a film soundstage. The building of sets, the use of carefully designed and executed cinematographic devices such as elaborate lighting and sound effects, became an integral part of this exhibition, which used a varied series of “display” strategies. The presentations were not homogeneous. The act and experiences of viewership of One Hundred Objects to Represent the World seemed to fall anywhere between a very intimate viewing situation of more traditional museum objects at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, to a larger-than-life theme-park-like experience of “A Cloud,” for example, at Vienna’s Semper Depot. This use of blatant artifice next to the “aura” of traditional museum object viewing unveiled the construction of each mode of viewership. However, this juxtaposition also reclaimed these modes of viewership as valuable, suggesting that the concept of the authenticity of the museum object and the reality of a constructed film set are shifting, blurred, and fluid constructions.

The exhibition in Vienna was attended by over 90,000 viewers in five weeks and produced a profusely illustrated catalogue. The exhibition held for Greenaway perhaps even greater possibilities, since he hoped to “re-create” the exhibition in other cities around the world, each time remaking it within the cultural parameters, practicalities, and ambitions of the host cities. More important, however, with these exhibitions Greenaway identified a new type of audience—or perhaps created one—that was not content with a sedentary and passive viewership but, rather, that was interested in questioning the relationship between objects, images, viewing dynamics, and constructions of reality. This audience was also a sociable one that could be presented with multiple, differing, and heterogeneous perspectives around a particular—and subjective—theme, all
“under the auspices of light and sound dealing with a large slice of the cinema’s vocabulary” (Stairs/Geneva, 28).

THE STAIRS

In 1993, Greenaway undertook a large, and truly epic, public art-project entitled The Stairs, which would eventually consist of ten public installations, each lasting 100 days, to be installed in various cities over a period of many years. This series of installations treats the theme of film and its language, elaborating concepts that Greenaway outlines as fundamental elements of film language. These are: Location, Audience, the Frame, Acting, Properties, Light, Text, Time, Scale, and Illusion. The first of these public art-projects was installed in Geneva, in 1993, and the second took place in Munich, in 1995. The Stairs project represents a unifying work that best responds to Greenaway’s concerns with materiality, multiple viewpoints, and the desire to activate the audience in a much more substantial way.

The specific theme of the Geneva exhibition was “location.” Greenaway chose 100 sites in the city and framed them using a structure that consisted of a staircase leading to a partially enclosed platform area with a perforation through which one could observe a framed view of a location, or

Figure 2.2  Stairs/Geneva. Courtesy of Peter Greenaway.
site, that Greenaway had scouted out. Directly related to this concept of the location was the idea of the frame and the act of framing—a notion Greenaway further explored with the Munich exhibition and one that has appeared repeatedly in Greenaway’s films. *The Draughtsman’s Contract* (1982) and *The Belly of an Architect* (1987) are two examples of films that explore this at length, and props that appeared in the latter inspired a prototype of the Geneva staircases. With *The Stairs/Geneva*, Greenaway attempted to move away from the use and authority of the frame in conventional cinema, which drives the audience toward an imposed and uncritical position of voyeurism. Although the viewer in the Geneva exhibit looks through a type of peephole onto a prescribed scene, s/he is conscious of performing this act of looking within the given structure of *The Stairs* project and within the larger context of the (real) city. In assuming this position consciously, the viewer cannot but engage with a critique of the apparatus of spectatorship. For a future *Stairs* exhibition on “the audience,” Greenaway has proposed to create groups of seated audiences throughout a city, “acting” as spectators of the unstaged everyday life of the city unfolding in front of them, themselves performing “viewership.” *The Stairs/Geneva* transformed the city into a collection of *tableaux-vivants* that gave us something closer to a *cinéma-vivant*, oscillating continually between fiction and fact.

The viewers of *The Stairs/Geneva* moved from one staircase to another with the help of a map pinpointing each numbered location. Of course, they could also stumble upon the staircases while strolling through the city on daily rounds. At night, the sites were artificially lit so as to provide round-the-clock access and viewing possibilities. *The Stairs/Geneva* embodied, in no uncertain terms, the idea of a “living cinema” with each viewer becoming an active participant and an intrinsic part of the exhibit. The map, which surfaces in many of Greenaway films—starting with *A Walk through H* (1978)—becomes the “script” for *The Stairs/Geneva*. This script, however, is more like a list than a narrative and is open-ended and mutable, having no ulterior purpose other than being a (non-compulsory) aid to negotiating viewing possibilities and positions; the rest is left to chance, that is, to what may or may not be occurring at a given site, and to the viewer’s desire to follow the suggested trajectory further. The only suggestion of a prescribed order on the maps were the numbers of the listed sites. These numbers could be linked to the ticking away of frames or to time lapsing. The act of numbering—another signature device figuring in many of Greenaway’s films—suggests not only an order but also a primitive narrative of sorts—all, in a sense, mocking the very conventions of film that Greenaway finds so limiting.
By using the real city of Geneva as a site for a “possible” or “potential” film, Greenaway engages the audience members, encouraging them to “assemble” their own “film” with chosen vantage points selected and “framed” by the filmmaker. The act and process of this assembling stresses the concept of multiplicity for, as a public art-piece, all one hundred sites/frames/staircases are simultaneously full of viewing/experiencing potentialities. In this sense it becomes interactive—the audience becomes an important participant in The Stairs/Geneva by the very fact that the audience is needed to activate the locations chosen by Greenaway. Thus, the experience and the event of filmmaking in all their complexities, as “materialized” by the objects, the bodies, the sets, the script, script revisions, and the rehearsals, are here translated into a form that can be shared by the audience on many levels through its engagement with the 100 sites. Greenaway thus activates “audience-ness” in an unprecedented way and, in so doing, radically alters the nature of film viewership by not only making the audience an active participant in the act of looking but also by transforming that act of looking into a type of performance that becomes fundamental to the experience of The Stairs/Geneva. The process of negotiating a map to get from one site to another is an act that activates the entire city as the stage/set/site. The act of peering through a frame onto a site becomes the crucial element of a mechanism that is activated by the audience/viewer and is at par with what is taking place at the site on the other side of the frame. It transforms both sides of the stairs’ frames, making them physically related and indeed dynamic.

With The Stairs/Geneva, Greenaway also makes a striking commentary on the nature of objectivity and realism. With the 100 framed views, Greenaway sets up a situation for the audience that both acknowledges the contrived and subjective nature of the act of framing and contrasts it with the stream of everyday (“objective”) urban life. As a filmmaker, Greenaway stops at mid-point in the construction of the cinematic fiction and shares the responsibility for this construction with the viewers themselves. Greenaway’s audiences are participatory audiences who, by their own accord, focus their attention on the frame, and consequently on the framed event, and acknowledge Greenaway’s subjectivity as well as their own. In a sense, Greenaway mocks the concept of an oppositional relationship between objectivity and subjectivity and, by giving relief to the paradoxes and conventions of representation, he proposes a more complex and fluid notion of these.

Greenaway has stated that what is unfortunate and limiting about cinema’s ability to stimulate, develop, and deploy the imagination is that, compared to literature or painting, cinema can only offer its audience one phenomena at a time and only in a time frame that is entirely dictated by the
filmmaker (*Stairs/Geneva*, 3). In his opinion, this “singularity” is a severe limitation when compared to the multiple possibilities to stop, ponder, return to, and scrutinize afforded a reader of text or a viewer of a painting. In addition, film can never truly engage with history since its images have no real materiality. This perceived impoverishment of cinema has shaped Greenaway’s way of making and thinking about films; as a result, his cinema is a vast and complex weave of conventions and oppositions. His films oscillate back and forth between a rejection and an embrace of literature and its conventions, even though he believes most cinema is far too dependent on literature. He has tried to expand what he perceives to be severe limitations of cinema by simultaneously embracing and rejecting traditional canons of Western art history and of contemporary art practices that often define themselves in opposition to those very canons. This has inevitably involved a series of paradoxes, ironies, overlappings, overreachings, and contradictions that often bleed from one film into another and from film into other artistic media and practices.

It is in this sense that Peter Greenaway is a hybrid-filmmaker, and it is in this way that he distinguishes himself from most of his contemporaries. His notion of cinema expands the discourse of the medium by going beyond the strict practice of filmmaking. All this involves, among other things, challenging and attempting to redefine larger issues about visuality, materiality, and viewership. Greenaway’s ambitious future project, *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*, is sure to do just that: it is being conceived as a multi-faceted project that will include a two- or four-hour film, a sixteen-part television series, two CD-ROMs, and an Internet site. Traditional cinema has failed Greenaway, and it is this failure that has shaped his unique practice—one that is best seen as a vast continuum across media and disciplines. It is with this understanding that we can best grasp Greenaway’s vision and the preoccupations that drive his oeuvre.
THE NEO-BAROQUE TIME

The term *baroque* has often been applied negatively to a period of crisis that counterbalanced its insecurity with stylistic bombast, excess, and manners of representation conscious of their diverse “interpretational” devices and strategies. The historical baroque indulged in the self-conscious game of changing perspectives—an activity we have learned to consider as typical of postmodernism. A baroque style, and its visual practices, originated from the early mannerist painters who worked “alla maniera di,” that is, “in the manner of” the great artists of the Renaissance—like Raphael and Michelangelo. The various baroque modes that found artistic expression in literature, architecture, and the visual arts in general were forms of mannerism, in other words, constructions that over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries moved away from their initial imitative intent and transcended their “alla maniera di” quality to become something else.

The baroque era produced art that, unlike the relatively static look of the Renaissance, appeared dynamic, colorful, theatrical, artificial, passionate, sensual, opulent, versatile, citational, “interpretational,” and, overall, excessive. In all different fields, use of these notions was self-consciously and freely accentuated to excess in a flourishing of overtly “constructed and staged” aesthetic expressions that powerfully emerged also in religious and political propaganda.

As scholars have noted, baroque modes have manifested themselves over the centuries, whenever a period of crisis would put the act of artistic creation at an impasse. Our century has indeed developed a new taste and understanding for the insecurities of the baroque age and for the many ways in which the baroque styles manifest themselves. During the baroque age, disorder and decline forced a confused, contradictory state of mind. The new
scientific and geographical discoveries were bringing, among many uncertainties, one clear and recurrent message: that the only certainty was that everything was uncertain. The desire to impress, marvel, and shock through massiveness and grandeur appeared as a solution. This happened at other times in history and is also happening today in many artistic expressions we have come to call postmodern. Among many who have come to reconsider the baroque and its transitional traits, Peter Greenaway has been very vocal about his penchant for the baroque and for historical periods of transitions in general:

I enjoy these periods of cultural insecurity—like the period between the post-Michelangelo, post-Raphael, post-daVinci, post-Renaissance and the Baroque, or between Louis XIV and the French Revolution, and perhaps now post-Picasso, post-Stravinsky, post-Corbusier [. . .] For Mannerism, I am sure you could better offer simply “transitional,” moving from one set of values to another, a period of searching and investigation, moving occasionally into dead-ends and U-bends, perhaps involving self-quotation and pastiche, but ultimately looking for a way through. (Woods, 234)

The aesthetic figurae of the baroque use a series of scopic regimes. These observational strategies include the conceit, mannerist representation, repetition, parody, satire, the menippea, intertextuality, mirroring, trompe l’oeil, the labyrinth, carnivalization, morphing of forms, staging, distortion, contradiction, instability, disorder, chaos, detail, and fragment. These scopic strategies propel artistic transformations, metamorphoses, and consequent morphogeneses of any given artform. Their coming together made baroque art a multi-faceted, interdisciplinary medium where self-conscious artifice predominates. This phenomenon resembles the multiple convergence of many aesthetic expressions into what we are now understanding and defining as postmodernism. There are striking similarities between the kind of art and time we have come to term postmodern and the baroque artistic system and its scopic regime. Fundamental figurae of historical baroque are present in the postmodern conceptualization of the world where a neo-baroque mode functions as a new aesthetic category.

The particular tendency of being “neo-baroque” in the present postmodern time refers to a particular way of imagining, describing, and representing the world that returns to many of the observational/interpretational strategies of the baroque. By using these optical codes, the neo-baroque/postmodern manner of representation opens up the limits of narratorial de-
vices. It allows new multiple interrelationships between the art work, the artist, and the reader/viewer/interpreter and their world(s) of representation. The new arrangements of these multiple perspectives are associated with a rhetorical mode of description/observation that recalls the creativity of the historical baroque style(s) and system(s) of conceptualized ideas.

Martin Jay devotes a large segment of his study of Walter Benjamin’s “historical force fields” to the discussion of various scopic regimes in the visual arts. He identifies three models of visual representation that constitute visual models for the modern era. The first is closely linked to the Renaissance notion of perspective in the visual arts and with the Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy. Jay sees the eighteenth-century French architect Étienne-Louis Boullée as representative of the development of this trend. One should remember that in The Belly of an Architect (1987) Greenaway makes Boullée a “secret hero, an architect whose reputation is based on paper buildings” (Woods, 236). The second scopic regime defined by Jay is associated with the Dutch art of describing, and the third kind is identified with the concept of the baroque itself as a means of subverting the rational neoclassicism of the Renaissance by placing trompe l’œil effect in interiors ornamented by opulent facades (Jay, 114–127).

Greenaway manages to include, in various degrees of intensity, these three visual perceptions of the world in his works. His admiration for Dutch painting, for instance, is evident in his films. In his writings, he often mentions his fascination with the Renaissance world-view, but he also remarks that he feels we are in a mannerist period. In fact, in The Belly of an Architect, Kracklite writes to Boullée that he feels like living in a mannerist time. These three scopic regimes are present in the baroque conception of the visual field of Greenaway’s representational world and underline his conception of art-making. In the final analysis, it seems that the inclusive baroque scopic regime, Jay’s third kind, is the one Greenaway mostly explores. Of it, he retains the all-inclusive perceptual vision, an opticality that becomes a form of memory, relying on the old but striving for the new. It constitutes a scopic regime that includes the “narrative” of the texts and the forms of the past in order to elaborate the texts and the forms of the future. It also allows the possibility of containing, in encyclopedic-like manner, a comprehensive view of the world.

Greenaway’s interest in representing filmically relies heavily on the exercise of re-writing images through the teaching of art history, which, as we shall see later, has formed him artistically. His particular interest in retrieving the tradition of art history in the present postmodern time is in line with the position of two French critics. Convinced that “not only are we baroque, but
we still remain baroque,” Guy Hocquenghem and René Schérer claim that postmodernism is nothing else but a manifold aesthetic enterprise that focuses on the re-writing of history—where history is conceived of as art history: “Véritable début d’une pensée esthétique absolue [...] le retour au baroque marque le début dans le moderne d’un post-modernisme qui commence avec la réécriture de l’histoire en tant qu’histoire de l’art” (186). (“True beginning of an absolute aesthetic thought [...] the return to the baroque marks the beginning, within the modern, of a kind of postmodernism that starts with the re-writing of history conceived as art history.”

This kind of cinema re-writes history. It “re-presents” the baroque mirroring strategies of a painting like Velásquez’s self-reflexive Las Meninas (1656, The Maids of Honor, oil on canvas, 10’5” x 9′, Madrid, Prado), where the many levels of mirroring construct a fictitious layering of the Real. Postmodernist cinema has thus learned to play with baroque scopic strategies and forms of mirroring. As discussed by David Pascoe, a reference to Velásquez’s painting appears in the first scene of Drowning by Numbers, a film whose “formal composition is also intended to remind the viewer of another more sophisticated scene” (Pascoe, 149). As explained by Greenaway, the out-of-the-ordinary costume worn by the skipping girl “quotes the Spanish Infanta, the Inquisition, Velásquez” (Greenaway, Fear of Drowning by Numbers, 11). This is one of the many references that manneristically elaborates the “preoccupations” of the original text into something else.

The baroque scopic regime calls for functions of updating. Often, however, these forms self-consciously transform themselves into overcoded interpretations that become overinterpretations, which in turn rely on various mnemonic activities. As argued by Umberto Eco in The Limits of Interpretation and Interpretation and Overinterpretation, overinterpretation occurs when the complex transaction between the “competence” of the interpreter and his/her world’s knowledge goes beyond the kind of competence the test postulates, and the limits of safe legitimate interpretation are trespassed. In postmodern representation, overinterpreting is carried out in a manner that is, as in the baroque style, excessively self-conscious of its own network of strategies. As in the baroque self-conscious game of “carnivalized styles,” the postmodern manner of observation privileges the rhetorical description of morphings, of changes that concern any given “state of things” (Eco, Interpretation and Overinterpretation). In postmodern art forms, the rules of the game are those of the baroque semiotic universe and its dynamic optical changes, and of “nomadic”—the term is borrowed from Deleuze’s A Thousand Plateaus—forms of expression that often reach the status of excess when and where the boundaries of the cited forms of the past are elaborated to carry meaning at different levels.
The excessive baroque signifying system of observation offered a way of seeing and understanding a world whose limits and boundaries had been changed, thanks to the new scientific and geographical discoveries. The optical tools through which things were viewed relied on the recent scientific discoveries but also on the more empirical, and irrational, observational practices of recording and interpreting by remembering—a practice that carried over from the analogical way of thinking of the Renaissance hermetic thought. These forms of memory depended on the analogical reasoning Umberto Eco has defined as “hermetic semiosis” (Eco, The Limits of Interpretation), a dangerous form of interpretation—an overinterpretation. The signifying system of hermetic semiosis, that mainly relies on analogies, constitutes a rather complex combination of rational and irrational thought. It appears to be a form of overinterpretation where we exceed the limits of “safe” interpretation, and our learning something else prevails over our learning something more. Through the excessive forms of the baroque, which signify by inferential mode, we come to learn something else. We perform the dangerous interpretational practice that takes us away from learning something more on what we started with and leads us to other uncharted territories of knowledge and understanding. However, Eco concludes his many theoretical studies on this topic by admitting that, although dangerous, this thought is certainly more interesting and challenging. In his films, Greenaway’s neo-baroque strategies often offer the viewer the possibility of playing this analogical inferential game. At times, even his characters engage in it and often the results are deadly, as it happens, for instance, to Smut in Drowning by Numbers (1988) and to Jerome in The Pillow Book (1996).

Although, in general, the baroque arts show excessive interpretations of the forms of the past, it is also true that baroque modes of “reading-interpreting” have become allegorical functions of “re-reading.” Forms of re-reading have also become, in both literary and filmic texts, an important function in postmodernism. In literature, re-reading occurs, for example, in Italo Calvino’s interpretation of the world through a recognizable “cinematic writerly style” and through the baroque theme of sensuality connected to the cognitive functions of the body and its five senses. Calvino explores this in Under the Jaguar Sun (1986). In the visual arts, Greenaway’s works are highly representative of this sensorial re-reading of the world of knowledge through the body. As also noted by Anthony Purdy and Bridget Elliott, the vehicles that are crucial in this interpretational practice are the language(s) of books and the language(s) of the body. These systems of conceptualized ideas remain constant in most of Greenaway’s films (179–211).
In his article “Baroque and Neo-Baroque in the Age of the Spectacle,” Peter Wollen discusses the presence of the baroque in postmodern visual arts and their manners of representation. Wollen notes that the historical baroque is present today and has close affinities with postmodernism, and goes on to consider these affinities by discussing some of the features of the historical baroque:

the baroque strove for optical effect, whether through virtuoso tricks or perspectives or eye-catching polychrome sculpture or brightly glittering tiles. It was brilliant and dazzling [...] the Baroque preferred coloristic impressions to the delineation of outline, the curved to the straight, the oval to the rectangle, the dynamic to the static, and decentered compositions [...] (“Neo-Baroque” 11)

Like a baroque painting, a baroque poem, or baroque architecture, postmodern cinema places our attention in the dark areas, like the dark areas of baroque paintings; in what is not visible; in what is behind the metaphor; in what lies behind our surprise and astonishment. In other words, it takes our attention away from the story to place it on the ideas that can exist behind the image. The baroque conception of the world that revolves around notions of movement, transformation, morphing of forms, metamorphoses, parody, and self-reference is rather similar to the world of postmodern art forms and, of course, of postmodern cinema, especially a cinema where self-reflexivity and parodied carnivalization play the biggest role. Making cinema in this neo-baroque manner becomes essentially an exercise in changing perspectives, where the voyeuristic act explicitly takes place on both sides of the transparent plane (the lens) that divides what is considered “the real” from what is perceived as “the represented.”

As the baroque mirroring/carnivalizing effects were elements of disturbance that displaced illusions, so postmodern, neo-baroque cinema displaces our illusions. Like baroque art, it creates spaces where multi-layered, *metaleptic* planes of realities force estrangement, decenteredness—spaces where the illusion of consistency are being questioned, disturbed, in other words, carnivalized. By acting on the game of perspective, the neo-baroque behaves like the baroque. Systems of functions are set as pre-existing the film because the scopic regimes that generally regulate the baroque imaging require a “sophisticated” spectatorial presence that parallels the levels of awareness postmodern cinema forces us to adopt. The morphing power of the mind able to create and invent forms through memory has been replaced by the power of television and computers, which have blurred the distinction
between “the original” and “the copy,” “the imitation,” or better, the presence of the original in the copy. Neo-baroque directors such as Greenaway show full awareness of this problem and have, in their films, expressed the fact that the changes, the metamorphoses of our culture, can be brought back to us if we allow freedom of imagination to combine with our memory system and our human experience.

In postmodernism, we see the complexity of the baroque signifying systems of representation taking form in a true self-conscious art of adaptation in various “genres” and “fields,” in a set of representational strategies, of *tropes*, as Deleuze would have it (*The Fold*). Defining the neo-baroque as a trope of postmodernism is in itself an allegorical strategy that plays with history and memory. The neo-baroque observational systems can also take the form of the encyclopedia where documentation and memory of the past co-exist in the effort to keep the state of things updated and potentially “in progress.” As an example of this phenomenon of updating and “in progress” keeping, we may remember that Greenaway presented his then unfinished film *The Pillow Book*, as a “work in progress” at the Venice Film Festival in September 1995, and presented it again in a more complete form at the Cannes Film Festival in April 1996. Moreover, his overt and/or covert references to his own work make Greenaway’s *oeuvre* a true self-reflexive work-in-progress that inferentially signifies at many different levels. And it is on these levels that the viewer gets to understand something else.

Gilles Deleuze is among the many thinkers to re-evaluate the spirit of the baroque in the postmodern time. For Deleuze, the baroque designates a *trope* that originates from the renewal of artistic form and prevails over other stylistic cultural manipulations.13 “The Baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function, to a trait. It endlessly produces folds. It does not invent things: [. . .] the Baroque trait twists and turns its folds, pushing them to infinity, fold over fold, one upon the other. The Baroque fold unfurls all the way to infinity” (*The Fold*, 3). Deleuze’s image of “the fold” is particularly effective in explaining some of the issues that connect the qualities of historical Baroque and postmodernism. As he points out, the concept of the baroque re-appears, transhistorically, whenever loss of center occurs (Deleuze, *The Fold*, 125).

The figura of the fold, explains Deleuze, allows the possibility for changes and metamorphoses: “A fold is always folded within a fold, like a cavern. The unity of matter, the smallest element of the labyrinth, is the fold, not the point which is never a part, but a simple extremity of the line” (*The Fold*, 6). The fold also implies the concept of being heteromorphic, “just like the butterfly is folded into the caterpillar that will soon unfold” (*The Fold*,
9). Deleuze says of baroque painting that it is “so packed with folds that there results a sort of schizophrenic ‘stuffing’” where the movement of multiplicity has no limits and plays with conscious historical references (The Fold, 123). Neo-baroque tropes of representation coagulate or—to employ a term Deleuze used in relationship to the category of time—crystallize in forms that can be defined as “de-figurations,” for they simultaneously and paradoxically express the attempt to get away from history but play with historical references. Our postmodern cinema is as imaginary and “about movement” as the imaginary architecture of eighteenth-century Europe. These “folded” forms of representation—or, better, of “ri-presentation,” as Deleuze would have it—engage in a process of constant morphogeneses, of re-codification that often takes the shape of hyperbolic, labyrinthine involutions and relies on bombast and excess of expression (Deleuze, Différence and Repetition, 129–167).

Greenaway’s neo-baroque, postmodern cinema is packed with endless “folds” whose systems of signification organize self-conscious historical and cultural references. His works develop in this process of constant morphogeneses in a “nomadic” and “encyclopedic” manner, ultimately to fold onto themselves. Heavily based on the neo-baroque trope of postmodernism, his films operate through constructed visual dialogism, a form of “nomadology” whose scopic spectrum includes, in a multi-media manner, the whole history and stories of all arts. The narrative of baroque painting, the dynamism, the “nomadology” of baroque architecture, and the metaphorical, excessive language of baroque art in general constitutes a principle of composition for postmodern art forms that are more than represented. They are “ri-presented.” The postmodern regime promotes a “trans-textual” working canvas of perspectives where the emblem and hyperbole betray the loss of centrality:

> with baroque, durable plasticity is more important than the form. A form can be wiped out or modified and is therefore inadequate and uncertain, so what really counts in baroque’s economy of representation is the strategy, the terms in which it is stated and not what is said or how it is done.”
> (Brea, 125)

For Deleuze, the focus is on what lies behind the form—the form remaining the starting point. I would like to consider the neo-baroque a form of nomadology that propels movement, transformation, metamorphoses, and morphogeneses. Thus conceived, the neo-baroque becomes a form of hermeneutic hermetic semiosis whose scopic regime “includes,” trans-textually, all other forms of art. It tries to look at them by either taking
distance from them or by englobing them in a visual/scopic “cannibalistic” ritual. This occurrence can remind the viewer of a hermetic semiosis of the senses that proceeds by analogical inferences—where we drift, we dangerously digress and end up by learning something else about any given fact—instead of using the logic of unlimited semiosis reasoning, where we achieve added knowledge and learn something more (Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 23–43). Greenaway’s cinema relies on such scopic cannibalistic rituals of representation where the focus is always oriented toward the digressive drift that recalls past forms by reference and moves them toward the new unfolded meanings where the “something else” prevails.

In his films, Greenaway uses optical technology to reach a self-conscious pleasure of interpretation. Optical imaging achieved by employing high-definition graphics, morphing conversional technology, and references to a baroque composite of the image call into question a “new” neo-baroque scopic regime of interpretation. It is this new regime of optical imaging, combined with the complexity of word play and conceit, that creates a neo-baroque mode in Greenaway’s films. Greenaway himself is quite aware of this: “The surface of my films, from *The Draughtsman’s Contract* [1982] onwards, [is] very baroque. They use every device I can think of to indicate the richness and magnificence” (MacFarlane, 41). It is, therefore, rather limiting to define only *Prospero’s Books* (1991) and *The Baby of Mâcon* (1993) as “opere neobarocche” (see DeGaetano, 167), because Greenaway has always extensively used sixteenth-century figurative rhetoric (Cherchi-Usai, 12). He has brought the presence of the baroque scopic regime of postmodernism to the extreme. Riddled with patterns of painterly citational and self-referential quality, Greenaway’s cinema uses many of the scopic strategies we label “baroque.” His cinema is excessive as it evades and trespasses any given notion to create a space where forms of manneristic representations become neo-baroque. It constitutes an outstanding example of what I have called “postmodernist/neo-baroque cinema”—a trend that exhibits an interest for the painterly look of a style, a mode and a manner that present striking similarities and commonalities with the styles and the qualities that derived from Renaissance ideas and developed into the historical Baroque in the visual arts (Degli-Esposti, “Orlando”).

**HYPERTEXTS**

Greenaway’s films are hypertexts that function as multi-voiced layerings of the *metalepses*, that is, the various levels of reality. Conceptualizing the repertoire
of baroque multi-faceted forms and styles, they present systems of (over)interpretation. In combining high-definition technology and metaleptic, multi-layered imaging, they revisit our past and our histories to elaborate a new sense of time. This new elaborated time contains what various scholars like Umberto Eco, Silvio Gaggi, and George P. Landow define as hypertexts, a series of fluid, flexible, and multiple organized systems of data that engineer new notions of individuality and authorship. Suracing from the many windows of the screen—as in many Greenaway’s films—these pieces of information present a great variety of variables that can be bound to an indefinite number of meanings where the combinatorial laws of expression can lead to the formulation of new possible relationships between the quiddity of things and ideas that could, potentially, explain our future.

As hypertexts, Greenaway’s works also reckon a great variety of “background books,” that is, of tools that constitute the place of the past, of history and memory. Reinventing those spaces becomes an exercise of mannerist, baroque quality. The baroque is indeed a hypertextual space where the conscious manipulation and interpretation of the forms of the past branch out and incorporate various texts into other texts. Such a labyrinthine pattern of signification offers a decentered and disoriented communicational network. We find this kind of “hyperspace” in Greenaway’s highly hypertextual works. In his cinema, which has often been referred to as a “cinema of ideas,” the explorative use of several media is at work, from the investigative nature of painting to the newest computer imaging technologies (see Bencivenni and Samueli, 127–142).

One of the strengths of Greenaway’s hypertextual cinema is the fact that the convergence of numerous texts never loses sight of a directional axis that takes the viewer from a filmic stipulated use of time that offers a beginning, a middle, and an end. Greenaway himself reminds us that “a film is an artificial construction decided upon by the film-maker’s use of time” (Drowning by Numbers, 25). That is why the disorienting pattern of the hypertext is systematically regulated in his films by a structure (like the narrative organized by numbers in Drowning by Numbers or the flow of time ordered by the menu listings in The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover) or of specific codes (like the color coding of The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover). The formal and mannered camera strategies of his films set up the textual world in “rhetorical and stylistic overcoding” (Eco, Role, 19 and Theory, 129). The viewer can therefore relate to a structure and, relying on his level of intellectual “competence,” be conscious of the numerous levels at which the film works. According to his competence, he/she can enjoy the understanding of the overcoded sub-texts that feed on inferences, contradictions, and exceeded limits of inter-
pretation, which constitute a cinema of citational digressions, of metamorphoses. The textual strategy of Greenaway’s works also opens up the infinite implications of what Umberto Eco calls “inferential walks,” the ones the director has taken and the ones the viewer will take (Eco, Role, 32).

This investigative way of approaching the making of moving images started with A TV Dante (1984: Canto V; 1989: Cantos I–IV, VI–VIII), when Greenaway began to explore the possibilities of writing with the video language and with the opportunity of layering images in order “to make new uses of narrative that did not seem characteristic of conventional film and TV drama” (Woods, 227). The inclusion of commentary, footnotes, and codicils inside the smaller screens to complement the main flow of Dante’s narrative offers the pursuit of other layers of reality that Greenaway had not accomplished, for instance, with the fictionalized maps of A Walk through H (1978). With A TV Dante and its post–production TV language possibilities, Greenaway can finally concentrate on a way of making images move in an encyclopedic way, where each commentary can either be seen interwoven into the central flow of things or as a “neo–baroque” fragment—a part of an absent whole, a minimalist narrative that can exist by itself.17

Neo-baroque traits, perspectives, and tropes can be found in virtually all of Greenaway’s works. His whole conception of making things move, whether in a shot or in an exhibition, is based on a baroque conception of movement and metamorphoses of forms. I remember the intriguing sense of movement that pervaded his Watching Water exhibition at the Palazzo Fortuny in Venice, June 1993. The real subject matter of the exhibition was the staged and arranged imaging of memory, curtained in baroque manner. Drapes of red curtains hung from the walls of the south façade and blue ones from the main one. Going through the rooms, the viewer was called into the sharing of aesthetic representation and performance and to the most intriguing mnemonic signification of all the objects and things displayed.

A true hypertext, Greenaway’s exhibition tried to enlarge the experience of watching a film. In his organized itinerary of memories from his filmic images, he conceived the conception of film not only as a flat screen but also as a place where the audience can move through and, more important, a place where one can actually feel the physicality of the experience of watching moving images, their morphing and our changing with them. In one of the rooms the text of Drowning by Numbers was hung in about 200 frames on the walls. This some 30 square meters space, which surrounded a small screen that showed the film, constituted the physical area the audience could walk into. To have the audience engaged in constructing or reconstructing a film has always been one of Greenaway’s main concerns.
The whole exhibition was inspired by the mannerist artists Bronzino, Pontormo, and Parmigianino and by the baroque concept of the world of the seventeenth century—which he defines as his favorite. The new physical approach to the filmic scopic regime he tried to stage with *Watching Water* would ideally take Greenaway to a post-cubist cinema that he defines as “my ambition” (Caruso, 5). As he feels that the old way of distributing cinema is too limited, his future plans include a multi-media experience: a film about his celluloid alter ego, Tulse Luper, invented some twenty years ago, to be arranged as a television series, a 35-millimeter film, a CD-ROM, and to be also put on the Internet.18

FROM PRINTMAKING TO FILMMAKING

Greenaway’s rhetorical use of the camera as mnemonic device to rewrite history as art history stems from his interest in the cinema, which developed when he was an art student. His cinema appears to be adaptations of what he remembered from the formal arrangements the paintings he studied had to offer him:

> I began my film-making when I was an art-student studying to be a mural painter and had ambitions to make every film-image as self-sufficient as a painting. As with painting, so with the cinema; I wanted to make films that were not illustrations of already existing text, or vehicles for actors, or slaves to a plot, or an excuse to provide material for any emotional catharsis—mine or anybody else’s; cinema is not therapy, both life and cinema deserve better than that. My ambitions were to see if I could make films that acknowledged cinema’s artifice and illusions, and demonstrate that—however fascinating—that was what they were—artifices and illusions. I wanted to make a cinema of ideas, not plots, and to try to use the same aesthetics as painting which has always paid great attention to formal devices of structure, composition and framing, and most importantly, insisted on attention on metaphor [. . .] Since film is not painting [. . .] I wanted to explore their connections and their differences—stretching the formal interests to questions of editing, pacing, studying the formal properties of time intervals, repetitions, variations on a theme, and so on. (*Early Films*, 2)

In a 1988 interview, Greenaway states that he considers painting to be the supreme art, more interesting than the cinema (Bogani, 9). Elsewhere, he
explains that, rather than a filmmaker, he felt more like a writer or a painter who travels within the cinema (Cixous, 122). The abundance of references to paintings we find in his films indeed reveals Greenaway's fascination with a pictorial look that appears to be a form of memory, a form of interpretation, which he often elaborates in conscious overinterpretations. The employment of pictorial imaging and references in his films come across as examples of metamorphosing imaging through mnemonic adaptation of old forms that “fold,” in neo-baroque manner, into new expressions. Greenaway orchestrates these conscious “carnivalized,” subversive arrangements of several layers of reality by widely drawing from art, especially manneristic and baroque art. We can see Turner, Constable, Tiepolo, Veronese, George de La Tour, and Caravaggio in The Draughtsman’s Contract; Jan Vermeer of Delft in A Zed and Two Noughts (1986); Piero della Francesca and Velázquez in The Belly of an Architect; Rubens, Velázquez, Mantegna, and Vermeer in Drowning by Numbers; Frans Hals in The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover; de La Tour, Antonello Da Messina, Bronzino, Veronese, Titian, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Velázquez, Piranesi, and Breughel in Prospero’s Books; and Bellini, Carpaccio, and Caravaggio in The Baby of Mâcon (1992).

As a former printmaker, Greenaway organizes and structures the diverse orders of the postmodern world, both inside and outside the limits of the frame. In Prospero’s Books, the frame of the image and the frame of the page are shown to contain multiple worlds that recall extra-frame sources. The limits of the visible have to be trespassed, exceeded in multiple ways exemplified by the metalepses, the levels of “reality” at work. This can be seen in the various visual stratifications of the many smaller frames that inhabit the larger frame or in the literary and/or painterly references, as in the sequence from Prospero’s Books where in the background we see a blue-dressed Prospero writing while a red-dressed Prospero walks across a library swept by Botticelli-like blowing winds. These interframing techniques explore a viewing power of optical neo-baroque quality. The screens within screens are digressing devices that work to arrange the organization of a hypertext, as in the interframing narrative systems of Death in the Seine (1989), A TV Dante, Prospero’s Books, M is for Man, Music, Mozart (1991), and The Pillow Book. In this last film, another catalogue movie, the overlaying technique is developed a step further as it allows a simultaneous imaging of past, present, and future. Multiple screens break down the chronology of conventional narrative to elicit a narrative semiotic system with stories within stories that never really become a plot. Rather, they offer that labyrinthine “something else” that takes the knowledge of the viewer to different levels of understanding while the
strong structures—like those of the alphabet or of numbers—keep the images anchored to the imaginative space of metaphor and literalism.

Interested in creating a fabric of interlacing images that forcefully summon the attention of the viewer, Greenaway often laments the loss of visual language and the fact that only very few filmmakers, like Fellini and Tarkovski, fully utilized the power of the image (Cixous, 123). The cataloguing “intention” of Greenaway’s visual language discloses a desire to create an order for whatever seems to be in need of a structure. I am referring to the concept of intentio as explained by Eco in “Intentio Lectoris: The State of the Art,” in The Limits of Interpretation (44–63), where the various intentions—of the text, of the author, and of the reader—are singled out and taken into consideration as separate “competences.” Greenaway explains that cinema “is no more than a painter’s brush. It is just a tool in which to organize things” (MacFarlane, 69). A great admirer of Alain Resnais, Greenaway arranged the structure of his first feature film, The Draughtsman’s Contract, on the mystery contained by twelve drawings that reveal twelve optical interpretations of a garden. Hortus conclusus, the garden stands as the stretching of the interior of the baroque castle into the neo-baroque treatment of the exterior. If seen by a painterly eye, the garden is the “ekphrastic evaluation” of the interior. The optically structured imaging of the film constitutes the structure of the film itself. Greenaway orchestrates and fills the “space”
of the image with possible meanings. He takes this from baroque aesthetic in the arts and combines it with the lesson learned from Alain Resnais’s cinema and his use of the traveling camera. Like Resnais, Greenaway, who worked in most of his films with Resnais’s director of photography, Sasha Vierny, lets “filmic movement” reveal space while accumulating layers of meaning over layers of meaning, and layers of images over layers of images.

Greenaway’s use of the optical tool of the camera and, more recently, of the latest computer technology combine to become world-creating devices that force the spectator to read and interpret the “aboutness” of the filmic text. Camera movements are very few, and one notices them because they stand in contrast with the abundance of minutiae and “folds” that create the narrative, the diegesis of each scene or tableau. One needs time to understand each of them. The tracking shot signifies for Greenaway a beginning, as in the opening scenes of Prospero’s Books, or a movement of transition in the narrative, as in The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover. The camera look is slow. Reflecting the static quality of landscape paintings, it encases the enormous amount of details in the mise-en-scène. Contrary to “classical” norms of editing, the tracking shot in Greenaway’s films does not signify a continuation in the plot but rather a beginning or a change. At the time of the release of The Draughtsman’s Contract he stated: “il cinema come l’arte del suo assieme non può essere linearmente esplicito. Ognuno è autorizzato a fantasticarci sopra, trovare il significato plausibile” (“cinema, like art in general, cannot be linearly explicit. Everyone is entitled to fantasize on it, to find a plausible meaning”) (Zocaro, 434).

Greenaway’s cinema favors slow camera movements over fast editing to signify a new order of the world. The carefully organized gaze of the camera determines the space and the time of everything presented in the film. It enjoys the clever and manneristic staging of forms that recall those of the past, and works to transport the act of signification into new fields of intellectual competence. It is this neo-baroque style that mostly prevails in his works—our eye fooled into seeing either “the Other” or “an other,” or else whatever we might individually interpret. Greenaway is fully aware of that, and his works are replete with such bewildering references. With his films after The Falls (1980) and with The Draughtsman’s Contract, Greenaway openly refers to the intent to explore “an unapologetically baroque view of the world”:

After The Falls cultural baggage has proliferated. Conspiracy theory, de-romanticised sex, equal participation of the female, the trauma of death, and an unapologetically baroque view of the world in all its richness and
complexity have now become some of the constant characteristics. [. . .]
What is also constant—then and now—is the irony—irony as toler-
ance, as non-dogma, that “this is only cinema, not life,” that there are no
longer any certainties—if indeed there ever were—and surely no single
meanings—except to the very simple-minded who endearingly want
things kept straightforward and clear-cut. If a numerical, alphabetical or
colour-coding system is employed, it is done so deliberately as a device,
a construct, to counteract, dilute, augment, or complement the all-
pervasive obsessive cinema interest in plot, in narrative, in the “I’m now
going to tell you a story” school of film-making, which nine times out
of ten begins life as literature, an origin with very different concerns, am-
tivities and characteristics from those of the cinema. (Early Films, 3)

Neo-baroque cinema displaces perspectives in order to expropriate the
Real of its quality of matter-of-factness and favor the concept of dynamic
fluidity of forms, of morphogeneses. In this displacing of perspectives, color-
coding functions as a cataloguing device and as optical strategy to render the
flavor and temperament of each historical period and its mood or mode. By
mapping a series of chromatic changes that help the chronological code-
switch, color-coding becomes an organizing principle, and color association
expresses identification and coding of the world—as mentioned earlier, a
means by which the multidirectional nature of the hypertext can maintain a
sense of structure. Colors constitute a chromatic pansemiotic system. Green-
away relies on colors, costume, and design to structure a narrative through a
series of opulent historic tableaux that specifically endow the form of the
film with chromatic codifications that change with the shifts of time(s) and
space(s). Colors also indicate the parallel universes of the filmic space, as in
the obvious case of The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover. Greenaway
uses the power and symbolism of colors to exceed the structure and instate
a narrative within the narrative similar to what Fellini achieved in Satyricon

When discussing his notion of order, Greenaway explains: “My fram-
ing is deliberately related to the Renaissance sense of a framed space, an or-
organized space, a space which is [. . .] selected in order to make use of com-
position” (McFarlane, 41). The Renaissance credo that used paintings as
means of achieving an objective knowledge of nature through the repro-
duction of the real relationships among things appears as a constant influence
on his films, as an effort to document and to show how quotations from the
past influence the present. However, the organized space of the Renaissance
in itself is not enough for Greenaway, who has to fill it with corporeality and
with encyclopedic descriptive minutiae. In his films the two scopic regimes that Jay had postulated combine into the third, the baroque one, where spatial configuration records the movement, the morphing of forms that inhabit each tableau. The baroque pictorialism of these films exemplifies systems of codification, catalogues, and taxonomies—an encyclopedization of the world. As his own exegete, Greenaway’s cinema points to itself. The self-referential quality touches everything he does as a director or a curator.

To avoid segmentation in this kind of citational, cerebral, and theatricalized cinema, his extended tracking shots convey a sense of continuity whenever taxonomy and encyclopedization cease for a while to provide the main “narrative framework.” It is, however, a world of artifice where the ability to balance a carefully worked out structure of spaces is combined with changing forms that obey the law of improvisational openness to the unexpected and the unexplainable. We are reminded of the “artificiality,” of “the staged” by the presence of theater curtains and the breaking of the fourth wall—emphasized with various degrees of overtness, for example, in The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover; Prospero’s Books; and The Baby of Mâcon. The combination of baroque themes and postmodern technology reaches a high level of effectiveness in Prospero’s Books. In The Baby of Mâcon, this complex combination appears as an exercise in excessive replication. Perhaps this is the message. Greenaway elaborates on this concept and reproduces the memory of a memory. The Baby of Mâcon is the representation of a medieval play in 1659 seen through the camera lens in 1992; it is a transhistorical trompe l’oeil that reflects on itself from diverse perspectives—theater within the theater within the cinema, and cinema within a cinema of filmic encyclopedic referential quality.

THE FILMIC ENCYCLOPEDIA AS MNEMONIC CATALOGUE

The countless references to art and literature in Greenaway’s films have proved him to be an expert film-encyclopedist. His way of using the medium has opened a new path into the conception of filmmaking. The concept of filmic-encyclopedia is also used to display the content of the volumes of Prospero’s Books. The film becomes, under his supervision, a space where numerous layers of past knowledge co-exist. A TV Dante offers a layered, neo-baroque re-reading of Dante’s Inferno. The literary world of the past is effectively retrieved into the present by a metamorphosing way of imaging that relies on the technology of computer graphics to render layers of images from both past and future that mutually exchange existence on the screen.
Credited as a collaborator with Tom Phillips in the direction of *A TV Dante*, Greenaway’s influence is fully visible. From its very first images, this visual adaptation of *The Divine Comedy* shares unquestionable similarities with the opening sequences of *Prospero’s Books*: Greenaway’s presence is felt in the layered imaging and the recurrent woman’s laughter we hear in the background. Sir John Gielgud’s words open Dante’s journey through the inferno. He is Virgil, Dante’s mentor and guide. His voice and close-up face create a transfilmic bridge to Greenaway’s next film, *Prospero’s Books*. Indeed, Gielgud seems to be rehearsing to be a better guide for the next filmic imaging. The immediate appearance of digressive frames within frames—where various experts speak from their window-insets—create the typical Greenaway mise-en-abyme/encyclopedic structure he so lusciously carries to full fruition in *Prospero’s Books*.

Like *A TV Dante*, *Prospero’s Books* violates the dominant experience of movie watching, presenting itself as an erudite filmic hypertext that exceeds the limits of mainstream conventions and engages in the dispensation of an aesthetic conception of the neo-baroque and its encyclopedic quality in the cinema. Using a particular kind of imaging to render the diverse coexistence of many encyclopedic levels of reality, the film self-reflexively reprises motifs from Greenaway’s earlier films in an all-pervasive postmodern manner that expands, re-invents, parodizes the very concept of the art of filmmaking in order to make it encyclopedic, continuously testing out intertextual competence and the knowledge one might have acquired from “background texts.” One example of this can be seen in the long tracking shot that follows Prospero as he walks alongside a myriad of mythological figures. One of these figures is the skipping girl, whose outfit is not the Velázquez-like costume she wore in *Drowning by Numbers*, but whose voice is unmistakably the same, still counting the names of the stars (many of which recall, intertextually, characters from other Greenaway works). Greenaway applies the concept of the encyclopedia as a container of memory. While memory stores iconic thought, the encyclopedia works as a documentaristic phenomenon of crystallization of iconic thought that partitions, organizes, classifies, and explains. The encyclopedia can also be seen as a memory system where the recollected can always be manipulated, morphed, and updated.

Referring indirectly to one another, Greenaway’s films are encyclopedic and are left open to the process of updating proper of the encyclopedia. Greenaway admits: “Je déteste terminer, abandonner un film. Mes films ont un côté encyclopédique, et chacun sait qu’une encyclopédie doit constamment être remise à jour” (I hate to finish, abandon a film. My films are en-
cyclopedic and we all know that an encyclopedia must constantly be up-dated) (Pilard, 27). The concept of encyclopedia—the microcosm for the macrocosm, the place where the world is unfolded and represented in one place—fascinates Greenaway. Defining films as works of art and as “encyclopedic by nature,” he wants “to make films that rationally represent all the world in one place. That mock human effort [. . .]. My movies are sections of this world encyclopedia. What I am manipulating is our cultural illusions” (Pally, 6).

The idea of a filmic encyclopedia is excessive and endless, as it tries to accomplish a task that goes beyond the feasible. This idea considers every entry, every name as part of a wider world of knowledge. The Finnegan’s Wake-like project Greenaway attempts in his idea of cinema as artifice is, by its very nature, manneristically excessive. It tries to convey what civilization is about in an idea, an image, a cliché. The filmic encyclopedia, as the literary one, has become the epitome of the postmodern conception of culture as playful appropriation, as “literary or cinematic theft.” Greenaway plays along with the postmodern aesthetic of theft, that kind of “archaeology” that “steals” the old and catalogues it through diverse art forms. The fabrication of this museum, which is the postmodern art form, aims at one precise goal: the creation of illusion in the audience. Greenaway states that: “Tous les cinéastes sont des faussaires car, ils préfabriquent des séries d’images pour créer un sentiment d’illusion dans le public” (“All film directors are forgers because they fabricate series of images to create a feeling of illusion in the audience”) (Ciment, 34).

Presenting the utopia of a combinatory universe, Greenaway creates a new filmic encyclopedic structure that speaks of itself and of the world, in a manneristic/neo-baroque/postmodern self-reflexive way. The encyclopedic quality of his films leaves them open to the process of updating proper of the encyclopedia. His films appear to be obeying the law of an irrational chain of conjectures where the view of a catalogued world is presented as the only possible way to exceed excess. In a 1987 interview with Positif, Greenaway admits loving catalogues and lists (Ciment, 32). For him, art is “trying to find some order in chaos” (Pally, 6). As an art form, his cinema attempts to organize the excessive status of chaos. Numbers constitute another kind of catalogue, an alternative to narration. Mathematical structures help Greenaway organize what he perceives as unlimited narrative freedom (Cixous, 125).

Greenaway loves to systematize things, people, and places in a fashion reminiscent of the process typical of the ancient art of memory. This interest in systematization can be detected in the organization of the landscape and the structure of paintings through the sense of sight in The
Draughtman’s Contract; of animals and plants, and the structure of the alphabet in *A Zed and Two Noughts*; of places and the structure of architecture in *The Belly of an Architect*; in the numerical structure of *Drowning by Numbers*; in the food menus and the color system of *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*; in the list of books and the structured knowledge of the universe they represent in *Prospero’s Books*; in the multi-media trompe l’œil perspectives in *The Baby of Mâcon*; and in the enumeration of things derived by the pleasures of books and of the flesh in *The Pillow Book*. All these films try to give a structure to history and culture in the search for knowledge. Greenaway admits: “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 movies” (Pally, 10).

**NEO-BAROQUE, MINIMALIST DOCUMENTARIES**

Greenaway’s representation of space is always filled with an excessive assemblage of details (where the whole is taken into account) and fragments from other absent sources. Space decomposes the gaze of the viewer who is forced to take in the spectacle-within-the-spectacle as the screen is filed with multiple superimpositions and, therefore, multiple layers of reality. The abundance of details, of references, of visual digressions, and of the play of correspondences determines the structure of a cultural space that works *en abyme*. It forces the gaze to exceed the limits of the form of things and read beyond the limits of the visible space. It becomes a documentary form recording the making of itself.

Evolving around the interplay of reality and illusion, Greenaway’s feature films present fictional stories told with documentaristic traits. He admits: “à cause de ma formation, mes films de fiction contiennent des éléments documentaires” (“Because of my training, my fictional films contain documentary elements”) (Ciment, 32). They are documentaries that pay a lot of attention to details. The various arrangements and compositions are seen through a baroque observational code that paradoxically combines reality and illusion. Aware of this, Greenaway declares loving the play between reality and illusion, between documentary and fiction (Ciment, 34). Filled with an abundance of inferential clues charged with multiple meanings, each image is an example of this special form of minimalism and emphasis on detail and/versus fragment, typical of many baroque artistic expressions. His particular neo-baroque style aims at the attainment of a shock, of a sense of
marvel, of surprise, at a time when it is very difficult to be surprised. Like the historical baroque in the visual arts, the postmodern, neo-baroque cinema tries to shock and, of course, to fool our eye by playing on what is and what seems to be in a labyrinth of interrelating self-conscious citations. This conscious redundancy of citations can be recognized in virtually every scene of any Greenaway film. Ideally, the spectator surrenders to the power of the neo-baroque image. In it, “On s’abandonne complètement au film, on suspend son jugement, on est soumis au jeu rituel très élaboré de gros plans, de plans d’ensemble, etc.” (“One surrenders completely to the film, one suspends judgement, one is subjected to a very elaborate ritual game of close-ups and long shots, etc.”) (Cixous, 125).

The neo-baroque, minimalist, documentaristic touch exceeds the canon of the documentary, as Greenaway gives the genre a new meaning. The documentaristic attempt to organize the minute references that populate his films has great affinities with some of Caravaggio’s naturalism and studies of still-life. For Caravaggio, still-life painting represented the effort to mirror nature in detail. From the locution natura morta, still-life painting presents freeze-like compositions through which the artist depicts with great truth and studied formality, moments of arrested reality. As in baroque still-life painting—which appears as a choreographic freeze-frame piece of reality, a segment, possibly a fiction stemming out of a greater picture—Greenaway’s cinema praises movement while remaining intrigued by the potential power of arrested moments of reality arising from the staticity of images. Greenaway claims that his original conception of the cinema has been extremely static (Cixous, 127). Indeed, his filmic representations have the static pictorial quality of baroque paintings that rely on the movement that their narratorial composition and their use of light bestow. While at times using staticity of forms, Greenaway purposely creates movement, as in baroque painting, through the presence or the absence of light.

Greenaway’s abundant use of quotations, citations, and references to the arts of Western civilization leads the viewer to understand that he/she is watching a constructed artifice, a play on culture, a form of art in itself, a “theatricalized document” on the postmodern conceptualization of the filmic art-form. His referential intents are often singled out by the use of curtains. We might remember that Greenaway likes to use curtains for buildings as well, as he did for the Palazzo Fortuny in Venice. The curtain points to the element of artificiality, of theatricality indicating the function of representational space. One might remember that The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover opens and closes with curtains so as to frame and organize self-conscious references in a fictional territory. Curtains also appear in Prospero’s
Books. Coming out of the curtain-frame, Prospero’s words tells us that “We are such stuff as dreams are made on.” In The Baby of Mâcon, charts alerting the spectator that Acts One, Two, and Three are being represented also constitute a curtain-effect: they promote the framed/curtained story with a commentary, an inventory, a documentation of the fiction by staging the juxtaposition of reality and illusion through the filter of memory. The neo-baroque scopic regime constitutes a conscious paradoxical documentaristic attempt to deal with memory presented as locus memoriae, the place where remembering is a way of documenting and of inventing. The neo-baroque style appears to be the “theatrical documentaristic mode” that records the metamorphoses and the morphogeneses of our time.

MODELS OF METAMORPHOSES

The “vision” of the grandiose, the redundant, the trompe l’œil, and the excessive work together to produce an effect of estrangement and separation from previous aesthetic forms. The bewilderment created by the morphing of forms paradoxically places us at a distance and draws our interest by surprising and shocking us. Some of the puzzling, “fantastic” frames in Greenaway’s films are baroquely fictitious and break the demands of historical realism by bringing to the fore some characteristics of the ancient menippea tradition of Petronius’s Satyricon or Apuleio’s Metamorphoses. This genre of aesthetic representation suspends the demands for mimetic historical realism and advocates a satirical, carnivalesque, “fantastic” movement of metamorphoses that leads in and out of different “spaces” or “worlds” where extraordinary situations can occur. Greenaway’s stories seem to be a descendant of this ancient art form. What appears to link the baroque to the menippea mode is their mutual hostility toward fixity of forms and their penchant for movement/morphing of forms, for carnivalization and for the violation of social-normative “property.” Bakhtin sees the menippea closely related to the notion of the carnival, “the space” where the rules of life undergo a series of metamorphoses (Dostoevsky’s Poetics).

The morphing pattern is enhanced in Prospero’s Books by HDTV conversional technology but returns to more “traditional” schemes in The Baby of Mâcon. Once again, Greenaway proposes a story introduced by a title that functions as a pseudo-narrative device. Most of his film titles, in fact, appear to single out in self-conscious and perhaps parodic manner an intentio of their own. As argued by Eco, a title is always a “virtual text” and, as a consequence, another level of reality (Role, 23). In The Baby of Mâcon, Greenaway uses a
story set in the Middle Ages, told to a fictitious seventeenth-century audience constituting another level of “reality,” in order to suggest a discourse on power today. The Vittore Carpaccio-, Giovanni Bellini-, Artemisia Gentileschi-, Caravaggio-like atmosphere rendered by the mise-en-scène is a pretext to indulge in a bitter satire of the present. Greenaway does this in a dark, baroque manner where the redundant, the macabre, and the morbid are excessively unfolded on the screen. I cannot but agree with Geoffrey Macnab when he refers to the two acts of brutality at the end of The Baby of Mâcon as marking a repulsive finale to the film, which unevenly excels in formalism but leaves a perplexing feeling of exhaustion (41). Received rather frostily at Cannes in 1993, this film appears as an exercise in redundancy, possibly a form of carnivalization, where the constructed, staged world gets tragically mistaken for the real. The result is an entropy of metalepses.

Greenaway’s interest in the subject-matter of The Baby of Mâcon started while he was organizing an exhibition in Rotterdam on the topic of the physical self, centering on images of naked bodies. It seems that the image that most caught Greenaway’s interest was the poster by Oliviero Toscani representing a newly born baby still bloody and attached to the mother. For Greenaway, that photo was an incentive to look at childbirth in Renaissance painting in a different way. Moreover, the scandal propelled by Toscani’s picture was responsible for Greenaway’s attempt to digress on the theme of today’s abuse and excessive manipulation of children. Greenaway uses the historical period that stands for the epitome of excess, the period that more than any other presents epistemological and ontological similarities with our own postmodern time. By staging his story as a self-reflexive theatrical representation of a medieval morality play (c. 1459) performed in 1657, he develops a fresco of power-games between State and Church, ingenuity and greed. He carries on, in the cinema, Eco’s trans-historical discourse that sees close references between the postmodern time and periods of supposed crisis like the Middle Ages and the baroque era.

Merging into one time-frame, “reality” and drama distinctions are blurred, thus deliberately calling into question our position or intentio as spectators. Greenaway’s “engineered” replicas of history induce the slippage of the gaze and of syntagmatic conceptualization. He does not approach costume drama in the genre of realism. He renders history as imagination, as invented memory where the aesthetics of quotation, of pastiche, have their logic—their parataxis (i.e., the regulated aesthetics of lists) where every detail obeys a code of metaphoric argumentation. In The Pillow Book, models of metamorphoses and the folds of neo-baroque aesthetics are interwoven in a more sophisticated way. The film successfully acknowledges its own
artificiality and its illusory manipulation of words and images that morphe
and transform themselves in a territory without a center. Here, the manu-
facturing of images explores calligraphy as an ideal image, a lexicography of
quotation, an encyclopedia in constant flux and constant need to be updated:

The narrative concerns an emancipated woman with a love of literature
who likes her lovers to write on her body. The text on the body is not
permanent. There are no notions of branding and tattooing. The callig-
raphy is applied by a delicate ink brush, with the writing washed away by
the rain, by bathing, by swimming in the sea. The page is constantly
changeable, relating to the notion of writing on water, and on perishable
paper, that makes an association with the ephemerality of the body, the
ephemerality of the flesh—connections between the mortality of paper
and flesh and writing. (Woods, 268)

The choice of calligraphy and its oriental tradition as the ideal com-
po site of the image appears in harmony with Greenaway's other films and
his art works in general. This system consolidates his neo-baroque/
postmodern conception of the art of filmmaking. The signifying system of
calligraphy, which identifies image with word and word with image, is
virtually centerless; it offers multidirectional perspectives and shares the qual-
ity of multiplicity and centerlessness with the opulent optical and text-
generated schemata of the oriental tradition in painting, where texts can be
“folded” or rolled. As we have argued, these characteristics are also traits of
the baroque scopic regime of representation and its “folding” composition
of the world and of artistic forms. As Greenaway equates texts and bodies,
we see that a body can actually be folded and deprived of any notion of cen-
trality. At the end of the film, the calligraphy-written body is turned into a
folded, decentered matter that will metamorphose together with the roots of
a plant into other forms. Decentering texts and bodies to recompose a form
of memory of the past is what happens at the end of The Pillow Book when
the main female character has gained enough experience to become a lexi-
cographer of her own pillow book, her own series of lists. It is no coinci-
dence that, at this point in the film, smaller screens containing scenes from
the film start to assemble on the larger frame—fragments of a whole that, as
a list of images, does not have a center.

As art forms, Greenaway’s films require an elliptical and excessive use
of the gaze to match the excessive use of minutiae and endless series of spec-
cular references. The gaze must go beyond the seen and look for the whole
behind the fragments in order to understand the playful game of neo-
baroque/postmodern forms of art. The representational forms of our neo-
baroque/postmodern encyclopedic time try to make sense of the past out of
the number of fragments we retain. It is an investigative job that requires or-
ganized systems of codification and a good amount of self-irony, as Green-
away appears to have: “What is all this about arcane cultural information that
I’m trying to construct into a film? What am I doing looking over my shoul-
der at past ages and dragging all this past culture into some organization,
some art, for the present day—this postmodern concern with trying to make
history and culture relevant to now?” (Pally, 9). Greenaway’s art works pres-
ent highly sophisticated manners to express arcane cultural information.
Imaging the return of that ancient erudition in the concerns of our present
is what they are all about. They are “artifacts” that speak of the worlds of
other periods and of our own. They try to question the filmic perspectives
that derive from the scopic regimes singled out by Jay, especially the third
one, the baroque one, which is historically comprehensive of the other two.
They order, systematize, schematize, organize, and direct the images that be-
long to a self-reflexive filmic encyclopedia, one that remains updatable and
refers, in neo-baroque manner, to itself.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Heinrich Wölfflin, Renaissance and Baroque; Arnold Hauser,
Mannerism. The Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art; Walter Benjamin,
The Origin of German Tragic Drama; Eugenio D’Ors, Lo Barroco; Arnold Hauser, Man-
nerism. The Crisis of the Renaissance and the Origin of Modern Art; Gillo Dorfles, Il barocco
nell’architettura moderna and Architetture ambigue. Dal neobarocco al postmoderno; Gilles
Deleuze, The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque; and Peter Wollen, “Baroque and Neo-
Baroque in the Age of the Spectacle.” For a general overview of the concept of the
neo-baroque, see Omar Calabrese, Neo-Baroque. A Sign of the Times. For a theoretical
discussion of the return of the baroque style in the twentieth century, see Severo Sar-
duy, “El barroco y el neo-barroco,” in América Latina en su literatura, 167–184; and Sar-
duy’s Barocco.

2. In a chapter of Enigmas, “Baroque and Neo-Baroque Enigmas,” Mario Perniola
traces a panoramic view of the recurrence of the definition of “neo-baroque,” find-
ing connections among cultures from the time of the Egyptians to the present. To lo-
cate the baroque/neo-baroque in the theater, see William Mould, “Parisian Theater,
Fall 1984: Toward a New Baroque,” 49–58.

3. The label “neo-baroque” was used in relation to the paintings of Antoine-Jean
Gros (1771–1835), who carried over into the early Romantic period baroque uses of
color, drama, and rhetorical grandeur. The Neo-Baroque Romantic trend was continued by Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863). For the use of the term *neo-baroque* at the beginning of the nineteenth century, also see Frederick Antal, “Reflections on Classicism and Romanticism,” in W. Eugene Kleinbauer, *Modern Perspectives in Western Art History*, 339–348.

4. I am borrowing the definition of “scopic regime” used by Christian Metz to indicate the act of observation and, consequently, of investigation and interpretation—as suggested by its Greek original meaning, *skopēin*. See Metz in *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Trans. Celia Britton et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 61.

5. For further analysis of the concept of the menippean satire, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 101–108. In his study *Neo-Baroque. A Sign of the Times*, Omar Calabrese discusses the differences between detail and fragment—the former being a part of a whole that is still present, the latter remaining the part of a whole that is absent.

6. I discuss some of the issues that clarify a theory of the neo-baroque in post-modernism in these three articles: “The Neo-Baroque Scopic Regime of Peter Greenaway’s Encyclopedic Cinema,” 34–45; “Federico Fellini’s *Intervista* or the Neo-Baroque Creativity of the Analysand on Screen,” 157–172; and “Sally Potter’s *Orlando* and the Neo-Baroque Scopic Regime,” 75–93.


8. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are mine.

9. In *Las Meninas*, the mirror in the center background reflects the King and Queen of Spain, who are not visible anywhere else within the painting. Next to his easel, Velázquez himself is the painter of the picture’s narrative we are supposed to watch. “This subject” being portrayed (i.e., the King and Queen) stands outside the frame and uncannily holds a place that should be “our place.” An obvious example of the recurrence of neo-baroque properties can be seen in Sally Potter’s *Orlando*, where the multiple levels of metamorphoses, mirroring, and genderbending representations are grouped (Degli-Esposti, “*Orlando*”).

10. Greenaway draws, once again, from Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* in designing the costume for the infant Queen Isabella of Spain for his opera *Christopher Columbus*, which opened at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, in Berlin, on October 21, 1998. This multi-media production, co-directed with Saskia Boddeke, is based on Darius Milhaud’s opera *Christopher Columbus*, performed at the Staatsoper opera house in Berlin, in 1930. The libretto for the original opera was based on Paul Claudel’s play *The Book of Christopher Columbus*. Greenaway’s and Boddeke’s opera is a critical revisiting of the discovery of the New World and its legacy, through an examination of Columbus’s life. Like his previous operas, this one makes extensive use of cinematic
projections to portray the relationship between text and image and to display text as image. The opera draws on symbolism and allegory, elaborating on the references in the name “Christopher Columbus” to Columbus’s self-defined mission as Christ-bearer and to the Dove of the Holy Spirit (colomba). For further comments on this opera, see the August 9 interview at the back of this volume [Editor’s note].

11. About the “safety” of unlimited semiosis and the “danger” of hermetic semiosis, see Umberto Eco, “Unlimited Semiosis and Drift: Pragmaticism vs. “Pragmatism,” in The Limits of Interpretation, 23–43, and “Interpretation and History” and “Overinterpreting Texts,” in Interpretation and Overinterpretation, 23–44; 45–66.

12. See Guy Hocquenghem and René Schérer, “Pourquoi nous sommes allégoriques,” in L’âme atomique, 153–178. Also see Walter Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama, 56. Particularly interesting is the section on “Allegory and Trauerspiel.”

13. I have previously addressed the importance of Deleuze’s reevaluation of the Baroque in Degli-Esposti, 1996. Also see Timothy Murray, 1997.


15. For further readings on the semiotic concept of hypertext, see Umberto Eco, The Search for the Perfect Language, originally published as La ricerca della lingua perfetta nella cultura europea (Bari: Laterza, 1993). Eco also explores the notion of hypertext and computing power in “From Marco Polo to Gutenberg,” one of his Columbia University Lectures held at Columbia University (October 24, 1996–December 10, 1996), which can be found at: http://www.columbia.edu/cu/casaitaliana/marco6.htm. Eco considers the notion of organized systems of information and knowledge by employing a name of recent invention: hypertext. He traces the origin of this concept, and the practice of the organized systematization it signifies, back to John Wilkins’s writings in the middle of the seventeenth century. Silvio Gaggi’s From Text to Hypertext offers a good analysis of this concept across the fields of painting, literature, and film. George P. Landow’s HyperText/Theory is a collection of studies on the hypertext from various disciplines, and his Hypertext 2.0 also explores interactive-intermedia projects carried out on the Internet.

16. Eco discusses the concept of “background books” in his Columbia lecture “Marco Polo to Leibniz: Stories of Intellectual Misunderstanding.” The concept had already appeared under a similar definition, that of “intertextual competence” in The Role of the Reader.

17. For further readings on the notion of fragment as opposed to that of detail, see Calabrese, Neo-Baroque, 68–90.

18. This is, perhaps, Greenaway’s attempt to elaborate what he has called in a lecture a “post-cinematic” mode of expression. However, while Greenaway has worked to expand the parameters of cinema, and of representation in general, in his operas
and installations by developing a mode of visual expression that is not limited by the frame, that is not structured by a linear model of temporality, and that does not bind the spectator’s body to a chair, this multi-media project currently under production is an instance of hypertext that challenges only cinema’s temporal linearity. This new undertaking may, in fact, condemn the spectator even more to sitting in front of a screen, reducing him/her to a spatially fixed device for processing purely visual information. There are, then, perhaps two directions that Greenaway may take in developing a “post-cinematic” art: toward the incorporation of cinema in live performances such as his operas and installations; or toward greater virtualization afforded by computer technology [Editor's note].

19. *Death in the Seine* (1989) is another example of this kind of experiment, a necessary step toward the sophistication of *Prospero’s Books*.

20. This version of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is so extraordinary because it exactly resembles the reading experience of the postmodern reader who approaches Dante’s work carrying within himself/herself the presence of the images, the explanations, the digressions that have been acquired prior to the reading/viewing experience of Dante’s voyage. Phillips and Greenaway give examples of images, explanations, and digressions to the viewer in metaleptic format. I was particularly impressed when I first watched it because I literally went through the same experience I had when first reading *The Divine Comedy* in high school, where I had teachers’ commentaries and digressive explanations on each canto.

In the nineteenth century, the utopia is concerned with the final decline of time rather than with its morning: this is because knowledge is no longer constituted in the form of a table but in that of a series, of sequential connection and of development: when, with the promised evening the shadow of dénouement comes, the slow erosion or violent eruption of History will cause man’s anthropological truth to spring forth in its stony immobility; calendar time will be able to continue; but it will be, as it were, void, for historicity will have been superimposed exactly upon the human essence. (Foucault, 262)

When it was completed in 1980, The Falls summed up Peter Greenaway’s previous fourteen years of experimental films. The Falls also, if less saliently, anticipated his feature filmmaking, begun with The Draughtsmen’s Contract (1982), and his documentary and television work, which soon after became a continuous activity, from Act of God (1980) through A TV Dante (1984–1988) and Death in the Seine (1989) to the present. A crucial point of transition and summation for Greenaway, then, The Falls should be regarded as much more than an “early film.” The first signaling work in Greenaway’s project, the initial realization of a later widely recognized sensibility, it is also the inaugural major accomplishment of a career.

The first section of this essay discusses Greenaway’s experimental filmmaking in the setting of British and American avant-garde cinema of the 1970s, and the second discusses The Falls using Michel Foucault’s The Order of Things (1971) as the context for interpretation. Greenaway’s films of the 1970s, more expressly in The Falls than later, are preoccupied with the arbitrary semiotic systems that serve as guardians of everyday reason in the ordering of information and knowledge—with what Foucault terms representation and whose subtending historical epistemological foundations he
analyses and brings under critique. Greenaway has often popularly been crit-
icized for being enamored of intellectual games in his films. Foucault casts interpretive light on Greenaway and enables us to discern a filmmaker who pursues a parallel analysis and critique and does so with a clarity and playful inventiveness unique in the domain of cinema.

GREENAWAY AND EXPERIMENTAL FILM: THE 1970S

Trained formally as a painter, Greenaway began his film career as an editor of commissioned documentaries, most of them at the British Central Office of Information. While continuing to paint, he started making his own films in the ‘60s in the self-funding artisan’s fashion typical of avant-garde cinema and, for well over a decade, Greenaway worked in isolation. After his work became known—that is, after *The Falls*—the style of Greenaway’s films has been loosely regarded as *structural film* (Kennedy). The term, following P. Adams Sitney’s coinage (“Structural Film”) serves as a generalization to mean that Greenaway foregrounds formal systems as constructs rather than imbedding films within mimetic ends, like story-telling. As a generalization, this assessment is initially helpful in distinguishing the two phases of the filmmaker’s career. However, structural film is more theoretically overwrought and more historically complicated. Sitney himself draws distinctions within structural film and, in a recent essay, accordingly describes *The Falls* as a “linguistically organized system film” (“The Falls,” 46). In the essay Sitney also associates the 1970s phase of Greenaway’s filmmaking with the work of the American experimentalist Hollis Frampton. Greenaway confirms this: aside from expressions of admiration for Frampton in conversation, Greenaway makes pointed allusions in *The Falls* to Frampton’s first extended work, *Hapax Logomena* (1971–1972). Among these allusions is the name of one of the “VUE languages” that serves as a key motif of the film.¹

The distinctions within structural film Sitney makes by indicating a “linguistically organized” mode and his association of Greenaway with Frampton provide helpful openings to grasping Greenaway’s project and his isolated position within British experimental cinema. Structural film arose in North America in the late 1960s. It was a major movement in the later American avant-garde, which had for a decade previous been dominated by what Sitney calls the “lyrical film” (*Visionary Film*), a high-expressionist mode of personal filmmaking whose montage complexity and highly wrought imagism, especially as exemplified in the films of Stan Brakhage, suggested parallels with Abstract Expressionism. Presaged by Andy Warhol’s early film work,
structural film countered lyrical film with a greatly simplified montage and image-repertoire that paralleled Pop Art (in the cases of Warhol, then Joyce Wieland) and Minimalism in sculpture, painting, and music (in the cases of Frampton, Michael Snow, Ernie Gehr, and Paul Sharits).

The reception of structural film in Britain, however, took a specifically theoretical and politically intensified turn. British critics and filmmakers, led by Malcolm Le Grice and Peter Gidal, cast structural films as high-modernist and as the mode of avant-garde cinema best suited to act as ideological critique. Their theoretico-political investment is difficult to overestimate.²

Renamed “structural/materialist film,” the British movement was, in fact, doubly inspired: by French Structuralism and Apparatus Theory in conceptualization and by North American structural filmmaking in practice. In some measure, because of the similarity of their names, structural film practice and Structuralism theory were erroneously conflated in the ensuing critical debates (see, for example, James, 263–275). The declared goal of British structural film was the exposure of cinema’s materiality through filmmaking forms. Gidal and Le Grice regarded all imagistic or representational uses of film, including any narrative or lyrical tendencies, to be ideologically retrograde. Because they struggled as theorists against “representationalism” in all forms, they focused film practice exclusively on forging reductionist metacinema. A favored tactic was to strip form down to isolated technical devices and give them full exfoliation. This preference led the British critics to appropriate selected North American filmmakers, notably the Canadian Michael Snow, as precursors and companions. The maker of such inaugural structural films as Wavelength (1967) and <——> (Back and Forth)(1969), Snow actually pioneered the isolation of cinematic devices, in these cases the zoom and the pan, respectively.

North American structural film practice, however, retained phenomenological implications long current in advanced American art, so that Wavelength and <——> persisted in the perceptual and phenomenological ethos of American experimentalism, or so some influential American critics persuasively argued (Michelson). Therefore, while the rubrics of “meta-cinema” and “self-reflectivity” applied equally well to structural film on both sides of the Atlantic, British theory and politics differed from the preoccupations of North American artists, who continued to be concerned with issues of subjectivity,apperception, and representation. Indeed, their concentration in these areas made them forerunners to what, in the next decade, came to be called postmodernism.³

The British never recognized a “linguistically organized system” cinema as a branch of structural film. The language-based forms of Frampton
and other Americans, like Owen Land (and by 1974, Snow himself), were equitably regarded as a branch of structural film in the United States but never found a place in the critical regard of their British colleagues.⁴

Neither did Greenaway, who, despite the geographical and cultural distances, felt himself closer to Frampton and alienated from his local colleagues. Nonetheless, Greenaway showed scant interest in the phenomenological side of structural film or, generally, in the intellectual culture behind American avant-garde filmmaking. No less than his British colleagues, Greenaway was also drawn to a critique of representation, though he came to it by his own pathway, which, this essay will argue, connected him to Continental theory in a different fashion. These qualifications aside, like Snow with Rameau’s Nephew (1974) and Frampton with the Magellan cycle (1972–1979), Greenaway with The Falls came through structural filmmaking at the opposite side of the British movement’s asceticism and reductionism. Greenaway arrived at an encyclopedic maximalism.

Greenaway made his first films, such as Train (1966), Tree (1966), and Intervals (1969), as finished pieces. These rarely seen and even now seldom screened films are formal exercises in editing, camera movement, and systematic graphic matches, often based on modern musical forms.⁵ If they have any relationship to structural film, it is remote and their generic roots lie in the graphic-avant-garde filmmaking of an earlier Continental generation. By the time of Intervals, however, Greenaway began to work with language as a structuring device and simultaneously developed a growing attraction to found forms and materials. Intervals, for instance, includes a soundtrack consisting of an Italian instructional language record (Brown). Then, in the 1970s, with H Is for House (1973, re-edited in 1978) and Windows (1975), Greenaway emerged into a language-based structural filmmaking. Over his next eight films, he pushed toward the culmination of a “linguistically organized system”—The Falls. Between 1973 and 1980, then, Greenaway developed in ways comparable to the work of Frampton, despite his isolation, never meeting the American artists he admired or having an opportunity to associate with them.⁶

By the time The Falls was completed, both the British and North American structural film movements had dissipated, and little remained of them beyond the generalization that critics were to apply to The Falls.

Unlike Gidal, Le Grice, or Snow, Greenaway never attempted to exfoliate the material basics of film in his work. Nor did he originate the formal systems he soon deployed, including the alphabet, mathematical formulas, and narrative shell-formulas. In fact, as his filmmaking project grew more definite through the 1970s, Greenaway became less, not more,
formally inventive. Greenaway also derived stylistic features of his work directly from found sources, in contrast with Frampton who was a great devisor of idiosyncratic style usage, however parodic its purpose. There is something enduringly idealistic and utopian, Sitney suggests, something “Emersonian” about Frampton’s whole project. His cinema, writes Sitney, “posits visionary schemes, of perfected machines and idealized languages” (Sitney, “The Falls,” 46). In comparison, Sitney argues, Greenaway is embedded in a skeptical tradition of inquiry and ionization: “more elusively Greenaway seems to have turned for inspiration to the Age of Johnson and the masters of 18th century fiction. [. . .] His films are vehicles for arousing and compounding doubt” (46).

Greenaway was particularly attracted to two ready-made cinematic systems of organization: documentary and narrative. He practiced on them a type of subversive re-making that Pier Paolo Pasolini termed contamination, that is, a complex and poetic imbrication of languages and materials. In cultivating this tendency, Greenaway was already foreshadowing his postmodernist extravagance in the 1980s feature films, films that would link him with European cinema exemplified by Alain Resnais’s Last Year at Marienbad and by Pasolini’s late films, notably the Trilogy of Life and Salo.

Documentary cinema offered Greenaway his most attractive ready-made form because of its word-to-image relation. In most conventional nonfiction expository films, the formal system is arrayed so that language provides cultural, discursive, and interpretive anchoring for the image (Barthes, Responsibility of Forms, 14–16). This image-language relation is Greenaway’s preferred found-format in most of the films until 1978, and overwhelmingly in The Falls. As a formal and lexical system, the use of this found-format’s language strengthens the “textualizing” tendency of his films and has collateral effects on his style of shooting and editing.

By the time he makes Windows, Greenaway greatly reduces cutting speeds and assertive patterning, and his images become easily readable illusionistic pictures that he overlays with confidently toned and well-matched passages of expository language. His language is, likewise, derived from found (or fictively found) social-scientific material and mathematical and/or alphabetical systems. The consequence is a sort of formally simplified cinema of collations, but the structure of his films increasingly evinces an emerging parametric tendency governing both whole’s parts. This latter development of Greenaway’s compositions would have enduring consequences: his steady cycle of documentary pieces after 1980 never ceases to cultivate the systemic form and cadence of his 1970s experimental works. The narrative films also feel their gravitational pull, and this accounts, in some measure, for the
enduring sense that Greenaway never commits himself to dramatic narrative, an impression he tirelessly reinforces in statements and interviews.

But such effects extend well beyond his style of filmmaking to his larger textual conceits. The concept of an archive, the inclination toward found texts—simulated or actual—and historical statistical effluvia, proliferate after 1973; and it is these that Greenaway exploits ruthlessly to devise the diegetic complications that even his shortest films engender. It is in these particular respects that Greenaway expresses his affinities for the structural filmmaking exemplified by Frampton. In (nostalgia), Critical Mass and Poetic Justice (all parts of Hapax Logomena) and in Magellan, Frampton likewise engages in the encumbering of found (and fictively found) materials with contaminating complications and analytic elaboration. Neither artist, then, so much criticizes illusionism—on the surface both cultivate it assiduously—as confound it through a relentlessly logical but parodically didactic self-reflexivity built on the conundrums posed by representational systems. The systematic self-reflexivity of films such as Windows, Goole by Numbers (1976), A Walk through H (1978) and Vertical Features Remake (1978) import arbitrary structures (alphabetical, numerical, lexiconographical, ornithological, cartographical, correlative, or narrational) that Greenaway uses to shape—through categorical forms of sorting data or through multi-diegetic narratives—some actual or invented files, or archives, that become the object of his films’ subversive scrutiny.

A straightforward example is Windows. A voice-over initiates the film by reciting statistics about people who have fallen, been pushed, or jumped from windows to their deaths in a region of England during a delimited period. This provision of a tidy police file then proliferates into brief tales that the film’s soundtrack elaborates into a short-story anthology. Meanwhile, the montage assembles lovely shots of windows in an English country house, hinting that these are all somehow a suitable location—a stand-in—for the narrated events, though this is quite impossible. Similarly, the statistical prelude declares a commonality that the stories undercut even while literally proving it, since they all end with a death by falling from a window. The discord between the lyrical shots of windows and landscapes beyond, and the tales of death by defenestration, is initially obvious and, by the end of this very short film, the narratives have quite overwhelmed the initial declaration of a tidy report with the pathos—or, alternately the ridiculous mishappenstance—of their individuality. The initial image-language diegetic accord has grown to a subversive deviation by sheer multiplication. The animating mystery of the film, death of the individual, radically complicates and undermines Windows’ confident recitation from within.
H Is for House is a precursory work, and it is telling that Greenaway recomposed it in 1978. It seems to have been started in 1973 as a lyrical home movie, consisting of shots of a lovely country house, interior and exterior, and of the filmmaker’s wife and young daughter enjoying a sunny late-summer day amid the cheerful disarray of an apple-strewn table. The cutting pattern is a different matter, however, for its metrical regularity serves the voice-over/musical soundtrack in the circulated 1978 version. Several voices are heard. There is a voice-over dialogue between a very young girl and a man running through the dictionary, or at least through the entries for the letter “H,” and proliferating long lists of oddly piled-on words, until she intermittently interjects words that count for her. Into this weave of the arbitrarily systematic and the childishly insistent word lists, another male voice interrupts with three peculiar tales, resulting in a very eccentric sort of cosmogony of houses.

There are apparent exceptions to the simplicity and documentary basis of the films of the period exemplified by Windows and H Is for House. Several of these more complex films are outright fictions, like Dear Phone (1977), which constructs a written text on screen (supplemented by voice-over) that becomes a parametric narrative: the changing ingredients all hold homologous places in the story structure through numerous revisions. Nonetheless, the effect is not dissimilar to Windows. Water Wrackets (1975) is but a variation on the form. Over slightly varied shots of lakes, streams, swamps, and pools, Water Wrackets generates a fictive narrative of a tribal, or perhaps medieval (likely Celtic) people, their language, history, wars, heroes, dynasties, and customs. All of these matters are told by a confident voice-over narrator. Although there is a pretense of a replete historic saga (of some lost Celtic race perhaps), it is so elliptical a history no one would be likely to construct a cogent chronicle from it any more than one could construct a convincing geography from the shots of water, despite insistent cutting patterns cued to narrative shifts in the script. Water Wrackets maintains the delightful conceit that it is a swift, efficient, and authoritative education documentary while being, in fact, utterly uninformative and fictional. That is to say that the film builds a complete discursive universe that cannot be comprehended or connected outside itself. But it can, nonetheless, be received as an exact simulation of formal constructions frequently encountered in such didactic nonfiction films.

Dear Phone offers a more proximate universe—contemporary England—but the effect is akin to Water Wrackets. What could be actually fiction updated from the age of Johnston—an epistolary novel, though in this case composed for telephone, with a populous cast, a picaresque and mercurial protagonist,
and prospects of marriage, wealth, love, and betrayal—starts with a voice-over reading from the screen a roughly written draft on a sheet of paper. Fragments of indecipherable and slightly smeared hand-written texts continue to appear on screen at very regular intervals to suggest drafts of this “novel.” The voice-over is, however, superbly assured that each version of his story is definitive. The other images—and they alternate rigidly with the written sheets—are a series of British red phone booths (accompanied only by electric phone sounds). These images are taken at many locations and times of day at long-shot distance, and all are devoid of people. Again, as in Water Wrackets, the arena of narrative action is indeterminable; the association of the iconic image (water there, phone boxes here) and the texts is asserted by the montage, but the film does not, cannot, cohere into an actualized story space or cohesive narrative. The phone-box shots and the serially revised—or rather, serially re-started—narrative appearing on the blotched sheets are covered by the voice possessing certain conviction that the facts are solid. Yet as the film progresses and we compare versions—as the work’s structure insists we do—the narrative that the texts conjure up keeps mutating so wildly that no single story can be sustained. By the end, when a final typed script appears on screen, the tangle of possibilities for the tale has become so great that it has already precluded the satisfactions of narrative completion. The final narrative relates a hero’s absurd, Beckett-like death, in effect, by telephone.

Another self-complicating narrative, A Walk through H, opens with the camera on a stroll through an art gallery. Then a voice-over narrator begins to speak, representing himself as an adventurer and autobiographer, as the camera closes in on his maps (examples of Greenaway’s paintings), which both represent his travel experiences and prompt his pre-trip autobiography. The complication arises in this case because of the narration pointing in two temporal directions simultaneously. The number of the maps, ninety-two, informs the viewer about the serial extent of the film—and they are counted off—which will have no clear narrative destination. Though initially the pictures are assumed to be the protagonist’s guides through the terrain of “H,” his commentary repeatedly doubles back to a fragmented autobiography whose important moments seem mostly to have been occasions for obtaining the maps.8

Many have come to him through the agency of Tulse Luper, the polymath-Gnostic magus (and, incidentally, an ornithologist) whose gnomic tutelage hereafter guides so many of Greenaway’s protagonists.

Even in such cases of films that are outwardly, even outlandishly fictional, like Water Wrackets, Dear Phone, and A Walk through H, Greenaway’s conceits remain rooted in the pretenses of the documentary’s formal system.
The point these films make is that the filmmaker is not at all interested in the conventional ways the issue of “realism” has been debated in documentary film criticism or in theorizing the way fiction narrative operates. On the contrary, Greenaway imaginatively underscores the fact that fiction and non-fiction films share systematic properties: shaping materials that always imply that they existed before finding their place in a construct. Conventionally, this condition is one never to be acknowledged: documentaries and fiction films alike insist that everything they contain is immanent to their structures. The assembly Greenaway performs—and performs repeatedly in the course of the 1970s—is subversive in part because it makes the films say they are about “recovery” or “reclamation” of some story substance, a police file, blotchy written sheets, paintings paraded as maps, waterways where an archaic kingdom flourished.

The Greenaway protagonist is, or joins, a narrator engaged in painstaking interpretations of this found material that has come into his possession. The story of how he interprets, how the material came to him, matter more than the story substance itself, a reversal of priorities that is a formal effect of Greenaway’s composition. Indeed, the concern with internal interpretation so complicates, then impedes, and then utterly contaminates the proceedings that narrative momentum expires, and only the structure of the film, a parametric machine of repetition and variation, stubbornly continues to the end. The “narratives” of these films operate, then, as elaborated exegetical occasions for which the images scarcely serve as more than mute pictorial witnesses. As lucidly illusionistic as they might look, and as precisely edited and arranged as they appear, Greenaway’s shots have a close kinship with the mysterious, glyph-strewn paintings, the maps of misreading that never guide the hero through “H” so much as accompany him into enigmas of space and time.

Looking at these films as precursors of *The Falls*, we may better understand how obsessively and variously Greenaway controls them. This is how ordering systems regulate material, how they distribute it through a structure, and how systematic forms transform materials into discursive and/or compositional control is not in the service of the image-language materials. On the contrary, the films’ interest lies in how contaminating (through impossible complication and failed exegesis) them goes, and in what the consequences are—namely, hermeneutical entropy and empiricist doubt. These films are self-subverting artifacts of a peculiar kind, for the result of their mannered ordering is invariably the sense of a failure of order itself. Mediated by wall-to-wall confident narration, these films use systems chosen for their ready-made formal structures (of succession, comparison, distinction,
etc.) or just for their arbitrariness, which each film underscores by simply making it impossible to construct a diegetic whole of narrative, history, depiction, memoir, statistical survey, or alphabet lesson. Despite the meticulous pedantry and lucidity of the framework, once the details get out of hand, which invariably happens in a Greenaway film, the viewer sees what is overwhelming familiar undergo an odd slow collapse. The result is a sustained and very particular sort of hilarity; Greenaway’s articulation shifts to comedy, but by way of unaccented exaggeration and overelaboration. The constant consequence is, in Sitney’s words, “arousing and compounding doubt” (“The Falls,” 46); but, what may well interest us more after our laughter fades is what comes under such bemused and complex suspicion.

The systems Greenaway selects are entirely rationalistic, coolly detached, and familiarly functional. They are as close-to-hand as anyone’s daily use of the phone book and dictionary, the random acquaintance with statistical studies in medicine and social science appearing in newspapers, or the casual experience of documentaries and educational films. Put another way, these systems are very ordinary; they are the perfectly pervasive modern and quotidian manifestations of what Michel Foucault terms “representation.” By the end of each film, however, Greenaway has rendered them alien and mysterious, not so much obsolete as peculiarly science-fictional in their inadequacy.9

Doubts arise in these films partly on account of the films’ only seemingly bland style. Neither the systems nor their complicating imbrication emerge from, or merge with, the material of the images the way they are constantly supposed to do. As Greenaway’s style of shooting becomes less inventive (in the familiar sense of an experimental filmmaker) and lucidly representational, and his editing patterns relax into metrical obedience to music and voice-over, the images paradoxically yield up less and less of themselves, leaving literalness and repetition—windows, water flows, phone boxes, maps—which Greenaway never redeems to significance despite a continuous promissory seduction. But never once do the images finally yield in their muteness; they remain fully readable to the eye but indecipherable. The aggregate result of these films is to remain blankly mysterious.

If Greenaway seems, simply, to replicate the formal systems shared by documentary and fictional cinema by ensuring that the images do not surrender to the system of arrangement, viewers themselves become contaminated with skeptical doubt. Greenaway is no less ruthless, in the end, than other British structural filmmakers who sought, however, to defame representational illusionism directly by revealing its technical determinations. Greenaway’s critique of representation is neither as radical nor as confronta-
tional as theirs, but it is no less thorough and unyielding. It proceeds obliquely by gently contaminating familiar formal systems and by inflecting them with their own occluded complexity and conundrums. Aware that normative narrative or documentary continuity engenders an etiological illusion—something will be explained or defined, an enigma resolved—in all his usages, Greenaway deploys parametric formalism; it is a subtle virus that he makes silently destructive of the cinematic organism. Cordially, he appears to continue to articulate differences and to set comparisons in motion, which is how his films never falter in being systematic and in being structural films; but he simultaneously precludes images or language from their supposedly destined significant closures of meaning.10 Their composition stubbornly remains just that, an arrangement and not a mechanism that permits a final truth to be reached.11

In 1978, the same year that *A Walk through H* was made, Greenaway provided a second opportunity for Tulse Luper to make an appearance, this time posthumously (though by no means was it to be his final role). The film is *Vertical Features Remake* (1978), Greenaway’s last film before *The Falls*. At his death, we are told, Tulse Luper left behind footage for a film in an unfinished state. The work consists of the cinematic document of the vertical features (trees, poles, fences, etc.) in a regional British landscape. Supposedly, Tulse Luper made it with the purpose of revealing some mysterious, recondite natural (or even cosmic) order that only he comprehended. An official team of researchers has been convened to determine the right assembly of the footage, and the film consists of several “remakes,” or editing of the material, interspersed with voice-over passages giving a detailed account of the theories behind each version and reporting the critical disputes that greet every one of them. The results are quietly parodic. No formal permutation of the Luper footage is persuasively more revealing than any other, only more arcane and complicated. So, as the series proceeds, the footage remains mute as it was in its original and absurd minimalism.

*Vertical Features Remake* is Greenaway’s openly sarcastic meta-critical comedy on the pretense that takes film theory to be a science, a pretense that gripped British film culture tightly in the 1970s. Perfectly symptomatic, British structural film theorists believed that a hypertrophic formalism could carry arcane theories toward radical political critique. At another level, which reaches more deeply into the filmmaker’s own project, *Vertical Features Remake* belatedly declared Greenaway’s skepticism loudly. The film can, therefore, also be regarded as a self-reflective account of the subversions his previous films performed on more quotidian materials and systems. But here, the material is experimental cinema itself. To accept the conceit that the film
artifact, however composed, could explain mysteries presumed to have been grasped by Tulse Luper (and here is how the magus-side of Luper’s persona comes to be played out as a type of the “visionary” artist) is no less to confuse art-making with species of gnosticism, film theory with science.

Greenaway’s skepticism toward such prospects bears comparison with Frampton’s irony in his essays on film theory. These often begin with parodic fictions about epistemic archaeologies. Keeping Water Wrackets in mind for comparison, a relevant example is “A Stipulation of Terms from Maternal Hopi” (Frampton, 171–176) in which Frampton fantasizes the discovery of some 75,000 identical copper solar emblems, in the form of reels, each of which was wound around 300 meters of a transparent substance, uniformly 32 millimeters wide, that proved, upon microscopic examination, to be made of dried and flattened dog intestine. The find, “immediately dubbed ‘archives’ by the sensational press,” is obviously a massive archaic proto-cinema library that consists of a civilization’s complete record, about whose decipherment Frampton’s narrator provides a “conjecture.” In Frampton’s utopian imagination, however ironical its exposition of cases, a serious dream arises from this allegory that whole archaic civilizations (not our own) have expended all their energies on the creation of a great art work. That work, a counter-plenitude, was to be the isomorphically perfect signifying double of everything known. Excavated by us, this archive of material might offer the gravest revelations, were we only able to figure out its system, have its hermeneutic key. On the other hand, what Frampton parodies with such a fable he also characterizes as the “meta-cinema,” the logical construction of the whole of our modern civilization’s image-making (which is similarly the double of our everything known). Though not a culture that has an expressed cosmology, ours is one that behaves unconsciously just like those imaginary archaic ones that did. For Frampton, the pathos of such imaginative discoveries is that such an imagining is the beginning of the art of film. In this case, it is the prelude to his own unfinished and unfinishable Magellan.

Greenaway’s Water Wrackets, A Walk through H, and Vertical Features Re-make resonate with similar fantasy. But in Greenaway’s case, there are only self-defeating ambitions of the replete representation. Greenaway never approached the films he made between 1973 and 1979 with any of Frampton’s axiomatic passion for the possible utopian system of a total work of this kind. Greenaway was more thoroughly the ironist and, finally, skeptical parodist, as Sitney claims. Then, however, Greenaway struck upon the opposite of Frampton’s kind of imaginary utopia in cinema and devised a work whose fiction of totalizing catastrophe becomes, in the term that Foucault uses in The Order of Things, a heterotopia. That work is The Falls.
CONCEITS OF THE FALLS

One fine Morning, I awoke to discover that, during the night, I had learned to understand the language of birds. I have listened to them ever since. They say: “Look at me!” or: “Get out of here! or: “Let’s fuck! or: “Help!” or “Hurrah!” or “I found a worm!” and that’s all they say. And that, when you boil it down, is about all we say. (Which of those things am I saying now?). Hollis Frampton (66)

The Falls has as its main narrative conceits two overlapping fictions. The first is the “VUE Directory” and the “VUE Commission” that maintains it. The second is the Violent Unknown Event itself. The VUE Commission has made the three-and-a-half-hour compilation documentary from its Directory that Greenaway’s The Falls calls “The Falls.” This isomorphy is offered as a deadpan assertion, and it is crucial to the film’s vastly extended irony, which involves a fictional—but-systematic denial of Greenaway’s authorship, of his own expressivity. It is also an affirmation that the film’s own fictional system is the gargantuan task of a collective, institutional author, the compilers of a vast anthropological archive. Totally unlike Peter Greenaway, the author, the VUE Commission is not given to self-reflection or doubts. Indeed, it contrasts sharply with the scholars convened to ponder and to remake Tulse Luper’s fragmentary Vertical Features, who deadlocked in debate over interpretive principles. The VUE Commissioners suffer no such theoretical impediments to getting on with their huge work and, so, their discourse is wholly and confidently operational. The result, the Commission’s “The Falls” is clad in the certainty (which viewers soon recognize as a species of amnesia) that dogged, systematic accumulation (which will soon tax the viewer with tedium) will suffice. The Commission’s ignorance about the frailty of its methods and procedures is endemic and total.

The VUE Commission’s film consists of a few less than the promised ninety-two brief profiles of people affected by the Violent Unknown Event. The collection of ninety-two dossiers forms what the Commission blithely calls “a reasonable cross-section of the nineteen million other names that are contained” in its Directory. The victims of the VUE, the methods of the Directory, the VUE Commission, and the VUE itself may be a fiction, but their methods and procedures conform (with quiet hilarity) to the common practices of innumerable commissions and investigations into disasters—social, economic, and natural—that modern states install, and whose reports, files, and mass-media emanations constitute the great social science archives of our time. They also conform to another feature of such labors and one that
is peculiar for fiction film: that while a narrative film promises an end, an archive does not. An archive promises only the inert infinity of factual accumulations and correlations. The controlling irony of the vast volume of Greenaway’s three-hour and tirelessly repetitive film is that it obdurately conforms to the inertia of the archive, and not to fictive or documentary narrative. This animates *The Falls* with its peculiar tensions and opens interstitial spaces that (when approached from a certain angle) are those that appear whenever narrative materials are subject to the constraints and rigorous repetitiveness made available through structural filmmaking.

Greenaway’s film is also, and more than incidentally, composed as a great patchwork of found-film stylistics, an encyclopedic panoply of documentary usages, from *cinema vérité*, to activist newsreel; from nature film to historical recounting; from family saga to film-archive compilation, to crime reconstruction even down to the rock-star celebrity interview. This vast parody is a moment-to-moment affair in *The Falls* and a main source of the film’s obvious surface humor. And while cataloguing the patchwork might prove interesting, what makes it compelling overall is that the dynamic and improbable unity it occasions is not, as in Greenaway’s previous films, formal but a matter of widening discursive implication. What is constantly insisted on, and just as constantly but implicitly denied, is that this is the right and serious pathway toward representation as our culture understands it.

*The Falls* deploys a layer of sober and fact-laden voice-overs on everything. This thick blanket of language serves conventional purposes that Greenaway has exploited before to supplement the images and set the agenda for their interpretation; now, he extends this to bind the images’ heterogeneous array into a diegetic and evidential unity. Further, and crucially, authoritatively layered language means to conform the biographies to an institution’s taxonomy through repetition of details. Every biography of *The Falls* begins with a file number and a name, then a set of images with voice-over. The commentary is invariably an identification of its subject as object of scrutiny and analysis. There are many stories told but only a few parametric frames to fit them, and these are to be derived from the VUE Commission’s expository discourse. Contrastingly, the imagery is varied and so are the odd names and eccentric characteristics of the victims. While the voice-overs annotate all these, they do so without acknowledging their oddities. An entry may begin with archival photo-evidence, a revisitation to a site or a home, a landscape associated with the victim, an interview or a discussion with an expert, or some combination of these. Although the format remains constant well after the viewer gets the parodic and pedantic point of *The Falls*, Greenaway varies the voice-overs, giving the sense of an institutional
montage of authorities, fact-gatherers, and experts. The effect of each file is to contribute to a self-enmassing redundancy.

Often, Greenaway plays humorously on the documentary voice-image convention, and the effects are similar to what he does in earlier films: complication and doubt. Unexpectedly, he places sober commentary over unlikely or inadequate images and montages. Or, he allows the images to spiral out into a fantasy entertained by the profiled VUE victims (biographies 42, 43, and 68) while the voice-over remains resolutely factual and earth-bound; he introduces obvious puns between images and words (biographies 12 and 64) and matches sound-image edits often to a comic end; or he sets forth literalisms or pedantic hair-splittings about how evidential images are to be read (biographies 5, 68, and 75).

As a consequence of such variously inappropriate, reflexive, or exaggerated conjunctions, the guiding unities of word and image set to the Commission’s implied analytical schemata start to slide away from one another. The reading of the images and the way we listen to the voices fall under amused suspicion, and we begin to doubt and to entertain alternative readings, vague and confused as these might be. Nonetheless, the image/word conjunction is never broken but only bent, for the images would then become wholly enigmatic. In any case, because the whole process begins all over again every few minutes, the construction renews itself as soon as it decays. The rapid passage of entries pulls the viewer—assumed to be ever-hopeful—once again back into the weave of images and commentary for the next entry.

Greenaway’s genius for stage-managing great variety within a highly repetitive and system-regulated format in *The Falls* has never been surpassed. The question to be asked is, to what end is the viewer solicited to stay with this massively repetitive expository elongation—doubts, confusions, and suspicions notwithstanding? For the whole of the Commission’s filmed discourse, the voice-overs are studded with authorized knowers, experts who speak, often on camera, in the jargon languages of sciences like linguistics, medical symptomatology, psychiatry, ornithology, musicology, art history, and cartography. Their discourse stands out against the massed narration because it is openly analytical and its intended purpose is to draw the short biographies further into the subtending system of the Commission’s investigation. The experts mutely imply that this system has been carefully worked out and can now be safely assumed. Therefore, the linkage between details arising from any biographical sketch and the taxonomic system of the Commission partially articulates the “grid” of the compilation. Accumulation itself promises some unifying representation of the whole VUE phenomenon, but the
experts’ categories give it the appearance of a representational rationale. This is what holds us to *The Falls* and keeps us hopeful.

The major problem now, however, is that the Violent Unknown Event, the second conceit of the film, remains an obscure episode—as its name jokingly suggests—though it is the structuring narrative enigma of *The Falls* as a whole. From what one can glean from the film’s scattered information, the event occurred one night and throughout the world (though the film restricts its geographical range mainly to Europe with a few excursions to Canada). It seems to have concentrated at various urban and rural “epicenters” in Europe and Britain. Many victims apparently died, but 92 million survived to become mildly mutated and now suffer from several afflictions. They have contracted peculiar diseases; they now speak one of ninety-two new unprecedented languages; they are double-gendered; and they experience various physiological and psychological transformations. These are relentlessly detailed in each biography with the effect of the sure knowledge that the VUE is a world-historical catastrophe that it has imposed its own counter-system on the human world. Because the VUE seems neither to have done property damage nor resulted in serious social disorder, it conforms to the peculiar kind of eschatology that Michel Foucault defines as “historicity superimposed exactly upon human essence,” and that he regards as peculiarly modern-utopian (262). The VUE might, like any eschatology, be conventionally expected to be the end of a cause-and-effect chain similar to some environmental disaster. But it is an effect whose links back to causes are unknown, certainly unaccounted by the Commission’s investigations. These provide abundant facts of times and places before and after the Event, but of the precise unfolding of the catastrophe the Commission is silent. On offer are, then, manifold facts that concern a multiplicity of specific effects on the VUE victims, but their single cause (much less a plausible unity of the effects) remains obscure or escapes notice. This investigative failure opens the important interstice where we encounter the victims’ own extravagant speculations, one of their preferred but improbable theories being the “responsibility of birds” for the whole disaster.

Because its causes remain obscured and permanently unavailable as a source of explanation, and because the Commission seems peculiarly unconcerned, as an eschatology the VUE operates like a narrative *origin* rather than an end. In standard script-writing terms, the VUE is a “back story.” But it is much more than this in *The Falls*, for this untold story transformed its ostensible subjects. The VUE is an *a priori* where the story starts and, like the Fall (and this allusion in the title is obvious), the Tower of Babel (referred to
repeatedly, as in biography 41 whose subject writes a book called *The View from Babel* and the Flood (references to water, twins, and matched-up couples abound) depicted in the biblical Genesis, the VUE’s main force is equally eschatological and etiological. It is still always an eschatology, a radical novelty that intrudes on the human world and transforms it; but it is also a story of how *this* world, of the film’s diegesis, came into being and gained its peculiar characteristics.

The VUE might, then, be initially construed this way: the origin of the victims and their new world of mild human mutation is both a mystery and the ground of a new anthropological world-system in which the defining event is human mutation. The VUE is, then, both a catastrophic-eschatological event and an anthropological-cosmogonic occasion. As such, the VUE conforms to a second feature of modern eschatological thought, what Foucault terms the “retreat and return of origins” characteristic of the modern conception of time and narrative in the modern structure of knowledge (328–335).12

It follows that, regarded as a narrative construct, *The Falls* moves its investigations toward an origin that would come out of its own discursive future. Such an oscillation between genesis and apocalypse Foucault takes to be characteristic of the modern pursuit of truth (Foucault, 332–333), a foundation of modern intellectual systems.13

This also is what closure customarily means in narrative cinema, and this sense suggests Greenaway’s complicated and only partial relationship both to narrative cinema and to the modern overall. Narrative is the modern form of knowledge par excellence, as Foucault demonstrates in *The Order of Things*. More locally, “realistic” film narrative rests on the pretense of an empiricism dynamized as an etiologic system. In films, the origin of human things established at the start—characters’ desires, goals, destinies—are realized at the end of their proper unfolding. Of the fabled “illusionism” of “realistic” modern narratives, not the least crucial feature is that the beginning can be made to answer to its ending and, finally, the end makes known and realizes what was asked at the start. In effect, normative film narrative, the mythic idealization of the modern knowledge system, is constrained only by the way empiricism—or narrative “realism”—has been unfolded by modernity, as the concatenation of cause-and-effect linearity. Hence, the modern film narrative (or rather, film narrative as modern) becomes, at every level, a perfect modern species of illusionism rooted in modern forms of knowledge. Yet film narrative is also a frail illusionism for a naive etiology underpins it, and it is Greenaway’s subversion of it to cause its constitutive elements to fall back into their actual conditions of origination, into their inert archival
representation. In this regard, *The Falls* inverts the process by which narrative arises. Modern stories arise out of elements in an arrangement that we habitually term *representation*: the tabulation of the narrative archive that consists of semantic items, stock oppositions, icons, and actants. It is Greenaway’s recurring gesture to return these to that originating precondition of representation: by thwarting narrative dynamism, he returns the narrative elements to the archive, to the table-like grid structure. This inversion, achieved
through the entropy of diegetic complication at which Greenaway excels, always remains his favorite strategy and the means by which he always is a structural filmmaker. Nonetheless, Greenaway achieves, for the first and last time, the hypertrophic and programmatic realization of this strategy in *The Falls*.

The multiple effects of the VUE are, initially, simple-seeming but then supremely frustrating: the eschatological horizon of the VUE’s “truth” keeps receding at equal speed with the obscure past of the VUE conceit. The Commission accumulates an ever-expanding volume of discourse, but it only results in a bad infinity. In one of the numerous self-reflexive gestures Greenaway injects into the proceedings (under the conceit that he is not the author, for it is always a victim who makes the notation), he evokes the “myth of closure” in cinema in many places, not the least by allusions to Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (biography 91).14

This film is another catastrophic-eschatological fiction, one with a notoriously weak and ambiguous ending that fails to explain its central enigma, which happens to be the murderous animosity of birds. The refusal of the usually invariable temporal structure of narrative cinema serves a crucial role throughout *The Falls*.

In some respects, by speaking of the dominance of time and narrative, and their organization through an eschatological style of thinking in modernity, I have already, and prematurely, started on the modern side of Foucault’s massive expository book *The Order of Things*. We must now pause briefly to indicate at least the most relevant portion of this work, which is not its account of modernity, but its account of an earlier intellectual form, representation. We will begin with Foucault’s commentary on the author who inspired both the writing of his book and Greenaway’s devising of his film, Jorge Luis Borges.

**THE FALLS AND FOUCAULT’S THE ORDER OF THINGS**

I will, then, temporarily uncouple *The Falls* from its filmic forms and conceits and consider what, self-reflexively, Greenaway solicits from the viewer: our recognition of how arbitrary rational systems and the procedures of dataformation are joined by the institutional will to order. In his preface to *The Order of Things* about the origin of the book, Foucault remarks that his “archaeological” project “first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered [. . .] all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography” (xv). That passage
quotes a “certain Chinese encyclopedia” whose taxonomy of fantastic animals cannot exist in any familiar discursive space:

animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies. (xv)

In this passage, writes Foucault, Borges “does away with the site, the mute ground upon which it is possible for entities to be juxtaposed” (xvii). What has been removed is the tabula, says Foucault, “that enables thought to operate upon the entities of the world, to put them in order, to divide them into classes, to group them according to names that designate their similarities and differences—the table upon which, since the beginning of time, language has intersected space” (xvii).

*The Order of Things* is a study of three distinct and, for Foucault, disjoined, eras of knowledge-formation. Each is characterized by its own archaeological deep structure of order that provides the positive conditions of knowledge. Foucault distinguishes such deep structures, on the one hand, from the philosophical thought of a period that seeks to explain why order itself exists and, on the other, from the “fundamental codes of a culture” that establish the “empirical orders” (of perception, for example) (xx). There is a “middle region” that he terms “positive unconscious” and “epistemological field”—termed *episteme* throughout the book. It is where the rules permitting knowledge to emerge in an ordered, sustained, and concrete fashion arise during a historical period. It is this middle region where the social sciences arise and have their preeminence, and Foucault focuses his study on three of these: economics, language, and biology. The eras that *The Order of Things* examines are the Renaissance, the Enlightenment (which he terms the Classical period), and the modern. By the end of the book, a fourth era looms, which might be termed the postmodern but remains unnamed as such, the edge of its system barely glimpsed. To each of these eras Foucault attaches a dominant mode of knowledge-structure: to the Renaissance “resemblance”; to the Classical period “representation”; and to the Modern a variety of terms seem to apply, but knowledge in the period is bound up with the complex realm of the “historical,” as remarked earlier when I mentioned knowledge of an “eschatological type.” Each era has its exemplary manifestations and artifacts that contain seeds of its subversion. Velásquez’s great painting *Las
Meninas encapsulates the Classical era; Don Quixote marks the end of “resemblance;” the Marquis de Sade’s writings, the close of representation; and Mallarmé and Flaubert manifest the deep problematic of the modern. Each era also offers the artist a possibility of imaginative subversion, and Borges is the late, the modern subversive allegorist of the classical episteme.

This raises a problem. Foucault notoriously denies that continuity runs from one era to another, for each is structurally self-contained. “In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one episteme that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice” (168). This is demonstrated at length in the case of the radical difference between the Renaissance-resemblance and the Enlightenment (46–63). But the shift from Classical thought to Modern thought is less sharp in some respects. The modern regime of knowledge does not, for Foucault, replace Classical representation but rather displaces it. It is not a case of superimposition, much less a continuity, for the Modern episteme radically qualifies the claims to true knowledge of representation and does so in both senses of “qualify”: it strives to justify representation in its claims to knowledge competence (starting with Immanuel Kant) and also limits those claims to certain regions of knowledge.

Hence, the ordering of empirical data remains representation’s legitimate tasks in modernity, but the true account of any thing now changes its position, and representation is, of itself, inadequate to justify itself. Hence, modernity continues “pragmatically” and “pre-critically” with the institutions of Classical knowledge still in place, but modernity obliges all who engage in it to justify its parameters and procedures: the Modern episteme demands that representation represent itself rightly representing. This has the effect of reinstalling representation, but now most often as a “pre-critical positivism,” and that condition of thought opens the way toward its critique and subversion as an activity both serious—the Modern ongoing search for the foundations of knowledge—and parodic—the Modern skeptical regard for representational systems that modernist art and literature have made familiar to us.

The Borges passage that so struck Foucault parodies representation for him by bringing into view the frail but certain basis of representation, the tabula of language that begins with the alphabet: “What transgresses the boundaries of all imagination, of all possible thought, is simply that alphabetical series (a, b, c, d) which links each of these categories to all the others” (xvi). Where else could such a collection as Borges’s reports appear but in “the non-place of language.” The tabula is a key image, a spatial metaphor, in Foucault’s consideration of the classical episteme, and it today still exerts influence on “our thought.” In formulating the meaning of the tabula, he
writes “the table of the signs will be the image of the things” (66). The *tabula* will constitute the complete network of signs in which the patterns proper to their ordering will also be proper and adequate to meaning and knowledge. Foucault refers to this replete and perfectly regulated discursive space, this grid of representation, as “the great utopia of a perfectly transparent language” (117). So, when Borges scrambles taxonomy with his report of the Chinese fantastic encyclopedia, Foucault says that gesture evacuates the table or exposes it as non-place. Foucault calls the spatial-metaphorical result *heterotopia*, for Borges enacts a deep disturbance of the space of representation, making it impossible “to find a place of residence for [things], to define a common locus beneath them all” (xviii).

*The Falls* fits such a *tabula* to generate its archive, and it is the VUE Commission’s discursive space. The Commission seeks to represent the VUE by fitting data—namely, the victims’ biographies—into categories, onto the grid of diseases, physical transformations, languages, even dreams that affect them. In some distant future, the “representation” of the VUE should emerge, and with it the meaning of its whole structure. But even the distant end, explanation, has been forgotten: to “explain” in the modern sense is to show representation representing, and that would mean justifying the grid itself. The institution of the Commission has, however, taken on a life of its own, and its operational system is also an amnesiac about its system; it neglects Modern self-reflection. This is the case despite the characteristically Modern, eschatological character of the catastrophe discussed earlier. This is why *The Falls* must be such a very long and tirelessly redundant film: its project, like representation itself, is infinite, which also means infinitely deferred with respect to its destination, even while being constantly, equally redundantly eschatological in its diegetical circumstance, as virtually every detail of its narration keeps informing us.

The Classical *episteme* is guided, explains Foucault, by a double theory of representation. The first is the theory of the complex idea, which may be an object, a perception, or a picture; the second is the theory of language, which yields the *tabula* as a transparent taxonomy of logical series that serves for analysis of any complexity. In the Classical, *episteme* language, in a sense, did not exist but was entirely a function, wholly operational. Language provides “adequate signs for all representations” and establishes “links between them” (85) because, in Classical thinking, language consists essentially of nouns and nouns represent not individuals but perform the grouping activity of language. So, discourse can express the whole content of a representation “[b]ecause it is made up of words that name, part by part, what is given to representation” (96). It does so along two vectors. “Horizontal articulation” is the
grouping together of individuals that have identities in common and the separat-
ing of those that are different, forming sequential generalizations of groups. “Vertical articulations” distinguish things that exist of themselves and their modifications, features, characteristics. Language tells us we have encountered “substances” and “substantives” (qualities). Foucault summarizes:

The entire order of the resulting coordinations and subordinations is covered by the grid of language, and each one of these points will be found upon [the grid] together with its name: from the individual to the species, then from the species to the genus and on to the class, language is articulated precisely upon the dimension of increasing generalities: this taxonomic function is manifested in language by the substantives: we say an animal, a quadruped, a dog, a spaniel. (97)

The relationships between the two kinds of representations—the one given to perception in the form of complex ideas or pictures, and the other that results when the first is passed through the grid of language, breaking wholes down into elemental constituents—are epistemologically identical because the relations between the elements of a proposition are identical to what it articulates (without excess or remained or lack) and operate according to the same modes. Language adds nothing and takes nothing away; language is, then, transparent in the Classical episteme and it can always be arranged upon its object point for point. Language possesses “the power to articulate the representation it transforms into discourse in more than one way” (99). That is, language is representation providing an articulation for another representation, but “with the possibility of a displacement” (98).

By “displacement” Foucault means two things. First, the second or linguistic articulation has analyzed the first, perception, into modes and categories that are, in their substance, different from it, in the same way that an exact diagram of a machine, a plant, or a landscape does not reproduce it but chooses certain categories (gears, pistons, stamens and bloom, rivers and hills) that are relevant and that constitute the second representation. The freedom that results is that these categories can be applied to many things, be regarded as adequate (true to the thing), and yet permit comparisons—and hence differences and similarities—to appear between many things. These, in turn, can be manipulated among themselves to suggest modifications. The resulting tabula, or grid, allows an infinite range of things to be “placed” for comparison and differentiation into ordered series. Once this is understood, as the Classical age came to understand it, everything can become discourse. The utopia of language is such a totality of knowledge.
For Foucault, the difference between utopia and heterotopia is the difference between representation and the subversion of language’s imaginary space, the plausible co-presence of many things in a homogeneous field, language. That space, the tabula, is generated by the tightly coordinated work of analysis, ordering, placing, and naming that language allows. Following on this analysis of language and representation, Foucault defines the project of the classical episteme as achieving a representation of beings that situates them in logical series. Representation lays out the table of pertinent categories that permits analysts to put things in their correct place in the series. As activities, analysis (the breaking down of entities according to the system of signs) and ordering (the arrangement of analyzed entities according to their similarities and differences) at once require and produce the tabula as the reliable and transparent medium of places in series, each held by a name/noun. The work of representational discourse is to provide an analytical description of what is already there, complexly and confusedly, in the representation given already to perception or in picture, and nothing more. In the final analysis, the tabula is always and already language itself. At least, this is how language is utopian, when it functions as that perfect transparent medium—that grid-space—in which all things can be named and arrayed in logical sequence. When replete, language can be regarded as the “common discourse” of representation and things, the place where nature and human nature intersect.

Foucault elaborates one further crucial feature of the Classical episteme already alluded to, that it cannot represent representation; it cannot account for its own operations. When this self-reflexive questioning begins, Foucault argues, the threshold of the Modern appears: “the great detour, the great quest, beyond representation, for the very being of what is represented” begins, and the discovery occurs of “a sort of behind-the-scenes world even deeper and more dense than representation itself” (240, 239).

In The Falls, the VUE Commission is caught, in medias res, performing exactly this representational activity. Its extremely pedantic language serves only an instrumental purpose, so that the changes to the VUE victims’ bodies, for instance, are carefully analyzed according to changes in musculature, organs of sight and smell, internal organs, and appearance (body color changes especially). The same may be said for the VUE diseases, the VUE languages, and the victims’ dreams. The Commission’s analyses engender the grid by building up categories and subcategories. Throughout The Falls, Greenaway plays constantly on the notion of both the film medium and language as mutually transparent languages—the image, so clear and readable, so evidential (hence the panoply of documentary usages)—and on language it-
self as the analytical tool of representation—the voice-over sets the reading of the images and arranges their elements into ordered succession. The very frequent allusions to maps, photographs, diagrams, catalogues, lists, cartography, serial musical works, and other empirical systems redouble the VUE Commission’s compilations, to suggest, in effect, a whole civilization expending all its energies on the vast project of its own representation, after the catastrophe. This doubled pretense, which effectively contaminates *The Falls* through a tremendous complication of its own fictive generation, puts the join between conventions of documentary and those of institutional discourse constantly in doubt, and, in so doing, corresponds closely to Foucault’s account of representation’s incapacity to represent representation.

When it becomes obvious that the VUE recedes into the future of the film’s discourse and into its past simultaneously, the diegetic history the film premises becomes a vast simultaneity; we are left in that “infinity” of the *tabula*. The first subversion of *The Falls* is the subversion of the modern assumptions of a narrative film. The second arises from the site familiar to the Classical *episteme*, for the VUE Directory is where intersecting representations could go on for millions of entries in complete homogeneity of perfect collation of similarities and differences. Now, we need to ask, what is in *The Falls* that troubles this edition of the Classical *tabula* and its confidence in the paradigmatic taxonomy, which should be “providing adequate signs for all representations . . . establishing possible links between them” (66). Negatively, we must immediately assert that it is and is not modernity, for Greenaway has, in the manner he has structured *The Falls*, diffused the authority of modern historical ordering of knowledge (as embedded in film narratives), even while insisting something has happened that has remade human history the “new order of time.”

In another sense, modernity does intrude but from a strange direction. The first of these might be called the desire for self-reflection that the inadequacy of representation arouses. Then, in those other spaces I have called the film’s interstices, arise the oddities of the proper name, and the pre-classical *episteme*. The term *biographemes* (Barthes, *Camera Lucida*; Della Penna and Shedden) helps to keep a distinction between proper biographies and what the Commission seeks to do with the victims’ lives. Through selection—bits from a life are written into categorical schemes—they are taking de-temporalized story “snapshots” out of a life. The narrative sketches of each VUE victim populate the film’s archive with highly idiosyncratic individuals. But each individual and each idiosyncrasy is broken down and inserted into a system of categorization as it is narrated. In addition to languages, diseases, and physical changes, other details of a victim’s life,
profession, avocation, aspiration, and sexual proclivities are linked with symptoms—the state of his teeth, nose, breathing, dreaming, gender, and so on. As the short story of a victim unfolds, its details are folded into categories of diseases, language, and obsessions and the “personality” vanishes, or rather is willed away. The implied categories simultaneously convey the strangeness of the VUE and try to tame it. The latter effort is consistently unsuccessful, for connections are not persuasively drawn.

Typically, the biographies tell a life divided into pre-VUE and post-VUE phases, how the victims vary diversely, speak new languages, suffer diseases and other physical changes. But this variety, like each victim’s idiosyncrasy, is ordered. The discourses rhyme with the activity of mapping (cartographical diagrammatic processes are constantly alluded to in the images).¹⁵

These are the arbitrary codes of representation, but they are precritically taken to manifest the order of things, starting with the alphabet but extending across the whole panoply of uses familiar to us from what Foucault calls the “human sciences.” The categories are further broken down into multiple subtypes.

However, this system of the Commission’s grid and categories is never fully accounted, much less justified. The actual structure of the whole archive is never revealed because the terms are meant (parodically, that is) to operate like a classical representation—an ordered series, not an abstracted grid, format, or mode of inquiry. The biographies operate systematically on a grid of indexical signifiers (that is, symptoms or marks) controlling the distribution of details, but the categories never admit of signification, are never opened to the system/discourse relation. There are semiotic systems at work here, but without what seems essential to Modern epistemic reasonableness: namely, semiotic critique and foundation. They are pre-critical in the sense that they never leave the space of representation to account for its operations. The institutional amnesia of the VUE Commission, symptom of what Foucault sees as representation unable to show itself representing, is the undoing of its own discourses.

Greenaway offers a very obvious trope to highlight this problematic in The Falls. As the viewer watches the film, he or she soon notices that many of the VUE symptoms being registered have to do with people who are, in varying degrees, mutating into birds. The Commission’s discourse processes this strangeness through schemata that are rational without being explanatory. Even the simplest, most obvious depth-continuities between victims are never explicated. The Commission never says that these people are turning into birds, that the VUE is a catastrophe because it has upset the phyla of natural evolution. The discourse never steps outside its system of collation to re-
flect on the bases of its system. On the one hand, this failure pertains to the fact that the Commission never gets down to the “simplest elements” of the VUE languages and physical changes, which remain far too complex. Then, too, the combination of elements remains enigmatic to its tabula. What do languages have to do with diseases and diseases to do with geographical sites? The VUE Commission is stalled between the representations given to it and analysis, since such features of the VUE belong to discourses far too remote.
from one another for us not to ask: What did these diverse phenomena have to do with one another? While this might well exemplify general problems with the state of the social sciences as we commonly encounter them, Greenaway pursues the logic of this complexity of representational categories much further than we usually encounter, for the generalities that pester the Commission are unstoppable and cannot even be imagined to attain explanatory elegance.

Worse, the Commissioners seem incapable of even suggesting anything of the density of the internal and paradoxical relations among the matter they report: that the victims are immortal but diseased, that they are possessed of expressive new languages (languages consistently redolent of desire, languages rooted in the body’s recesses) but are threatened with linguistic solipsism; that their genders are full (for each possesses two), but they are sterile. That, in short, the victims have become doubles of themselves, all-too-human and non-human at the same time. Greenaway ensures that the viewer notices this, for the victims consistently anticipate their traits, inclinations, and obsessions even before the VUE radically bifurcated their lives. Further, the victims also double the work of the Commission with their own eccentric and massed counter-discourse, which is nothing less than their search for their origins.

All this points at once to a Modern question, and an ancient one. It concerns the “order of being.” In commenting on Foucault, Dreyfus and Rabinow remark,

The classical age set itself the project of constructing a universal method of analysis which would yield perfect certainty by perfectly ordering representations and signs to mirror the ordering of the world, the order of being—for being, in the classical age, had a universal order. (19)

The “order of being” was assumed to be homogeneous and the same as the order of representation. The VUE, however, has tangled being into a heterogeneity, human being is now disordered. The victims’ human substance (the signs of the body, the signs of language) have been slightly mutated. The VUE does not belong to nature as the Classical age conceived it; being no longer has a universal form, and the tabula pulls apart because of the weight of that difference.

One of the powerful linguistic means Greenaway uses to suggest this is the use of proper names, which in this film are baroque in their strangeness and involve a complex array of puns and spiraling suggestions.16 Their principle structural effect is to indicate that the human species of the victims is mutating into a multiplicity of species, represented by the mul-

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tiplicity of languages. The idiosyncrasy of names overthrows the homogeneity of the “noun” (of classical nomenclature and hence taxonomy) on which the edifice of representation rests. The 92 million victims do not partake of the same differential substance, human or “VUE victim,” but multiple substances, multiple species. Their odd names and odder new languages are united emblems of the plurality of their being. Their names signify their status: these are beings that can no longer be truthfully grouped by the representational “noun.” Moreover, their languages have deranged the language of representation, for VUE languages cannot be corralled inside representation’s functional, operational language that belongs to the tabula. In one of the brilliant turns on the film’s massed redundancy, Greenaway ensures that the VUE languages are languages as, Foucault explains, modernity understands them: rooted in the body’s recesses, expressive of desires, the VUE languages exemplify the “behind the scenes world even deeper and more dense than representation itself” (Foucault, 239). The being of the VUE victims has taken on a new eschatological character of modernity itself, as Guy Gutting comments:

A thing is not what it is because of its place in the ideal classification system but because of its place in real history. The order of concrete existing things is from now on determined not by ideal essences outside them but by historical forces buried within them. (181)

History, the VUE catastrophe, is that force that, buried within the victims, has mutated them. They stand against the unities of representation. Now, although the viewer may well infer all this, such inferences are importantly absent from the VUE Commission’s representational discourse. They arise from the interstices of the film and from a viewer’s increasingly aggressive interpretive stance, born of doubt and confusion, and boredom with repetition. Even the simplest suggestions are not yet discovered by the VUE Commission, as if they were facing some pre-historic or, as the fiction of The Falls insists, post-eschatological dictionary written on the body. Like Frampton’s “Maternal Hopi,” the VUE victims are a vast heterogeneous found archive whose codex is not yet known, but whose institutional discourse is being organized through the imposition of an arbitrary, supremely confident, but inadequate system of differences and similarities. Because The Falls exaggerates the counter-tendency toward idiosyncratic characterization and insistence on the very strange individuation wrought by the VUE that rhymes with the odd names and tongues of the VUE victims far better than with the frail categories of the Commission, heterotopia is where fascination builds and
fulminates. More, the biographies include the victims’ own theories of and abundant researches into the VUE. The VUE Commission’s stance precludes empathy with their strangeness, relegating it to the category of another sort of mental deformation of the human substance: the victims’ peculiarities become themselves material for categorization. And, the Commission meticulously records them.

In *The Falls*, as the review of Foucault is meant to suggest, the VUE Commission inherits the discursive style of the Classical *episteme*. The grid of categories—the analytical pretense about the VUE languages, the symptomatology of the VUE diseases, the schematic biographemes, the mathematical correlations and cross-references, in short, the apparatus of classical knowledge—enters the film. This is, however, why *The Falls* becomes a *heterotopia*: the *tabula* falls piece by piece into ruin, and Greenaway’s great success with the film is to keep its entropy and its discursive classicism going to the end at a matched pace. The VUE victims are akin to Borges’s fantastic animals. It is not that they do not fit the table of similarities and differences—they are in any case forced to do so—or that their representation cannot satisfy our hopes through analysis and ordering, although I have tried to suggest that the victims do in fact threaten the whole system. What may finally matter is that they are massively *in excess* of the Commission’s representational discourse, which is the most radical threat to its system. What does it mean that people are turning into birds? If, for Foucault, in classical discourse “content is indicated only in representation that posits itself as such” (64), the utopian promise should exhaust in an isomorphic mapping between beings and language. That is his “great utopia.” But in *The Falls*, the discourse does not double over itself in this way. Instead, it feeds back and points to the gaps between columns and vectors in the grid: What do the multiplication of genders, the proliferation of languages, people becoming birds, and so on have to do with each other?

Such destructive questions are the result of Greenaway’s strategic exaggerations, which, first of all, allow conceptual gaps to appear between the squares of the grid structure. There are no points where the film’s representational work can join one complex idea to another without calling attention to a gap. This gap is the need for an explanation—a method. This, the Classical *episteme* cannot, in principle, provide, for, as Foucault explains, such reflexive thinking is a modern provenance. So, the space, or plane of representation, is bent and perverted. However, it is never broken. Indeed, the stubborn commentary continues to the end, stretching toward that discursive infinity Foucault attributes to the classical *episteme*. Yet the laughter is resonant with that induced by Borges. The grid is absurdly atomized and cir-
culates ridiculously, opening many gaps, different spaces, suggestions of hidden recesses and depths.

Finally, as *The Falls* shadows these opening gaps with the idiosyncratic efforts of the VUE victims to record and explain the phenomenon that affects them, these interstices solicit greater and greater degrees of the viewer’s interest. The victims’ openly crazy, banal, charming, or often paranoid theories are no worse than the Commission’s. These multiple theories accumulate a unifying logic of their own and, not incidentally, a way to turn over the whole question of people turning into birds, which is, after all, the one thing these new beings have in common. People are not just mutating, they are devolving; but the point is that they theorize that there is something to devolve into.

To interpret what that might mean perhaps requires evoking the earliest of Foucault’s *epistemes*, resemblance (17–45). He situates it in the Renaissance, but it suggests a much more ancient wisdom. In this *episteme*, knowledge is founded on the sense that beings are not homogeneous but that they “emulate” each other across the universe. The extreme variety of the victims can be read—quite easily in fact—under the interpretive regime Foucault calls the “four similitudes.” Here, the sign is an inscription, a mark, an index written into things, as it is onto the bodies of the VUE victims. The victims’ “paranoid” theories are really a hermeneutic “commentary” on evidence that Greenaway ensures mixes legend (the myth of Icarus is repeated often), history (of flight, predominantly) and science (ornithology), cosmology, cartography, and a broad selection of the arts and art theories.¹⁷

The VUE victims are nothing if not fabulously promiscuous in their intellectual and artistic interests, and Greenaway provokes them constantly to perform a massive countering subinscription of the oldest and most recodite, indeed often Gnostic, interpretive schemes in the spaces opened in the gaps of the Commission’s infinite representation. But their promiscuity is as deceptive as their eccentricity, for all their theories and activities have the same hermeneutical destination, their own new substance, their bird-ness. Needless to say, never the author of the film’s discourse, Greenaway does not commit himself to their endeavors, but instead allows the VUE victims themselves vastly to compound the already massed authorship of *The Falls*. But in the steady glare of the subversions he enacts upon the cinema’s narrative entanglements with the Modern *episteme*, and the stupendous (and stupefying) comedy he has constructed on the ruinous parody of the still-dominant institutional platform of the Classical *episteme*, his bemused but imaginative engagement with, and his tireless and sympathetic invention of, these teeming “characters” who populate *The Falls* finally makes within the
film a delicate architecture for the author's own imaginative investment of a very different, though impossible, utopia.

NOTES

1. These conversations include several the author had with Greenaway during his visit to Toronto in 1984. Sitney’s “The Falls” offers an interesting interpretation of the reference to Frampton’s film, based on the fact that *hapax logomena* is, in classical philology, a word that appears only once in the corpus, posing distinctive problems of definition. The language to which Greenaway gives that name appears only once among the VUE languages.

2. British structural filmmakers produced several important accounts of the movement and a significant amount of theory. These are gathered in *Structural Film Anthology*. Both Le Grice (1977) and Gidal (1989) also produced detailed theoretical accounts. For an account of the movement’s career in British radical film culture, see Rodowick (126–146).

3. It is the Canadian filmmaker-critic R. Bruce Elder who best articulates this position with respect to *Wavelength* and Snow particularly, and other Canadian film artists generally, in his *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* (185–213 on *Wavelength*; 243–295 on postmodernism and Canadian avant-garde film). Elder’s foil in this analysis is Brakhage.

4. Snow (in Gidal, 1976, 50–51) and Frampton (in Gidal, 1976, 75–77) rigorously disagreed with Gidal’s and Le Grice’s interpretations of their films. I discuss the history of these debates in “An Axiomatic Cinema: Michael Snow’s Films” (26–83).

5. In the spring of 1990, the Art Gallery of Ontario mounted what I, as programmer, intended to be a complete retrospective of Greenaway’s films, including his documentaries and television pieces. Although the filmmaker was extremely helpful in securing rare copies of many works, he refused to make his earliest films available.

6. Although Greenaway wished to meet them, Sitney reports that he was traveling to Buffalo, New York, in 1984 finally to make Frampton’s acquaintance when the ailing American suddenly died.

7. See Naomi Greene, 43–48 and 122–125. Greene situates Pasolini’s concept of “contamination” in two settings: his “pastiche” of materials—for example, using Bach on a soundtrack to accompany the brutish behavior of proletarian characters; and Pasolini’s theory of filmic enunciation, “free indirect subjectivity,” which involves the discursive sliding pastiche of character and narration in point of view, which Pasolini regarded as equivalent to linguistic mixtures. Also see Pasolini himself, in “Living Signs and Dead Poets.”
8. *A Walk through H* has much about it that suggests the unidentified Borges tale that Jean Baudrillard analyzes briefly at the beginning of *Simulations*, as well as and more obviously Borges’s “Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (3–19).

9. In this respect (and not this respect alone), Greenaway’s films bear comparison with the “New Wave” science-fictions the British doctor-become-writer J. G. Ballard was composing at the same time, the 1970s, particularly the stories collected in *The Best Short Stories of J. G. Ballard* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995) and the novel *The Drowned World* (London: Carroll and Gradd, 1987). The usual literary association is with the Italo Calvino of *Invisible Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1974) and *Cosmicomics* (London: Sphere Books, 1982), whose name is voiced in the same breath as Jorge Luis Borges in discussions of Greenaway. However, I find the allegorical sensibility so important a part of Calvino’s short fictions to be of a very different character than Greenaway’s, whose interests in the entropy of the systematizing intellect share a greater kinship with his fellow Englishman’s science-fiction. This connection remains, however, unexplored.

10. When Greenaway redeployes the delicate and measured pictorialism of *Windows* and *Water Wrackets* in his narrative films, for instance, *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, the images might be supposed all over again in the narrative register of his later films to articulate the plot. To a degree they do. However, he ensures that they do not perform the task adequately. In the case of *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, his protagonist, the systematic but finally hapless Mr. Neville, proves himself fatally unable to penetrate the images’ muteness despite his arrogance on just this matter. Given the recurrence of Neville’s problem among other Greenaway protagonists, like those of *Drowning by Numbers* and *The Belly of an Architect* and the villain Spica in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, one must regard Greenaway as inclined toward dramas that repeatedly incarnate a sort of epistemological disaster not so much because images deceive (though they do seduce) but because they never yield up necessary information.

11. The concept of parametric narration in cinema being invoked here was first proposed by Noel Burch in *The Theory of Film Practice*. David Bordwell provides a careful and well-illustrated study of parametric narration in *Narration in the Fiction Film* (274–310). The origins of parametricity lie in modern music theory. One of the advanced theorists and practitioners of its forms is Michael Nyman, the composer whose collaboration with Greenaway begins in the 1970s and continues through most of the feature films and other works for the next fifteen or so years (see Nyman, 1974). Burch’s and Bordwell’s analysis deal with a number of filmmakers for whom Greenaway has expressed the highest admiration, like Michelangelo Antonioni and especially Alain Resnais, whose *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) must be regarded as the paradigm case of parametric narration in fiction filmmaking, as Frampton’s *Zorn’s Lemma* (1970) and Michael Snow’s `<—>` (1968–1969) are the exemplary instances of parametric structural filmmaking in avant-garde cinema.
12. Foucault writes, “It is no longer origin that gives rise to history; it is historicity that, in its very fabric, makes possible the necessity of an origin which must be both internal and foreign to it: like the virtual tip of a cone in which all differences, all dispersions, all discontinuities would be knitted together so as to form no more than a single point of identity, the impalpable figure of the Same, yet possessing the power, nevertheless, to burst open upon itself and become Other” (329–330).

13. Foucault expressly names exemplary thinkers of this modern type: Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, Spengler, and Nietzsche (334).

14. This is not the only allusion to the Hitchcock film. For example, victims who wish them are provided with a set of pseudonymous identities, and one of these is “Melanie Daniels” (played by Tipi Hedren), heroine of *The Birds* and first victim of a bird attack. See also Amy Lawrence’s discussion of *The Falls* in *The Films of Peter Greenaway* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

15. Of the Classical episteme’s reliance on maps, diagrams, and pictures as types of the “content-less” sign filled only by its representational function, Foucault writes, “In fact, the signifying element has no content, no function, and no determination other than what it represents: it is entirely ordered upon and transparent to it. But this content is indicated only in representation that posits itself as such, and that which is signified resides, without residuum and without opacity, within the representation of the sign. It is characteristic that the first example of a sign given by the *Logique de Port-Royal* is not the word, nor the cry, nor the symbol, but the spatial and graphic representation—the drawing as map or picture. This is because the picture has no other content on fact than that which it represents, and yet that content is made visible only because it is represented by a representation” (64).

16. Sitney (1990) is particularly adept at noting some of the peculiar names, and his commentary (50) on biography 30 points us toward the way Greenaway underscores the punning on names in the film.

17. Because Sitney takes Greenaway’s skepticism to be the interpretive key to *The Falls*, he offers this explanation of the VUE victims’ “paranoid” theories (47): “Following perhaps Freud’s suggestion of the links between paranoia and the elaboration of philosophical systems, Greenaway introduces another dimension of doubt by having his creatures offer a range of theories about the malevolent nature of the event . . . ” On the other hand, Sitney also glancingly entertains the prospect that Greenaway comes close to expressing a “gnostic theology of his encyclopedia of fallenness” (“The Falls,” 48).
II

POSTMODERN FEATURES

“Arriving at a conclusion even though one cannot come to an end.”

Edmond Jabès
The purpose of this essay is to analyze the structural similarities between two filmic narratives, Alain Resnais’s *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) and Peter Greenaway’s *The Draughtsman’s Contract* (1982). In a television interview, Greenaway cited *Marienbad* as having had a great deal of influence on him and, in a *Sight and Sound* interview, he explicitly stated that his approach to shooting *The Draughtsman’s Contract* was guided by *Marienbad* (Brown, 38). Alan Woods states that Greenaway has often referred to his debt to Resnais’s film, “a film of unreliable story telling but no straightforward narrative, of statues in a formal garden, of (literal) theatricality, of deep perspectives, of games-playing, of repetitions, which lies more obviously behind many elements of Greenaway’s cinema” (16). The similarities between these two films point to the development of a postmodern/poststructuralist style in cinema whose contours have not yet fully been theorized. While there are recently published books that do deal with postmodern cinema, these studies do not cover the idea of a postmodern cinema based on poststructuralist theories in any depth (see Brooker, and Degli-Esposti). In this article, I am mostly interested in comparing the narrative techniques of the two films since it is here that the form of a postmodern/poststructuralist cinema can be most clearly seen at the moment; it is not within the scope of this essay to address the development of a particular cinematic language and visual style.

I will argue that *Marienbad*, although usually seen as part of modernist art cinema, is a seminal work in the development of a postmodern/poststructuralist cinema. Its innovative narrative strategies are linked to those of the French New Novel, which has been seen by literary critics and by some of the New Novelists themselves as the turning point between modernism and postmodernism (Smyth, 54–55). Alain Robbe-Grillet, the leading writer and theoretician of this movement, scripted *Marienbad* and with the collaboration of the director, Alain Resnais, brought the New
Novel’s strategies to the screen. These narrative strategies include: the mise-en-abyme technique, self-reflexivity, serialism, the presentation of unsolvable enigmas, and the forwarding of multiple meanings and contradictions that are left open for the audience’s active interpretation.

In 1961, the meeting of a filmmaker in search of a new cinematographic style and of a novelist eager to break with the aesthetics of the traditional novel gave birth to *Last Year at Marienbad*. Both Resnais and Robbe-Grillet can be characterized by the frequency of the theme of absence in their work, of life as an illusion, of the fluidity of time perceptions, the demystification of social and cultural ideologies, and the importance of mental images and ellipses (Maakaroun, 105). Robbe-Grillet went on to direct feature films himself. However, there are noted differences between Resnais and Robbe-Grillet that have translated into a different reception of their films. Joël Magny points out that Resnais’s films, in spite of their montages of mental states, are more conventional in form and content than those of Robbe-Grillet and have, therefore, been more popular (147). If Resnais’s films deal with political situations per se, Robbe-Grillet’s works deal more with writing and filmmaking as ways of deconstructing knowledge, that is, ideology. He transforms already known fictions, texts, and their givens—myths, images, fantasies (Magny, 155–156).

Greenaway’s *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, like *Marienbad*, is a happy conjunction of Resnais’s political concerns and Robbe-Grillet’s deconstructive aims. In his film, Greenaway brings the narrative strategies of the New Novel to the screen but keeps a certain fullness of the real that engages the audience’s emotions. In both *Marienbad* and *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, the audience is presented with a mystery that is never resolved. We never know if X really met A at Marienbad, nor do we ever learn who killed Mrs. Herbert’s husband in *The Draughtsman’s Contract*. This strategy of presenting an enigma whose resolution is left open to the audience is an important one in relation to the unusual narrative structures used by these films. According to Woods, “Many are irritated by this refusal to solely fulfill the canons of the linear narrative, tying ends neatly, finding solutions of completion, locking the whole together in an orthodox manner, sending the audience home satisfied that good has prevailed, a solution has been found, evil has been put back in its box, the waters have been calmed” (240).

Postmodern/Poststructuralist forms put forth a multiplicity of meanings, or “truths,” in order to put into question any fixed or totalizing vision of reality. This is different from modernism’s focus on epistemological doubt through the forwarding of an ambiguous, subjective point of view. Modernism’s focus is analogous to Einstein’s principles of relativity, which were
not predicated upon the denial of causality; rather, notions of absolute knowledge were disavowed because the position of the observer was seen to be relative to the thing observed. According to Scott Bukatman, Einstein stopped short of embracing a thorough relativism. In the world of quantum physics, however, which is the world of postmodernism, the observer fundamentally determines the events, and the universe is cast as a field of possibilities devoid of absolute causation. Our perception of reality consequently appears contradictory, dualistic, and paradoxical (173–174).

This kind of postmodernist narrative is related as well to poststructuralist epistemologies. Poststructuralist thought grows out of the theories of structuralist thinkers such as Saussure and Lévi-Strauss but also operates as a critique of these thinkers—especially in the work of Jacques Derrida (Burgoyne, 23). This critique can be extended to include modernist forms of art and literature since, as Barthes has pointed out, the concepts underlying modernism are linked to structuralist modes of thought. Both are based not on analogy of substance (as in so-called realist art) but on the analogy of functions. There is a fabrication of a world not in order to copy the real world but to render it intelligible (“The Structuralist Activity,” 125–137). In the same way that poststructuralist thought bases itself on structuralism and yet is critical of it, postmodern forms of art, literature, and film are based on modernist ones while also being critical of them.

There are, broadly, two main streams in postmodern theory and practice: one aligned with the work of Derrida and the other with that of Jameson. In film criticism, the prevalent notions about postmodernism come from Jameson, who sees the postmodern style developing in conjunction with the emergence of a postindustrial consumer society. Pastiche, which Jameson defines as the imitation of dead styles and which he sees as a sign of imprisonment in the past, is an important strategy of postmodern popular films. According to him, this strategy recycles past styles of filmmaking in a nostalgic evocation of past values and as a covert reinforcement of conventional ideologies (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 111–125). Even Doctorow, whom Jameson sees as one of the few “genuinely Left or radical novelists at work today,” is, according to him, like other postmodern artists, condemned to seek the historical past in pop images and stereotypes of that past (Postmodernism, 21–25). However, by putting past styles and narrative forms in quotation marks, so to speak, these postmodern works make the audience aware that these are constructions of reality rather than reality itself. It is this awareness of the artificiality of fictional realities that links the use of pastiche in popular works to poststructuralist/postmodern narrative forms that put into question any construction of reality claiming to be the definitive one.
As Jim Collins has pointed out, Jameson’s pessimism about postmodern art forms is not always justified. In those circles where politics of race and sexuality are taken seriously, critical postmodernism is identified with a politics of contestation and change. Within this politics of diversity and difference, “value” is not abandoned—only absolute “truth values,” or transcendent universal qualities as proof or verification for all evaluation (341). In other words, postmodern works can effectively act in a critical manner toward the dominant ideologies even if they do not adopt one universal truth or grand narrative, such as Jameson’s Marxism.

Other postmodern techniques, besides pastiche, have been used in postmodern literature and films. In addressing the similarities between The Draughtsman’s Contract and Marienbad, I intend, partly, to trace the influence of such literary techniques on poststructuralist/postmodern narrative films. There is no doubt that Greenaway also uses the self-reflective Brechtian techniques of Godard and the ambiguous subjective point of view on reality of a modernist such as Ingmar Bergman. There are important differences, however, in Greenaway’s use of such techniques. A purely Brechtian cinema tends to anchor its meaning in a particular argument, rather than leave it
completely free for audience interpretation (Kuhn, 264–265). Although films such as Bergman’s, which are influenced by twentieth-century modernist literature and which Bordwell terms “the art cinema” (205–233), retain an ambiguous, subjective point of view of reality and are characterized by a loosening of cause and effect structures, they do not adopt illogical narrative structures. Bordwell sees Marienbad as being the first narrative fiction film to do so (278).

The Draughtsman’s Contract and Marienbad use modern and postmodern techniques to question accepted values, particularly those of the property-owning bourgeois class. Perhaps the most important postmodern technique deployed by these works is that of juxtaposing different constructions of reality so as to put into question the idea that there is only one truth about reality. Greenaway comments that “in the end, we ‘read’ everything, putting forward some personal or borrowed order with which to discipline every chaos, hoping for rules—and if there aren’t any, then inventing some” (Ciment, 8; my translation). In other words, he sees us as creating different constructions of reality in an attempt to make sense of the world. Some of these constructions—such as the rationalist accounts of science and the spiritualist accounts of religion—contradict each other. Greenaway’s approach to filmmaking is based on the acceptance, rather than on the avoidance, of contradictory constructions of reality. Lyotard argued, in The Postmodern Condition, that the acceptance of heterogeneous language games is an important aspect of postmodern knowledge. There is not one truth, but many truths that contradict one another and coexist. Lyotard concludes his study of the postmodern condition by challenging us to accept this multiplicity of truths:

We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer: Let us wage war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unpresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name. (81–82)

Postmodern works thus leave their audience with the task of deciding how to deal with the contradictions that are presented.

Bruce Morrissette, one of the most important critics to write on the techniques used in Robbe-Grillet’s novels, has shown how Marienbad is bound to a revolution in the novel—a revolution that he sees as destined to
overturn the style and structure of traditional narration. Morrissette sees this new type of narrative as ground-breaking because it demands that the spectator take part in the process of creation of the work (213). It is true that Brechtian strategies already fostered in the reader/spectator a more distanced and critical attitude toward the version of reality that was being presented. However, while a Brechtian work might involve its audience in an argument, it also tends to lead them toward a particular conclusion. According to Annette Kuhn, “the various discourses of the text tend to work in concert with one another to ‘anchor’ meaning.” Within feminist filmmaking this mode is called “deconstructive cinema” and is to be differentiated from “feminine writing,” which, for Kuhn, privileges heterogeneity and multiplicity of meanings in its mode of address (264–265).

In *Marienbad*, we never know whose version of the past to believe. X, the protagonist, claims that he met A, the heroine, last year at Marienbad. A denies the truth of this statement and X’s construction of reality is continuously put into question by the film. In *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, we are presented with two murders and various possibilities as to who the murderers are. We are also presented with questions about gender and property relations and are left to sort out who are the victims and the victimizers in these relations. In *Marienbad*, the protagonist’s own identity is put into question. In the preface to the published script, Robbe-Grillet offers multiple possibilities for his identity:

Is the stranger an ordinary seducer? Is he mad? Or is he merely confusing two faces? The young woman, in any case, takes it all first as a game […] But the man is serious . . . she seems to accept her role as the woman that the stranger has been expecting, and appears ready to go away with him, toward something […] love, poetry, freedom . . . or, perhaps, death . . . (13–14)

While a seducer, a madman, or an ordinary but confused individual are rather different character structures, we never learn which one of these X really is. Nor do we learn whether the couple really escapes, or whether their escape will lead to death, as all of these possible outcomes are implied by the voice-over. In the end, it is the nature of love itself which is being questioned—is it an illusion, a form of madness, a way to save oneself from the confines of society, or does it lead right back into these confines? One of the contradictions in *Marienbad* is between love as an expression of freedom from society’s structures and love as a form of insanity that has no place in society’s structures. Love can, of course, also entrap one in society’s structures.
Morrissette sees *Marienbad* as a love story that unfolds “realistically” insofar as it portrays the shifting emotions that the two characters experience. He deduces that Robbe-Grillet is attempting to depict emotions, rather than individual characters, through contradictory images open to multiple interpretations. As in Robbe-Grillet’s novel *La Jalousie*, this is achieved through the detemporalization of mental states and the mixture of memories, imagination, desire, and affective projections. Robbe-Grillet explains that, in *Marienbad*:

> We can only be dealing . . . with a subjective, mental, personal development. These things must be happening in someone’s mind. But in whose? The hero narrator? Or the hypnotized heroine’s? Or else through a constant exchange of images between the two of them, in both their minds at the same time? It would be better to agree on a solution of a different order: in the same way that the only time that matters here is that of the film, the only “character” who matters is the spectator. The whole story is happening in his head, and is precisely imagined by him. (*Snapshot*, 150)

This shifting of responsibility for the existence of the story to the viewer is a characteristically postmodern technique, compatible with Roland Barthes’s view that the death of the author means the birth of the reader. For Barthes, “a text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author” (212). In a postmodern text, such as *Marienbad*, this multiplicity of meanings is purposely left open for the reader so that the ultimate meaning of the text is created by each reader/viewer rather than by the author/filmmaker. This, according to Barthes, “liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law” (212). In this regard, it is amusing to see the draughtsman, Mr. Neville, take on the dictatorial qualities of a traditional author. One of the characters in the film, Mr. Talman, notes that Mr. Neville seems to “have the god-like power of emptying the landscape.” It is true that I’m writing about Greenaway as an “auteur,” but he is one who also questions his “authorial role”; my concern is more to place his work in a broad cultural context than to enshrine his “vision.”

In a chapter entitled “Postmodern Generative Fiction,” Morrissette delineates some of the self-reflexive techniques used by Robbe-Grillet. One of the most important of these is what novelist André Gide was the first to
name, the “mise-en-abyme” technique. As an example, Gide pointed to the role of the inner play in *Hamlet*. The difference, in postmodern works, is that the characters in the fiction are not aware of the duplications that mirror their situation (*Novel and Film*, 8). In *Marienbad*, the play within the film mirrors the story of the film: a man waits for a woman to leave another man and become his lover. This duplication emphasizes the fact that these are both constructions of reality.

The mise-en-abyme technique functions in a self-reflexive manner because it points to the fact that we are watching a story that has been told before, even if in another form. Ultimately, it should lead the audience to realize that all accounts of reality are constructions rather than “truths.” Lyotard affirms that even scientific knowledge is made up of constructions of reality that change over time as one construction replaces another as the “true” one (26). In *Marienbad*, this idea is again brought to the fore when X and A discuss the many possible meanings that can be attributed to the statue of the couple with the dog. As Amy Lawrence points out, “At a central point in each film, the characters stop and contemplate a work of art [. . .] Debating its meaning, they find no clear answer or, rather, too many answers, none with greater purchase than another” (63). In *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, Mr. Neville speculates on the possible meanings of a painting.¹

Peter Greenaway also makes use of the mise-en-abyme technique in his film. Mr. Neville is asked by Mrs. Herbert to make twelve drawings of her estate during her husband’s absence. Complying with Mr. Neville’s wishes, Mrs. Herbert promises sexual favors as well as money in return. The grid-like, square viewfinder through which Mr. Neville views each scene he is going to draw duplicates the camera’s point of view in the cinematic process. This is emphasized by the fact that the grid is placed in front of the camera many times in the course of the film. “Balanced on a black lacquered tripod, the frame metonymically figures the film screen, whose perfectly composed images are fixed by Greenaway’s static camera” (Lawrence, 51). This use of the mise-en-abyme technique comments on the process of representation in the cinema and should make the viewer aware that the film itself is a construction of reality. Greenaway freely acknowledges his desire to emphasize this process:

> The film is essentially about a draughtsman drawing a landscape, and the facets of the drawing and the landscape are compared on another level of representation, the film. I want those three ideas to be present in the whole structure of the movie, so that one is aware that we are making comparisons all the time between the real landscape, Mr. Neville’s image...
of it and, ultimately, us as viewers seeing those ideas represented on film. (Brown, 35)

This instance of the mise-en-abyme technique is central to the ideological import of the film. Its use implicates the audience and the cinematographic apparatus itself in the bourgeois ideology that sets up a relationship of objectification/ownership with nature. The implied contradiction is that art both celebrates nature and exploits it. The other contradiction that occurs is that the draughtsman’s drawings, while intended to show off the wealth of the property-owning class, also reveal their crimes, both by inadvertently showing evidence of Mr. Herbert’s murder and by pointing to the crimes of a capitalist/rationalist society. The square view-finder that he uses, with its emphasis on measuring and squaring-off the view, is an apt metaphor for the ways in which the bourgeoisie sees nature as an object that can be measured, quantified, and owned.

There is a constant juxtaposition of the camera’s view of the landscape with the drawing of that particular view in various stages of completion. “In The Draughtsman’s Contract, the draughtsman’s perspective frame is explicitly compared to a camera; the film camera which both repeats and frames its views poised between subjectivity and objectivity” (Woods, 45). The draughtsman’s drawings are “realistic” and use Renaissance perspective techniques. The camera obscura, the predecessor of the film camera, was closely linked to this method of drawing, which was designed to give the appearance of depth and three dimensionality to a flat surface. In “The Tutor Code of Classical Cinema,” Daniel Dayan cites Oudart’s analysis of the ideological maneuvers of Classical figurative painting, where the viewer is positioned as owner of the gaze so that the objects presented seem real:

Functioning without being perceived, the codes reinforce the ideology which they embody while the painting produced “an impression of reality” (effet-de-réal). This invisible functioning of the figurative codes can be defined as a “naturalization”: the impression of reality produced testifies that the figurative codes are “natural” (instead of being ideological products). It imposes as “truth” the vision of the world entertained by a certain class. (184)

This “realistic” depiction of nature hides the ideology of the bourgeois/mercantile class that rose in power during the Renaissance. Dayan argues that the cinematic apparatus is complicit, in its uses of verisimilitude, with the codes of classical painting (191). Greenaway’s film tries to make us aware of
these codes and of their ideological implications. This ideology is substan-
tially that of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy, which “objectifies and
masters.” As Craig Owens has pointed out, postmodern works attempt to
“upset the reassuring stability of that mastering position” (58). In the film,
notes David Pascoe, “[. . .] Neville observes the garden through the grid of
his view-finder and so occupies a place which is equally that of spectator and
that of a director in the process of filming” (73).

Robbe-Grillet also believed that a certain kind of realism was the prod-
uct and conveyor of bourgeois ideology. In *Towards a New Novel*, he proposed
a correlation between the aesthetic strategies of the New Novel and the
“overthrow of bourgeois values” (64). He explains that his passion for a cer-
tain kind of surface realism is due to his distaste for the property-owning ma-
nia of Western man. For him, there is a new element that separates the New
Novelist from writers like Balzac, Gide, and Madame de La Fayette, whose
works are marked by the old myth of “depth.” The role of the writer tradi-
tionally consisted in “burrowing down into Nature” and the effect of this on
the reader was to reassure him/her about his/her powers of domination over
the world. In *Marienbad*, the illogicality of the depiction of time and space
serves the purpose of destabilizing the viewer’s sense of mastery. An action
may carry from one time and space continuum to another without a cut. For
instance, at the start of the film, a blonde woman who has been part of the
audience watching the play, turns around in the theater and is suddenly sit-
uated in the lobby. According to Bordwell, *Marienbad* combines contradic-
tions of space, time, and events in many variations (*Film Art*, 308).

Robbe-Grillet considers that the revolution that has taken place is
enormous because not only can we not consider the world a possession, but
we also no longer believe in depths. He goes on to add that what people
meant by a well-told story is one that presents them with ready-made ideas
of reality:

The narrative, as conceived by our academic critics and by plenty of read-
ers in their wake, represents a kind of order. This order, which can in fact
be described as natural, is linked to a whole system that is both rational-
ist and organizing, whose development corresponds to the assumption of
power by the middle class. (*Snapshot*, 64)

It is this rationalizing and organizing system that Greenaway parodies
in the device of the square used by the draughtsman in the film, a device
that, he says, he fabricated himself: “We invented our own grid that one
finds throughout the whole film with the use of windows, of vertical and
horizontals, and the refusal of diagonals. The grid through which the draughtsman looks is very close to the viewfinder of the camera” (Ciment, 8; my translation). Of course, what is also parodied in the film is the notion of the artist as a sort of deity who has total control over the universe that he is creating. The actions of Mr. Neville, as he orders everyone about and tries to fix reality so that he can reproduce it in neat little squares, are clearly meant as an ironic commentary on the god-like author of realistic works of art such as the nineteenth century novel. Mr. Neville finds that he cannot control reality. Objects keep appearing in his line of sight and what once seemed an innocent landscape now holds clues to a murder.

Like poststructuralist thinkers, postmodern artists question the notion of an author-given or a God-given truth about reality. Mise-en-abyme techniques are popular with postmodern artists because they underline the idea that any definition of reality is a construct that can be replaced by another construct. The drawings in The Draughtsman’s Contract point to the fact that all filmic reality is a visual construct. The play within Marienbad duplicates the story of the film to emphasize that it is also a construction. As Robbe-Grillet put it, “Today we have decided to assume fully the artificiality of our work; there is no natural order, either moral, political, or narrative; there are only human orders created by man, with all what that implies in terms of the provisional and the arbitrary” (quoted in Stolzfus, 24).
Derrida’s “Structure, Sign and Play in the Human Sciences” marks the moment when poststructuralism opposes itself to classical structuralism, as well as to traditional humanism and empiricism. Classical structuralism, based on Saussure’s linguistics, held out the hope of achieving a “scientific” account of culture by identifying the system that underlies all and any form of cultural production. For Derrida, all such analyses imply that they are based on some secure ground, a “transcendental signified” that is outside the system and thus guarantees its intelligibility (Lodge, 107). However, according to Derrida, there is no secure ground. He, himself, has no qualms about embracing a world of signs without truth and without origin and offering it to our active interpretation (Derrida, 121–122). It is this way of thinking that is akin to that of postmodern artists like Robbe-Grillet and Greenaway—artists who offer unstable structures full of contradictions to the active interpretation of the audience. All works of art can be interpreted in many different ways, but in postmodern works that multiplicity of meanings is emphasized.

In the Draughtsman’s Contract, the unseizability of nature/reality is stressed by the draughtsman’s inability to control the content and meaning of his drawings. As Greenaway explains, “At its very best, the reality of landscape is much more profound than any attempt to try to change it, transform it into art form” (Brown, 41). The upper class depicted in the film is one that is not only full of artifice and ordering impulses but that also tries to impose that order and artifice on nature. Greenaway situates this society in a very particular historical period in England. The events of the film take place in 1694, four years after the battle of Le Boyne. This was a crucial time for English culture because it is at this time that the Stuarts, the Catholic sovereigns, lost the throne to the Protestant Dutch merchants who inaugurated the modern era in England (Brown, 38). This change of guard is reflected in the film by the attitude of the German brother-in-law and the others toward the Catholics, and the draughtsman’s defense of them. As Pascoe tells us, at the center of the film is the issue of the very legitimacy of the ruling classes—highlighted by Talman’s impotency. “Beneath all the ornate social and political structures lies the body, in its base, changeable, unpredictable form; and bodily functions and failures, none of which can be legislated for or against” (82). Here again, the unpredictability of nature/reality becomes evident.

The position of the artist hired by this propertied class is paradoxical. While he is an outsider who does not quite fit in and who does not share their values, he has put his art at their service and has tried to fix and appropriate nature for their use. The function of the artist as “appropriator of
nature” is reflected in his treatment of Mrs. Herbert as a sexual object and possession. That he aspires to emulate the bourgeois classes for whom he works is stressed by the fact that, at the start of the film, we are told that Mr. Herbert holds in esteem his property, his horse, his garden, and his wife, in that order. Mr. Herbert acquired the property upon marrying Mrs. Herbert, and, apparently, she was the least valued of these acquisitions.

The dilemma of the artist is best stated by Mrs. Herbert’s daughter in a central scene in the film. In this scene, the women begin to change their position vis-à-vis the artist. Rather than serving as objects for his use, they begin using him for their own ends and possibly have been doing so from the start. Mrs. Talman inquires as to whether Mr. Neville could disguise the presence of a shirt that is prominent enough in his drawing. Like a true realist, Mr. Neville answers that he tries hard “never to distort or dissemble.” Mrs. Talman points out that in all of his drawings there have appeared, strewn about, various items of clothing belonging to her father. She asks him if he might not soon find the body that inhabited all these clothes. When he protests that the drawings are innocent, she answers that, taken one by one they might be but taken together he could be seen as an accomplice to misadventure. To the draughtsman’s contention that she is fanciful, Mrs. Talman responds with the following speech:

Mr. Neville, I have grown to believe that a really intelligent man makes an indifferent painter. Painting requires a certain blindness—a partial refusal to be aware of all options. An intelligent man will know more than what he is drawing, than he will see, and in the space between knowing and seeing he will become constrained—unable to pursue an idea strongly—fearing that the discerning—those that he is eager to please—will find him wanting if he does not put in not only what he knows but what they know.

As Mr. Neville points out, this is a no-win situation since he cannot be both intelligent and true to what he sees.

A postmodern perspective recognizes that there are many ways of knowing; postmodern artists, such as Greenaway, allow contradictory ways of knowing to co-exist while “realist” artists focus the work on a unified, coherent point of view. This is especially true when vision is limited to the one-eyed perspective of the camera obscura or the film camera. The rules of perspective prevent us from drawing all sides of a cube, for instance, even though we know that they exist. Are we drawing what we see rather than what we know, or are we merely following the rules that tell us what and how
to see? What are the options for the artist in this film and in this society, which surely represents ours? Paradoxically, by drawing what he sees, Mr. Neville also shows the crimes that are being committed under his eyes and through his eyes—not only the murder but also the objectification/appropriation of nature and woman.

There seems to be no way out for the artist in the film and, thus, he becomes the victim who must pay both for being the tool of society and for threatening to show up society’s crimes. A true postmodern paradox. This is made apparent at the end of the film when Mr. Neville becomes the sacrificial victim and is murdered by the society he has been serving. Although the men carry out the deed, the women appear to be in collusion with them, while the living statue—probably a personification of a nature god—looks on indifferently. What is the meaning of this quasi-ritualistic murder and how is it related to the murder of Mr. Herbert? The idea that the victimizer can become the victim is congruent with what happens in ancient myths and rituals involving the death and rebirth of the land. In *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, Greenaway alludes to these ancient myths, that is, to these ancient constructions of reality.

As Elliott and Purdy have pointed out, Greenaway’s work can be associated with the neo-baroque in its complexity and fluidity of form and its propensity to use allegories. “The avant-garde work is thus deliberately and ostentatiously nonorganic in that it makes no attempt to hide the fact that it has been put together from fragments isolated from their original context” (24). In an allegorical work, meanings are neither self-evident nor cohesive and tend to offer resistance to totalizing interpretations. Meanings proliferate but cannot be fixed, migrating instead from detail to detail in a play of significations that settle into no hierarchical arrangement, establish no “truth.”

It is this allegorical play of meaning in *The Draughtsman’s Contract* that I now want to examine. A. S. Byatt has written that no book has had a greater effect on modern literature than Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. Byatt emphasizes the great part played in modern and postmodern literature by those examples of myth that are about gods dying and being reborn, that is, about death and rebirth in nature (122–124). Frazer’s title, *The Golden Bough*, refers to a particular variation of the myth associated with an ancient rite that took place on the shores of the little woodland lake of Nemi, in Italy, and made famous by Turner’s painting. On the northern shores of the lake stood the sacred grove of Diana of the Wood. There grew a tree around which a male figure with a drawn sword prowled. This figure was both priest and murderer since he would have had to kill his predecessor to become the
priest. The tree was sacred and, therefore, none of its branches could be broken except by a runaway slave who, if he succeeded, would win the right to fight and kill the priest (1–4).

The narrative structure of this myth has appeared repeatedly over time and is associated with fertility rituals that take place in the autumn and spring of every year, that is, at the times of the death and rebirth of vegetation. In *The Draughtsman's Contract*, this myth is invoked in the murders of Mr. Herbert and Mr. Neville, who can be seen to represent the priestly king figures associated with the golden bough. According to Frazer, the ritualistic death of these male figures did not always involve a battle between them. Sometimes, the older figure was a king who must be killed when his powers of ensuring the fertility of the land waned—because his wife complained about him or just because he was getting old. The old king was replaced by a younger one who was all powerful as long as he continued to serve the community, but who was put to death once he no longer did. Both Mrs. Herbert and her daughter accuse their husbands of negligence and seem to have conspired to murder Mr. Herbert. They also seem to have conspired with the murderers of Mr. Neville once they have no further use for him. He has ensured their continued ownership of the land by impregnating Mrs. Herbert's daughter and seems to have been used as a foil in the plot to murder Mr. Herbert. Although we never really learn if the women are responsible for the murders in this film, there is certainly a reversal of roles implied as the victimizers—the males—become the victims, and the victims—the women—become the victimizers.

Both accounts of this situation appear in the many versions of the ancient fertility myth. The idea of the woman as sacrificial victim in rituals designed to ensure the fertility of the land is intrinsic to the story of Demeter and Persephone (Frazer, 319–330). According to the legend, Persephone was abducted by Hades, the king of the underworld, and her mother, Demeter, mourned so bitterly that the earth became infertile. Spring and the rebirth of the land was only ensured when her daughter was allowed to come out from the underworld for six months of the year. That Mrs. Herbert and her daughter are associated with this myth is made evident in the film by the ironic use of the pomegranate given by Mr. Neville to Mrs. Herbert when he returns to see her after her husband's funeral. As Mrs. Herbert herself explains, it was because Persephone ate a pomegranate seed that she was trapped in the underworld. Mrs. Herbert's daughter can be taken to represent Persephone, and her sexless, fruitless marriage a descent into the underworld. Through her infidelity with Mr. Neville, however, she succeeds in getting pregnant, thus ensuring the women's ownership of their estate. Thus,
as in the myth, women, fertility, and the land are linked. Mrs. Herbert compares the juice of the pomegranate to the blood of a newborn and to that of a murder. Since the rituals and myths described in *The Golden Bough* are about the rebirth of vegetation ensured through the death of sacrificial victims, the allusion here is undeniable.

Taken metaphorically, this story alludes to the difficult relations between men and women. In “Revisiting the Myth of Demeter and Persephone,” Christine Downing comments on how important this myth has been for contemporary feminists. For some, the myth valorizes the power of the mother–daughter bond and, by extension, of the bond between all women. From this perspective, the abduction of Persephone by Hades symbolizes paternal violation, rape, incest, abuse, the rise of patriarchy, and the suppression of the goddess religion (31). This reading of the myth is reflected in the film, where the women are either abused or neglected by their men. The land, which originally belonged to Mrs. Herbert, is appropriated by her husband, who considers her less important than his horse and his estate, and she has to give sexual favors to Mr. Neville in order to get him to undertake the contract for the drawings.

While some feminists have seen this myth as being about gender relations, ecofeminists have emphasized its relevance to concerns about the earth’s renewal (Downing, 32–33). The objectification and victimization of women and nature by patriarchy are portrayed as interrelated issues in the
film and are also part of the concerns of postmodernism. Craig Owens, in “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” links the domination of nature and women to the fact that, for modern man, everything that exists does so only in and through representation. He asserts that to claim this is also to claim that the world exists only in and through a subject who believes that he is producing the world in producing its representation. With the interweaving of these two events, there begins a way of being human that is given over to measuring and executing for the purpose of gaining mastery of that which is whole. It is the Third-World nations, the “revolt of nature,” and the women’s movement, that is, the voice of the conquered, that have challenged the West’s desire for domination and control in the postmodern age (66–67).

Mr. Neville’s art is also one that appropriates nature through the objectification of the gaze and rationalizes its ownership and use by the bourgeoisie. However, Mr. Neville can never really master nature and, like Mr. Herbert, he, too, is murdered. The women do seem to win out in the end; that is, they seem to collude with the rest of the society to use these men as sacrificial victims. The idea of nature itself as ultimately unseizable is suggested by the “living statue” that moves about the garden and looks indifferently when Mr. Neville is being murdered.

What are we to make of this contradiction? Do men use women and nature for their own ends, or do women and nature use men? Which construction of reality is the correct one? As with postmodern works in general, Greenaway’s film does not resolve the contradiction. As Downing explains, the various interpretations of the myth of Demeter and Persephone “contradict, complement, complicate, and ultimately enrich one another. Just as no one version of the myth is the ‘real’ one, just as a myth is its many variants, so no one interpretation is the ‘right’ one, the myth means these many different understandings of it” (47).

Marienbad owes more to Freud than to Frazer, but here, too, an ancient story is central to the plot of the film: a younger man tries to take a woman away from her husband. This plot is, of course, analogous to that of the Oedipus myth, where the son vies with the father for the love of the mother. (The drama of Oedipus is not that different from the story of the golden bough, where two men are fighting to possess the grove sacred to Diana—if one sees Diana and the grove as one and the same.) Robbe-Grillet’s first novel, The Erasers (1953), is also based on the Oedipus myth, and the repetition of the myth in Marienbad works as what Morrissette calls a “serialistic pattern endlessly repeating itself” (The Novels of Robbe-Grillet, 38). Marienbad shows us the myth of Oedipus as a serialistic pattern endlessly repeating itself in the
various versions of the central couple’s story. Not only does the play-within-the-film repeat the story of a man taking a woman away from another man, but so do the conversations of the various couples that we overhear.

In his discussion of literary and cinematic serialism, David Bordwell notes that one of the most important trends in European music of the 1950s was “total serialism”—the model for which is usually held to be Messiaen’s 1940s piece *Mode de valeur et d’intensités*. The crucial aspect of serialist doctrine for Bordwell is “the possibility that large scale structures may be determined by fundamental stylistic choices.” Many experimental trends in French literature at that time, such as the New Novel, resembled serialist thinking. Works like Butor’s *L’Emploi du temps* (1956) and Robbe-Grillet’s *La Jalousie* “mixed together fragmentary blocks of time in a way that suggested a hidden formula controlling surface variants” (277). Bordwell cites Philippe Sollers’s and J. D. Pollet’s *Mediterranée* (1963) and *Marienbad* as landmarks of the use of serialist techniques in the cinema. He sees *Marienbad* as a film where each scene remains significant as a variant of abstract narrative *topos*—that is, a man tries to persuade a woman to leave with him. Bordwell concludes that both films were made in full consciousness of the serialistic aesthetic of experimental literature and music (279). He never uses the word *postmodernism*, or for that matter *poststructuralism*, yet his description of *Marienbad* is extremely useful in placing it within a certain cultural era and pointing to its importance as a seminal film for postmodernist cinema.

Bordwell goes on to explain that serialism was based on structuralist thought. Both serialism and structuralism saw narrative content as being part of the formal order of the work. They also both treated textual form as a “spatial” phenomena. Lévi-Strauss lays out action in a horizontal line. Pierre Boulez speaks of a musical work as a “concrete sound object” occupying “musical space.” Claude Simon’s novel *La Route de Flandres* (1960) possesses an overt shape, as do several others of the French New Novels. Bordwell explains that there is another way in which the text can be seen to posses a spatial order, and this is related to its invisible properties. The ordering of the parts can be treated as a *distribution* of elements drawn from a fixed storehouse “behind the scenes.” This process works according to the Saussurean principle of syntagm and paradigm—the syntagmatic axis being the combined string of items visibly present in the text and the paradigmatic being that set from which each item is selected.

In 1955, Lévi-Strauss argued that myth is a particular kind of story composed of “gross constituent units.” These are defined not only by their position in a horizontal chain of actions but by their relation to purely
conceptual (“vertical”) categories. The mythologist could analyze the text by spatializing it: write each action on a card, then lay out the cards in a two dimensional array in order to discover both the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes. (Bordwell 277)

Bordwell adds that Lévi-Strauss treats different versions of the myth in the same way and that for him any one mythical text is only one manifestation of a larger permutation group. He explains that the New Novel made much of this principle. “Robbe-Grillet’s novels characteristically make each scene a slightly incompatible variant upon a central event, which may never be presented in an authoritative fashion” (278). However, Bordwell is careful to point out that there are important differences between serialism and structuralism. Serialism is a means of composition while structuralism, on the other hand, is a method of analysis. Both schools emphasize the organization of signifiers, the spatialization of form, permutation, and non-perceptible structures but serialism values transgression and the need for each art-work to construct a unique system. It is significant that films such as Marienbad owed more to serialism and the French New Novel than to structuralism (278). I would argue that the reason for this can be found in the relationship of serialist forms to poststructuralist thinking. Evidence of this relationship can be seen in the value that serialism places on transgression, or what Derrida would call “free play.” Derrida posits a distinction between the structural approach and the “transgressive” one:

Turned toward the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy is therefore the saddened, negative, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play whose other side would be the Nietzschean affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. (121)

Ben Stoltzfus has also explored the connection between the New Novel and serialism. He points out that New Novelists tend to use a number of “generative themes” to structure the work. By themes, however, the New Novelists mean words, objects, colors, images, or ideas. Robbe-Grillet prefers colors and objects as generative themes, but he also structures serial combinations with the images of popular and classical myths. These themes carry connotations of meaning with which the reader/viewer can play (36). This is a strategy, I would add, characteristic of postmodern works and is also, of course, related to pastiche strategies.
Robbe-Grillet claims that his film *L’Eden et après* (1970) uses a series of generative themes that are comparable to Schoenberg’s atonal system. Stoltzfus gives Robbe-Grillet’s list of generative themes for this film as comprising the following: (1) Picture; (2) Labyrinth; (3) Imagination; (4) The Dance; (5) Sperm; (6) Doors; and (7) Male sex (36). One could make a similar list for *Marienbad* that would look something like this: (1) Corridors; (2) Mirrors; (3) Oedipus myth; (4) Female sex; (5) Labyrinth; (6) Games; and (7) Male sex. There are other possibilities, of course, but the intention here is to point out how the generative themes in *Marienbad* are repeated throughout the work to form a structure full of reverberations of meaning, but without a specific order of meaning. *Marienbad* invites its viewers to structure their own order and meaning and puts into question any idea of a natural order. Robbe-Grillet states that, in sum,

ideology is established order which masquerades as natural order, which pretends not to be a creation of society but, on the contrary, a sort of divine law dictated, so to speak, by God, exactly as God dictated the ten commandments to Moses. Every society pretends that its laws are natural and tries to make them endure. . . . My discourse is not that of society, it is even opposed to society’s order. (Stoltzfus, 42)

For this reason, the viewer is allowed a freedom not only within the narrative order but also within the mythical order that mirrors the social order. What we have is a serialistic technique that offers the viewer contradictory versions of the same story, that is, the Oedipus myth. Within these contradictory versions, there is a possibility that the hero and heroine may escape from patriarchal society. While Hollywood films often have “happy endings” where the hero wins the heroine in spite of the opposition of a patriarchal authority figure, in *Marienbad*, this is only one among many possibilities, and the couple is not reintegrated into society as in most Hollywood films. While all authors/filmmakers use recurring motifs and symbols in their work, Robbe-Grillet and Greenaway emphasize the thematic structure of the work and leave it open for active interpretation, thus making us aware of the multiple meanings available in such a structure.

In *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, the generative themes might be listed as: (1) Landscape/Nature; (2) Art; (3) Square view-finder/Renaissance perspective; (4) Murders/Sacrificial victims; (5) Sexual acts/Gender relations; (6) Bourgeois house and society; and (7) Myths of death and rebirth. This structure is playful and does not settle into an ordered configuration of meaning but is left open to interpretation. While all art-works are open to interpre-
tation to some degree, the contradictions are usually resolved rather than for-
warded. The God-like author, like Mr. Neville, especially in nineteenth-
century realist novels, attempts to put a rational order into his work. This
rational order, like Mr. Neville’s square viewfinder, tries to objectify and
master nature’s protean reality. For the postmodern artist or the poststruc-
turalist thinker, this is not possible. As Lyotard puts it, even in science

the effective, singular statement (the token) that nature will produce is
unpredictable. All that can be calculated is the probability that the state-
ment will say one thing or another. On the level of microphysics, “bet-
ter” information—in other words information with a higher perform-
ance capability—cannot be obtained . . . Einstein balked at the idea that
“God plays with dice.” Yet dice is precisely a game for which this kind of
“sufficient” statistical regularities can be established (so much for the old
image of the supreme determinant). (57)

Postmodern/poststructuralist works follow this turn in scientific epistemol-
yogy since they, too, do away with the “supreme determinant,” or God-like
author, and give us a number of possible conclusions rather than a singular
statement. For postmodern artists such as Robbe-Grillet and Greenaway, the
only way out is to try to present all the options—to present all that one sees
and knows, and that one does not see or know everything. That is, to present the
contradictions and the limits of seeing, knowledge, and representation. Na-
ture will always be more than can be captured by representation.

NOTES

1. The painting in question is Januarius Zick’s Allegory of Newton’s Service to Op-
tics. For an extended discussion of the painting and its role within Greenaway’s film,
see David Pascoe’s Peter Greenaway: Museums and Moving Images (67–70) [Editor’s
note].

2. Greenaway’s most provocative use of the mise-en-abyme technique occurs in
The Baby of Mâcon. For a discussion of this film, see Cristina Degli-Esposti Reinert’s
and Lia Hotchkiss’s essays in the present volume [Editor’s note].
Peter Greenaway’s 1987 film *The Belly of an Architect* is concerned with two architects, one terminally ill and one long dead, and the correspondence between them. It tells the story of Stourley Kracklite and his young wife, Louisa, who have traveled from Chicago, city of “blood, meat, and money,” to Rome, “belly of the Western World” and home of the “best carnivorous architecture in the Western World” (*Belly*, 3). Kracklite, a less-than-successful architect, has been invited to Rome to stage an exhibition of the work of Etienne-Louis Boullée, a little-known eighteenth-century architect who was linked to the rise in modernism through his teacher Jacques François Blondel. *The Belly of an Architect* chronicles the last nine months of Kracklite’s life and the period from conception to the birth of his son. It tells the story of Kracklite’s obsession with his growing illness, his wife’s and his own infidelities, and finally his barring from the exhibition he set out to stage. The film ends nine months after it started, on February 12, 1986, Boullée’s birthday, with Louisa giving birth while Kracklite commits suicide, “falling backwards from the top gallery of the Victor-Emmanuel building in Rome” (Steinmetz, 57).

“In its form,” Leon Steinmetz argues, *The Belly of an Architect* “is simple, perhaps the most accessible of Greenaway’s films,” yet in its content “it is a highly sophisticated work” (57). By the “form” of the film, Steinmetz is referring to those cinematic devices that conventionally enrich the otherwise straightforward foreground intertwining of characters, settings, and events. In comparison with most of Greenaway’s long cinematic works, *The Belly of an Architect* is indeed spare and formal in its staging and almost sparse in its elements of screenplay. While the classical frontal perspective employed throughout the majority of the film provides some of this sense of simplicity, it is the
uncanny sense that something is missing from the film that enhances the subtle feeling of emptiness. Like Baudelaire—who while attempting to affirm his own existence within the city decided that it was the missing or erased sections of urban space that provide the key—the viewer of Greenaway’s film is left with the sense that the elusive impression of simplicity is the result of some act of cinematic erasure. For those familiar with Greenaway’s other works, *The Belly of an Architect* seems to lack the director’s usual iconic signature element: a thematic sequence that manifests itself repeatedly throughout a film. Such thematic sequences, referred to indirectly by Greenaway as “organising principles” and often known as “formal devices” or “structuring devices,” provide the means by which an audience or a critic may start to unravel the complex weave of language, image, and meaning presented in the film (Greenaway, *Organising*). The formal device is like a critical clue in a detective story: without it the narrative seems curiously empty, while with it, the scene, however complex, is made accessible. While the absence of such a gesture does not necessarily hinder the ability to analyze and dissect *The Belly of an Architect*, it does suggest that any attempt at such dissection may be inherently flawed. By removing the formal device, Greenaway’s work is rendered hermetic: the meanings within the film are sealed away from the narrative, only to be interpreted from without. It is as if the filmmaker’s language has been translated and in this process the connection between the narrative signifier and its signified meaning has become disconnected. While Derrida would argue that such a situation is inevitable, the more complete the translation the more closely connected the signifier and the signified may become. The formal device assists in the process of translation; it mitigates against misreading and the violence inherent in interpretation. Without the formal device the process of translation is fraught with difficulty.

Significantly, a formal device was originally planned for *The Belly of an Architect*. An abstract organizing device was envisaged by Greenaway to structure the narrative, yet while it was scripted in great detail it was never filmed. This chapter is concerned with reinstating Greenaway’s formal structuring device, a series of eight time-lapse images that were contained in the original script for *The Belly of an Architect*. Through this process of hypothetical reconstruction, it is possible to see that Greenaway was not merely supporting the return of the body to its historic position as hegemonic form generator in architecture. Reinstating the missing formal device makes it apparent that Greenaway was commenting not only on architecture but also on the way in which the postmodern city may be read in both space and time. Through the process of reconstruction, it is possible to read within *The Belly of an Architect* an ironic warning regarding the decentralized nature of cities
and the breakdown of the urban fabric. Within Greenaway’s reconstructed
film the Enlightenment project of recording mankind’s greatest structure—
the city—in its totality, is seen as flawed. In this sense, Boullée and Kracklite
represent, respectively, the beginning and the end of modernism. Boullée’s
failure to build his greatest works and the ignominy of being used as an in-
spiration for a fascist architecture in Rome mark the beginning of the down-
fall of modernity in architecture. The disintegration of Kracklite’s body, mar-
riage, and professional aspirations are symptomatic of the failure of the
modernist project to adapt to technological, social, and political change. The
postmodern city, a city not of places and spaces but of vectors, speeds, and
times, is the city that Kracklite confronts head-on. It is a city not connected
by streets and avenues or by the historic decumanus maximus and the cardo
maximus, but by inconsistencies and fabrications. Greenaway’s Rome captures
the essence of Lyotard’s “local determinisms,” Frampton’s “regional resist-
ances,” and Baudrillard’s “simulated city.” The eight time-lapse sequences
point toward an intuitive understanding of Virilio’s “lost dimension” and
Foucault’s “heterotopias.” While it is possible to interpret the film as calling
for a revival of the historic architectural forms as a clear alternative to the
Modernist project, this is a surface interpretation at best. Greenaway’s Rome
is a distinctly Postmodern vision of urban space; he presents the city as a dis-
continuous and fragmented realm that is heavily influenced by the machina-
tions of technology and the media.

The nature of this chapter, then, is a process of hypothetical recon-
struction that reinstates scripted but unfilmed sequences into the film. The
ruins of the title are primarily literary and cinematic; they are the discrepan-
cies that exist between the script and the final film. Yet because the process
of ruination is frequently the result of “expediency” and the related “factors
of time and money,” it is uncertain which is the whole and which the ruin.
Consequently, many of the original scripted ideas that were abandoned were
later “regretted” by Greenaway while others “were welcomed” (Belly, vii).
For this reason it is impossible to determine whether it is the film, the script,
or both which are in ruins. Regardless of this, as David Harvey records, “ru-
ins” provide an otherwise solid ground for “our shaken identity” because
they assist interpretation in a “rapidly transforming world” (272). The pur-
pose of the hypothetical reconstruction of script and film proposed in this
chapter is to provide a framework for interpreting The Belly of an Architect
and positioning it among Greenaway’s other works.

The ruins within the title of this chapter are also undeniably architec-
tural; they are the decaying remains of historic and modern buildings and the
pale and putrefying corpses of the victims of architects and architecture. In
Greenaway’s Rome, the line between the building and the body is invariably a blurred one. As Io Speckler, Kracklite’s host in Rome says: “Rome in ruins has had more influence on architecture than it ever would brand new . . . what you can’t see—you can imagine.” To which Caspadian Speckler, Io’s lascivious son and Louisa’s lover, replies: “sounds just like a woman with clothes on” (Belly, 49). The power of the ruin is in its ability to assist in interpreting a possible truth from beneath the covering of vines and moss or beneath the contrivances of silk and lace. After all, Greenaway’s Rome is the city where “[d]octors are archaeologists” and “architects are gynaecologists” (Belly, 136). It is the city where ruined people and buildings coincide; where Louisa can admit to her lover, with a “wry smile,” that “I have had several miscarriages . . . almost the same number as Kracklite has of unsatisfactory buildings” (Belly, 28). In Greenaway’s Rome, the relationship between the body and architecture is especially close; through the process of reinstating the missing structural devices, however, it is possible to uncover an even more revealing relationship between the Modern body and the postmodern city.

**FORMAL DEVICES**

Formal devices are self-contained elements that are neither narrative nor strictly structural, in a supporting sense, but that counterpoint the primary score, scenario, spatial progression, or architectonic expression. The formal device, through its juxtaposition or concurrence, often serves to emphasize the scene or event that it parallels. In The Politics of Postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon suggests that the aim of such devices is to support and subvert simultaneously. “Postmodernism’s distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale ‘nudging’ commitment to doubleness or duplicity” (1). In this way the formal device may be seen to serve as an ironic counterpoint—a way of highlighting the “self-contradictory, self-undermining” nature of the event, statement, or scene. The formal device is paradoxical because it undermines and supports simultaneously; its presence is laced with irony and a perverse wit.

Trevor Johnston proposes that the formal device arose in Greenaway’s work through his fascination with “the ways and means by which we classify and make sense of the world around us” (1). This quasi-documentary approach to classification and enumeration systems may also be linked to Greenaway’s time in the British Central Office of Information and to his father’s enthusiasm for natural history and ornithology. While Greenaway’s
pennonchant for such devices may be seen in his early works, including *Vertical Features Remake* and *A Walk through H*, it wasn’t until his 1980 documentary *The Falls* that evidence appeared that the formal device was potentially more important than any narrative in the work. For Johnston, the Violent Unknown Event (VUE) directory, which structures *The Falls*, acts as a “conceptual forerunner to the landscape drawings of *The Draughtsman’s Contract*,” the “world-defining library tomes that lie at the core of *Prospero’s Books*,” and the “numeric progressions and funny-serious games in *Drowning by Numbers*” (1).

In *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, the continuity of the cinematic “figures-in-a-landscape” is broken on twelve occasions while the arrogant draughtsman, Mr. Neville, sets out his demands for the inhabitants of the estate. Each time, his “curriculum for the execution of the Drawings at Compton Anstey” is explicit; it is also inevitably accompanied by his voice-over describing how, in the first instance, from “7 o’clock in the morning until 9 o’clock in the morning the whole of the back of the house from the stable block to the lower garden will be clear. No person shall use the main stableyard gates whatsoever and no person shall use the back door” (Greenaway, *Papers*, 31). His vaguely supercilious voice is attended by Michael Nyman’s strident and meticulous interpretation of Henry Purcell’s compositions and a series of images showing Neville working on the drawings. The curriculum and execution of the drawings serve to counterpoint the gradual growth in stature and, then, dramatic demise of the draughtsman. The twelve drawings, each carefully dated and numbered, are a formal structuring device; they provide an ironic commentary on the inability of the draughtsman to see clearly.

Shakespeare’s description of the honest counselor Gonzalo’s charity provides the catalyst for another formal device that counterpoints and elucidates Greenaway’s reworking of the *Tempest*. In the *Tempest*, Prospero, Duke of Milan, records how upon being cast adrift in a boat it was Gonzalo who, knowing “I loved my books,” furnished from “mine own library” the works “I prize above my dukedom.” Greenaway explains that he wished to speculate on the nature of the library and thus his film *Prospero’s Books* is structured not only by the events that connect Prospero, Miranda, and Caliban but, more important, by a series of twenty-four elaborately realized books that an “elderly scholar” would need to “rear and educate a young daughter” (*Prospero’s Books*, 9). Throughout *Prospero’s Books*, a series of tomes reveals itself, each book appropriate to its nature and each one, like Mr. Neville’s commissions, providing a strong underlying system of order to the film that simultaneously destabilizes the narrative. “There would need to be
books to offer solace and advise patience and put past glory and present de-
spendy into perspective” and there “would need to be books to encour-
age revenge.” In total, Greenaway thought that “[t]wenty-four volumes
might be enough to cover the information needed” (Prospero’s Books, 9).

Perhaps the most elaborate series of thematic structures are present
within the film Drowning by Numbers, wherein two simultaneous devices
frame the story of three Cissie Colpitts dispatching their husbands to watery
deaths. The first device becomes obvious at the start of the film when a
young girl is depicted counting and naming the stars as she skips rope.
Thereafter, throughout the film, the numbers one to one hundred may be
traced, in sequence, in the background of most scenes. Number one is the
number of the eldest Cissie Colpitt’s house. Number two “appears on a tin
bath” and number three is “the laundry mark on Jake’s discarded blue and
white striped shirt” (Drowning, 116). The number count provides a curious
sub-text to the entire film; it serves as a structural device that is supportive
of neither the narrative nor the setting. Against this number count is set an-
other formal device, a series of games devised by the coroner’s son Smut.
“Dawn Card Castles” is the first of Smut’s games and its rules are read in
voice-over in a manner strongly reminiscent of Mr. Neville’s forthright but
naive instructions to the household of Compton Anstey. “In the game of
Dawn Card Castles, fifty-two playing cards are stacked up into a castle in a
draught-free space: the player can determine the dreams of the next night if
he awakes before the castle collapses” (Drowning, 12).

Smut’s games, while connecting sporadically with the rest of the narra-
tive, fulfill the same purpose as Prospero’s books, Tulse Luper’s maps in A
Walk through H, and Mr. Neville’s drawings in The Draughtsman’s Contract.
Each of these elements is part of the tradition Greenaway developed in The
Falls, Vertical Features Remake, H Is for House, Windows, Dear Phone, and Goole
by Numbers; they are anti-narrational devices. At a simplistic level, they struc-
ture the film through the process of classification—as is the case with the-
tmatic devices such as the VUE and the numerical progression in Drowning
by Numbers. In this sense, the formal device acts, at its most obvious level, as
an ordering mechanism for the remainder of the narrative. Like Porphyrian
trees, Chomskyan sentence diagrams, and Linnaean taxonomies, the formal
device is frequently an arbitrary structure in that it is applied regardless of
other constraints. However, while such systems have been criticized in phi-
losophy and cultural theory in literature, architecture, and film, they serve, as
Jencks has noted, through satire and duplicity. For Jencks, the formal device
acts to subvert the underlying functionality of a work of architecture, art, or
film. One of the best-known examples of such a formal device and its oper-
lations may be seen in architecture, in Peter Eisenman’s canonical structure House VI.

Eisenman’s House VI, like his five previous works, was presented as a set of abstract “intellectual exercises” (Blackwood, 45). In numbering his projects without regard for the clients, sites, or functions of the buildings, Eisenman was starting to impose a form of documentary abstraction onto his work. Notably at the same time, Greenaway was experimenting with ideas of documentary abstraction and inventory in his art and film. However, the system of naming used in Eisenman’s numbered houses was only the starting point for Eisenman’s application of an arbitrary structural device. Eisenman formed House VI from a system of geometric rules derived from Chomskyan semiotic patterns (a system that deliberately had little to do with architecture), which he applied to an archetypal modernist floor plan. In this way, Eisenman was able to design a house that challenged conventional definitions of the idea of home because the formal device was assumed to be more important than the lives of the inhabitants. Jencks’s description of walking through House VI and observing the intentionally humorous and ironic outcomes of Eisenman’s formal device is strangely reminiscent of Alan Woods’s descriptions of viewing one of Greenaway’s films. As the work is experienced, “one becomes sensitised” to the abstract ordering devices that dominate its function and the “game . . . commences” (Jencks, 121). In one place, in House VI, Eisenman’s vocabulary of form demanded that the upstairs master bedroom, its floors and walls (and the bed itself), be split in two by a void caused by the system of rules that governed the presence or absence of columns in the house. As Jencks humorously remarked, this created the potential for many problems for the young couple who intended to start a family; one “false step or leap and you’d land in the living room” (122). Similarly, in Drowning by Numbers, Greenaway’s formal device, the number count literally separates people both before and after intercourse. The number three, a laundry mark on Jake’s shirt, separates the start and the finish of Jake’s and Nancy’s animalistic and adulterous coupling. Immediately afterward, they may be seen in post-coital repose, partially submerged in twin baths that have previously been identified with the number two. Like Eisenman’s mischievously broken marriage bed, the twin tubs in Drowning by Numbers are split by a formal device that takes precedence over the possibility of a perilous and amorous leap across the gap. The playful intervention of Greenaway’s number three, like the intervention of Eisenman’s column, acts as an ironic or duplicitous sign that intercourse is secondary to the abstract formal device. According to Schwarz, the ideas expressed by Eisenman in House VI are “tempered by irony and a certain critical attitude” (45).
Similarly, according to Alan Woods, Greenaway’s cinematic ideas work most effectively “through oppositions and paradoxes which are often ironic” (194). The formal device in each of these examples undermines the project of Modernism by breaking down the role of function, narrative, and structure through the use of irony and fragmentation.

In the original script and notes for *The Belly of an Architect* Greenaway planned a formal device that was to underpin the entire film. He recorded his intent that “[e]ight of Rome’s celebrated architectural sites chronologically structure *The Belly of an Architect*” (*Belly*, vii). These eight sites not only connect the scenes within the narrative but they also “connect Boullée to Kracklite, for the first seven of them were Boullée’s major inspiration.” The eight sites “represent an architectural heritage of two and a half thousand years to put Kracklite’s nine-month predicament into perspective.” They emphasize “the ephemerality of one foreign individual striving for significance in an eternal city that has absorbed so many foreigners” (*Belly*, vii). While in the finished film it is still eminently clear that the major relationships are between architecture and the body, the nature of these relationships is less obvious. Leon Steinmetz has suggested that the key theme in *The Belly of an Architect* is the concept of the monument. Greg Missingham has argued that the film depicts Greenaway’s “modernist, conjectural intent,” an interpretation derived from his penchant for “ordering the world” around “clas-

![Figure 6.1](image.png)
sical” conceptual frameworks (“Ideas,” 30). David Wills has used the film, in its finished state, to argue that it is a typical Greenaway play upon the close relationship between fornication and defecation, between “growth and decay,” and between “digestive disorder and fecundation” (96). Similarly, Brigitte Peucker has used these themes to argue that Greenaway’s fundamental intent is to dramatize the act of “taking metaphors literally” (159). Two additional interpretations are notable in the context of the present attempt to reinstate the missing formal device. Bridget Elliott and Anthony Purdy describe *The Belly of an Architect* as a “museum film” because it explores “alternative logics” such as taxonomy that parallel and counterpoint the narrative of the film (90). Significantly, they identify traces of what they call “structuring devices,” which lead to their classification of the film as being concerned with the museological impulse. Amy Lawrence also identifies this impulse in Greenaway’s work and utilizes it herself to analyze *The Belly of an Architect*. Lawrence describes the film as possessing an “excess of signification” and a “proliferation of possible metaphors” that lead her to instate her own formal device in an attempt to come to terms with the multiple levels of meaning present in the film (113). Lawrence’s alphabetical approach to analysis affirms that the absence of the formal device within *The Belly of an Architect* presents a difficulty for those seeking to investigate the film. While all of these readings from Steinmetz, Missingham, Wills, Peucker, Elliott, Purdy, and Lawrence are legitimate interpretations, the inclusion of the missing formal device may provide quite a different key to understanding the film.

Initially, Greenaway’s formal device in *The Belly of an Architect* was planned to display each of the eight significant buildings in a series of “elaborate” time-lapse sequences. Each of these sequences, like the opening of Prospero’s books, the reading of Smut’s games, and the execution of Mr. Neville’s drawings, was to be spaced throughout the film and was to be separated from the body of the film by a distinct change in music and atmosphere. Greenaway described his intent in the notes for the first time-lapse sequence:

There now follows the first of eight shots that make a formal record of the eight Roman buildings or groups of buildings—mostly tombs or memorials—that influenced Boullée, or, ironically, in the last case, that Boullée influenced [. . .] The ambition of using these shots—each some 15–25 seconds long (maybe longer)—is to find a powerful visual metaphor for Rome’s age and endurance, its architecture seemingly independent of the activities and time scale of man. Each of the eight shots is to be con-
constructed in such a way that exaggerated (universal) time—[i.e.,] the slow curve of the sun from noon, through the afternoon into sunset and night over the Colosseum, condensed into some 30 seconds—should imperceptibly convert to real time (and by inference ephemeral time) where a character in the film is perceived to [be] going about his second-by-second mundane business. These shots are accompanied by “grand,” even “grandiose,” exultant music that comments on the power of Rome, Roman architecture and Roman history, and on Time itself. (Belly, 4–5)

The first seven buildings are part of history: they are the Augustan Mausoleum, the Pantheon, the Colosseum, the Baths of Villa Adriana, St. Peter’s Square (and the Dome of St. Peter’s), the Forum, and Piazza Navona. The final building is from the twentieth century; it is the EUR Building, colloquially known as the square colosseum. Each time-lapse sequence was intricately planned and lovingly described by Greenaway. The second sequence was to rise above the audience applauding architecture (because as Io Speckler exclaims: “Good architecture should always be applauded”) to “present a wide-screen finely composed view of the Pantheon and the night sky above and behind.” Then, almost imperceptibly, “real time goes into exaggerated time and we watch the moon steadily rise and sail in an arc over the Pantheon” (Belly, 18). Each time-lapse sequence was also to be accompanied by the most strident and powerful pieces of music. In the first time-lapse sequence the music is “grand,” “grandiose,” and exultant, yet as the film progresses it starts to change. By the third time-lapse sequence the music has become “sonorous” and “barbarous,” a fitting accompaniment to the Colosseum. “The sun goes down, the floodlights come on, night falls, the traffic continues to streak the darkness, the moon rises” (Belly, 42). By the last sequence the music that was to accompany the fascist EUR Building has become a “grandiloquent” variation on the “Roman architectural music” (Belly, 86).

The key to understanding Greenaway’s initial intentions for The Belly of an Architect lies in reinstating the eight time-lapse sequences. While they do not change the general broad themes at work within the film, they suggest a shift in focus from the body and architecture to the demise of modernism in the postmodern city. Architecture, in the form of the monument, remains important to the work because, as Greenaway states, “you cannot avoid architecture.” However, for Greenaway, the “title could have been changed to The Belly of a Film-maker” (The Physical Self, 16), suggesting not only that architecture and filmmaking are interchangeable but also that architecture alone is not the focus of the film. By reinstating the missing for-
mal device, a new reading of Greenaway’s *The Belly of an Architect*, reliant on a distinctly postmodern view of the city, is possible. The eight scenes would break down the essence of the city of Rome (the city in its entirety) and replace it with a set of buildings, each connected not by streets and alleys but by the less tangible connections afforded by technology, history, and the museological impulse.

The process of re-construction—of reinstating the unfilmed formal devices—will take place in two stages. In the first stage, the eight structures that were to be featured in time-lapse sequences are considered for the way in which they comprise a symbolic record of the rise and fall of modernism. The choice of these structures is then juxtaposed against the method of their depiction, which relies upon a distinctly postmodern strategy of fragmentation and isolation. This line of inquiry is consequential to the film, and its interpretation, because the main characters in *The Belly of an Architect* (Boulée and Kracklite) may be seen to represent the beginning and the end of modernism in architecture. When Kracklite and Boullée confront the seemingly historic, and thereby architecturally safe, city of Rome, they encounter instead Greenaway’s postmodern cityscape, not of footpaths and vistas but of eight monuments dislocated in space and trapped in the exaggerated passage of time. The second stage in the process of reconstruction is to search for elements that were either filmed or scripted but that lack meaning without the missing sequences; such elements assist in interpreting the efficacy of the reconstruction. This final stage is concerned with laser lights, fragments of maps, photographic enlargements, postcards, and Canaletto boxes.

### RECONSTRUCTION

David Harvey has suggested that Boullée’s “eighteenth century design for Newton’s Cenotaph pioneered the rational and ordered sense of architectural space later taken up by modernism” (250). This idea, that Étienne-Louis Boullée’s work was part of the rise of the modernist tradition, has also been supported by Joseph Rykwert’s seminal study *The First Moderns*, although Rykwert does not place Boullée so prominently as Harvey does. While many scholarly works have been written on Boullée, it is his association with the rise of modernism that is today his greatest claim to prosperity. Thus, Greenaway’s decision to use this otherwise obscure architect as a major character in *The Belly of an Architect* suggests a clear agenda associated with the project of modernism. This reading is further reinforced through the reinstatement of the formal device. Seven of the eight buildings that were
to be featured in Greenaway’s time-lapse sequences were said to be Boullée’s inspiration; they led him along the path of modernism. The eighth structure, the EUR building by architects Guerrini, Lapadula, and Romano, which was said to have been inspired by Boullée, has been viewed as symbolic of the demise of rationalist modernism. All of these eight structures, which represent the life and death of modernism, frame The Belly of an Architect from its opening scenes to the final moments of Kracklite’s life.

A ninth building is also featured centrally in The Belly of an Architect. Boullée’s Newton’s Cenotaph is the model structure at the center of Kracklite’s ill-fated exhibition, the location where his wife, Louisa, gives birth; it also features prominently in the early stages of the film, first in the form of a birthday cake, which Louisa cuts, and most important, at the crescendo of a scripted but unfilmed montage sequence. Just after the first time-lapse sequence was scripted to appear, Kracklite, while unpacking, drops a bundle of books to the floor in a grandiose, “baroque gesture.” This is the cue for an interlude, highly reminiscent of the time-lapse sequences:

This fall of books is the cue for a celebratory montage—cut to exultant music—of Boullée’s contribution to visionary architecture—black-and-white and sepia drawings, plans and designs of opera houses, libraries, grandiose palaces of justice, city gates, public baths, high spirling towers, ideal cities on vast plains, monumental cenotaphs and immense memorials. Rapidly following one another, this sequence of drawings and plans finishes with a wide aspect of the memorial Boullée designed for Sir Isaac Newton. (Belly, 6)

This montage of rapidly turning pages represents a surrogate time-lapse sequence that serves to raise the profile of the Newton Cenotaph temporarily to the status of the other eight buildings. As the structure was never built, Greenaway cannot film it as a time-lapse sequence, but he treats it in a remarkably similar way. This montage is consequential because it frames, along with the EUR building, the symbolic extent of modern architecture. The two buildings are also important because they have been strongly shaped by geometric repetition, hierarchical order, and underlying conceptual systems based on binary opposites, all of which render these structures strongly Cartesian—a fundamental characteristic of modern architecture. Jencks, in The Language of Post-Modern Architecture, describes the EUR building as a kind of “[d]eflowered classicism” made of “endlessly repeated blank forms.” It represents an “architecture of control” that “depends on boring redundancy for its coercion” (20). For Jencks, the EUR building is the epitome of
rationalism, that peculiarly Italian strand of modernism. It is an example of the flawed belief, which grew in prominence through Ledoux and Boullée, that geometric simplicity and the formation of clear Cartesian hierarchies within space would return the focus of architecture to humanity. Not only are both buildings, Newton’s Cenotaph and the EUR building, representative of the extent of a movement, they are also both eminently Cartesian—a feature that has symbolic importance for the way in which the missing formal devices are interpreted.

Benjamin Genocchio has characterized the main urban reaction against modernism in terms of a shift away from acceptance of Cartesian spatial systems. Cartesian spatiality, along with associated binary, bifurcate, arborescent, and hierarchical systems, has, until relatively recently, been central to Western metaphysical discourse on space. Indeed, the philosophers Deleuze and Guattari have argued that such systems have “dominated Western reality and all of Western thought, from botany to biology and anatomy, but also gnoseology, theology, ontology, all of philosophy” (18). In architecture and urbanism, as well as in areas of cultural criticism, the rejection of the Cartesian spatial system has become an accepted characteristic of postmodernism. Genocchio suggests that modernism’s constant valorization of the Cartesian orthodoxy has only recently started to give way to a new vision of urban space that is reliant not on hierarchy but on discontinuity, simulation, and fragmentation. For Genocchio, this shift in viewpoint is at the center of postmodern urban theory because “what can loosely be described as ‘postmodern’ discourse has largely come to be associated with a critique of Cartesian space” (35). However, dramatically conflicting techniques have been used to describe the new, non-Cartesian spatial systems.

Jean Baudrillard has argued that the new spatial order is reliant on simulation, and Paul Virilio has proposed that the postmodern cityscape is defined through speed and temporality. Fredric Jameson has similarly maintained that as a result of the changes taking place in urban space, the human body has been losing “the capacity to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively map its position within a mappable external world” (83). Each of these three theorists have been strongly critical of the shift toward the formation of non-Cartesian spatial systems. In contrast Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari have promoted the idea that anti-hierarchical, anti-Cartesian approaches will invigorate urban social, political, and spatial systems. Each of these four have argued for the city to be viewed as a discontinuous landscape of isolated urban fragments. In the middle ground, between these extremes, David Harvey has seen that the city is becoming increasingly a mass of “isolated,” “fragmented” spaces on a
“shrinking map.” Edward Soja has built upon Harvey’s work to propose that the “archetypical postmodern conditions” are “depthlessness, fragmentation, the reduction of history to nostalgia, and, underlying it all, the programmatic decentering of the subject” (Heterotopologies, 21). For Soja, one of the six key characteristics of the postmodern city is the way in which new patterns of “social fragmentation, segregation, and polarization” break down the sense of continuous, Cartesian space (Postmodern, 133). Despite major differences, the theorists discussed here each have a common or “collective desire to promote new forms of conceiving social space in an attempt to account for an eclectic occupation and engagement with an increasingly segregated, oppressively functionalist and electronically monitored everyday reality” (Genocchio, 35–36). In all of these cases, the postmodern city may be characterized as being spatially discontinuous and technologically mediated. A question then follows: if Greenaway’s eight (or nine) time-lapse buildings are symbolically linked to the modernist tradition, and his film is about the failure of architects associated with these buildings, is his depiction of these buildings and of Rome a duplicitous one? Or, even more simply: Is Greenaway’s Rome a postmodern city?

Greenaway literally describes the city of Rome as the “third character” in The Belly of an Architect because it is against the “background of its eternal monuments” that the relationship between the major characters, Kracklite and Boullée, is played out (Steinmetz, 58–59). It is statements such as these that have led Steinmetz to suggest that the dominant thematic devices of the film are the monuments of the city. While there is certainly evidence to propose that the “eternal monuments” are central to the film, by reinstating the missing time-lapse sequences this reading may be subtly inverted to suggest that the monuments are not representative of the city but rather that the city has become representative of the monuments. This thematic inversion draws from both Soja and Foucault, who have each argued that when conventional time is broken down—as the time-lapse sequence attempts to do—“the power of place is neutralized or inverted . . . into places of power” (Heterotopologies, 19). When time and space break down, because the city has become fragmented into a series of monuments—places of power—contemporary geography collapses into “postmodern geography.” This shift mirrors the change from Cartesian spatiality to discontinuous spatiality. The postmodern city is a site of fragmentation; it is no longer able to be viewed in its totality—a commonplace aim of Enlightenment intellectuals enthusiastically revived in modernism. Rome is not the third character in The Belly of an Architect; the eight buildings that were to be the focus of the time-lapse sequences are collectively the third character. Rome is not represented by the
eight buildings; the eight buildings represent themselves to the exclusion of all else.

This shift from the “power of place” to the “places of power” may also be explained using Foucault’s theory of the relationship between power, knowledge, and spatiality. Foucault suggests that during the Enlightenment, “[s]pace was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile” while time was viewed as “richness, fecundity, life, [and] dialectic” (*Power*, 70). By valorizing time over space, the study of history and of historical figures (Kracklite’s obsession) failed to trace the power relationships implicit in “forms of implantation, delimitation and demarcation of objects” and “modes of tabulation” (*Power*, 70). In light of Foucault’s assertion, Greenaway’s time-lapse sequences may be viewed in two related contexts. In the first instance, the time-lapse sequences invert the historic privileging of time over space by depicting the spaces as unchangeable and isolated within the passage of time. At the same time, these sequences are devices of both power and knowledge because they are examples of the documentary impulse that Greenaway regularly employs. As Colin Gordon records, Foucault viewed any “practice which establishes certain relationships between heterogeneous elements” as an “exercise of power” (245). The formation of “discourses and the genealogy of knowledge need to be analysed, not in terms of types of consciousness, modes of perception and forms of ideology, but in terms of tactics and strategies of power” (*Power*, 77). This is the reason Greenaway so often uses the documentary device as a means of parodying power and those who, like Kracklite, Mr. Neville, and the coroner Madgett, misunderstand its consequences.

Viewed in this light, it is possible to see the eight time-lapse sequences in *The Belly of an Architect* as a means of classifying or documenting the city, an act replete with power connotations. By defining Rome in terms of its monuments, these structures must be seen as symbolic of knowledge—of space, time, and the city. Yet this knowledge, like so many other arbitrary and constructed systems, is misleading because knowledge is power. Foucault states that “[o]nce knowledge can be analysed in terms of region, domain, implantation, displacement, transposition, one is able to capture the process by which knowledge functions as a form of power and disseminates the effects of power” (*Power*, 69). How then could the eight monuments be seen as places of both knowledge and power, and how does this facilitate the shift away from viewing Rome as the third character? One obvious answer lies in the 124 postcards that Kracklite writes to Boullée in the course of his time in Rome. Greenaway suggests that postcard visions of Rome’s monuments somehow attempt to make the city accessible to the tourist. The postcard presents the visitor with the illusion of power over the fragmented spaces and
aleatory events of the city. While the eight monuments can be seen as the quintessence of Rome—as embodiments of the power of place—each of these buildings must also be viewed as knowledge. Yet, paradoxically, these structures serve a “panoptic” purpose. Instead of providing any genuine power over the city, the postcard must be viewed, like the monument, as an “instrument of control” that encourages the viewer to participate in a regulated way. The postcard manipulates the way in which Kracklite interacts with Rome; it frames his relationship with the city. The postcard encourages the tourist to see certain places from certain angles while at the same time discouraging any individual viewpoint. The eight monuments are therefore knowledge, in a Foucauldian sense, and must also be seen as power. Instead of capturing the knowledge or power of place, the monuments dominate the city and become panoptic places of knowledge and power. Yet, Foucault maintains, while the “terrain of power” is spatial and geographical, ultimately it impacts on the health of the body. Instead of providing the key for Kracklite, to make the city accessible (knowable), the monuments exert their power and controlling influence over his mind and body.

Greenaway’s planned presentation of the eight fragments of Rome, the monuments that mean so much to the modernist Kracklite, emphasizes their individuality and power over the city of Rome. Yet in choosing Rome, Greenaway chose a city that, more than any other ancient city, has been mapped using techniques that amplify the fragmented and discontinuous over the Cartesian and the binary. As the architectural historian Edmond Bacon notes, whereas the “Greeks developed the highest expression in Western civilization of the flow of life as total organic unity, and built their cities accordingly, the Romans achieved and sustained a rational order which was made possible only by the fragmentation of functions” (85). This form of urban discontinuity has also been captured by Taddeo di Bartolo who, in 1413, produced a famous “map” of Rome that depicted not the city but its monuments. In di Bartolo’s vision, various symbols standing for monuments in the city (notably including two of Greenaway’s eight structures, the Pantheon and the Colosseum) were collected together in a “map” and then “distributed in a general way in the appropriate parts of the city, but without any specific positioning or hint of design interrelationship” (Bacon, 138). Like Greenaway’s formal device, di Bartolo’s map was concerned with specific buildings isolated outside of the conventional spaces and times of the city. In both cases, Greenaway’s and di Bartolo’s, a reading was proposed not of Rome in terms of its monuments (“the power of place” or Cartesian spatiality), but of the monuments in indifference to Rome (“the places of power” or discontinuous spatiality).
Greenaway has commented that Romans who have seen *The Belly of an Architect* responded that “they recognised Rome in this film, but they also did not recognise it.” He asks, “How did the camera make it the same and make it different?” (Stairs, 42). Perhaps, he answers, every location used in a film “is always re-created by the film to make its own sense of geography, topography and space” (Stairs, 77). Rome is different in *The Belly of an Architect* precisely because Greenaway presents it at its most postmodern; the eight monuments have become the “places of power” surrounded by endless, labyrinthine, traffic-clogged streets. The rest of Rome is almost invisible, it is glimpsed in passing but it is not framed by the camera, Wim Merten’s music, or the passage of exaggerated time. If the time-lapse sequences were reinstated, Rome would seem to fade into the background altogether in favor of these eight (or nine) buildings. The overall effect would be to fragment the film even more forcefully into a series of spatially discontinuous settings that exist outside conventional, experiential time.

Greenaway had previously employed the rapid passage of time as a formal device in his study of symmetry and death that takes place against the backdrop of a zoo. In *A Zed and Two Noughts* (*ZOO*), the film Greenaway made immediately prior to *The Belly of an Architect*, one of the two main characters, the zoologist Oswald Deuce, conducts a series of investigations into the nature of death. At the center of his experiments are a series of organisms (starting with vegetable matter and progressing through crustaceans toward mammals) that he photographs during the process of decay. One of the first planned scenes of decay was to be an angelfish. In Greenaway’s notes the scene is described from the point of view of the camera, which pans across a room to “reveal a second aquarium” filled with dead angelfish. “The aquarium of dead fish is illuminated every eight seconds by a bright white light,” which is the time-lapse camera “photographing their decay” (*ZOO*, 69). Having set the scene, the narrative in the film is later broken to display “Oswald Deuce’s decay experiment with the angelfish.” In this scene “ten or so days of rotting” are “condensed into twenty seconds.” The time-lapse sequence, which is accompanied by Nyman’s exaggerated music, shows two “angelfish corpses floating in a brightly lit aquarium grow white, are attacked by crustaceans, putrefy and the bones are picked clean” (*ZOO*, 81). While the series of time-lapse sequences that punctuate *A Zed and Two Noughts* each depict the decay of a once-living organism, they also isolate and thereby frame the process of decay. Like the time-lapse sequences in *The Belly of an Architect* that celebrate the breakdown of the city, the formal device in *A Zed and Two Noughts* celebrates the breakdown of the body. Viewed together, these devices emphasize the way in which the time-lapse device serves to fragment time and the conventional cinematic and architectural referent, the
According to the architectural theorist Anthony Vidler, the postmodern body “seems to be a body in pieces, fragmented . . . mutilated almost beyond recognition” (69). Postmodern architecture is not designed to suit a conventional Renaissance body or the body of modern man; rather, it is a response to the breakdown of the body itself through the agency of technology, media, and time-altering techniques. The time-lapse sequence glorifies fragmentation; it literally breaks down the continuity of the film, the city, and the body.

**FINISHING TOUCHES**

Five final elements are required to complete the process of reinstating the missing formal device and to elucidate the interpretation of Greenaway’s film presented here. Four of these elements are visible in the finished film (or more clearly in its publicity stills) but do not seem especially notable in themselves without the eight time-lapse sequences. These four elements are the postcards Kracklite writes, and, in the exhibition, the eight photographic enlargements, the Nolli map of Rome and the Canaletto boxes. The fifth element is Caspasian’s laser light display; it was never filmed. Like the formal device, this fifth element is not present in the finished film but is critical to the process of reconstruction and interpretation.

Since the release of *The Belly of an Architect*, Greenaway has regularly cited the use of postcard views of Rome as one of the major thematic devices within the film.

For a few lire it is possible to buy a handful of Roman picture-postcards that will conduct you building by building, street by street, from one side of the city to the other. Twenty-five postcards can take you from the Piazza del Popolo to St[.] Peters, each postcard photograph containing in the background a detail of the main view in the next postcard. Every postcard is printed in an edition of five hundred thousand. (*Papers*, 26)

In *The Belly of an Architect*, Kracklite sends postcards, sometimes as many as six each day, to the last known address of Etienne-Louis Boullée. On one level these postcards chart Kracklite’s growing pain and paranoia while, on another level, these postcards are a mediatized map of Rome. They are like Taddeo di Bartolo’s map, in that they record only monuments at the expense of places. Moreover, the modern postcard has often been electronically retouched and recomposed, its perspective corrected and its color adjusted, until it no longer represents a real viewpoint. For this reason Greenaway has promoted
the process of collaging postcards into one another in such a way that various monuments combine into one. In this new, anti-modern map of Rome, the “connecting threads will not be sights or sites or tourist attractions or streets or buildings but threads of an entirely different nature” (*Papers*, 26).

The missing time-lapse sequences were to link the same sites depicted in the postcards by way of a different “thread”—the exaggerated passage of
time. But Greenaway scripted yet another even more obvious reference to the way in which technology is complicit in promoting a discontinuous geography. This second element is alluded to in a discussion regarding the exhibition layout in the Victor-Emmanuel building. As Kracklite, Io Speckler (father of the lascivious Caspasian), and Frederico (a “young, witty and mischievous” friend of Caspasian) peer into a model of the exhibition, Io enthusiastically announces that Caspasian has found “twenty-five thousand dollars’ worth of laser equipment” with which he plans “to join all of the buildings in Rome that influenced Boullée” (Belly, 44). Despite Kracklite’s horror at this technological subversion of Cartesian space, in the original script the laser lights were eventually used in his exhibition. The Italian contingent, along with “three officials and four electricians,” turned on “the green laser beams.” Soon after, “They flash out over Rome in the direction of the Pantheon, the Piazza del Popolo, the Augusteum, the Piazza Navona and St[.] Peter’s. As they turn each one on, there is a cry of surprise, delight and excitement” (Belly, 100). The laser lights are a literal symbol of the way that technology may arbitrarily be used to connect places of power—monuments. The laser light, like the time-lapse sequence and the postcard, is a postmodern spatial device that ironically violates Boullée’s and Kracklite’s essential Cartesian modernism.

Three final, closely connected elements are needed to complete the process of reconstruction. In the final moments of the film, a tripartite strategy emphasizes the importance of the missing time-lapse sequences. The first of these elements, while barely visible in the finished film, was intended to be seen most clearly in the background of the exhibition as Kracklite prepares to commit suicide. As Kracklite removes his watch and wallet and climbs toward the heights of the Victor-Emmanuel building, the exhibition chamber was to be revealed to be ringed with giant photographs of the eight structures from the time-lapse sequences. Each of these structures is displayed isolated from the city, as if in a museum. This mode of museological presentation mirrors Donald Kuspit’s claim that postmodern architectural space is emphatically “encyclopaedic” and has a “quasi-museum-like character” (68). The next element, which is very clear in the completed film, may be seen on the floor beneath Kracklite’s feet as he walks across the top gallery of the exhibition hall. As Kracklite looks down, he sees that he “stands on the map of Rome”—a closer examination reveals that a series of enlarged fragments from the 1748 Giambattista Nolli map line the floor (Greenaway, Stairs, 35). The Nolli map of Rome is famous for various reasons, not the least of which is the way that it identifies the interlocking of public and private spaces rather than the location of streets and buildings. The Nolli map records the fragmentary, palimpsestic layering of spaces in Rome. In the words of the historian Bacon,
the map displays the “confused forms of the medieval city” implanted “upon the formerly disciplined plans of classical Rome,” which “have been reordered by the architectural discipline of the Baroque” (161). The importance of the use of the Nolli map in Kracklite’s exhibition is two-fold: first, it repeats the thematic breakdown of space through the passage of time (which Greenaway planned for the time-lapse formal devices); and second, it orientates the visitor toward the final component of the reconstruction. The script records that in the final scenes of the film, Kracklite “walks along the colonnade—looking out over Rome where a series of ‘Canaletto’ boxes have been set up. He looks in the ‘Pantheon Box’—a framing device to isolate part of the huge panorama of Rome” (Belly, 110). The Canaletto boxes, like the Nolli map and the eight photographic works that were planned to dominate the walls of the exhibition, frame the same places that were to appear in the time-lapse sequences. Moreover, each of these elements denies the presence of anything else in Rome other than the eight buildings.

In combination, all of these elements strongly support the idea that Greenaway’s Rome is the archetypal postmodern city, a compendium of places of power that Kracklite naively believes provides him with a connection to Boullée but that, in reality, is the shifting ground on which his exhibition and his life ultimately falter. Through the process of reconstruction, it becomes clear that Greenaway intended Kracklite’s suicide to occur not in Rome but within the gaps between the discontinuous and fragmentary spaces of the postmodern world. Kracklite’s final resting place is fittingly anti-Cartesian. He does not land on the steps of the Victor-Emmanuel building or on the model buildings of Boullée; instead he lands, ironically, on the roof of Caspasian’s car.

NOTES

1. Various discrepancies exist between versions of the number count recorded by Greenaway in Drowning by Numbers. For example, in the script: “Taking of his shirt—[Jake] reveals—on the collar—a laundry mark—NUMBER 2 in the film series” (Drowning, 7). Yet in the summary of the numbers in the same script (and again in Greenaway’s Fear of Drowning by Numbers) “2 appears on a tin-bath holding windfall apples that Nancy drunkenly tips out on the grass in the moonlight garden” (Drowning, 116; Fear, 27). A detailed analysis of the film itself displays further differences.

2. In the original script for The Belly of an Architect, eight time-lapse sequences were planned and all eight structures were featured in some manner, however minor, in the finished work. Although nine structures are listed in the script, it is clear that “the Piazza and the Dome of St[.] Peter’s” are viewed as one distinct work of architecture and
constitute one time-lapse sequence, giving a total of eight. However, in this paper, I contend that the Boullée montage ending with Newton’s Cenotaph, scripted in scene five almost directly following the first time-lapse sequence, constitutes a ninth building. Yet to further complicate this issue, almost eight years after the making of The Belly of an Architect Greenaway commented on the film, while completing his project The Stairs, referring to “seven significant architectural sites from the Colosseum to the EUR building” (Stairs, 42). While on closer reading, it appears that Greenaway may have intended to refer to seven historic sites and the EUR (making eight), this discrepancy has been repeated in various articles and interviews since.

Laura Denham’s The Films of Peter Greenaway continues the confusion by stating that “The film also pays homage to seven of Rome’s most important monuments . . . Significantly all seven buildings are either memorials or tombs” (22). In her text Denham makes no distinction between the modern and historic monuments, and thus it is unclear whether or not she is simply repeating Greenaway’s own mistake. Finally, Greg Missingham presciently recorded that “[t]he Victor Emanuel is a ninth building that is significant throughout the film’s narrative” (Feasts, 41). Missingham is correct in suggesting that the Victor Emanuel frames the film and is thus as important as the other eight. However, while the Victor Emanuel was never intended as a time-lapse sequence, Boullée’s Newton’s Cenotaph was intended to be filmed in a manner strongly reminiscent of the original eight time-lapse sequences. Nevertheless, despite these misgivings, Missingham’s contention is noteworthy and may constitute the grounds for recognizing a tenth significant structure in The Belly of an Architect. As both the formal devices and their number have rarely been considered, this discrepancy has existed largely unnoticed and whether there are seven, eight, nine, or ten sequences must remain unknown.

3. This is reminiscent of, and was perhaps the inspiration for, Greenaway’s Cosmology at the Piazza del Popolo (June 1996), a light and sound exhibition in which Greenaway and his lighting designer, Reinier van Brummelen, lit the various monuments (the entry gate of Porto del Popolo, the three Baroque churches, the statuary, the fountains, and the 3,000-year-old obelisk brought back from Egypt by Emperor Augustus in celebration of his Egyptian Campaign) with the help of 6,000 lamps powered by fifteen generators and choreographed by computers. Greenaway thus creates a narrative of sorts, enacting the rhythms of day and night, and demonstrating that “light is a genre of its own” (quoted in Pascoe, 193). For a more complete description of the event, see Pascoe, 193–194; for impressive color reproductions of some of the lit buildings, see Elliott and Purdy, Architecture and Allegory, 113–117 [Editor’s note].
Pretences of knowledge can be doubted in two ways. One can point out that there are events for which the kind of knowledge there is (knowledge that has received endorsement from the sites that men of knowledge admit to be sound and credible) does not have a convincing, agreed narrative; events that cannot be made into a story that men of knowledge would recognize as their own. Or one can say that the narrative that knowledge does offer is not the only story that may be told of events; not even the best story, or at least not the only one able to claim the right to be considered “better tested.” The first kind of doubt is modern; the second is postmodern.

Zygmunt Bauman

Of all the dislocations, disruptions, decenterings, denudings, and deconstructions endemic to postmodernity, perhaps the most existentially unnerving have been those insights that have transformed our convictions about what we think we know, why we think we know, and how we go about the business of knowing. These epistemological tergiversations have been mirrored in a postmodernist aesthetic tendency that Ihab Hassan has termed “indeterminance” (92), evoking both the immanent self-reflexivity of a postmodern sensibility, along with its penchant for indeterminacy or, as Hassan elaborates, its “ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, deformation” (92). The films of Peter Greenaway, which strive, in the director’s words, for “maximum ambiguity” (Lecture, 24 April, 1997), participate in this postmodernist interrogation of knowledge, for in addition to their unremitting theoreticism and self-consciousness, they are quintessentially ambiguous, heterodox, pluralistic, and perverse.

Jean Petrolle
Greenaway’s 1986 film *A Zed and Two Noughts* (*ZOO*) is among the director’s most challenging works and may be his most characteristically postmodernist, parading before its viewers a lush, often puzzling assortment of allusions, puns, visual clues, bizarre images, taxonomies, and self-referential musings. The film’s encyclopedic sprawl and interpretive “red herrings” threaten a precocious hermeticism, yet its overt self-consciousness and insistent references to seventeenth-century allegorical painter Jan Vermeer constantly invite us to read it. This simultaneous resistance and invitation to interpretation constitutes both an exploration and an enactment of a problematics of signification.

Viewers familiar with Greenaway’s admiration for seventeenth-century Dutch painting have an interpretive advantage: allegory and self-reflexivity proliferated in the painting of this era and, predictably, *A Zed and Two Noughts* yields up a trove of meanings to an allegorical reading. The director discusses his fascination with allegory in a 1991 *Cineaste* interview, remarking that “the most successful of all painting has been that of the Dutch golden age [. . . .] because art [. . .] was most understood . . . on both its literal and allegorical levels” (7). Greenaway goes on to say, “I would like my movies to work the way Dutch painting did, on literal and metaphorical levels. If you’ve got that as a premise it’s no problem at all to find all the information that ought to go in the frame—all the cultural, allegorical material” (7). Even without the filmmaker’s announcement of intention, *A Zed and Two Noughts* warrants an allegorical reading by advertising, through its references, its own allegorical structure.

Given the film’s preoccupation with signification and interpretation, it is no accident, of course, that its mode should be allegory and its “master of ceremonies” Vermeer (*ZOO*, 14). Of contemporary allegorical practice, Deborah Madsen has written,

Modern allegory confronts us with the unknowability of transcendent categories of experience and restricts our sphere of questioning to the subjective [. . .] Postmodernist allegory, then, asks whether we can ever separate the perception of meaning from the subjective projection of significance and, if we cannot, whose interests are served by this ambiguity [. . .] The essential indeterminacy of reference that characterizes allegorical interpretation and allegorical narratives lends to allegory the kind of flexibility needed to respond to the vicissitudes of cultural history. Allegory comes into its own during periods of uncertainty regarding the nature of communication, the reliability of language and the authenticity of culturally important texts because allegory is, above all, focused on the complexities and difficulties inherent in the activity of interpretation. (4)
Certainly, postmodernity constitutes a cultural crisis of the sort Madsen describes. The legacy of structuralism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction have left postmodern intellectuals skeptical about the referential aspirations of language. More generally, as Lyotard has noted, the collapse of faith in narrative knowledge, and specifically, in the metanarratives that undergird premodern and modern knowledge, marks postmodernist discourse. The appeal of allegory for postmodern artists derives from its innate flexibility, its de facto undermining of referentiality and the authority of the sign: “An allegorical image [...] establishes a multivalent relationship to reality so that, as its meaning is developed in the narrative, it is seen to refer to several spheres of experience” (Madsen, 124). Naturally, this climate of multiplicity complicates interpretation, with the result that, as Madsen observes, “all allegories treat the idea of interpretation thematically” (127). A Zed and Two Noughts, then, in its very form, has as its center the act of interpretation, which focuses attention on the perception and production of meaning.

The quotation of Vermeer in A Zed and Two Noughts suits the film’s ludic and self-reflexive aims especially well. In Dutch genre painting, meaning balances precariously between a realistic representational surface and the symbolic sum of the coded objects, spatial relationships, and characters portrayed. John Rupert Martin writes, “In a realistic iconography such as that developed by Dutch artists, symbols are frequently concealed in the form of familiar household objects, and emblematic allusions may be easily overlooked or misunderstood” (129). Of Dutch genre painters, Vermeer was among the most theoretical, self-reflexive, and indeterminate. Vermeer scholar Daniel Arasse writes, “The divergences and aporias to which iconographic interpretations lead are [...] due [...] to Vermeer’s plan, to his manner of using material to elude interpretation, to hold meaning in suspense, to make the ‘reading’ of what is visible indeterminate” (31). Undoubtedly, Greenaway, who trained as a painter and knows art history well, found the markedly enigmatic and self-referential quality of Vermeer particularly appropriate to his film’s inquiry into the nature of meaning and processes of interpretation.

The film’s cinematic tableau vivant of Vermeer’s The Art of Painting, also known as The Allegory of Painting, provides particularly pointed encouragement for the viewer to read A Zed and Two Noughts as an allegory of film and underscores the film’s theoretical aspirations. In addition to evoking the lighting, colors, and interiors of Dutch genre painting, the film has a would-be Vermeer impersonator, the surgeon Van Meegeren, who has fake Vermeers hanging and lying about everywhere and develops an erotic fixation on Alba Bewick because of her alleged resemblance to Vermeer women.
Meegeren commissions Venus De Milo—who, in addition to being the zoo’s resident prostitute, is a writer, story-teller, and seamstress—to make Alba an exact replica of the dress “worn by Madame Van Ees in both *The Concert* and *The Music Lesson*” (76). When Milo fits Alba’s dress for the first time, the scenario becomes a modified *tableau vivant* of *The Music Lesson*. *The Music Lesson*, along with *The Allegory of Painting*, stands out in Vermeer’s *oeuvre* for its overt self-reflexivity. The painting contains an image of a mirror that reflects, in addition to its own foreground, the painter’s easel. As Vermeer’s paintings, in their self-consciousness, prompt viewers to reflect on the nature, purpose, and signifying strategies of painting, so *A Zed and Two Noughts* invites us to reflect on the nature, purpose, and signifying strategies of film.
Exploiting the allegorical possibilities of the cinema complicates the semiotic inquiry at work in Greenaway’s films. The cinema, rooted as it is in photography, tends heavily toward illusionistic realism, and the “allegorical material” Greenaway includes usually proves disruptive to the viewer’s illusion that a meaningful world is unfolding. Consequently, viewers maintain a critical distance from the film, focusing a theoretical attention on the signifying processes at work and exerting the effort necessary to generate a coherent reading for themselves. The viewer’s own involvement in the film highlights the slippery and subjective nature of meaning—a principle mirrored by the film’s outlandish diegesis.

The main characters in *A Zed and Two Noughts*, Oliver and Oswald Deuce, Siamese twin brothers separated at birth and both zoologists, find themselves inquisitors into the meaning behind a chain of bizarre, tragic, and grotesque coincidences. The Deuces’ wives are simultaneously killed when their car, driven by one Alba Bewick, careens into a swan on Swan’s Way. To the Deuce brothers, these details—two zoologists, two wives, a swan, Swan’s Way—seem weighted with significance, and they attempt to weave them into a narrative that will make sense of the tragedy. Their maddening search for meaning parallels the viewer’s search for textual details that will make sense of the film. Their quest, and the viewer’s, models the process of producing meaning: one attempts to connect an assortment of events or phenomena by telling a story about them. While the irreducible absurdity of the women’s deaths thwarts the brothers’ effort to understand it, the film’s textual web of references, subplots, and surreal imagery thwarts the viewer’s efforts to organize its plenitude into a more or less stable interpretation.

This instability alienates even extremely sophisticated viewers. David Wills and Alex McHoul, for example, after offering three quite plausible readings of the film, accuse it of vacuousness and “(pretentious, intellectualist) theoreticism” (23). Though some of us like to be teased more than others, even the most indefatigable poststructuralists and deconstructionists among us find ourselves facing a text and wanting desperately to know: What does it mean? We may agree that knowledge—knowledge of texts included—is narrative, subjective, and contingent, but this doesn’t quell our desire to know with certainty.

The film’s refusal to entirely satisfy this craving does not, however, leave it devoid of any positive content, as Wills and McHoul suggest. The disturbing experience of wanting-to-know and not-knowing, the film poignantly and playfully demonstrates, applies to life’s most fundamental mysteries—the origins of life, the phenomena of aging and death, the vulnerability of the body, the dazzling array of biological life forms. To admit
this is to perceive the limitations of the human mind—an uncomfortable insight. We cannot, finally, achieve certainty about our most impassioned questions, and with tricksterish, indeterminate artworks, our epistemological disquiet before existence is mimed in the act of textual interpretation.

With its elusiveness, *A Zed and Two Noughts* induces in viewers the epistemological response that Bauman calls characteristic of the postmodern psyche. What haunts postmodernity, he says, is not the modernist insight that not all experience can be satisfactorily narrativized, but that numerous narratives have equal claim to the appellation “knowledge” (*Modernity and Ambivalence*, 238). Just as creationism, classical mythology, and Darwinism offer competing narratives to explain the origins of life, a number of narratives might explain the film: it documents the pain of mortality and the obsessive character of grief; it examines the principle of symmetry, and how the lateral line determines our aesthetic perception; it highlights our subjection to our bodies, which imprison us like zoo animals. The interpretations multiply easily. But perhaps the film concerns itself not so much with the origin of life, the mystery of death, or the vulnerability of the body as it does with the process whereby humans try to narrativize these phenomena, and the apparent impossibility (and perhaps undesirability) of coming up, once and for all, with a satisfactory story.

With its self-conscious, deliberate multivalency, *A Zed and Two Noughts* suggests that the very process of reading a film is an allegory for how human beings strain to make sense of experience. In their obsessive search for answers to their wives’ deaths, Oliver and Oswald turn to evolutionary theory, in the form of a film. Shortly after the crash, Oliver appears in the zoo theater, watching David Attenborough’s series *Life on Earth*, thinking that perhaps evolutionary theory will supply him with the rational explanation he needs in order to accept his wife’s death. As we watch Oliver watching, bright light pours out of the projector behind him—this image offers a representation of cinema itself and foregrounds the viewer’s own position. Later, during another viewing experience, Oliver tells the zoo controller Fallast, “I’m on the look-out for clues.” When Fallast asks, “What sort of clues,” Oliver replies, “I need to separate the true clues from the red herrings.” He also remarks, “I’m going to take it [*Life on Earth*] in stages, it needs absorbing” (29). Oliver’s comments sound suspiciously like instructions for textual interpretation, linking his own search for the meaning of his wife’s death with the viewer’s efforts to make meaning out of the film.

Viewers of *A Zed and Two Noughts*, certainly, must separate the true clues from the red herrings. The “red herring” is, after all, a Greenaway trademark. In a 1982 interview, Stuart Morgan comments on Greenaway’s
“blatant use of red herrings,” citing as an example the 1977 short Dear Phone, in which all the women are named Zelda, all are driving their husbands mad, and “thrown in for good measure [is] a cleaning woman whose favorite novel [is] Tender is the Night” (49). As Morgan points out, “None of that serves any purpose in the film,” to which Greenaway responds: “It serves the purpose of not serving a purpose, surely quite a valid one. Life is full of a thousand red herrings, and it takes the history of civilization to work out which are the red herrings and which aren’t” (49). Greenaway’s remark about his own use of the red herrings reveals that this aspect of his filmmaking mirrors for him the epistemological quandaries of the human mind before existence.

As is characteristic of Greenaway’s films, A Zed and Two Noughts contains numerous red herrings—extraneous details and patterns that will send attentive viewers on fruitless hermeneutic forays. The fact that the wives die by a swan on Swan’s Way (merely coincidentally similar to Swann’s Way?) might send dutiful, unsuspecting viewers on a mental search for the connection between Charles Darwin and Marcel Proust, but these viewers will come up empty-handed or will make such a reach that they must notice how their own subjective activity constructs meaning. An artwork’s determination to accentuate the reader’s own role in textual creation is, of course, typical of self-conscious fiction—metafiction. As Linda Hutcheon points out, metafiction makes the reader’s (or viewer’s) own interpretive processes the subject of the text:

[…] the reader’s task becomes increasingly difficult and demanding, as he sorts out the various narrative threads. The universe he thus creates, he must then acknowledge as fictional and of his own making. With this latter recognition his conscious relation to the text alters. With a technique not unlike that of Brecht’s alienation effect, the parody and self-reflection of narcissistic narrative work to prevent the reader’s identification with any one character and to force a new, active, thinking relationship upon him. It becomes increasingly clear that, though free to interpret, the reader is also responsible for his interpretation. (Narcissistic Narrative, 49)

The red herring proves an effective tool for making the viewer hyperaware of his or her interpretive processes.

A Zed and Two Noughts sets further interpretive traps for the viewer by exploiting the camera’s ability to impart significance to objects. The film’s second shot depicts a tiger pacing his cage; on the floor lies a zebra’s decapitated head. The camera cuts to a close-up of the head, then to a credit, then
back to the tiger pacing, and back to the head. We hear a crash, and the camera cuts to an image of a car wedged partway up a black and white striped pole, a billboard with a tiger on it filling the top right quadrant of the frame. The billboard appears again when Oliver collects glass from the crash site. During the scene in which Oliver and Oswald first meet Alba, the camera cuts for no apparent reason to a close-up of a toy zebra on a table. Oliver picks it up while the camera highlights his movements with an extended medium shot. Later, we get a glimpse of zebra-striped underwear worn by Alba’s nurse. The zoo prostitute, Venus de Milo, who is fond of wearing black and white, fantasizes about, and eventually attempts, sex with a zebra. Any mindful viewer might legitimately wonder about the significance of all these stripes, but they may be nothing more than a parody of how film manipulates detail to articulate meaning. At most, they constitute a glib quip about phenomena that evolutionary theory fails to explain. For anyone looking to discover in them some key to the film’s meaning, they are, indeed, red herrings. The film fails to authorize any particular connections we might make in order to tell a story about their cumulative meaning.

In fact, *A Zed and Two Noughts* contains a visual joke about the predicament in which it places the viewer. During one of Oswald’s visits to Alba, she offers him the key to her childhood home, L’Escargot. Oswald empties her handbag to find it full of keys, which he dumps into a large pile on the bed. When Oswald asks her to identify the correct key (to separate the true key from the red herrings), she tells him that she doesn’t know which one is the right key and that he’d better try them all. The viewer must also “try them all,” must follow each path down which an allusion points, connect each detail with others in its category (red herring or no), puzzle over every enigmatic remark by the characters—all with no assurance that a hermeneutically fruitful detail has been isolated.

Oliver and Oswald meet with similar frustration as they try to face their wives’ sudden deaths. The search for a reason, an answer, leads both twins frantically to try to connect the details of the crash. Oliver races into Alba’s hospital room, asking, “I’ve just thought . . . at the crash, which way was the wind blowing? Was it coming off the buildings on the south side . . . or . . .” Alba, in exasperation at the twins’ continuing efforts to find meaning in the crash, tells Oswald, “Look, it was an accident. Five thousand accidents happen every day—bizarre, tragic, farcical . . . they’re Acts of God fit only to amaze the survivors and irritate the Insurance Company . . .” When Oliver presses on, insisting, “This one is different . . . the wives of two zoologists die in a car driven by a woman called Bewick who is attacked by a swan on Swan’s Way,” Alba tries to calm his interpretive frenzy, scolding, “You are al-
ready beginning to build yourself a case for the supernatural—another set of
details from the same crash could produce something completely different”
(47, 65). In addition to pinpointing an occupational peril of interpretation
(after all, textual analysis proceeds through a similar cataloguing and con-
necting of minutiae; our conclusions depend on how a scene is lit, where the
shadows fall, what is in the frame, and how all these details relate), Alba’s re-
mark summarizes the epistemological difficulty that, in Bauman’s estimation,
bedevils the postmodern mind—that lurking sense that one’s own is “not the
only story that may be told of events” (238). To further explore the fragility
and constructedness of narrative knowledge, *A Zed and Two Noughts* presents
and plays with a multiplicity of meaning systems.

Several Greenaway films use the alphabet or numbering as a basic struc-
tural device. Throughout *A Zed and Two Noughts*, Alba’s daughter Beta and
her caretakers play an alphabet game, matching each letter of the alphabet
with an animal. In displaying a fascination with the alphabet, the film calls
attention to the moneme—the most basic unit of meaning. The film also has
a fascination for numbers. The viewer first meets Oliver while he is keeping
track of a caged tiger’s pacing, clicking a counter each time the tiger turns.
As the screenplay notes, “the tiger-counter shows the number of 676, the
square of 26” (18). When Oliver asks Alba why she named her daughter
Beta, Alba explains that Beta was her second child, who survived the first
child, named Alpha; Alba states that she had planned to have twenty-six chil-
dren, one for each letter of the Greek alphabet. Oliver points out that the
Greek alphabet only has twenty-three letters, heralding his brother’s later ob-
servation that “Vermeer only painted twenty-six paintings—and three of
those are dubious” (45) That the Greek alphabet should have as many letters
as there are *bona fide* Vermeers exemplifies the strange coincidences latent in
number systems. The film’s playfulness with numbers evokes the remarkable
curiosities apparent to anyone who studies numbers closely; mathematics is
devoted to revealing these uncanny patterns.¹¹ This play with fundamental
units of meaning accompanies allusions to elaborately articulated meaning
systems designed to explain the natural world—Greco-Roman mythology,
Judeo-Christian mythology, and science.

Shortly after the crash, a radio announcer is heard trying to put together
the details of the crash and, in doing so, makes a reference to Greco-Roman
mythology that will be echoed throughout the film. The announcer asks,
“... a swan? ... what sort of swan? ... Leda? ... who’s Leda? ... is she the
injured woman? ... by whom? ... laid by whom? ... by Jupiter? ... who’s
he?” (20) Later, Oswald tells Alba that in the course of evolution, reptiles
“grew feathers and became birds,” at which statement Alba asks, “So our swan
was a flying lizard? Did Jupiter know that when he raped Leda?” (70). After the birth of Alba’s twins, Oliver asks her what she will name them. Alba suggests “Castor and Polydeuces,” but after Oswald asks, “...from the rape of the swan?” Oliver insists that the names would be “Too obvious” (102).

The film also evokes Genesis. Shortly after their wives’ burials, Oswald asks Oliver about the process of decay, and Oliver gives a rather unorthodox account of the history of bacteria. The bacteria that set to work in the intestines, he says, are “Bisocosis populi. There are supposed to be one hundred and thirty thousand bisocosis in one lick of the human tongue ... two hundred and fifty thousand in a French kiss. First exchanged at the very beginning of creation when Adam kissed Eve.” Oswald asks, “Suppose Eve kissed Adam?” “Unlikely ...” replies Oliver, “she used her first one hundred thousand on the apple” (24). These mythological narratives form the background of a textual fabric threaded through with another narrative of creation—evolutionary theory. Against this background of myth, scientific narrative becomes yet another story.

Immediately following this reference to creationism, David Attenborough’s narration of the Life on Earth series begins: “...and life almost certainly started at such a conjunction in the primaeval seas—of shallow water, sunlight, warm salts, and electric storms” (25). A Zed and Two Noughts quotes Life on Earth continually, following the narrative from single-celled animals through reptiles and birds and mammals to humans—the Darwinian trajectory that, since invented by human beings, can only end with human beings. By showing us “knowledge” (and who sounds more authoritative than Attenborough?) literally as narration, the film calls attention to the narrative basis of scientific knowledge that, when presented without a self-reflexive methodological and linguistic savvy, masquerades as absolute, unmediated Reality.

Van Hoyten, the zoo’s Keeper of the Owls, and his confidant Joshua Plate, share an exchange that suggests that evolutionary theory is just another story. In a reprise of the sequence in which Oliver watches Life on Earth, Van Hoyten and Plate appear in the viewing theater, watching the same series:

**Van Hoyten:** What’s Oliver looking for?

**Plate:** I don’t know—an answer to his wife’s death?

**Van Hoyten:** He’ll not find it here. This is just a straightforward account.

**Plate:** Both brothers have taken out a copy . . .

**Van Hoyten:** Have I got to sit through them all? There’s eight parts and this is only the second...and God—it’s all such a dreary fiction. (44)
Their conversation represents two conceptions regarding the nature of science: the naive view that science merely offers a “straightforward account,” a trustworthy monologue of fact and truth; and the idea that science itself is fiction, a carefully ordered arrangement of language to produce meaning.

The film performs such deconstructions of scientific knowledge repeatedly, offering numerous references to, images of, and critiques of scientific method. Oliver and Oswald, in their obsession with their wives’ decay, conduct a series of “experiments” to record the process of decay. They set up time-lapse cameras focused on decomposing corpses, gradually working their way up the ladder of evolution, starting with an apple, and moving to prawns, then to a crocodile, swan, dog, zebra, ape, and, finally, to themselves. Their “experiments,” motivated by grief and obsession, suggest the subjective motivations that fuel the pursuit of knowledge and thus indicate that science, despite its pretensions to objectivity, cannot escape its imbrication with subjective human biases and aims.

The film pokes fun at scientific method in several of its absurdist comic moments. When Oliver and Oswald take Beta out for a sundae, the little girl, with help from Alba’s nurse Catarina Bolnes, easily disabuses the twins of their pretenses to comprehensive scientific knowledge. The twins try to amaze Beta with the scope of their information. Oliver tells her, “the ostrich eats anything at all.” To which Oswald adds, “... and buries its head in the sand when it’s frightened.” Oliver continues, “and the elephant lives to be a hundred ...” “[And] never forgets a face,” finishes Oswald. “So you see that between us,” Oliver boasts, “we know everything.” “You don’t know everything,” challenges Beta. In the ensuing exchange, the film pokes fun at scientific practices of knowing. Beta points out that the twins do not know what color knickers Catarina is wearing and dares Oliver to go ask. Oliver does, and Catarina tells him but follows him back to his table, complaining that he hasn’t followed the proper methodology for scientific discovery:

*BOLNES:* Excuse me. Just in case you don’t believe me, I can show you.

*OLIVER:* No, thank you, we believe you.

*BOLNES:* I insist.

*OLIVER:* (Rattled and uneasy) It’s really alright, thank you.

*BOLNES:* If you are zoologists as you claim and you pride yourselves on your powers of observation, you must continue the experiment. If you don’t look at the evidence, you’re cheating the child. Come with me, or I swear I’ll kick this table over. (66)
Oliver follows her into the women’s restroom to “observe” her underwear, only to be cuffed soundly, propositioned, and sent back to his table. Through antics like these, *A Zed and Two Noughts* parodies scientific method and deconstructs the hubris contained in the scientific faith in method. By the time we hear the last narrated segment of *Life on Earth*, this hubris is sufficiently exposed and ironized. Images of naked tribesmen and women flash on a television screen, and Attenborough proudly announces, “the ability to store and pass on his knowledge is the key to [man’s] success,” as the twins prepare to confront their final failures—the rejection of their paternity, the loss of the chance to complete their experiment by filming Alba’s decay, and their failure to record their own deaths in the name of science.

Oliver and Oswald have, of course, suffered a more devastating failure—the failure of Science to satisfactorily provide an explanation of their wives’ death. Their turning to the *Life on Earth* series is not arbitrary, and Oliver’s search for “clues” in this paradigmatic “scientific” document is anything but detached. While searching the series for clues, Oliver remarks to Fallast that he “must’ve got it wrong before” (29). In the context of the plot, Oliver means that the tragic, senseless, sudden violence of his wife’s death has forced him to reconsider his most basic assumptions about life. As an animal behaviorist, he has assumed, like any scientist, that there exists an underlying order to the cosmos that can be discovered, understood, measured, and explained. The bizarre specifics of her death make him question this order.

Oswald experiences the same irreversible crisis of scientific faith. He complains, “I cannot stand the idea of her rotting away . . . for nothing . . . or was it for some reason?” (24). Like Oliver, he scrutinizes the same paradigmatic scientific account of the life process for clues. He visits Alba late one night to show her the *Life on Earth* segment on reptiles. She asks him, “What’s all this watching for?” He responds, “I’m trying to work it out.” “What out?” she insists. “Why we’ve come all this way—slowly and painfully—inch by inch—fraction by fraction—second by second—so that my wife should die by a swan” (70). The Deuce brothers are questing after no less than the meaning of life, that elusive and immeasurable nugget of gnosis that has taunted humankind perennially with questions that mythology, science, philosophy, and art have traditionally attempted to answer: Who am I? How did I get here? Why am I here? Am I strictly body or something else besides? What is death and what happens after I die? And of course: What’s the point of it? Answers to these questions offer to mitigate the painful experiences of contingency, loss, and helplessness.

That *A Zed and Two Noughts* takes knowledge and mortality as its two central concerns points to the special relationship between the two. Zyg-
munt Bauman explores this relationship at length in his book *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies*. Bauman writes:

> the knowledge of having to die may well dwarf and make futile, pompous, and absurd even the most grandiose of human projects. If "meaning" is the product of intention, if action is meaningful insofar as it is purpose-oriented—then what is the meaning of life? This question,
and the stubborn necessity and relentless urge to ask it, is the curse of the human condition and the source of interminable agony. But it is also life’s mind-boggling chance. There is a void to be filled; a void which in no way limits the range of contents with which it can be filled. Purposes and meanings are not “given”; therefore, purpose can be chosen, meaning can be created ab nihilo. (Mortality, 6)

Mortality, then, creates an ontological conundrum: What can be the meaning of life if death obviates all purposes? Bauman goes on to argue that this largely unconscious philosophical gadfly motivates all human enterprise. Ironically, however, the effectiveness of our constructions of meaning seems to depend on the degree to which we can hide its constructedness. “Human culture is,” he writes, “on the one hand, a gigantic [. . .] ongoing effort to give meaning to human life; on the other hand, it is an obstinate [. . .] effort to suppress awareness of the irreparably surrogate, and brittle character of such meaning” (8). Biblical knowledge, philosophical knowledge, scientific knowledge—any knowledge only fulfills its death-defying function so long as it can be perceived as true. Once meaning is revealed in all its artificiality and contingency, it loses its consolatory power.

This may be the reason why some readers and critics react with indignation to fiction that lays bare its own fictional structures. Postmodernist fiction, Hutcheon writes, “reveals rather than conceals the tracks of the signifying systems that constitute our world—that is, systems constructed by us in answer to our needs. However important these systems are, they are not natural, given, or universal (Poetics of Postmodernism, 13). Hutcheon adds that in metafiction, “fiction is offered as another of the discourses by which we construct our versions of reality, and both the construction and the need for it are what are foregrounded in the postmodernist novel” (40). The same holds, of course, for postmodernist film. As it dramatizes how a shocking confrontation with mortality makes desperately urgent a painful, frustrating search for meaning on the part of the protagonists, and while deconstructing a number of systems vying to supply such meaning, A Zed and Two Noughts playfully calls attention to its own strategies of meaning-production by referencing painting, photography, and cinema itself.

However, reading a postmodernist work of art like A Zed and Two Noughts as allegory of the hunger for meaning makes it possible to consider how postmodernist formal strategies may go beyond deconstructing culture and narrative, and instead add up to a positive insight into why and how our minds seek, make, unmake, and remake meaning, and how this process characterizes not only our responses to texts but also our responses to the most
pressing personal and universal life experiences. Theorists like Jameson, Eagleton, Habermas, and Norris, who perceive in postmodernist fictions (and theories, if such a distinction can be made) a refusal to take human problems seriously, fail to recognize postmodernist insights into the nature of meaning as valuable; obviously, their disapprobation issues from their own investment in philosophical and ethical systems that depend on fixed and universal meanings.

Dissatisfied consumers of postmodern texts decry their labyrinthine narrative entanglements, their self-consciousness, their effusion of references, and, perhaps most of all, their stubborn resistance to interpretation. In the 1996 summer fiction issue of the *New Yorker*, Bill Buford celebrates what he sees as the disappearance of modernism and postmodernism. “In 1985,” he says, “it was still possible to say (and earn tenure for saying) that American fiction is a manifestation of our postmodern modernit [. . .] There were stories about stories, there were stories about writing stories, and there were stories about searches for the writers to write the stories. It was art! It was modern! And, finally, it disappeared!” (12). Buford goes on to give the return of the good, old-fashioned narrative (the kind that makes the reader “want to find out what happens next”) a resounding welcome. *A Zed and Two Noughts* would no doubt annoy him. Buford ends by saying that “we need stories [. . .] [because] they are a fundamental unit of knowledge, the foundation of memory, essential to the way we make sense of our lives” and that “narrative is as important to writing as the human body is to representational painting” (12). “We have returned to narrative,” he claims, “because it is impossible to live without [it]” (12). Like Marxist and humanist theorists, Buford supposes that knowledge need follow a linear, narrative model in which meaning can be clearly articulated and made to stand still.

Ironically, Greenaway, who loves stories as much as anyone else, would likely agree that narrative helps us to organize our experience. However, the filmmaker has also commented that “cinema is far too rich and capable a medium to be merely left to the storytellers” (*Zed and Two Noughts*, 15). Naive story-telling—stories without acknowledged awareness of their fictiveness—helps reinforce the illusion that meaning and, by extension, reality exist independent of human perceptions and constructions of them. Robert Stam explores this idea at length in *Reflexivity in Film and Literature*: “Reflexive fictions defiantly call attention to their own artifice and operations, refusing a transparent self-effacing language that opens quietly onto the world [. . .] reflexive artists cast doubt on the central assumption of mimetic art—the notion of an antecedent reality on which the artistic text is supposedly modeled” (129). In postmodern culture, where notions
of transparent language, immanent “reality,” and universal meaning collapse under questioning, metafiction becomes increasingly appealing for its ability to incorporate such collapses into its own form and thereby question the basic foundations of knowledge.

The allure of stories—fully illusionistic stories—never ebbs, however, precisely because of their capacity to provide the false sense of security we crave. *A Zed and Two Noughts* dramatizes how the making and unmaking of stories by turns satiates, intensifies, and frustrates the hunger for meaning. The twins, ultimately unable to construct a satisfactory narrative, commit a double suicide, and even their last-ditch attempt to make death mean something fails when the camera they have set up to film their own decay malfunctions because of the snails overrunning it. As viewers, our interpretive efforts meet the same fate since we cannot tell a tidy story about what the film means. The film’s deliberate shortcircuiting of interpretation does not, however, make it a cinematic exercise in nihilism, for its self-conscious trickery leaves us sharply aware of our acute need to make sense of texts—and of other uncountable, unnamable, astounding, confounding, and confusing details, artifacts, events, and phenomena that surround us. Awareness of our own epistemological habits makes it less tempting to reduce our ambiguities and less likely that we will mistake our meanings for Meaning; our realities for Reality; our knowledge for Knowledge.

Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on one’s perspective, avoiding this temptation means complicating our understanding considerably. Bauman describes modernity as an attempt to avoid this complication, defining ambivalence as “the possibility of assigning an object or event to more than one category” (*Modernity*, 1) and claiming that the modern is “a fight of determination against ambiguity, of semantic precision against ambivalence, of transparency against obscurity, clarity against fuzziness” (7). “The […] substance of […] modern intellect” he writes, “is the effort to exterminate ambivalence” (7). Postmodernity, then, may be seen as a determination to confront and embrace this ambiguity, obscurity, polysemy. With its ludic postmodernist formal strategies, *A Zed and Two Noughts* suggests that it is possible, necessary, and sometimes even fun to live with ambivalence.

**NOTES**

1. For a concise summary of structuralist and poststructuralist claims, see Culler, 3–109.
2. For a discussion of the discursivity, narrativity, and political implications of knowledge practices, see Foucault’s *Power/Knowledge*, 78–108; and *Archeology of Knowledge*, 166–195. For a discussion of postmodernity and narrative knowledge, see Lyotard, xxiii–xxv; 18–37. For a summary of postmodernist challenges to Enlightenment epistemology, see Docherty, 37–62; 97–119.

3. Alan Woods, who harbors a clear distaste for postmodernist forms, places Greenaway within a modernist tradition of references to art and literary history. Woods writes:

[. . .] I would most carefully distinguish Greenaway from the post-modern; his love of art history has led him to question cinema rather than painting, and his knowledge of a commitment to the history of painting gives his work a depth, even—especially—as he quotes that history which is far removed from the easy pastiche of famous images which has dominated a cynical market. (56)

Woods’s orientation toward the postmodern departs from that of Hutcheon’s or my own; however, in *Being Naked, Playing Dead*, he demonstrates well how art history informs Greenaway’s films.

4. Van Meegeren was a twentieth-century forger of Vermeer. See Stechow, 4; Hutcheon, *Politics*, 117.

5. The same dress appears in numerous Vermeers.

6. For a discussion of *The Music Lesson*, see Arasse, 33–39; Wheelock, 85–95. For a discussion of *The Art of Painting*, see Arasse, 40–58; Hertel, 140–186. The mirror in *The Music Lesson* makes the painting similar to Velásquez’s *Las Meninas*, the epistemological implications of which Foucault discusses at length in *The Order of Things*, 3–16.

7. Fletcher, among others, has noted that action within an allegorical narrative usually takes the form of a quest. See 147–180.

8. Critics of postmodernism accuse postmodernist artworks of having no “positive content.” See Habermas, 90. Hutcheon responds to this charge in *Poetics*, 231.

9. Greenaway’s nonsense, then, ceases to be capricious self-indulgence, as his detractors claim, and becomes part of a serious philosophical meditation about the construction of knowledge. In her own incisive commentary about *A Zed and Two Noughts*, Anne T. Ciecko, invoking Wendy Steiner, notes that “nonsense is one of the greatest themes and modes in modernism and postmodernism” (45). She cites Steiner, who writes: “Nonsense inevitably raises the issue of how language and verbal art ‘mean’” (93).

of symbols, attributes, and personifications, set out in alphabetical order, was consulted by artists and writers for nearly two hundred years and obviously satisfies a deeply felt need for an allegorical mode of communication. Even today it remains ‘the key to the painted and sculptural allegories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’” (121).

11. Greenaway’s film *Drowning by Numbers*, and accompanying commentary *Fear of Drowning*, explore and display obsessions with numbers and counting.

12. Vermeer’s wife was named Catarina Bolnes.

13. Here, as elsewhere, the published screenplay differs somewhat from the film. I cite the dialogue as it is heard in the film.

14. See Rorty, xiii–xvi; 3–22; 73–95, for a discussion of the notion of “final vocabulary” language structures that have come to be seen as the truth.
I have behaved like an obstinate man, pursuing an appearance of order, when I should have realized that there is no order in the universe.

Umberto Eco

A conversation that gives delight in reality is, if transformed in writing and read, a painting with nothing but false perspectives.

Nietzsche

POSTMODERNISM OR THE END OF MODERNITY?

It has often been noted that Greenaway’s cinema is one of ideas, rather than one of emotions, narrative coherence, and character identification. Prospero’s Books, Greenaway’s 1991 cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare’s The Tempest, is no exception to Greenaway’s commitment to ideological investigation, to using film as a “philosophical medium” through which to “read” culture (Lecture, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, October 8, 1999). Prospero’s Books is also, perhaps, the most written about of Greenaway’s films. It has been criticized for being a self-indulgent, self-defeating merger of media and for ignoring the discourse on colonialism (Coursen, 164–167). And, it has been praised as being “one of the most outstandingly personal and uniquely experimental contributions to the history of Shakespearean film” (Schatz-Jacobsen, 133). The critical attention Prospero’s Books has received is no doubt due, in large part, to the fact that it is a daring cinematic “translation” of one
of Shakespeare’s most often adapted plays. One critic notes that adaptations of The Tempest are as old as the play itself (Vaughan, 16). The New York release of the film in the fall of 1991 also coincided with the staging of two other adaptations of The Tempest: Bob Carlton’s Sci-Fi rock musical, Return to the Forbidden Planet, and Aimé Césaire’s A Tempest, a play that was written in 1969 but only premiered in the United States in 1991, at the Ubu Repertory Theatre in New York (see Vaughan).

Recent adaptations of and critical commentaries on The Tempest have tended to explore its relevance to post-colonial discourse. Greenaway’s version has been criticized by some for failing to do so. I would suggest, however, that Greenaway’s Prospero’s Books calls attention to the inherent colonizing impulse of modernity. In this essay, I would like to discuss this film’s potential as a vehicle for exploring the notion of “modernity,” not as an aesthetic practice but as a historically grounded attitude toward the world and humanity’s relationship to it. I would like to propose that Prospero’s Books be read as a postmodernist “visual essay” that critically investigates a set of practices that became fundamental to the establishment of modernity in the seventeenth century: these are, the hegemonic role of vision, the rise of transcendental reason, and the concomitant Cartesian subject’s colonization and mastery of the world.

Greenaway has often noted many correspondences between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries, correspondences that he has dramatized by indulging in a neo-baroque aesthetics and a love of allegory, pastiche, and trompe l’oeil effects.1

The seventeenth century has been featured in most of Greenaway’s films, either as its setting or as its source of artistic inspiration, from architecture and sculpture to paintings. Greenaway finds that The Tempest, being a play about beginnings and endings, “is perhaps very relevant to the end of the century, the end of the millennium” (Rodgers, 12). What also makes it relevant to our times, explains Greenaway, is that “it’s a play about knowledge and the uses of knowledge. We are all so knowledgeable now and there’s so much knowledge available, that in some senses, we, too, have become magicians” (Turman, 106). Prospero’s Books is, in turn, a film about the beginnings and the end of modernity. It offers a challenge to one of the major tenets of modernity: that the acquisition and accumulation of knowledge about the world, and the subsequent use of this knowledge to effect changes in the world, is a progressive endeavor.

Ideologically, the seventeenth and twentieth centuries are marked, respectively, by science’s displacement of animism and alchemy and by the rise of the modern instrumentalist ethos, on the one hand, and, on the
other, by the questioning of that ethos and by the need to recover, or re-
discover, a non-exploitative and participatory relationship with the natu-
ral world. *Prospero’s Books* questions the feasibility and desirability of the rationalist and scientific pursuit of knowledge as truth and dramatizes the fact that the acquisition and use of knowledge are neither neutral, nor ob-
jective, nor impartial, but always motivated, self-serving, and reductive.
Knowledge is a discursive practice; to know the world is not to uncover
its secrets but to construct a theory, or narrative, about the world that im-
poverishes it and reduces its ambiguities. As Umberto Eco once noted, the
world constructed from conjectures is only “logically” more satisfying
than the organic world (252). To know the world is to mistake represen-
tations of the world for its organic Beingness.

The figures of Prospero and Caliban incarnate the modern and the postmodern conceptions of knowledge and Self as they will be understood here. These characters represent, respectively, the “nonparticipating con-
sciousness” of the modern disenchanted world of Cartesian dualism, and the “participating consciousness” of the pre- and, I would argue, postmodern reenchedanted worlds (Berman, 39–40). Modern and pre/postmodern con-
sciousness also converge in Greenaway’s treatment of the twenty-four books Prospero takes with him as he escapes into exile. While Shakespeare merely mentions the volumes as the absolute source of Prospero’s power, Greenaway makes them the central structuring device of the film. The written text is for both the film and the fiction constructed by Prospero within the film “the
master material on which all the magic, illusion and deception of the play is based”; it is from these books, explains Greenaway, that knowledge is “fabricated in pictorial form” (my emphasis, *Prospero’s Books*, 9). These books pur-
port to comprise a collection of all knowledge, and the film dramatizes not only the fabricated nature of this knowledge but the despotic potential of ac-
cumulating knowledge and equating knowledge with power. However, through the use of sophisticated high-definition television technology and a
digital Quantel Paintbox, Greenaway animates these books, bringing their content back to life and challenging the notion that the world can be re-
duced to accumulable units of knowledge that can be contained in the form of texts, drawings, graphs, charts, and maps.

*Prospero’s Books* has been critically recognized as a postmodernist proj-
ject that pushes signification to the threshold of destruction, exploring the limits of discontinuity, fragmentation, and the relations between fiction and reality (see Bénoliel, Grieve). Greenaway himself has used the term *postmod-
ern* to refer to the film’s self-reflexive traits, which, he points out, are already present in the original play. He is alluding in particular to the epilogue where
Prospero speaks directly to the audience. Although not unusual for the period, this device of direct address occurs only a few times in the Shakespearean corpus. As Greenaway himself explains, “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’” (Rodman, 38).

Other postmodernist devices that are operative in Prospero’s Books include a marked stylistic eclecticism; a mixing of discursive modes with the use of high-definition television techniques and the fusion of text with image; an ironic revisiting of the past in the very act and manner of adapting the Shakespearean text; the use of quotations from the director’s own filmic oeuvre as well as from such Renaissance artists as Botticelli, Bellini, Da Vinci, Veronese, and Breughel; a celebration of ambiguity, imagination, and complexity; a deliberate confusion between fact, fantasy, and memory; a tendency toward overcoding; and, above all, a thorough surrender to the visual spectacle. To borrow Michel de Certeau’s phrase, Prospero’s Books is a veritable “epic of the eye” (Practice, xxi) that seems both to reflect and critique the ocular-centric paradigm so dominant in Western culture since the ancient Greeks. As the film demonstrates through the actions of Prospero—its principal, and to a large degree only character—thought, knowledge, truth, and reality itself have been, since the “birth” of modernity, predominantly “vision-generated,” and “vision-centered” (Levin, Modernity, 2).

I will conceive of postmodernism in two distinct ways, thus embracing the positive and negative connotations the term tends to invite. I will speak of the postmodern, or of postmodernism, in the positive “wishful thinking” sense as a tactic for subverting the modern. This tactic is put into play in Prospero’s Books by means of formal and stylistic devices designed to undermine the ideology of the master narrative and its transcendental subject. I will use the term postmodern world to refer to our own late capitalist world, the end-product and logical conclusion of the hegemonic project of modernity started with Plato.

Since a definition of the origins of modernity is itself problematical, for the purposes of this analysis I will situate it—or its flourishing—in the fifteenth century with the advent of the printed book and of perspectivism, and with the rapid take-over of scientific consciousness and instrumental reason in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What is remarkable about these periods is the rapid developments in technology that enabled the concretization of a latent world-view dating back, according to some critics of modernity, to Plato’s totalistic and totalitarian world of Ideas. Other critics situate this world-view as far back as Pythagoras, whom they consider the
first modern for making pure reason the absolute arbitrator and the means to achieve what Friedrich Schlegel called, in the late 1700s, the utopian “system of infinite perfectibility” (Koslowski, 150).

Postmodernism can be positively viewed as an opportunity for erasure of the “totalizing imprint on the world” left by modernity (Koslowski, 151). Such hope for erasure must invite a new conception of knowledge that is not modeled on ocular vision at the exclusion of the other perceptual faculties and that is creative, imaginative, intuitive, dialectical, and participatory.²

It must also invite a new conception of the Self as neither a disembodied mind, nor a visionary atomistic transcendental subject, nor a mere voyeur, but rather, as what Morris Berman calls a “sensuous intellect” (76) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty refers to in The Primacy of Perception as the “incarnate Cogito.” This is a Self whose “knowledge” of the world is sensually and intellectually identificatory; who is both a part of and a participant in the world and who recognizes that self-realization is a communal event. As Warwick Fox notes, “There is no firm ontological divide in the field of existence. In other words, the world simply is not divided up into independently existing subjects and objects, nor is there any bifurcation in reality between the human and nonhuman realms. Rather, all entities are constituted by their relationships” (196).

HEGEMONIC AND TRANSCENDENTAL VISION, AND THE DISENCHANTED WORLD

Prospero's Books is paradigmatically postmodern in its excessive foregrounding of the visual. Modernity has created what Denzin calls “a pornography of the visible” (vii); postmodernism simply recognizes this fact. Prospero's world is an overt acknowledgment that the project of modernity is completed when representation truly succeeds in standing-in for the real. As Martin Heidegger put it in “The Age of the World Picture,” the “fact that the world becomes picture at all is what distinguishes the essence of the modern age” (130). Such a project of abstraction, reduction, and reification has—for Heidegger and other critics of modernity—its roots in the ontological reductionism brought about by the Platonist subjugation of being to being-represented and the equating of knowledge with total visibility. This project gains further impetus in the Renaissance with the discovery of perspectivism in the arts and with the rationalization of sight. In the sciences, this project is fueled by the developments in optics and by Descartes’ rejection of experiential vision and his displacement of the physical eye to the
mental domain—to the mind’s eye. As David Levin points out, although sight has perhaps always tended to be privileged over the other senses since the dawn of culture, “the hegemony of vision at work in modernity is nevertheless historically distinctive, and functions in a very different way, for it is allied with all the forces of our advanced technologies. The power to see, the power to make visible, is the power to control” (“Introduction,” 7).

For Descartes, the power of vision becomes the power of the mind to attain absolute knowledge. Through this alchemy of vision, Descartes rejects the vision of the body only to reappropriate it as a vision of reason. Descartes’ goal, explains Dalia Judovitz, is to “reframe the visible world through the paradoxical affirmation of the autonomy of reason” (64). This dual expression of the will to see and to conceptualize manifested in the arts and the sciences of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is, in effect, part of a single and broader concern with the ability to know and possess the world. Perspectivism and scientism both strive to organize, rationalize, normalize, and mathematize the visible: “the magical potential of perspectivism,” argues Judovitz, “lies in its efficacy as a technical and artistic instrument to organize knowledge and define its criteria” (66, my emphasis). This project finds its culmination in our postmodern world of excessive mediated and abstracted information, where the real is the visible collection of the artifacts manufactured, reproduced, and disseminated by our information technologies—a museum or list of sorts. It is through the conceptualization of fictions and their concretization into artifacts that a previously “given” reality is displaced by its representations. Once all vestiges of an “original reality” have disappeared, not only physically but conceptually—ideologically—the world becomes absolutely fictive, and fiction is the only referent left. Another way to put it is to say, as Daniel Bell did, that “there is no distinction between art and life.” For Bell, this is the essence of the postmodern temper (quoted in Calinescu, 6).

Prospero’s Books dramatizes the reification project undertaken by modernity, modeled on the visual paradigm, and brought to fruition by discursive reason and technology. In this dramatization process, the film uses the work of vision to offer “countervisions,” that is, critical, subversive, disruptive, and historically new ways of seeing that posit visions “very different in character from the one that has become hegemonic” (“Levin, Introduction,” 7). Greenaway’s antidote to the hegemonic eye of modernity exemplified by Prospero’s dominating, unitary, and self-contained gaze, is to offer a postmodernist “playful gaze” of multiple reflections, superimpositions, and metaframings of images. This playful or “aletheic gaze” “sees” from a multiplicity of perspectives, is complex and contex-
tual, and is open to a hermeneutical theory of truth and reality, whereas Prospero’s “assertoric” or “pro-positional” gaze is fixed, dogmatic, and intolerant. As Levin elucidates:

The “assertoric,” “pro-positional” gaze is essentially exclusionary, either excluding what cannot be seen from its present fixed position or else including what calls for different positions only by suppressing the differences: it allows only what can be seen from its own position. By contrast, the alethic gaze is pluralistic, democratic: it tends to be inclusive, but in a way that does not deny or suppress the differences; and it understands the relationship between visibility and power. (*Opening*, 440)

With the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment, “the language of the eye that dominated western epistemology since the ancient Greeks, became the language of the ‘I’ in the *cogito* and in the politics of possessive individualism” (Flynn, 283). Prospero is the modern visionary subject, holder of the assertoric gaze, creator and master manipulator of a fiction-become-reality; he is the Cartesian *cogito* who, like Descartes, and Plato long before him, negates the visible—the organic, dynamic, and unpredictable reality of the island and its inhabitants—only to construct the visible according to a “model-in-thought” (Merleau-Ponty, 169). As Merleau-Ponty reminds us, and *Prospero’s Books* illustrate, this attempt ultimately fails.

Prospero’s power is his ability to abstract; his most powerful tool of control is language—specifically, written language. Writing introduces a sense of order and linearity to the world that replaces the cyclical rhythms of nature and the fluidity of the spoken word. This linearity is reflected in the narrative Prospero constructs when he begins to author the story that we know as *The Tempest*. Prospero’s first authorial act is to commit to writing a word that was only spoken and whose written form dramatizes the gap between the spoken and the written word. This disjunction between the oral form of the word *bossum* and its written representation, *boastwain*, calls attention to literary productions as techniques of abstraction. Prospero’s repeated mouthings of the word *bossum* challenge, for the viewer who hears it, the closed authority of its scripted version visible on the screen.

Prospero’s use of language as a technique of abstraction for the creation of totalistic and imperialistic illusions does grant him, however, a concrete power and authority over people, things, and places—a power to produce and reproduce through the symbolic what was once simply given. As Carry Wolfe notes, “by virtue of the symbolic, not only society is transformed, but environment also ceases to be a given and begins to be, at least in part,
produced” (83). Michel de Certeau calls writing the “fundamental initiatory practice” that posits the existence of a distinct and distant subject and a blank space or “page,” in which “the ambiguities of the world have been exorcised.” Prospero deliberately mistakes the organic island on which he lands for “the island of the page,” a blank and empty space awaiting to be scripted (Practice, 135).

Prospero’s “scriptural enterprize” (de Certeau, Practice, 135) is, to begin with, one of conquest and colonization and then one of geographical and historical rewriting. First, he appropriates the island and its inhabitants in order to rewrite them so as to create a replica of his Renaissance kingdom and mentality. As Amy Lawrence notes, the issue of possession is central to the film, a fact already indicated by the title itself (144). Prospero then rewrites the past as well through a story of revenge designed to redress the wrongs that he feels have been done to him. As Stephen Tyler reminds us, “the true historical significance of writing is that it has increased our capacity to create totallistic illusions with which to have power over things or over others as if they were things. The whole ideology of representational significance is an ideology of power” (131). Unable, or rather, unwilling to integrate himself within the given natural space of the island, Prospero transforms this space into his own territory, rendering it speakable, that is, representationable in his colonizer’s language.

Prospero, of course, also imposes his own language on the inhabitants of the island, thus confirming a fact already understood in 1452 by Antonio de Nebrija, Queen Isabella’s grammatician: that language is the “companion” of empire (Greenblatt, 563). The establishment and imposition of a national language, argues de Certeau, “implies a distancing of the living body (both traditional and individual) and thus also of everything which remains, among the people, linked to the earth, to the place, to orality or to non-verbal tasks” (Practice, 138–39). The characters Prospero “creates” as he scripts his tale of revenge are like words in a discourse; they lend their bodies to the creation of meaning in Prospero’s signifying chain.3

Prospero’s revenge is thus an instrument, a technique of his will-to-author. With every technique comes “the potential to remake the world in harmony with the human imagination, so that every desire might be fulfilled” (Oelschlaeger, 90). In the text Prospero fathers, the characters are denied their own voices and are ventriloquized by Prospero himself, who not only authors their lines but speaks for them, thus embodying the tyranny of authorship by retaining total control over their performances.

Through the use of language, Prospero orders the world in two senses: he summons a world into being and imposes a specific structure on it. He assigns
to himself the position of authority, thus establishing a clear hierarchy between himself and his “creations”—the characters he conjures for effecting his revenge, and the spirits and inhabitants of the island. This ordering process, which establishes and maintains Prospero’s position of authority within a hierarchy, amounts to what Kenneth Burke calls a “pyramidal magic,” a concept that for Burke is inevitable in social relations and a product of alienation and reification (Wolfe, 82). The concept is visually rendered in the film by the presence of several pyramids and obelisks, the most dominant pyramid resembling the Pyramid of Cestius in Rome. These geometrical and rigid structures made of gray stone, marble, or terra cotta brick are, we are told, “like pyramids that have been enthusiastically built on the hearsay evidence of travellers . . . that have been constructed by an antiquarian like Prospero who obtained his knowledge from books, not first-hand observation” (Prospero’s Books, 98). The pyramids stand between the golden, geometrical, maze-like cornfield in the foreground and the dark forest beyond the horizon, separating Prospero’s tamed and “civilized” domain from “wild nature.” The pyramids become the symbol of Prospero’s will-to-abstract and thus to superimpose on the organic, experiential world of the island, a “man”-made world of artifacts modeled on the knowledge derived from his books.
Greenaway calls Prospero a “book-making-machine” whose knowledge is either derived from the books he brings with him to the island or manufactured by him and assembled into books. His is a knowledge-at-a-distance rather than the kind of knowledge or understanding one gains from unmediated interaction with the world. Prospero adopts an instrumentally rational attitude toward the island that nullifies it and strips objects and beings of any immanent purpose. Reduced to a blank space and then repopulated with creatures from Prospero’s books and imagination, the island becomes a reflection of Prospero’s mind, a concretization of his own vision—his thoughts and hallucinations.4

Prospero’s imaginings are often reflected in mirrors within the film, thus dramatizing the fact that they are reflections of his consciousness. The island can now be seen as a symbol of Prospero’s own ego and of his non-participating consciousness.

Max Oelschlaeger argues that “the modern mind has lost any sense of human dependence on an enveloping and therefore transcending source of life” (338). The image of the island as symbol of the ego evokes the modernist self who lives in isolation from the world. Morris Berman elaborates on this point when he says that modern persons see themselves in atomistic terms, as islands, whereas their ancient or medieval predecessor embodied a more holistic view of Self and environment. For the latter, the Self was like an embryo, immersed in and identical to its environment; Self and world were seen as parts of the same body. This kind of participating consciousness had already been identified by Plato as pathological, justifying his rejection of poetry. Poetry’s ability to induce emotional identification and fusion with experience, and to evoke contradictory experiences, prevented the self from becoming unitary and unified. “The poetic, or Homeric mentality,” Berman explains, “in which the individual is immersed in a sea of contradictory experiences and learns about the world through emotional identification with it (original participation), is precisely what Socrates and Plato intended to destroy” (71).

Starting in the sixteenth century with the gradual displacement of alchemy by science, which culminates, in the 1700s, in the thorough discrediting of alchemy, a radical paradigm shift occurs. The technical works known as “mechanics literature,” published by artisans in the 1600s and designed to attack Aristotelian science’s passivity toward nature, are a testament to this paradigm shift. This concern with technique and manipulation was also reflected in the growing popularity of “how to” books published in the same period. Methodus was a word frequently used in the titles of these books (Riggs, 36). Prospero’s The Tempest could be seen as a “how to master the
universe” book, using revenge as a method. What, in other contexts, would appear scientific is clearly fictive in this case. This is not to say that fiction does not have the power to create new worlds. As Abdul R. Jan Mohamed has noted regarding colonialist literature, the relationship between fiction and ideology is symbiotic: while the ideology can determine the fiction, “the fiction forms the ideology by articulating and justifying the position and aims of the colonialist” (102).

Alchemy was a “science” of participation that had existed for 2,500 years and that acknowledged the dialectical nature of reality and promoted a respectful “intervention” in the world. Down to the fifteenth century, any form of intervention or meddling in nature was accompanied by religious ceremonies designed to acknowledge the sacredness of nature. The Scientific Revolution broke with this form of consciousness and achieved the up-until-then unrealizable alchemist’s dream: the transmutation of the physical and biological world into a machine that could be studied, understood, and controlled as mere “atoms of matter-in motion” (Oelschlaeger, 96). With the advent of science, the animistic world-view is replaced by the Cartesian mechanistic paradigm, still operative today, which dictates that our interaction with the world be one of confrontation rather than mutual permeation. What was once animated and living becomes lifeless and mechanistic; the rooting out of animistic belief is seen as a process of maturation—in other words, as progressive. The material world is stripped of its soul and reduced to matter, data, phenomena that can be confronted, studied, and “known.”

The Cartesian separation of mind and body is extended to the world at large. The now “disembodied intellect,” incarnate in the figure of Prospero, no longer exists in a symbiotic relationship with the world, and nature becomes nothing more than a separate measurable and quantifiable theoretical object of inquiry for this disembodied intellect. This mechanistic attitude toward nature is made explicit in the film by Prospero’s consultation of Vesalius’s Anatomy of Birth, a book whose pages reveal graphic images of dissected organs, suggesting that the human body is an organic machine whose mechanism can be studied and understood. In another sequence, Prospero’s wife is seen peeling away the layer of skin over her protruding pregnant belly, thus revealing to the audience the inner workings of her abdominal and procreative organs.

Prospero is the magician become scientist whose tools and methods, like those of science, afford him a supernatural power over the world. The image of Prospero as this disembodied intellect is most strikingly rendered in the final moments of the film, when Prospero’s “talking head” appears on the screen against a black background.⁵
Prospero is nothing more than a mind in a void, growing smaller and smaller as the close-up image retreats from the viewer. The total absence of a body reminds us that Prospero’s involvement with the world has, all along, been purely intellectual rather than physical and sensually participatory. That this is to be the case is made evident by the opening sequences of the film where Prospero trades his bath, his physical immersion in water—the amniotic fluid, the “blood of life”—signifying his fusion with the world (Rodgers, 14) for his cell and desk—symbolizing his instrumental and rational/confrontational attitude toward the world. Ann Grieve points out that Prospero’s work as a creator, or author, begins when he covers his naked body with a cape. The cape shields him from the sensual world, emphasizing his separation from it. Prospero ceases to be an interactive body to become a mastering mind, a pure intellect. Sir John Gielgud’s eighty-six years of age further serve to define the character of Prospero by limiting the scope of his movements and thus accentuating his cerebral rather than physical relationship with the world.

Prospero’s separation from the world is his method for mastery; it is a strategy, in de Certeau’s sense of the term (Practice, 35–38) for, unlike a tactic, the strategy requires that the mastering subject, in this case Prospero, situate himself in a place from which he will exert control—his cell. Prospero defines his position as being outside that which he intends to dominate. This strategy affords him the illusion of immunity and independence from the variability of circumstances and from chance; prediction and control become the primary goals. This method, argues de Certeau, is managerial and scientific; it embodies the Cartesian attitude that calls for a place of power, a totalizing discourse, and a compartmentalization of space. Prospero’s cell is a “place”—a locus—not an environment. From this position Prospero can develop a totalizing narrative that constructs the world as readable and representable spaces. It is a quintessentially panoptic practice that allows mastery by sight.

Prospero’s creations are revealed to us imagistically, as “animated paintings,” calling our attention to their visionary nature. They reflect fifteenth-century paintings’ attempt to construct scientifically an image of the world (Bénoliel, 34). In many cases, the visions created by Prospero and reflected in mirrors, as well as Prospero’s domain, are replicas of famous Renaissance works: Prospero’s recounting of the conspiracy plotted against him by Antonio is rendered by an animated replica of a Veronese painting; the corn field where Ferdinand and Miranda first meet near the palace is a reproduction of a Breughel; the characters of Prospero, Ariel, and Miranda, and the shipwrecked Neapolitans are modeled, respectively, on paintings by de la Tour,
Bronzino, Botticelli, and Rembrandt. The architecture of the palace is itself copied from representations: Prospero’s cell is modeled on da Messina’s St. Jerome, and the library is a copy of Michelangelean architecture.  

Through this use of visual quotations, Greenaway is clearly emphasizing that Prospero’s reality is modeled on representations. Prospero’s world foreshadows the postmodern world of the hyperreal, where representations of reality have become the models for reality, a human-made reality.

Greenaway also shows that the cinematic image is modeled on the perspective construction of the Renaissance (see Baudry). The camera is made to adopt a position analogous to that afforded by perspectivist paintings. The camera’s position duplicates the frontal gaze of the spectatorial subject, giving the illusion of total visibility and absolute knowledge by reducing what it sees to a containable, homogeneous, and stable object of sight. By creating a clear distinction between the subject of sight and its object, the camera angle and the living paintings dramatize the fact that “separation is the price of vision” (de Certeau, “Madness,” 26). The reflections in the mirrors further call attention to the visible world created by Prospero as projection and spectacle. The mirror is the “instrument of a universal magic that changes things into spectacle” (Merleau-Ponty, 168). Like perspectivism, it is a “mechanical trick” that constructs a resemblance of the world belonging to thought. This resemblance is, according to Merleau-Ponty, a “relationship of projection,” and “there is no projection of the existing world which respects it in all aspects” (170, 174).

Robert Romanyshyn argues that linear perspective vision was an artistic invention that rapidly became a cultural habit of mind; what started as a technique soon became a comprehensive world-view, a metaphysics. Perspectivism invited a spectatorial position in relation to the world by creating visionary subjects of a world reduced to a mere object of vision. In codifying the laws of linear perspective, Leon Battista Alberti, the fifteenth-century artist, architect, and author, inaugurated “a psychology of distance between the eye of the mind and the flesh of the world, upon which the cogito project of Descartes rests and of which it is an elaboration” (349). When the world is textualized—encoded and enframed in books and images—it loses its material and organic nature and becomes a schematized abstraction.

It is interesting to note that the introduction and mass-production of the printed book coincides with Alberti’s codification of the laws of perspective, his transformation of the world into a “geometric grid.” As Romanyshyn explains, “the linearity of the geometric world will find its counterpart in the linear literacy of the book, where line by line, sentence by sentence, the chronological structure of the book will mirror the
sequential, ordered, linear structure of time in the sciences” (351). The triple textualization of the world by print, perspectivism, and science in the Renaissance is reflected in Prospero’s use of language, images, and magical powers to construct a new world according to a new model in thought. What the viewer sees is the product of a mental vision created by the mind’s eye.

The primacy given to sight by modernity and the appropriation of sight as a paradigm for thought help us sustain the illusion that we are spectators outside the world and are able to study the world to determine and control its functioning. The sense of depth brought about by perspectivism is an optical illusion. Not only is it false, but it is deliberately deceptive: it paradoxically robs the world of its own inherent depth, turning it into an observable and measurable flat surface. Merleau-Ponty identifies depth as the most primordial perception and argues that depth is a dimension of ambiguity and confusion through which we can experience our own presence within the world. Depth contains what is visible and what is invisible and reminds us that the world preexists and exceeds our vision. Depth is experienced through bodily perception, which must be distinguished from ocular vision. When we look at a representation, we see; we do not perceive. While vision appropriates, perception is inherently participatory. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is bodily and dialogical; it is a conversation between the living body and the living world, for it is the body, not the mind, that is the conscious subject of experience.

David Abram, in his study of the relevance of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy to an understanding of our current ecological crisis, explains that “it is depth that provides the slack or play in the immediately perceived world, the instability that already calls upon the freedom of the body to engage, to choose, to focus the world long before any verbal reflection comes to thematize and appropriate that freedom as its own” (103). Abram argues that our metaphysical detachment from the sensible world is a result of our distrust of the senses and of the body.

The world-view or ideology encouraged by perspectivism promotes contact at a distance while sustaining the illusion that images of the world accurately represent the world and our sensory involvement with it. This world-view literally puts us out of touch with the world.

Greenaway’s film strives to undermine the monocular vision replicated by the camera by introducing multiple framings. The image on the screen ceases to be two dimensional, enfolding into multiple layers. While this “trick” of placing a frame within a frame, known as vedute in painting, was already practiced by Renaissance artists (Bénoliel, 68), its use in the film may
serve to suggest the presence of depth, of multiple levels of reality in the world. Through this multiple layering of frames, Greenaway retains the viewers’ awareness of the invisible space behind the visible image on the screen. The world prolongs itself beyond our vision, dramatizing the limits of that vision. The multiple framings also show that vision itself is always in flux and that objects are not fixed and constant. Greenaway disrupts vision to point out that “presence is obtainable only in and through illusion” (Shapiro, 132).

The “reality” created by Prospero is continuously revealed to be a series of framed images reflected in mirrors. His perspectivalist gaze is manifest in the animated paintings he produces. The film’s postmodernist pluralization of vision undermines Prospero’s patriarchal, knowledge-producing gaze—an authoritative gaze analogous to the positivist gaze of science. The film thus equates realism in art with positivism in the sciences and shows that in both areas, objects always actually transcend their representations (Jay, “Ontology of Sight,” 145). The position of the transcendent knowing subject is challenged and the synthetic unity of this subject collapses. Rather than escaping vision, Greenaway differentiates modes of vision to show that vision itself can be pluralized “so as to deprive the colonizing, patriarchal gaze of authority” (Bal, 401). Mieke Bal argues that multiplying perspectives and proliferating points of view may, in fact, be effective means of denouncing the ideological implications of the dominant modes of representation (379). Greenaway’s pluralistic visions thus reveal the pathological nature of Prospero’s “verbo-ocular-ego consciousness” by challenging “its values of linear rationality, contextual coherence, narrative continuity, focused concentration, infinite progress, individual privacy, productive efficiency, detached comprehensiveness, and neutral objectivity” (Romanyshyn, 340). It is only when the subject is decentered that the dualistic philosophy, which denies the intertwining of subject and object, collapses and the subject is mingled with the world.

THE PRIMACY OF THE BODY AND THE REENCHANTMENT OF THE WORLD

Jonathan Romney, in his review of Prospero’s Books, calls attention to the film’s infinite fragmentation of language and image symbolized by the mariner’s cry, “We split! We split! We split!” The critic further notes that the film “embodies a desperate awareness of the transitory immaterial nature of images, to an extent countered by a fixation with the materiality of bodies” (44). This materiality of the body is most vividly
foregrounded through the figure of Caliban, played by dancer and choreographer Michael Clark. The predominant role given Caliban’s body serves to suggest an alternative means of playfully experiencing the world and constitutes an antidote to Prospero’s hegemonic visualist rationality. Caliban’s close association to both water and earth connotes an identificatory relation to the world, rather than an intellectual examination and domination of it. Caliban’s bodily movements draw our attention to the centrality of the body in the acquisition of tacit knowledge.

Caliban’s knowledge and experience of the world originate with his body; the mind simply functions as an organizer and amplifier of his experiences, making him the “sensuous intellect” of which Morris Berman speaks. Like the body of a preconscious infant who still exists in an oceanic undifferentiation with the world, Caliban’s body is frequently immersed in water; he is “an agent of sense” (Berman, 158), and his relationship with his surroundings is primarily tactile. He remains closely associated with water, the film’s symbol of the source of life, from which everything originates and to which everything returns. In fact, from beginning to end water can be said to permeate the entire film visually and audibly: from the opening shots of drops of water splashing in a black pool, to the many allegorical creatures as-

Figure 8.2  *Prospero’s Books.* Photo by Marc Guillamot. BFI Stills, Posters and Design.
associated with water, to the sound of the ocean that surfaces sporadically throughout the film, we are continuously reminded of the enveloping, permeating, life-giving, and life-taking nature of this element and of its recurring presence in Greenaway’s films.8

Caliban is first seen emerging from the murky brownish waters of the pit to which he has been exiled by Prospero for attempting to violate Miranda. As Prospero speaks Caliban’s lines, Caliban’s body begins slowly and ambiguously to reveal itself. He is not quite human, not quite animal. Although not a fish, he is said to be suited to water and to snort like a hippopotamus. Particular attention is drawn to his colorful genitals and his small curled horns. As Prospero speaks for him, Caliban’s body crawls around the rock to which he is bound in dance-like contortions. All of Caliban’s movements are executed in this same dance-like fashion, continuously emphasizing his nakedness and dramatizing the physicality of his being. The final image of Caliban emerging from the water, this time in order to rescue the two volumes Prospero has thrown in the sea, stresses once again his close relation to the enveloping medium and the “undividedness of the sensing and the sensed” (Merleau-Ponty, 163).

The space of the pit offers a startling contrast to that of Prospero’s cell, the realm of knowledge and rationality. Much like Plato’s cave, Caliban’s pit is portrayed as a primitive, debased, and dangerous world of shadows and deceptions. The light coming through the circular opening in the pit gives the characters and objects inside a ghostly aura while also suggesting the presence of an “enlightened” world outside the pit. In the pit, as in Plato’s cave, it is the sensible world that takes on spectral qualities. Caliban, his mother, Sycorax, and the creatures that dwell in the pit are associated with the dark powers of nature and black magic, while Prospero’s magic is said to be benign. In an ironical note Greenaway points out, however, that Sycorax and Prospero both have consorted with the devil: she carnally and he, with “the Devil in books” (Prospero’s Books, 29).

Both Caliban and Sycorax are closely bonded to the natural elements of the island. Greenaway retains the Shakespearean description of Sycorax as a witch “so strong/That she could control the moon, make flows and ebbst./And deal in her command, without her power” (Prospero’s Books, 159). Caliban’s fusion with nature is rendered by his constant evocation of and interaction with the natural elements of the island, his rightful “kingdom”; as Caliban reminds Prospero:

And then I loved thee,
And showed thee all the qualities o’the isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place, and fertile.

Prospero’s Books
Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am the [sic] all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own kind! And here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o’th’island. (Prospero’s Books, 94)

This fusion of Self and environment and the primacy of the body associated with a participating consciousness are evoked in a number of other scenes where the naked body is brought to the foreground. The island itself, for instance, is populated by naked mythical figures and spirits who, like Caliban, dance about playfully and give themselves freely to games, tricks, and ribaldry. After the shipwreck, the castaways’ naked and helpless bodies are seen under water, being rescued by the island’s water nymphs. The almost lyrical imagery of the castaways slowly floating upward toward the surface, their bodies enveloped in the oceanic amniotic-like fluid, calls attention to the fusion of Self and environment; this fusion predates their “birth” into the symbolic represented by their entry into Prospero’s narrative of revenge.

This passage from fusion to separation brought about by Prospero’s rationalistic and discursive model of interaction with the world, and the pain associated with such separation, are dramatized in the sequence where Ariel is “freed” from the pine tree where Sycorax left him. Whereas Ariel’s fusion with the tree is taken to be a form of imprisonment by Prospero’s non-participating consciousness, the image lends itself to an alternative interpretation, once a more holistic worldview is adopted. While Prospero’s relation to the world is atomistic, the image of Ariel in the tree suggests a more embryonic interconnectedness with the environment of which he is a part and on which he depends. Ariel’s fusion with the tree can be taken as evidence that person and environment are not only profoundly connected but, as Berman argues, “ultimately identical” (77).9

This image captures the reversibility of experience between Self and world, whereby to experience the world is to be experienced by it. Merleau-Ponty calls this reversibility a *chiasm*—that is, a blending, interweaving, synaesthetic intertwining of individual flesh and the flesh of the world. While in the tree, Ariel is literally “caught in the fabric of the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 163). This intertwining represents an alternative mode of being to our metaphysical detachment from the sensible and living world.

Ariel’s emergence from the tree, like the shipwrecks’ emergence from the sea, is a form of birth into Prospero’s symbolic world—a birth into
modernity. It is marked by pain, and it leaves scars. Prospero deliberately misidentifies the origin of the pain, however, locating it in Ariel’s “imprisonment” in the tree rather than in his “liberation” from it. The painful severing of Ariel from the tree graphically rendered by the film is described in the screenplay as clearly a sundering process:

Ariel in the pine tree is set free. With a loud, painful scream—pulling and stretching and the sound of ripping . . . Ariel emerges from the bark, moss and lichen . . . his body bloody. He stands in the light—moaning with pain . . . the blood running from around his neck, his armpits and groin . . . as we watch . . . the running blood disappears and his body—white in the light—is faintly marked with tree-rings . . . these too slowly vanish. (Prospero’s Books, 89)

This passage not only underscores Ariel’s birth into Prospero’s symbolic world but, through the repetition of the word light, it stresses the “enlightened” nature of this separation from the natural world. As Prospero sees it, Ariel’s liberation from the tree is a coming-into-the-light of reason and rationality; it is an event analogous to leaving the Cave.

Prospero’s demonization of Sycorax and his suppression of the metaphor of the Earth as nurturing mother are the fictions he constructs to validate his rewriting of the past and of the island, thus assuring his absolute power and control over all. Prospero redefines Ariel’s fusion with the tree in negative terms so as to use this fusion as a threat to control Ariel. As Peggy Phelan notes, “Prospero commands Ariel because he can continually project the past as the future” (49). For this strategy to be effective, however, Prospero has first to redefine the past—he rewrites history in Orwellian fashion. This strategy is analogous to that of the Scientific Revolution: in the name of progress, the Scientific Revolution has redefined the past as primitive and regressive and has instilled fear of this past in order to exert authority and control over it. This is the project of modernity—an ideological debasement and conversion of living nature into pure matter in motion, designed to fuel scientific inquiry, economic progress, and hegemonic control.

Greenaway’s visual treatment of the twenty-four books Prospero uses to “rewrite” the island historically and geographically force a confrontation between the two modes of consciousness discussed here: the normative and non-participatory consciousness of modernity and the pluralistic and participatory consciousness of pre/postmodernity exemplified by Prospero and Caliban, respectively. These books are a testament to modernity’s failed attempts at fixating the identity of the Self and the world. The knowledge or
understanding of the world collected in these books is shown to be irreducibly partial—limited and biased—and the world represented in them an ever-expanding, open, and dynamic organism rather than a fixed text.

These books are characteristically modern in their efforts to gather and codify information about the world. *The Book of Water*, for instance, contains investigative drawings, exploratory texts, diagrams, and maps of weather forecasting; and *The Vesalius Anatomy of Birth* is filled with descriptive drawings that explain the workings of the human body. They are also postmodern, however, in their self-reflexivity, in their pluralistic and open-ended nature, and in their failure to provide stable reflections or images of the world. *The Book of Mirrors* reflects the reader but cannot conclusively fixate his or her identity:

Some mirrors simply reflect the reader, some reflect the reader as he was three minutes previously, some reflect the reader as he will be in a year's time, as he would be if he were a child, a woman, a monster, an idea, a test or an angel. One mirror constantly lies, one mirror sees the world backwards, another upside down. (*Prospero’s Books*, 17)

This book questions not only the truthfulness and accuracy of the reflections but the stability and unity of the Self. It dramatizes the unbridgeable gap between reality and its representation.

It is the postmodern character of these books that seems to prevail, however. A Derridian approach to Greenaway’s portrayal of Prospero’s books, for instance, would be to see these books as events—as always in process, multiple, and open ended. The truly *encyclopedic* nature of Prospero’s books would, then, from this perspective, serve to challenge this conception of the book as a fixed, unchanging totality. A Derridian reading would, therefore, also deconstruct the notion that a “totality constituted by the signified preexists [the signifier], supervises its inscriptions and its signs and is independent of it in its ideality” (*Of Grammatology*, 18). *A Book of Mythologies*, while being a compendium of all mythologies complete with explanatory readings, also includes variants and alternative versions with symbolic interpretations. The book calls attention to the fact that any theory of knowledge is a theory of interpretation. *A Book of Traveller’s Tales* contains marvelous tales that are not to be believed. *A Bestiary of Past, Present, and Future Animals* is a thesaurus of real, imaginary, as well as apocryphal animals used by Prospero to populate the island. *The Book of Utopias* contains a description of not only real but imagined communities, blurring the distinction between fiction and reality. The reader is free to combine as he or she wishes the characteristics of the various societies described
in it to form his or her own utopian world. This book actively involves the reader in the “creation” of the text, thus blurring the distinction between the reading and the authoring processes. Moreover, the nature of the book also suggests that the possibilities for combination are not only multiple but infinite. There are potentially as many possible versions of the world as there are readers of the book. The favoring of one reading over another would be as monological and totalistic an endeavor as Prospero’s own scriptural project. Similarly, *The Book of Games* is said to contain games that “cover as many situations as there are experiences” (*Prospero’s Books*, 24).

Many of these books mix the metaphorical and the fantastical with the scientific, challenging the notion that these modes of cognition—like alchemy and science—are distinctly separate and represent opposing epistemologies. *The Book of Motions*, for example, simultaneously offers a “scientific” description of the flight of birds and the movement of waves and a less than scientific account of “how ideas chase one another in the memory and where thought goes when it is finished with” (*Prospero’s Books*, 24). *The Book of Universal Cosmography*, while attempting “to place all universal phenomena in one system” by means of “disciplined geometrical figures,” contains tables, lists, and catalogues that continuously move and rearrange themselves because they are inscribed on a human body that moves (*Prospero’s Books*, 24). Attempts to fixate the living world in the form of texts is undermined by the dynamic and living character of the books themselves. Knowledge of the world is thus always partial and incomplete because the world itself is incomplete: the world is not information, but *in formation*.

Rather than emphasizing a silent, isolated, distant, and abstract rapport with the world, these books involve the reader in direct experiential contact with their content. Some of the books, such as *A Harsh Book of Geometry* and *A Book of Architecture and Other Music*, unfold into three-dimensional models that rise out of the pages. When the books are opened, their content comes to life: pendulums swing, loose gravel and molten sand fall out, steam is exuded, and insects and reptiles crawl across the pages. Some books invoke direct sensory experience. In *The Book of Colours*, “the colour so strongly evokes a place, an object, a location or a situation that the associated sensory sensation is directly experienced. Thus a bright yellow-orange is an entry into a volcano and a dark blue-green is a reminder of deep sea where eels and fish swim and splash your face” (*Prospero’s Books*, 20). Some of the pages are impregnated with minerals and other elements of the earth that can, if ingested, cure or harm the reader.

These books thus emphasize the readers’ bodily rather than purely intellectual interaction with them. The rapport between reader and text, like
that between Self and world, is phenomenological, participatory, and dialectical. It involves all of the bodily senses—sight, touch, smell, and sound. When *The Vesalius of Anatomy* is opened, it lets out the sound of babies crying and stains the fingers red. Crowd noise and music can be heard in *A Book of Architecture and Other Music*. *The Book of the Earth* can change the color of one’s hair, create fire, make soap, and cure illnesses, as well as bring about death.

The books make no distinction between physical and mental perception, therefore collapsing the dichotomy of mind and body that began taking hold in the sixteenth century. The knowledge “contained” in them is encyclopedic in the same way the world is an encyclopedia of past, present, future, real, and possible life forms. They are *open texts* in the full sense of the term: they impose no limits in space or time, no epistemologies, no fixed chronologies, no linear narratives. Like the film itself, Prospero’s books are pluralistic and postmodern: they celebrate ambiguity and complexity, challenge the limits of visual perception by engaging all of our senses, obscure the distinction between fiction and represented reality, and contest the ideology of the Cartesian transcendental subject. Prospero’s books and *Prospero’s Books* recognize that representation—whether linguistic or imagistic—is always metaphorical and allegorical. In the film, as in the books, “words and sentences, paragraphs and chapters gather like tadpoles in a pond in April or starlings in a November evening sky” (*Prospero’s Books*, 21). Reality is always contextual, dynamic, whimsical, and open to chance. If representations of reality are to stand a chance of being “accurate,” they must acknowledge and reflect these characteristics. They must, therefore, be open, pluralistic, decentered, and must invite a dialectical and participatory rapport with the world.

Recent attacks on the hegemony of vision have identified modern vision as a technology, or tool, of dominance, rather than a method of gaining knowledge and freedom. Concepts such as Michel Foucault’s panoptic vision, David Levin’s assertoric gaze, and Hans Blumenberg’s coerced vision all direct our attention to the totalitarian potential of vision when ocular vision is not only disassociated from the other perceptual faculties but also appropriated as the paradigm for mental vision. Many critics have identified the overvaluing of sight at the expense of other perceptual modes and the replacement of intuitive knowledge with intellectual knowledge as crucial devices in the launching of the project of modernity. Levin, for instance, argues that “only in modernity does the ocularcentrism of our culture make its appearance in, and as panopticism: the system of administrative institutions and disciplinary practices organized by the conjunction of a universalized rationality and advanced technologies for the securing of conditions of visibility” (“Introduction,” 7).
In response to modernity’s despotic use of vision, many have called for “countervisions”: for new ways of seeing that are critical and subversive, historically new, or that reinvent old ways of seeing and being—ways that acknowledge and respect the mystery and sacredness of things, that cultivate a non-mastering attitude toward the world. In Opening of Vision, Levin calls for the displacement of the reductive and reifying “shadow-free vision of knowledge” by a genuine vision that is contemplative and open to the invisible in the visible, to the regions of darkness and shadow. Greenaway’s “epic of the eye” offers such a vision by extending the depth of the images on the screen through multiple layers of framing that let the invisible frames behind the visible one seep through. Greenaway further weakens the totalistic potential of ocular-vision-become-worldview by drawing attention to the primordial role of the body in experiencing and in tacitly knowing the world. He thus helps promote an alternative to the Cartesian ego-verbo-ocularcentric consciousness represented by Prospero.

All of Greenaway’s protagonists are archetypal modernist selves who share similarly destructive totalizing ambitions. All of his films trace the downfall of their protagonists; many end with their demise and, if they are artists, with the destruction of the art work. Marlene Rodgers has noted that Greenaway’s works seem continuously to address “the tension between the desire to control the world, whether through force or through ideas, and the reality of our own vulnerability to chaos and the natural process of decay” (18). In an interview published in Positif Greenaway confirms this reading of his films by explaining that all creation—including artistic creation—is a desperate failed attempt to impose order on a world we perceive as chaotic; in the final analysis, all our ordering strategies prove futile (Ciment, 42).

Like Greenaway’s other protagonists, Prospero is a “projection of Greenaway’s own self-questioning aspirations to transcendental authorship” (Romney, 44). As a spectator of his fossilized vision—a hallucination of sorts—Prospero is trapped in his own creation. Liberation can only come with the surrendering of technics. As Prospero, aided by Ariel, hurls his twenty-four books into the sea and breaks his magic stick in half, he frees not only himself but the entire island and its inhabitants from his totalizing grip. When Prospero’s source of power is nullified, so is the product of his magic. The final breakdown and collapse of the illusion-become-reality is accompanied by a return of the natural sounds of the island. Prospero’s Books is thus a thorough investigation of modernity’s authorial intents and its misguided faith in the quest for absolute understanding and control.
NOTES

*Portions of this essay have appeared in “Aimé Césaire’s A Tempest and Peter Greenaway’s Prospero’s Books as Ecological Readings and Rewritings of Shakespeare’s The Tempest.” In Reading the Earth. New Directions in the Study of Literature and Environment, Michael P. Branch et al., eds. Moscow, Idaho: University of Idaho Press, 1998 (263–279). I would like to thank the University of Idaho Press for permission to reprint this material.


2. Greenaway’s desire to engage all of the senses in the creation of an artform that is more truly participatory is best appreciated in his critique of cinema as a “spectator sport” that partakes of a non-corporeal world and in his exploration of installations and exhibits to create a more-than-visual experience. As he once explained, “I am interested in an audience that moves, that is not necessarily subject to a fixed frame, that does not have to remain in a fixed seat. Audiences that move are not unknown, but they are rare. Should we attempt to achieve audience movement as a prerequisite of cinema? Cinema as exhibition? Exhibition as cinema? Soon I suspect such a proposition will be commonplace” (Watching Water, 49). Greenaway has gone so far as to suggest that depictions of violence and sex in the media seem to be growing in number and intensity almost as if to compensate for a decrease in the corporeality of our lives (Stairs/Munich: Projection, 25).

3. This theme of the body as text is given full exploration in The Pillow Book. Here again, the “scriptural interprize” is initiated by an authorial figure—the father—and is designed to mirror the creative act of another authorial figure—God. Lawrence’s contention that Prospero—the father figure in Prospero’s Books—asserts his dominion over the other characters by exercising his power over language, is equally applicable to The Pillow Book, where the father expresses his control and ownership of his daughter Nagiko by every year, on her birthday, inscribing a greeting on her face and neck and signing his own name to “his creation” (The Pillow Book, 31). Both films explicitly equate linguistic and scriptural control with the Father and the Law, “thus demanding a critique both of patriarchy and of logocentrism as central to patriarchal power” (Lawrence, 149). For further discussion of this issue, see my “Fleshing the Text: The Pillow Book and the Erasure of the Body.”

4. The notion of landscapes, cities, and architecture in general as being a concretization of an authorial vision is given full exploration in The Belly of an Architect. The environments we construct not only house us but structure our behavior and determine our fate (see Purdy, “Artificial Eye,” and Michael Ostwald’s essay in this
Architecture is thus also a scriptural enterprise that acts upon the world and its inhabitants.

5. Prospero, too, like Alba Bewick in *A Zed and Two Noughts*, is “cut down to fit the picture” (*ZOO*, 107).

6. The reference to St. Jerome in *Prospero’s Books* also links this film to *The Pillow Book*, two films that contain the word book in their title. Both Prospero and Nagiko’s lover, Jerome, are scholars like St. Jerome. As Elliott and Purdy remark, Jerome is a polyglot and a translator, “like his namesake St. Jerome, the most learned and eloquent of the Latin Fathers and responsible for the first Latin translation of the Bible from the Hebrew” (see Elliott and Purdy in the present volume).

7. For a fuller exploration of this idea, see Abram’s more recent study *The Spell of the Sensuous: Human Perception in a More-Than-Human-World*. New York: Pantheon, 1996.

8. *Making a Splash*, a 25-minute film shot in 16 mm in 1984, opens with similar shots of drops splashing on a surface, cut to the music of Michael Nyman. It is, to my mind, Greenaway’s most beautiful celebration of the Body, both human and non-human.


10. For a comprehensive study of the history of these attacks on vision, see Martin Jay’s *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Of particular relevance to the present essay is Jay’s “The Ethics of Blindness and the Postmodern Sublime: Levinas and Lyotard,” where he discusses postmodernism’s duplicitous relationship to vision: “postmodernism may be understood as the culminating chapter in a story of the (enucleated) eye. Or rather, it may paradoxically be at once the hypertrophy of the visual, at least in one of its modes, and its denigration” (546).
I
n S/Z, Barthes defines interpretation as the operation meant to appreciate “the plural,” which constitutes the text, which, in its turn, can be imagined as “a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds.” This “triumphant plural,” he adds, “has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one” (5). Multiple entrances into a text require multiple introductions—one for each point of critical penetration—and a certain hermeneutic simultaneity that allows us to perceive this signifying plurality at the same time and gives us the freedom to choose our own point of entry, the one that suits us best. As one who “sees language,” Barthes bridges the gap between the readerly and the cinematic:

I have a disease: I see language . . . The primal scene in which I listen without seeing, is followed by a perverse scene, in which I imagine seeing what I am hearing. Hearing deviates to scopia: I feel myself to be the visionary and voyeur of language. (Roland Barthes, 161; my italics)

Barthes’s scopophilia brings him close to another disenchanted innovator of discourse who comments on the lack of simultaneity in the business of image-making: Peter Greenaway. Essayists by nature—artists by practice—Barthes and Greenaway are concerned with both the language of the primary text (in this case, the written fictional text and its cinematic counterpart—the “movie”) and the lack of originality of the critical commentary applied to it. Following Barthes’s pattern of multiple entrances, I intend to discuss Greenaway’s “triumphant plural” as it reveals itself in The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, by structuring this essay around a series of beginnings. A critical text made of “beginnings,” my script will echo the issues that make the concern of Greenaway’s film: theft and scholarship,
autobiographical anecdote, identification with/appropriation of texts, and the discourse—our collective obsession—within and without the “story.”

**DISCURSIVE ADDICTIONS**

Though it is true that I long wished to inscribe my work within the field of science—literary, lexicological, and socio-logical—I must admit that I have produced only essays, an am-biguous genre in which analysis vies with writing.

Roland Barthes

It is my belief, almost mystical, that things will happen, that things come together at the right moment.

Peter Greenaway

There is, I believe, no right moment, preferred critical approach, or recom-mended discourse in a discussion of Peter Greenaway. His “texts” humiliate hermeneutics and, saturated with allusions, remove completely the illusion of finiteness. Any exhaustive reading is denounced as a fraud. Any attempt at completeness is mocked. Despite his love for systems and classifications, Greenaway should not be read systematically but—as his films suggest—simultaneously, voraciously, and with impatience.

This decision alone, however, does not satisfy the hunger for that “ulti-mate meaning” that commentators are determined to find in Greenaway’s texts. Most important, this decision alone does not provide us with a critical language capable to cope with the demands of his cinema. But what would this “new” language be? A ludic mixture of postmodern pastiche and academic seriousness—an idiom that could, perhaps, be displayed inside a “museum without walls” but not on the page? A playful, yet complex, linguistic ma-chinery that would help us exclaim, “I see this film,” with the same uneasiness with which Barthes declares, “I see language”? Maybe. This script will reveal no more and no less than my struggle with such a language and my desire to experience—and not just talk about—“the degree zero” of essay writing.

In *S/Z*, Barthes describes the readerly text—the text subjected to in-terpretation—as a reversible textual continuum in which words on the page become maps of their own referentiality (6). In its ideal form, the readerly text is a plural text that places “normal” critical language and reasoning un-der suspicion.¹
The interpretation demanded by a specific text in its plurality, is in no way liberal: it is not a question of conceding some meanings, of magnanimously acknowledging that each one has its share of truth; it is a question, against all indifference, of asserting the very existence of plurality, which is not that of the true, the probable, or even the possible . . . All which comes down to saying that for the plural text there cannot be a narrative structure, a grammar, or a logic. (S/Z, 6; my italics).

Faithful to “the worn-out myth of the ‘superb creator and the humble servant, both necessary, each in his place’” (Criticism, 64), old criticism will not admit that, confronted with the act of writing, both the critic and the writer “come together, working on the same difficult tasks and faced with the same object: language” (Criticism, 64). What is denied here, even considered dangerous, is “the right to language” (Criticism, 52), the right and duty of language to place itself under investigation, “the right to speak deliriously” (Criticism, 81), if delirium is what we decide to call novelty.

It is interesting, and sad at the same time, that thirty years after Barthes’s response to the detractors of “new criticism,” we find ourselves locked inside the same dilemma, this time applied to cinema as well—the newest of the arts, the field in which we hoped for frenzied innovation. Consequently, Peter Greenaway’s position is more intransitive than Barthes’s. Accused—like Barthes—of intellectual snobbery, Greenaway recognizes in contemporary cinema a deficit of expression—a result of the yet unsolved tension between text and image. Greenaway is aware of “cinema’s restrictive frame, its lack of an ability for simultaneity, its passive audiences, its non-existent iconic presence, its poor narrative qualities, its slavery to text” (Woods, 263; my italics). In Greenaway’s films we recognize Barthes’s unorthodox approach to language, his concern for form, his proverbial boredom with certainties. But knowing that Barthes and Greenaway have gained unlimited access to the title of auteur, how are we to approach their texts—the whole critical lot of us, trapped in stylistic straitjackets, always careful to quote our sources? With deference? With a semiotic instinct that, as clever readers of postmodern things, we should possess?

Caught between the need to publish and our personal struggles with language, we have taken Barthes’s new criticism and rendered it empty, impotent, and sad. Jargon, as understood by Barthes as a place of necessary linguistic innovation (Criticism, 52), has gradually been demoted to a place of hiding. Our “old new criticism,” a vestige of the classical, structured, rigorous, legitimized approach to the text, has replaced the—once passionate—exchange of ideas. Instead of moving forward we are moving back. The gap
between the critic and the artist is now deeper than ever, and even the slight-est hint of creativity inside the structure of the critical essay is denounced as a fraud. Whether we like it or not, we find ourselves “before Barthes” and not “after Bakhtin” in our intolerance for flexibility of form. In this context, it might do us a world of good to remember Bakhtin’s thought: “After all, the boundaries between literature and non-literature, fiction and nonfiction, and so forth, are not laid in heaven” (Bakhtin, 33).

Cinema is Greenaway’s addiction—and his most bitter disenchantment, “a medium of recorded theatre and illustrated literature” that fails to fulfill its prophecies. But despite his statement “I don’t think we’ve probably seen any cinema yet, we’ve seen only one hundred years of cinema prologue” (Woods, 263; my italics), Greenaway manipulates the cinematic phrase into communicating a marriage between form and content “so that both reflect the other’s concerns” (Woods, 245). In a critical context, this match between form and content is, in fact, a blurring of distinction between the creative and the critical—Barthes’s delirium: “the readerly bleeding into the writerly, contaminating it, giving it form.”

“Criticism is not science,” says Barthes (Criticism, 79). Why, then, pretend it is? Why refuse its creative streak—for the sake of clarity? But “nothing is clearer than the work,” says Barthes (Criticism, 80). We should shatter the illusion that our critical act clarifies anything. At best, it increases the work’s mystery, it reveals its plurality, it creates new fictions upon the old ones—provided that it dares talk about itself. The critical essay is an “ambiguous genre,” and as such it is the measure of our insecurity. Whatever the causes, insecurity, nostalgia for classical and structured times, or, simply, the lack of an adequate vocabulary, critical commentary refuses to practice or even mirror the creativity of fiction. Such refusal has a side-effect: it removes the critical commentary from the primary source, from the literary text that justifies its existence.

In contemporary cinema, the situation is even more tense: there, the dissatisfaction begins with the primary source. Not only, according to Greenaway, is cinema used to “illustrate” text and not exploit image, but our dependence on story-telling could make the subject of a new “slave narrative.” It is “the slavery to the text,” that makes for Greenaway’s greatest discontent. But despite his unhappiness with the medium, Greenaway is close to finding a discursive solution. His polyphonic celluloid installations—films by default—both use and require a “delirious” language that allows for endless beginnings (a pastiche of the hundred years of prologue), thus staying true to the marriage between form and content. Like Barthes’s essays, Greenaway’s films are, generically speaking, “ambiguous.” Not a director but a “green-
away,” as his cinematographer, Sacha Vierny, calls him (Woods, 11), Greenaway frustrates his audiences and his critics not necessarily with the difficulty of his texts but with the fantastic taxonomies that make for their logic. Greenaway doesn’t list: he maps. His uncanny capacity for mapping concepts, places, objects, people, and names betrays his preference for encyclopedic structures and presents a tremendous advantage for the image-maker: after all, there is no grand narrative attached to the encyclopedia. For the critic it restates the dilemma: How to talk about these almost narrative films?

Alan Woods, one of Greenaway’s earliest commentators to attempt addressing Greenaway’s entire artistic corpus, remarks that he found himself structuring his own book-length study on Greenaway in a “cannibalistic” way that “apes or echoes the scaffolding of his ever-widening oeuvre.” As he further explains:

In a critical context, however, such homage or quotation too easily becomes parasitical, an empty repetition, a taking over of Greenaway’s art as if from some higher position which both judges and appropriates—a kind of cannibalism, even, the kind which supposes that digestion involves a kind of identification with what is swallowed. “As for critics,” Greenaway writes in his drawing essay Prospero’s Six-Part Fool, “one mediocre writer is more valuable than ten good critics. They are like haughty barren spinsters lodged in a maternity ward.” The last thing one needs in such circumstances is hysterical pregnancy. (25)

The sterility of critical language is painfully reinforced here. In a critical context, to think like Greenaway is to consume the “greenaway”—to steal. But isn’t such “aping,” in essence, a marriage between content and form that the artist himself strives for? What is the alternative to this “anxiety of influence” that Woods calls “hysterical pregnancy?” Informed panic, the fear that we never cover everything there is to say? It is a sad day for criticism the day when the most innovative of voyeurs prefers “a mediocre writer to ten good critics.” In a postmodern culture where everything is reproduced or quoted, “aping” Greenaway may be our only chance at originality.

I see now even more similarities between Barthes’s writing and Greenaway’s vision: both auteurs produce texts lost in perpetual contemplation of their own abyss, preoccupied with themselves, folded within. Texts of slippery surface, Barthes’s essays wither in spirit under rigid critical inspection; so do the films of Peter Greenaway. Normal criticism will make us miss not the meaning of his films—that ultimate truth that will be the death of us—but the “frisson du sens,” the uninhibited pleasure of his celluloid essays.
THEFT AND SCHOLARSHIP

To be quite frank, the critic ought to say: “Gentlemen, I am going to talk about myself on the subject of Shakespeare, or Racine, or Pascal, or Goethe—subjects that offer me a beautiful opportunity.”

(Anatole France)

With this resolution in mind I watch The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover and compare the NC 17- to the R-rated version. An amusing detail: the copy rated R is edited for time, not content. The love-making scenes are intact, while carefully crafted lyrical moments vital for Greenaway’s “canvas” are erased. Somewhere, in the darkness of a discreet editing room, the unassuming and impatient hand of an unknown censor has reduced the first meeting between Georgina and Michael to its essential details. Butchered, the scene fails to communicate tenderness. Georgina’s moment of decision, her careful evaluation of the reading man meant to become her lover, is gone. The passion with which she inhales the smoke of a blood-red cigarette is denied us. A mandatory question: Did Greenaway have censorship in mind when he invented Spica? Could we read in Spica’s obsession with power and appropriation, with dictators and their favorite dishes, the appetite of our cannibals of high art, the censors?

The gesture of the Chef who offers Roy a glass of wine is cut as well. But Roy has just suffered the most painful humiliation at the hand of Spica, and that glass of wine is important: owner of an exquisite palate, Roy rises above the humiliation. His body, covered in dog excrement, is being washed by one of the members of the staff: the water pours down his chest, his arms, his back. He drinks the wine and cries. Water, tears, and wine blend, rendering him clean again. Water, tears, and wine linger in the background of other scenes, reminding us of Greenaway’s obsession with this element: the lover’s baptism; the golden waters that transform the book depository into a shipwreck—bateau ivre of a tempestuous love affair; Spica’s last supper and the glass of wine Georgina pours for him, a mirror gesture of the first wine offering. But the R-rated version has no time for speculation. No matter. Abbreviated, Peter Greenaway’s name comes to an ironic PG.

Greenaway’s film looks like a map of the French Revolution: it is bloody and divided into journées. It is, in other words, structured around a series of repetitions. Let us follow its pattern, then—this time involving the characters as well—and re-examine issues of content and form, critical ap-
proach, and creative reading. I watch Michael, the Lover, reading his books undisturbed by the murmur of the restaurant, and I know that I am watching myself. But someone else is watching as well: the officers in Frans Hals’s painting, staring at us from the walls of Le Hollandais. They are both decor and participants in Greenaway’s play. In Spica and his court they see their doubles. Like them, I am inside and outside the story at the same time. In Michael’s reading habits I recognize my own. This is the degree zero: identification pushed to the extreme; destruction of all analogies; the eternal confusion between character, critic, and author; self-criticism.

Barthes writes: *Le Livre du Moi*. A “recessive” text “which falls back, but which may also gain perspective thereby” (*Roland Barthes*, 119). He speaks of a “remodeling” of genres, he takes the ambiguity of the essay personally, he believes the essay should “avow itself almost a novel” (*Roland Barthes*, 120). Barthes’s boredom with the orthodoxy of language is equaled only by Greenaway’s frustration with a certain stagnation in the evolution of cinematic language; equaled, in its turn, only by the devastating obsession of academics to explain everything. “Too many proofs spoil the truth,” says Greenaway (Woods, 248). He remembers the efforts of this special breed of audience to explain the titles of his films and the name of his favorite character, his alter ego, Tulse Luper:

The academics became obsessed with the man’s name. Who was Tulse Luper—a mixture of pulse and wolf? a combination of the vegetable and the animal? a rye crop leading to St. Anthony’s fire? the beat of a heart in a Looper caterpillar? You can imagine the sort of thing required. I later heard that a conference to debate *The Draughtsman’s Contract* met at Lyons for three days and was slow to investigate the film, having become distracted by the title and its possible French interpretations associated with the female pudenda. (Steinmetz, 41)

Greenaway’s relationship with his audiences—real or imaginary, perfect or merely polite—has become increasingly complicated. There are audiences present in all his films, inside the story, ready to take charge of the performance should the play require it or to replace the audience outside the picture, should it protest too much. Greenaway officiates for no one. We, his audiences, are merely projections of his mind:

I have silently pursued audiences in the cinema without being too much aware of the obsession until recently. There was an audience of murderers in *The Draughtsman’s Contract* and an audience of dilettanti architects
who clapped the Pantheon in _The Belly of An Architect_. There was an au-
dience of avengers in _The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover_, and cer-
tainly now very consciously—a wandering audience in _The Baby of Mâ-
con_. What constitutes an audience—who are they, what do they want,
how can they be entertained? I took to picturing them in their company
groups—a group of artisans, a group of priests, a gang of thieves, a com-
pany of cooks, a solipsim of scholars. (Steinmetz, 123)

In the end, Greenaway’s ideal audiences are drawn on pieces of
paper—his paintings—infinite rows of severed heads with blank faces that
await the imprint of an expression (Steinmetz, 122–125). Like the cook,
the thief, his wife, and her lover, they are characters cursed to repeat their
actions every evening, beings deficient in perception, still lives ready to be
displayed in sundry exhibitions around the world. There is, consequently,
little difference between the main protagonists of Greenaway’s film and
the still life on their table; little difference between the dishes painted on
Frans Hals’s two-dimensional canvas and their faithful yet exotic repro-
duction in the kitchen of _Le Hollandais_. There is little difference between
Hals’s _Banquet_ and Spica’s nocturnal feasts; and there is, ultimately, little
difference between us, external consumers of Greenaway’s concoctions,
and the consumers within. How do we separate, then, connoisseurs from
thieves, and thieves from scholars, in the world of _Le Hollandais_, “where it
is appropriate that all things should be eaten, if only experimentally”
(Cook, 8). What makes us and Michael (the Ur-consumers of Texts) bet-
ter than Spica, who is a connoisseur of the market?

_ALBERT_: Hello—what are you doing? Reading again? This is a restau-
rant, not a library. All you are allowed to read in here, you know, is the
menu . . . I’ve just been reading—stuff to make your hair curl—you go
in that toilet—that’s the sort of stuff people read—not this sort of thing—
don’t you feel out of touch? Does this stuff make money? (holding up the
book) I bet you’re the only person to have read this book—but I bet you
every man in this restaurant has had a read of that stuff in there . . . (point-
ing to the toilet) . . . makes you think, doesn’t it? (Cook, 44–45)

Books, people, or _spécialités de la maison_, everything and everybody may
end up on the menu—and since the menu is, according to Albert, the only
thing we are allowed to read in a restaurant, we are expected to become ver-
satile consumers inside a space of experimental reading. “Like the food in the
restaurant, some may find the extravagances difficult to swallow, and the im-
probabilities not easy to stomach,” says Greenaway (Cook, 8), who expects from us an infinite spirit of adventure. Caught between mirror images of identical feasts, we experience a nostalgia of irresponsibility: the desire to consume and appropriate texts entirely, without restriction; the need to become them (like Arcimboldo’s Librarian, the-man-made-of-texts, another version of Michael and ourselves). Once used, the primary text, and the source of our obsession, becomes a part of us—our property. This is the moment when the distinction between plagiarism and quotation becomes problematic. If quotation is a sign of caution, an homage to the writer—an act of cowardice, in fact—does it follow that we lack a certain kind of heroism?

The intertextual nature of the postmodern essay may thus be counted as a gain (postmodern poliphony is often witty and imaginative) but also as a loss. The essayist often hides behind quotations, afraid to sustain an original argument, tormented, at the same time, by the thought that her arguments are variations on an “already said.” She knows, on the other hand, that she is not to incorporate texts completely, making them hers with no trace of attribution—the ultimate but fraudulent consumption. Thus, she spends more time justifying her choices than bending rules.

Victims of frequent episodes of amnesia, we forget to be readers of things, lovers of discourse, travelers across language, as Greenaway suggests:

The eye can travel across this landscape, reading it small or reading it large, following directives, bumping into obstacles, circumnavigating colors, treading softly over precarious textures, questioning obscurities and ambiguities, understanding a reference point, bypassing unknown territory. In such a way we read a map of a landscape. In such a way, in the end, we “read” everything, putting forward some personal or borrowed order with which to discipline every chaos, hoping for rules—and if there aren’t any, then inventing some. (Steinmetz, 8; my italics)

Afraid to take Greenaway literally, desperate to stay abreast of other people’s theories, we deny ourselves the flow and beauty of language and live, in abstract form, inside a complex apparatus of endnotes, parentheses, and references. This is, it seems to me, Greenaway’s “message,” if a message needs to be found: that the critic has to be a reader who disremembers, if only for a moment, the fear of innovation. But innovation in this case refers to the essay’s ability to erase the difference between the primary source and itself, to adapt its form to its subject and thus become the primary text talking about itself: at one end of this spectrum we have Barthes’s exemplary essai, at the other, Borges’s Pierre Menard, both more or less faithful quotations of the
“original.” Between these two variations, the critical essay is a quote without the quotation marks, homage-plagiarism, total identification and delusion. Quotation marks are signs of intrusion and addition (of another’s voice or of a different meaning), disruptions of fluency, textual intermissions, names supporting other names: in this respect our essays do resemble the “greenaway.”

But intermissions, interruptions, are the mark of the self-reflective text: the Quixote is the best example. Many a time does Cervantes freeze the Hidalgo on the page—sword in hand, suspended in a negative time before the final blow—while he, the Author, decides to clarify this or that detail, tell another story, or, simply, shoot the romantic breeze. Can it be that, following this example, we feel our duty to arrest the train of our thought in order to send the readers to a note that sends them to a quote that sends them to another text, which quotes another? And does this mean that, unknowingly, we do fashion our criticism according to fictional models—forgetting, though, to mention it? Is this ultimate consumption or clarity?

In its desire to talk about universal consumption and appropriation The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover is a container of everything and nothing at the same time; Flaubert’s “nothing,” after which he lusts during the writing of Madame Bovary:

What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write is a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would hold up on its own by the internal strength of its style […] a book which would have almost no subject, or at least in which the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible. (Flaubert, 7; my italics)

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover glides over an “almost invisible” subject in order to ponder on its own style. Its mise-en-abyme grants the members of the audience within and without a fictitious status. As fictions, we are free to travel through the carefully divided space of this tale out of the theater of blood. As fictions we are free to identify, judge, and perish at the hand of the appropriators inside. But since Greenaway does his best to ask questions and not provide definitive answers, we do not see clearly (through tears of laughter or humiliation) the difference between the cultivated and the base. And preoccupied, as we are, to avoid any confusion, we forget that both Michael and Spica die at the end: one suffocated with pages from his favorite books, the other made to swallow his own words (“I’ll kill him, and I’ll eat him!”). Thus, in the end, it all comes down to a question of style: How do we wish to perish at the hand of Peter Greenaway—like scholars or like thieves?
Let us drop the metaphor—And the story too—if you please.

Laurence Sterne

The spectacle of *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* is negotiated between Greenaway’s real and his fictional audience. Shortly after the opening, we are invited in. Subtle, the invitation “inside” is an almost unnoticed gesture in the gigantic canvas of Frans Hals: with a smile on his face, the third man from the right extends his hand in a welcoming gesture. At the end of the play, the gesture—this time performed by a member of the staff—is “taken back:” watching Spica taste the ultimate delicacy, the waiter folds his arms and waits for the curtain.

Once inside, we are asked to “read” the film as if it were a map, or a menu (a menu as map). The choices are ours, but the landscape that surrounds us is as fictional as Quixote’s Spain, Alice’s chessboard in *Through the Looking-Glass*, or Eco’s Library in *The Name of the Rose*; and as mysterious as the canvas facing the painter in *Las Meninas*. In fact, Greenaway could easily switch places with him. The decision to call Greenaway an Artisan or a Merchant of Culture is ours and depends on whose side we are on. The appellative Greenaway coins for himself is that of a manufacturer of cinema. Maker of artificial and spectacular images, he invites us to share his characters’ reading list, while placing at our disposal already known fictions: Frans Hals, still lives, the French Revolution. Along the way, inside the book depository or the hospital, we are free to read ourselves into insanity, while, in the background, huge windmill sails revolve around imaginary axes.

But we must remember that Greenaway does not make films—he manufactures maps of imaginary worlds. Microscopic or blown out of proportion, maps are searched for “in every available surface; in the hides of piebald cows, in catscratchings on a kitchen door, in a path made across the grass by the shadow of a flying bird” (Steinmetz, 13–14). To read these maps “large” or “small” is our task. The landscape changes accordingly, reminding us that we are on the other side of the mirror and that this world can end at any moment because Greenaway’s Apocalypse has already happened. A “quiet, sneaky” event that came about “one summer night, not so long ago,” and “touched nineteen million people,” Greenaway’s Apocalypse explains his predisposition for collapsing boundaries and transnational/transhistorical events.2

Explains, defines, expands, explores, maps. Thus, the names of those nineteen million people affected by the Apocalypse begin with FALL.
The idea of falling is associated with flight. Images of flight are traced across imaginary territories, which transcend political and geographical boundaries, thus forming a chart of gigantic proportions whose “regions” are those of painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and mythology. This is the moment when Greenaway’s flexible landscape echoes again Alice’s travels *Through the Looking-Glass*. The image of the chessboard (the idea of strictly delineated squares) is replicated in Greenaway’s charts and in the set of *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, in the succession created by the parking lot, kitchen, dining-room, and lavatory.

Fabulous maps can be drawn for any concept that proves interesting to Peter Greenaway. Thus H, in *A Walk through H*, stands for House, Heaven, Hell, History, Hannover, Holland, Halls, Hollar, Herne Hill, Hemel Hempstead, Hampstead Heath, Hong Kong, Hanoi, Hannah, or “happy habitation of hopeful hedonists” (Steinmetz, 22). Anything is possible as long as we are willing to copy Greenaway and read words as if we were *circumnavigating* them. We must take our time: instant gratification is not the stuff of Greenaway. Here, every word considers its role carefully before attracting contradicting images; and every image consumes, greedily, from the inside, the meanings of the chosen word. Thus, Geography engulfs Politics, and History devours Geography; thus, landscape, image, and representation collapse into the *reflection* of a map; thus, “now” and “then” bleed into frames of arbitrary temporal signs, and postmodernism, the formidable, maddening fashion of our century, proves to be decadence in drag—while Greenaway is watching.

The director’s fascination with the idea of the spectacle, with “the look” of things, contaminates his characters. After killing Michael, Spica is concerned with the *appearance* of the killing: he displays the lover’s body for Georgina to see, he leaves all the evidence at the scene of the crime, he takes care of details like an artist enamored of his work. He talks about books and metaphors with an easiness that worries us: we thought—like Michael—that “Albert doesn’t read.” Albert’s style is his mark—so is Greenaway’s. This concern of both character and Author with the *appearance* of their work warns the critic against carelessness. The critic’s histrionic discourse must be in keeping with Spica’s theatrical display of feeling. Her “hysterical pregnancy” must match in intensity the climactic moment of the killing: she needs new taxonomies. Stuffed with books, she feels that a part of her died with Michael. She panics. Panic is good. Informed panic, she remembers, is even better. That is the stuff of Baudrillard and the hyperreal, of Foucault, self-reflexivity, and *Las Meninas*. Perspective: if everything revolves around style (aspect and appearance),
Baudrillard’s fascination with Foucault’s style, with the ability of his discourse to match its content, is nothing but a confirmation of the greenaway:

Foucault’s writing is perfect in that the very movement of the text gives an admirable account of what it proposes: on one hand, a powerful generating spiral that is no longer a despotic architecture but a filiation en abyme, coil and strophe without origin (without catastrophe, either), unfolding ever more widely and rigorously; but on the other hand, an interstitial flowing of power that seeps through the whole porous network of the social, the mental, and of bodies, infinitesimally modulating the technologies of power (where the relations of power and seduction are inextricably entangled). All this reads directly into Foucault’s discourse (which is also a discourse of

Figure 9.1 Windmill Series, 1978 trannie no. 34. Courtesy of Peter Greenaway.
The space “opened” by Foucault’s discourse contains and creates its reader. If Baudrillard’s reading of Foucault mimics Foucault’s reading of Velázquez, which, in its turn, reflects Velázquez’s reading of the model of himself, the critic finds herself surrounded by fictional models once more. And fictional models bring her back, full circle, to the quixotic imagery of *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*.

The film opens with a traveling shot of the metallic scaffold sustaining the “platform” of the “play.” Blood-red curtains open abruptly to reveal the stage. The dark blue space outside the restaurant yields into the immensity of the kitchen, and the imaginary journey through centuries begins. “A store of pots, pans and utensils,” the kitchen is lit from above in shades of “dark green, leaf-green, emerald, faded turquoise, and eau-de-nile—like the colors of a wet jungle” (*Cook*, 15). Vegetal paradise, Georgina and Michael’s Garden of Earthy Delights, this promiscuous space of “cooked” nature also suggests “the aircraft industry of the 1940s.” “Lazy trails of steam drift up to disappear under the dark ceiling,” while in the background, barely visible, Quixote’s “sign” makes its presence noticed. The *revolving* silhouettes of “eight large extractor-fans—like gigantic propellers—made in dull silver, milled metal,” are the first visual imprint of the windmill. Later on, “signs” of Quixote will accompany the yellow space of solitude and sickness (the hospital), and the sterile opening of the kitchen-morgue at the end of the film.

The windmill is the object that places itself, stubbornly, at the intersection of centuries of reading and interpretation as a warning to those who, like Quixote, choose to see dragons in its construction; which is how Quixote “reads” the whimsical device; which is how Cervantes reads Quixote, before releasing him into the world as an imaginative but sad gentleman. It is Quixote’s ultimate adventure that gives us the right (the power and desire) to read windmills into Greenaway, encouraged as we are by Frans Hals’s extended hand. But the “greenaway” spares no one: the shifting size of the eclectic dining-room is nothing but illusion, and going forward brings us back to square one, in a sterile movement of revolution. The “revolution” is perpetuated by the motion of the camera that circles Spica just before his death; by the revolving shadows of the windmill sails; and by the title of Michael’s book—*The French Revolution*.

A reading man caught in someone else’s story, Michael’s presence in the film is somewhat intrusive: in a world that comes to life under the palette of Jean-Paul Gaultier, Michael’s brown suit communicates a snobbery of the
banal. Passing through the blue, green, red, and white spaces of Le Hollandais the others blend in, their clothes change color. Michael’s costume is always the same. He wears a brown suit in the restaurant, a brown dressing-gown in the Book Depository; cooked, Michael’s body acquires dark tones of brown. Light brown, golden brown, ochre: Frans Hals’s favorite shades for the background of his paintings. Unaffected by the outside world, Michael will not be bothered with the exotic characters around him. “Your husband is a curiosity,” he tells Georgina. Under Greenaway’s playful direction Michael is everything that we would like to be, if trapped on a similar set: cultivated, loved, aloof.

Michael watches the other characters and reads their actions as he reads his books. But his fate is sealed like that of Emma Bovary and Quixote, for a similar reason: Michael’s readings are in fact misreadings. People, places, events are fictions for him, the same way The French Revolution, his favorite book, contains the fictionalized account of a historical event, and Napoleon’s life, which he enjoys reading, is nothing but a story about a character called Napoleon Bonaparte. His relationship with “the real world” as it is represented in the film, is non-existent. For Michael, the other characters in the film will always be characters. He understands Georgina’s tragedy at a very superficial level. His lines of inquiry betray curiosity, not compassion. He listens to Georgina’s story only after death. His constant (mis)reading of texts, events, and people sentences him to death. Stuffed with texts that have taught him nothing about “the real world,” Michael dies because he underestimates Spica and his world. His fascination with quiet movie characters makes him despise Spica’s loud appropriation of the restaurant. His reading of the thief is hurried and contemptuous: after all, Albert doesn’t read.

But Spica’s crime of passion takes place, ironically, inside the Book Depository. Painted in shades of gold and brown, this space of reading reminds us of the quiet study rooms of the seventeenth century—spaces of the Astrologer, the Geographer, the Medical Student. Captured in wave-like shadows and patches of light (in the tradition of Vermeer) and cushioned by sounds of dripping water, the Book Depository is a transient library. Shipwreck or island, this submerged vessel of knowledge and tragic feeling reminds us of the ethereal glass coffin attacked by algae at the end of Kieslowski’s Blue. Contained and self-sufficient, the Book Depository punishes the careless reader.

But before punishment lies the eternal Sunday of the seventeenth-century Dutch painting, a time of pleasure and excess to which Greenaway’s film pays inexhaustible homage.³

The stray dogs sniffing around the parking lot at the beginning of the film seem to have left, in a hurry—a still life where the game is plentiful.
They clutter and invade the frame to take part in a feast of a different cal-
er. It is a siege of the senses, which, in bleeding colors and music to match,
degenerates into an orgy of consumption. From its opening shot, The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover exemplifies Svetlana Alpers’s description of Dutch paintings as arrested instances of pleasure. “Dutch pictures,” Alpers comments, “are rich and various in their observation of the world, dazzling in their display of craft, domestic and domesticating in their concerns. The portraits, still lifes, landscapes, and the presentation of daily life represent pleasures taken in a world of pleasures: the pleasures of familial bonds, pleasures in possessions, pleasure in the towns, the churches, the land” (xxi–xxii).

Still life or group portrait, what characterizes the Dutch painting of the seventeenth century is its capacity to “describe” reality, to glide over the surface of things while capturing their essence, in a swift movement of the brush that leaves us with unanswered questions. What does this arrested quality of their portraits tell us? And why is it that we can so easily imagine the cook, the thief, his wife, or her lover displayed before the eyes of a Frans Hals or Rembrandt, awaiting recognition? The answer lies in the descriptive quality of the image: for Greenaway’s camera pans over the two-dimensional surface of the screen, in brisk strokes that remind us of Hals’s touch.

Discussing Hals’s work, Claus Grimm remarks that “the fluent brush work with its lithely set edges uses the properties of the medium to emphasize subtle color contrasts. It also makes individual areas, particularly the faces appear as if they were in motion” (70). “The simplicity of the Master’s composition is astonishing,” remarks N. S. Trivas. “The whole is like a close-up. The model is placed in the foreground of the picture and a slightly stressed perspective makes the objects in the first plane look larger while the volumes in the background are reduced” (13). Frans Hals, it appears, paints in a hurry. The faces, the hands of his characters are only sketched; the costumes completed in quick, diagonal brushstrokes give the illusion of motion; the people in his paintings look as if they have better things to do than be displayed. They have no patience for it, like Greenaway’s characters who have to be chased by the camera, followed, surprised. Relentlessly, the camera flees to the left and to the right, tracking the faintest illusion of movement. But it is only an illusion for, as the title states it, The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover is a collection of still lifes. Greenaway’s film reveals, in Leon Steinmetz’s words, “the metaphysical meaning” of the still life. “A great still life is an encyclopedia of meanings and metaphors, of which the uninitiated viewer sees only the surface” (Steinmetz, 99). Inside the Book Depository, Michael’s body—the ultimate still life—closes the pages of the encyclopedia.
The comparison can go further. In a century of expansion and exchange, Dutch painters envision Holland as a “container” of the world. Guided by their “mapping impulse,” the artists carefully trace Holland on maps of the world and place the maps in their drawing-rooms, as incidental ornaments of peaceful family houses. But their ornaments are never incidental, and—represented in their paintings—the maps live as arrested moments of controlled, and sometimes nostalgic, geography.

The map in Vermeer’s *Art of Painting* serves as best example of a map that has been “identified,” read, interpreted, and overinterpreted (Alpers, 119–124). “In size, scope, and graphic ambition,” Alpers argues, “it is a summa of the mapping art of the day, represented in paint by Vermeer.” Its presence merges the art of painting with the art of mapmaking. Similar to the mirror on the back wall of Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Wedding*, which contains the reflection of the painter-witness, Vermeer’s map is a representation of a world that he creates, witnesses, and signs. Bearing Vermeer’s signature, the map is also “a Vermeer.” But the “original” map is already a representation. Vermeer’s map is then a representation of that representation, a document that reflects the artist’s perspective. Like a mirror, it reflects the artist’s “reading” of the “original” map, and his profound understanding of the art of mapmaking. It also signals the artist’s presence outside the space represented in the painting. The map implies the existence of an empirical Vermeer but represents the act of a fictional model inside the painting, painting what he sees. Inside a painting that, once again, eludes the distance between “the real” and the fictional, the Artist is a presence beyond containment.

Greenaway’s appropriation of Hals mirrors Vermeer’s decision to paint a map still in existence. Hals offers Greenaway another side of his models: afraid to sneak behind Spica until the last moment, the camera reveals the film’s protagonists in lengthy pans that flatten their presence. Hals’s officers thus reflect, like a mirror, the “unseen” side of Spica and his men. Though functioning inside the film as a map of the seventeenth century, Hals’s painting is in no way “contained.” From the dining room it “travels” outside, where it is left to deteriorate. The painting dies with Michael, its historical moment consumed. Yet in the last scene, the officers are back inside, reminding us that *The Banquet* is nothing but a traveling fiction whose size, texture and, possibly, ownership change. But nobody mourns its death: the painting is, after all, a reproduction, and its movement through the centuries of Le Hollandais is, simply, one of revolution.

A passionate reader of history, Michael dies at the hand of Spica, who feeds him pages of *The French Revolution*, his favorite book. In this context, “the revolution” should be read not only as a reference to a political event
but as an intermingling of fabricated and true stories: legend and metaphor—story, not History. As J. F. Bosher suggests in his study, the historian who attempts to discuss the French Revolution today has to rethink not only the social, political, and cultural complexity of this (often taken for granted) incident but also the flexible categories of myth and reality:

The French Revolution has become a modern fable written and rewritten for people who imagine they already know the story even before they have read it. In particular, a fabulous inevitability pervades the tale, and it comes not from historical evidence, but from an inclination to assume that what happened was meant to happen. (ix)

The fable devours reality, and centuries of story-telling do not retrieve the truth but embellish, adorn, and “restore” it, like a painting.

In Greenaway’s film, the French Revolution sets the stage for the theater of blood and reminds us of the organizing principle of the journée. “Most of the events of the French revolution were and are cited as journée,” comments Bosher. “In French the word means ‘a dayful’ or a ‘day’s doing’” (Bosher, 268). Greenaway’s film follows the model of the French Revolution. Its “days” begin with a close-up of the menu, and, like the “stages” of the historical event, they indicate phases, series of upheavals, and repeated conflicts with various degrees of intensity. But hidden under the protective edges of the letter A (A is for Author/Artist/Architect), Greenaway constructs around his characters a landscape of stagnation, where the beginning and the end of history meet. In the end, the film cannibalizes its reader of history, and Michael ends up a text written on the menu of his favorite restaurant, containing pages from his favorite book. Thus, the “greenaway” accommodates all possible meanings of “the revolution,” inside a larger project whose goal is to test, retell, question, and repair history. But under Greenaway’s brush strokes, “his story” seems to have lost credibility.

History and Hals, though, are not the only things deteriorating: so is Georgina’s assessment of right and wrong; the Cook’s composure; our ability to cope with Greenaway’s dying world; and Spica’s poise and make-up. His draining monologues are less concerned with the surface of things—the rules of etiquette, the aspect of the restaurant; the appearance of the crime scene—and more preoccupied with images of destruction. After his “crime passionel,” Spica declares his (gastronomic) affinities with historical figures intimately connected with “the best and worst of times,” with bloodbaths and movements of revolution, with a rhetoric of war.
ALBERT: What did he say? The French Revolution was easier to swallow than Napoleon? Napoleon was a prat—he wasted everything—threw everything away. Napoleon was keen on seafood. Oysters Florentine was his favorite dish. Churchill’s favorite dish was seafood. It’s amazing, isn’t it how the great Generals liked seafood. What did Julius Caesar like? Or Hitler? Hitler liked clams. And Mussolini liked squid. (Cook, 80)

Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, Mussolini: larger than life, Spica’s shadows add flavor to the French Revolution, preparing it for consumption; because we know that when he eats Michael, Spica does not only swallow his own words, but also the book he once suggested “needed cooking.” Accused of fictionality, history repeats itself and Georgina kills Spica in act of “justified violence” that lives up to Spica’s ghastly crime—“a revenge killing, an affair of the heart.”

The last scene shows Georgina holding Spica at gun point: “Eat! Cannibal!” she says and pulls the trigger. Georgina looks toward the camera and the shot blows us away—well-read, instinctively semiotic, culturally aware, and sophisticated as we are. And, then, the camera circumnavigates Spica, now a nature morte himself, and we have time to notice two things: a waiter folding his arms, immediately after the shot, and a red curtain falling over this dramatic Greenaway affair. And then, in the silence preceding the chaos, we fade rapidly to black—fictions “of the day before.”

NOTES

1. In Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), Hayden White makes a distinction between Normal and Absurdist criticism: “To be sure, most critics—what we should call Normal critics—continue to believe that literature not only has sense but makes sense of experience. Most critics continue to believe, accordingly, that criticism is both necessary and possible. Normal criticism is not a problem, then—at least to Normal critics. Their problem is Absurdist criticism, which calls the practice of Normal criticism into doubt. It would be well, of course, for Normal critics to ignore their Absurdist critics, or rather their Absurd metacritics—for Absurdist criticism is more about criticism than about literature. When the absurdist critic—Foucault, Barthes, Derrida—comments on literary artifact, it is always in the interest of making a metacritical point” (262).

2. In The World of Peter Greenaway, Steinmetz calls Greenaway’s film The Falls, a “three hour long kino extravaganza” that “is precisely about such a quiet, sneaky
Apocalypse, which he calls the Violent Unknown Event, or VUE for short.” Greenaway’s Apocalypse foreshadows his book on flight (Peter Greenaway. *Flying Out of this World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). A collector of contradictory images, Greenaway discusses—in a phrase that reminds us of Umberto Eco—the possibilities of Flight, beginning, naturally, with “the impossibility of personalised flight” depicted as “a frozen moment in two dimensions” (1). Connected to images of flight, the Apocalypse is a Fall and a stagnation, an end and a beginning, frozen violence. (Editors’ note: Greenaway takes up this theme once again in his exhibit *Flying over Water*, in Barcelona.)

3. See Svetlana Alpers’s note on the seventeenth century, which—on canvas—appears to be “one long Sunday” (*The Art of Describing*, 236).
We are all united by the phenomenon that we have a body and that body is universally the same, more or less. If we lose sight of that perspective, everything else can desperately suffer.

Peter Greenaway

In the exhibition catalogue for The Stairs/Geneva: The Location, Peter Greenaway laments, among other things, cinema’s lack of material “substance” and “unique presence,” as well as its “disadvantages over theatre in its inevitable denial of the real and physical presence of actors, acting, people and crowds” (3–4, 7). As redress, he has embarked upon the series of ten exhibits comprising the punning Stairs. Each exhibit takes place in a different cityscape and explores, beyond the camera, a different aspect of cinema, such as location, audience, the frame, text, and illusion. Greenaway’s “post-cinematic art world,”¹ therefore, involves a “presencing” of cinema in at least two senses—the cinematic still present in the post-cinematic and rendering the cinematic experience material through rendering its signifiers present. Consequently, in this article, I (re)turn to two films in order to explore an ambivalence over the materiality and immateriality of theatrical and cinematic modes of representation already present in Greenaway’s cinema and that, in part, motivates The Stairs.

THE IMMATERIAL BODY: PROSPERO’S BOOKS

The director has said that Prospero’s Books, The Baby of Mâcon, and The Pillow Book form a trilogy (Roe, 59). I read the first two films as a pair whose complementarity derives from the different aspects of theater that each foregrounds, from their different modes of internalization of those aspects, and
from the consequently different treatments of the body that ensue.\(^2\) The vulnerability of the body is a recurrent motif in Greenaway’s films, as bodies are subject to gruesome allegorical violations, such as the draughtsman Neville’s blinding before death in *The Draughtsman’s Contract*; Michael’s forced choking on the words he was wont to read in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*; Jerome’s enscribed body flayed into a book in *The Pillow Book*; and, of course, the progressive exploitation of the Child’s body central to *The Baby of Mâcon*. Such depredations and their concomitant horror sharpened with irony are a function of the crossing or blurring of boundaries such as those between representation and enactment or signification and materiality. Although *Prospero’s Books* displays scores of naked bodies, its portrayal of *The Tempest* has a curiously disembodied quality. That effect derives in part from Gielgud/Prospero’s speaking the lines of the other characters throughout the bulk of the film, which is in turn a function of his creating the text of the play as the film progresses. And whereas in *The Baby of Mâcon* the exploitation of the body is the subject of the play–within–the film, in *Prospero’s Books*, magic preserves the bodies of the characters from the supposed tempest and shipwreck, emphasizing the immateriality of illusion.\(^3\) These two materially different outcomes are symptomatic not only of the plays’ plots but also of the two ways and interests in which the films internalize and represent theater.

In considering the cinematic internalization of theater, there are two pairs of terms to bear in mind: the two aspects of drama to which I have alluded and two modes of internalization. Theater has a double life. On the one hand, it is an art of performance characterized by the presence of the actor’s body, a communal audience, and an irreversible linear unfolding in time, all of which render individual performances unrepeatable and exemplary of one director’s or ensemble’s interpretation. Theater, in this sense, shares with cinema the creation of meaning in several registers beyond language alone, such as costuming and make-up, blocking, gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, use of props, lighting, and music and sound effects. On the other hand, theater has also been institutionalized as dramatic literature, savored as a literary—rather than visual—text, in which words dominate the reader’s experience, which is generally private and subject to her control over chronology, repetition, and multiple interpretations. As the film’s title hints, this sense of theater as literature dominates *Prospero’s Books*’s representation of *The Tempest*, in which the dramatic interest of the play’s plot is displaced onto Prospero’s writing the play and Greenaway’s creating a complex and allusive visual world—in short, on the artistic imagination and creation *per se* of writer, director, and reader/viewer, rather than the embodiment of that vision in theatrical (or even conventional narrative cinematic) performance.
The terms *incorporation* and *introjection*, which describe modes of internalization, imply a relationship between the object and subject of internalization in terms of similarity and/or difference between the two. *Incorporation* refers to the assimilation of an object into a literal or figurative body, as in the model of eating. *Introjection* refers to the internalization of an object whose difference from the body, or surrounding medium, is maintained, rather than effaced, as in the model of entombment. Incorporation, therefore, identifies object with subject, which eradicates difference either by destroying the object or assuming its characteristics and transforming itself. Introjection maintains the object as other. Both of these operations can serve reverential or destructive ends, sometimes simultaneously, as in an aggressive mourning that effects the wished-for absence of the other while disavowing culpability. Incorporation/introjection occur on two levels in each film, on the meta-level of the cinematic internalization of theater and on the level of plot, which thematizes loss and the immateriality of illusion in *Prospero’s Books* and exploitation and the materiality of performance in *The Baby of Mâcon*.

In an extended reading of *Prospero’s Books*, which I will merely summarize briefly here, I argue that Greenaway’s interpretation of Shakespeare presents an allegory of theater/film rivalry that effects just such an aggressive mourning in the interests of disavowing a problematic point of origin for cinema and establishing its cultural legitimization by appropriating theater’s cultural status and defining characteristic—namely, the fullness of presence conveyed by the actor’s body, whose absence from the performance of the finished film is just as necessary for the “imaginary signifier” of cinema as its presence is necessary to theater (Metz, 43–44, 61). In the service of this end, *Prospero’s Books* relies upon a complicated internalization of theater: it splits theater into its aspects of word and image, introjecting theater as written text and claiming image for cinema; and finally incorporates even the bookish remnant of theater as image by reducing books to the objects they represent (Hotchkiss, 8). Books and/as bodies “try to give the cinematic image the physical immediacy of live theatre, to overcome the text-like twodimensionality of the screen” (Lanier, 199).

The film is clearly heavily based on written texts, not only in relying on *The Tempest* but also by adding the books. Prospero’s Renaissance world in microcosm emerges from the central library’s cultural storehouse, not only figuratively but literally, since through books he learned and wields his magic. The displacement of theater as a visual art appears in the inability of the film’s images to be replicated on stage: images from different locations and time periods overlay one another, swift cross-cutting is common, and
miniature models fluidly transform themselves into full-scale sets. Moreover, even as it foregrounds the books, the film grants them a forceful visual presence that subordinates the written word to the images as well as the literal objects some of the books contain. Several of the books are even transformed into tiny cinema screens with animated illustrations. An allegory of cinema positioning itself in relation to theater appears in these competing modes of representation figured in the film: *A Book of Water* and *The Book of Mirrors* inaugurate theater-as-text and cinema, respectively. In the opening sequence, *A Book of Water* is associated not only with Prospero’s storm but also with the play he is writing as raindrops accompany credits, the lines that inspired the film, and ink. *The Book of Mirrors* introduces the large mirrors that, like cinema screens, portray distant events such as the storm, Tunis, and Milan. Initially, these two modes of representation, albeit distinct, appear as doubles: the mirrors rise out of the water of the pool from and with which Prospero directs the storm; Prospero’s reflection appears in the mirror over the sailors, and each mode, watery pool and mirror, presents the same action of the storm, the former via a homeopathic model, the latter via the humans affected.

Ultimately, drama and cinema are foils rather than alter egos: *The Book of Mirrors*, however, in part through its evocation of the splitting of the self in representation (its description says, “[. . .] some pages reflect the reader as he was three minutes previously, some reflect the reader as he will be in a year’s time [. . .]”) creates a lack for which cinema, as represented in the film, seeks to compensate, ultimately by attempting to incorporate text as image, a project foreshadowed by the expressive calligraphy of Prospero’s first passage. As the sharply defined mirror rises from the shapeless water, it underscores its difference from its double by showing the apparently “real” storm. That “realness,” of course, is highly problematic: for instance, it is supposedly created, not merely represented by homeopathic magic, and it is less a storm than the illusion of one, for no one suffers ill effects. That illusory but compelling reality is, of course, cinema’s advantage (or disadvantage, depending on point of view) relative to theater: in place of presence, it offers an absent presence that requires even less a suspension of disbelief than theater acting. A related appeal of that cinematic signifier lies in its iconicity, which reduces the gap between signifier and signified that exists in the arbitrariness of linguistic signs. The homeopathic magic of sinking a model ship and using Ariel’s urine as rain is symptomatic of the film’s insistent drive to make the signifying books resemble their signified contents, thereby functioning like the iconic cinematic image. In fact, as early as the opening storm sequence, the written text is literally overshadowed by its visual counterpart as a model
ship casts its shadow upon the book in front of Prospero: “The book becomes mere material surface—a cinema screen—as the ship’s shadow eclipses the text’s signifying meaning” (Hotchkiss, 22). The incorporation of Prospero’s imagined and material worlds is apparently complete when he unites characters and their voices, destroys his books, and scores of nude spirits disappear. The film, however, does not end there. Instead, as Caliban rescues the manuscript of the play as well as Shakespeare’s other plays, we come to see that the nearly complete incorporation of text as image rests upon a disavowed introjection, which maintains the difference between cinematic and theatrical forms of presence. In one sense, the original introjection of theater as written text rather than embodied performance forecloses the material body. The situation, however, is more complicated than that, for the subsequent drive toward incorporation is in the interests of gaining a body for film by rendering the theatrical signifier immaterial, a goal that relates directly to the overdetermined thematization of loss in the plot and representation of the play. Because that attempt at incorporative fullness fails due to its reliance upon a buried introjection, the still immaterial cinematic body remains invulnerable to physical threat.

THE MATERIAL BODY: THE BABY OF MÂCON

Where Prospero’s Books ultimately thematizes the absence of the body in cinema, The Baby of Mâcon thematizes the presence of the body in theater as it emphasizes the vulnerability of that body to exploitation. Broadly speaking, one set of key differences between the two films’ allegories are where each locates materiality and the source of illusion, and the valence that each gives the real, in the sense of whether it is a source of strength or vulnerability. In Prospero’s Books, cinema attempts to relocate the materiality of theater in the cinematic signifier. That material “realness” in cinema is problematic, therefore, because it is actually unreal; there is, instead, a greater illusion of the real—emphasis on illusion—that is, immateriality. In The Baby of Mâcon, however, the “realness” of theater is problematic precisely because it is material within theater, where there is a greater realness to the illusion—emphasis on realness—that is, materiality. Accordingly, The Baby of Mâcon represents theater as embodied performance instead of written text. In its portrayal of a play set 200 years earlier in the French village of Mâcon and performed in Italy in 1659, we see the accouterments of theater and its illusions: the stage, its curtains, sets dollied on and off, and so on. Unlike an incorporative “theatrical” film—in Bridget Elliott and Anthony Purdy’s sense, such as The Draughtsman’s Contract, where
theatrical convention is assimilated to create a style of cinema (90)—the initial effect here is one of the cinematic introjection of theater in the sense that the stage is portrayed as its own space of representation markedly different from and placed within cinema’s more mobile framing.

What is particularly significant about this film’s portrayal of theater, however, is that on the one hand, as Elliott and Purdy point out (70–72), it has certain affinities with Bertolt Brecht’s anti-illusionistic epic theater in its exposure of theatrical illusion, both in the way the play is performed (e.g., through the act division banners and through the prompter who speaks the Child’s lines), as well as in the way the film portrays the context of the performance (e.g., through the offstage conversations between the actors). On the other hand, this is a performance in which the real intrudes with disastrous consequences as, in a literal theater of cruelty, the boundaries between theatrical illusion and audience reality begin to blur. Consequently, as in Prospero’s Books, there are at least two different levels of incorporation/introjection in the film: one takes place within the film’s portrayal of the separation or confusion of play and world within the context of the production. The other takes place on the meta-level of the film’s own introjection of and consequent reflection upon theater as a medium of performance. This leads to a second important difference between the allegories. Each puts its representation of theater to a different use. As I argue elsewhere, the treatment of theater and cinema in Prospero’s Books establishes a particular relation between the two in the interests of cinematic legitimation. The Baby of Mâcon, however, is less concerned with such a relation per se than in using a relation of difference as a means of calling attention to its allegorical examination of materiality, performance, and performative acts. While the difference between cinematic and theatrical performance enables the necessary allegorical distance, the parallels the film establishes among theater, ritual, and cinema subsume all of them under the rubric of representation and its ideological consequences. Because of its reliance on the human body, theatrical illusion, when abused, poses a potential threat to that body, exploiting rather than preserving it. So, paradoxically, we have a film that foregrounds both the constructedness of illusion and the thin line between illusion and reality in the interests of pointing out the material dangers of abusing or misunderstanding that illusion. Those dangers themselves are portrayed on two levels: in part through the play’s own thematization of exploitation and in part through the film’s pivotal character, aristocratic audience member Cosimo de Medici III, who naively participates in the production.

The exploitation of the Child and other bodies in The Baby of Mâcon takes place in several different ways within the innermost “Chinese box” of
the film, the introjected play itself, set in fifteenth-century France in and around Mâcon.\(^7\) Albeit milder than later instances, the very attempt to read bodies—first the Child’s and mother’s, later the daughter’s—as signs of miraculous birth paves the way for exploitation, for the famine-weary people of Mâcon hope that the extraordinarily beautiful Child born to a woman past child-bearing age amidst ubiquitous sterility presages good fortune if they simply know how to read and seize it.\(^8\) Even the act of reading appears disingenuous, however, for the midwives interpreting the afterbirth cheat, moving the strewn bloody tissue around on the floor in order to produce patterns open to the interpretations they seek.\(^9\) The first significant exploitation \emph{per se} is the daughter’s taking advantage of the Child’s miraculous reputation in Mâcon for personal gain as, in mimicry of Church ceremony, she clothes the Child as a proto-saint and exchanges his blessings for goods to come, eventually sequestering her family and claiming that she is the Child’s virgin mother.\(^10\) Her and her potential lover’s bodies, too, however, fall victim to her scenario, for when she attempts to seduce the bishop’s illegitimate son, the Child commands a cow to gore him, declaring that her chastity is the price of her success because it alone sanctifies his birth. Pronouncing the daughter an unfit mother, the Church then takes the Child and carries his exploitation to more extreme heights by extracting and selling his spittle, condensed breath, urine, and even blood at exorbitant price to the wealthier inhabitants of Mâcon.\(^11\) When the jealous daughter kills the Child, the Church condemns her to be raped because of a local law preventing the execution of a virgin and orders the slaughter of her family. The townspeople, too, continually participate in the consumption of the Child, first in the purchase of the Child’s blessings from the daughter, then in the purchase of his fluids from the Church, and finally in the dismemberment of his body for relics they feel belong to them rather than the Church.

As the punishing famine returns to Mâcon, it is clear that through the morality play \emph{The Baby of Mâcon}, the film indicts the daughter’s cruel usage of her mother and brother, her murder of her brother, the Catholic Church’s appropriation and townspeople’s dismemberment of him, and the state’s collusion with the Church in the gang rape/murder of the daughter. At issue is power over embodied symbols, summed up most overtly in the contest between the daughter (and by extension, the people of Mâcon) and the Church over who will benefit, and on what terms, through controlling the body/symbol of the Child. The daughter’s pseudo-canonization of the Child to sell his blessings and the Church’s subsequent appropriation of her strategy for its own profit bespeak an actual historical tension over materiality within Counter-Reformation Catholicism.\(^12\) The Tridentine Church tried
to redirect people’s worship of the saints toward furthering spiritual discipline and sacramental conformity, but the eventual success of the Catholic renewal stemmed from melding orthodoxy and the popular practices of rural communities still stubbornly attached to benedictions and saints who would relieve bodily and worldly ills. In the areas where Tridentine saints, such as St. Ignatius, did become widely popular with masses not otherwise attracted to the new movements, it was through integration into traditional—and often locally idiosyncratic—rites of healing. Ignatius–Water, for example, was supposed to relieve women’s labor pains (Hsia, 196–202). Appropriately in ruins at the beginning of the play, the cathedral of Mâcon, and the bishopric it metonymically and metaphorically represents, is not meeting the material and emotional needs of the people in crisis, who turn to one of their own, an ersatz saint and/or Christ figure, who is part product of extreme communal need and part result of the daughter’s longing for a child and wealth. In keeping with remedying sterility, the daughter reunites materiality and spirituality with a liturgy that—with a suggestion of New Age healing through guided imagery—emphasizes fecundity, joy in nature, and physical restoration in her mock-canonization of the Child: “Imagine a time when walking on the earth was a pleasure. Remind yourself of the ecstasy of living. Remember the grass being long and the orchard-trees heavy. Remember when sleep with your partner was contentment.” Building upon familiar religious
beliefs and traditions, she literally and figuratively clothes the Child in the trappings of sainthood that give abstractions concrete form such as the Sash of Humility, the Robe of Piety, the Crown of Strength, and the Beads of Poverty. Even within the play itself, these stage props are represented as (mere) ceremonial props, as cantor, deacon, and choirs intone their provenance and price, thus emphasizing their dual status as costly goods deployed in a staged ceremony—not to mention, by implication, their status as gimmickery deployed on a stage—and as supposed relics whose symbolic exchange value bespeaks and conveys sacred worth beyond physical use value.

As ceremonial props and symbols are wont to do, the sanctified Child-turned-symbol soon exceeds his sister’s material goals: after concluding the ceremony by posing herself and her brother as a living sacra conversazione and later, dressed as the Madonna, hosting a banquet celebrating Maçon’s new prosperity, she finds her attempt to gain a Joseph for her Mary thwarted by the Child, who seems to have assumed supernatural powers. The stable scene is, of course, deliberately reminiscent of the Nativity, but instead of the birth of a god in human form who will bring redemption and life, this nativity is the apparent transformation of a human child into a divine being who metes out punishment and death. If anything, the Child’s ruthlessness in bringing about the death of the bishop’s son and decreeing his sister’s chastity seems out of proportion to what she has done and suggests a violence underlying human notions of the sacred. In Violence and the Sacred, René Girard argues that religion, paradoxically, seeks to quell violence through violence (20), often with a surrogate victim rather than the transgressor (269–270). In fact, Greenaway has said that he sees the figure of Christ not as a symbol of divine hope but human cruelty: “You can see it as an image of man’s inhumanity to man, but its interpretation as a potentiality for resurrection, I’m afraid, is far from my personal belief” (quoted in Sampson, 13). While it is the “maltreated body which has been sacrificed, not for spiritual reasons but for political gain” that prompts Greenaway’s comment, the Child, the most appropriated and fluid symbol in the film, manifests “man’s inhumanity to man” in two ways: as the human victim of that inhumanity and, in the stable, as an avenging divinity. Both manifestations are certainly made in the image of humankind, and both refute the daughter’s now seemingly naive picture of happiness with the Child and confirm his own foreknowledge of martyrdom:

DAUGHTER: I can see the most daring and eventful future for both of us.

CHILD: I can see the most daring and dangerous future for both of us.
DAUGHTER: I can see the dismay of all our enemies.

CHILD: I can see the delight of all our enemies.

[. . .]

DAUGHTER: I can see gold.

CHILD: I can see death.

Later, after she kills the Child, the daughter laments, “With me, you could have been so beautiful . . . / With me, you could have been a saint . . . / With me, you could have commanded the love of the world . . . / With me, you could have lived forever . . .” (101). She seems to suggest that the Child can be a saint without suffering, as if sainthood were a mere symbolic status independent of suffering. She learns, however, that symbolization can come with a material price. Perversely, in this scene her loss feels more poignant than the fact of her brother’s death, which seems inevitable, given the Christ-identification. Her fond foolishness was to think that she could not only beat the Catholic Church at its own game but also revise the Christian trajectory of sacrifice and martyrdom, which, the film suggests, inevitably consumes those who deploy its narrative.

To her credit, the daughter has at least apparently brought good fortune to Mâcon and fulfilled a need the Church had not. In consequence, she seems less harshly judged in the film than the Church, and her murder of the Child is of less moment than her own rape, which upstages even the dismemberment. Her enforced chastity, necessary to shore up the symbol of the Child’s divinity, ensures that she cedes control of her own body and will never bear such a child. In short, her body becomes subject to the interpretation she has imposed upon it, rather than interpretation subject to body. The further irony in this contest over symbols is that although the daughter’s successful ceremony has reminded the Church not to eschew the body—“Imagine a time when walking on the earth was a pleasure”—the ecclesiastical authorities nonetheless miss that point as they abuse the Child’s body for the profit of the Church. Correspondingly, the service in which the Child’s fluids are auctioned is more abstract than was the daughter’s earlier dispensing of blessings to render livestock and people fruitful: the Church’s liturgy simply consists in the assertion “This child will be a sign unto you that you are not forsaken.”14 The Child’s beautiful body no longer promises fertility to others but serves as mere sign of a relatively vague point of doctrine. And, especially given their exclusionary prices, the relics have less to do with the purchaser’s faith and piety, or even belief, than with his/her cash. The newly restored cathedral is less the sign of a materially—in the fullest
sense of the term—revivified spirituality than it is a mere show of religiosity without compassion for or responsibility toward the people, a charge often leveled against Counter-Reformation Catholicism to which Greenaway has alluded in interviews. At the expense of the body of Child-made-symbol, the Church achieves power over bodies for its own ends, rather than exercises power for the benefit of bodies.

This stab at Counter-Reformation display takes us from the play-within-the-film to the setting of its production, a northern Italian theater in 1659, the present of the film. The play clearly illustrates that power exercised through symbols has material repercussions when the symbol takes priority over the body that grounds it. Within the context of the play’s production—a second layer of the film’s plot—audience member Cosimo de Medici III is a central figure for this gesture of privileging signified meaning over signifying body to the detriment of the latter, in part because of his difficulty distinguishing theatrical illusion. Unlike much of the rest of the audience who, with apparent awareness of theatrical convention, gleefully participates in the play by, for instance, lewdly heckling one of the midwives in an obviously solicited audience intrusion, or unlike his Majordomo who avidly seeks a role in the play, Cosimo does not seem clearly to understand the introjective difference between representation—the play’s world—and reality—the actors’ and audiences’ world. Even those of the prince’s entourage who treat the play more as a religious lesson or experience than as entertainment—particularly his Abbess aunt and two nun nieces—regard the play as representation, though finally acquiescing in, and occasionally echoing the prince’s incorporative credulity. The two nuns, for example, try to comfort the apparently genuinely distressed young man after the Child is killed by gently reminding him that “[i]t is only a play . . . with music.” To which Cosimo, either deliberately or naively missing the point, responds, “It is only a play . . . with music? Does God say the same at every death? It is only a play . . . with music? When I die, will someone say the same? He was only a prince. He died. It was only a play . . . with music.” Giving in to his bathos but gently reminding him of his privileged position, one of the nuns tells him, “Sire, be grateful for the music. Most of us die in silence.” As this example suggests, Cosimo’s childlike wonder and engagement are difficult to dismiss as a mere desire to act or be the center of attention. Although the latter clearly pleases him, his ability to distinguish acting from other behavior is questionable. His difficulty separating illusion and reality appear upon the Child’s birth, when, awestruck and genuflecting, Cosimo wonders aloud, “Are we really born like this? Was I born like this? Was Christ born like this out of the Virgin Mary?” and (apparently unsuccessfully) insists that the child be named after him.
Although Greenaway obviously does not adhere slavishly to period events, the historical Cosimo de Medici III (1642–1723) is an appropriate figure for the film’s critique of power and representation: not only was he a religious fanatic fond of religious art more notable for its sentimental idealizations of faith or sensational portrayals of bloody martyrdoms—excesses associated with him and the play—but he also invested in show over substance for the aggrandizement of his family name and to the detriment of his people (Acton, passim; Goldberg, 17). In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Grand Duchy of Tuscany was suffering economically and politically, yet the ruling family’s spending on ducal display increased rather than diminished, betraying a concern with show over substance appropriate to the thematics of The Baby of Mâcon. In 1707, Cosimo III had to pawn the crown jewels in order to meet a war contribution exacted by Prince Eugene of Savoy (Goldberg, 3–4). The people of Tuscany paid for Cosimo’s pomp and doting support of a large bevy of priests with heavy taxes and a broken economy, not to mention severe religious stricures (Acton, 199–207).

Coming from a sheltered and sexually naive youth, much of Cosimo’s childish involvement in The Baby of Mâcon is harmless, albeit occasionally troubling in implication, and amuses players and audience, generally at his expense. Increasingly less ignored by the cast, however, he gradually becomes a more active participant in the play, most notably when the bishop wants to execute the daughter. To the dismay of many in his retinue, Cosimo proposes a punishment his showy sanctimony and the bishop’s desire to avenge his son’s death find fitting. Citing legendary precedents of sado-masochistic martyrdoms, the bishop decrees that the daughter will be raped thirteen times plus thirteen plus thirteen times plus thirteen times thirteen times (13 + (13 + 13)+(13 x 13) = 208). At this point, the representation clearly goes awry: screened by the bed curtains, the actress playing the daughter says to the actors pulling up her skirts that they don’t have to act anymore because no one can see them. Over her cries, they proceed to rape her anyway as a gradually more troubled Cosimo keeps track of the numbers. Ironically, this one clear instance in the film of a body testifying to its status—through the blood the first rapist finds—is dismissed: upon seeing blood as he wipes himself, the first rapist cries in surprise, “She is a virgin!” One of the soldiers returns, “Rubbish, lad—you’ve scratched your prick on a buckle.” When they have finished, the actress herself is dead. In this instance, incorporating reality, representation presents a corpse.

This dramatic—or rather nondramatic—turn of events wrenches our attention from play to production and goes to the heart of the film’s focus on the dangers of representation, a focus that eventually complicates the
film’s introjective portrayal of theater. A curious paradox about Cosimo’s responses furthers our awareness of deliberately blurred boundaries between acting and not acting: if Cosimo believed the acting was real, why was he so shocked when the actress/daughter died when she was going to be executed anyway? If he had finally decided that the play was illusion, why propose the punishment in the first place, and, more to the point, why become increasingly doubtful during the gang rape? His aunt, confessor, and majordomo further confuse the issue: respectively cold, accusing, and distressed during the rapes, they subsequently exonerate their charge by claiming that the daughter was a murderer and thus deserved Cosimo’s so-called justice. If they had believed the illusion to be real, why not intervene in time? If they had maintained a belief in the illusion as such, why collapse actress and character in exonerating Cosimo? Ironically, given either possibility of belief or disbelief, Cosimo’s naïveté and his religious instructors’ rationalization call attention to something curious about this production that playgoers more complacently familiar with theatrical illusion may have missed and that the film’s viewers will have begun to question—namely, peculiar moments even before the actress’s death in which reality has already intruded into the play at times other than apparently planned by the cast. Cosimo’s unsophisticated assumption that the staged events are happening not just in but to the flesh may have been right all along.

As early as the birth of the Child, illusion and reality are potentially confused: we see one of the midwives rush onto stage carrying a deformed wooden doll, which she subsequently discards during the graphically realistic birth of an unrealistically developed child. Apparently, the birth of a live infant was not in the script. Since so much of the drama hinges on the Child’s miraculous perfection of form, what direction would the story have taken with the deformed doll? How much of what ensues is the rehearsed play? How much of it is even a play at all? More later, during the interval after the goring, the unresponsive actor who played the bishop’s son is dragged offstage and coffined, apparently dead. The film also suggests that the actress playing the daughter has indeed smothered a real child, a possibility seemingly confirmed as we later see his body dismembered in close-up. At the end of the play, daughter and bishop’s son are displayed as bloody corpses, and the Child as an oversized head, while other actors take their bows out of character—the slender young actress playing the obese, elderly mother even doffs her body costume—suggesting that the actors who played Child, daughter, and son are themselves dead.

More subtly, the very world of the stage frequently seems to expand, displacing or even becoming the “real” world, the diegetic world of the
film. For example, the seduction gone awry is completely withheld from the play’s audience: we witness it, but only after the walls of the stable fall down do they and the citizens of Mâcon see the butchery. At other moments, audience and action appear to have been transported to different locales, such as the village streets. At first, the camera seems simply to have gone on stage, as occasionally it does, but that does not explain, for instance, the enormous space the tracking camera deliberately measures in the cathedral where action is too far away for an actual theater audience to see. The stage world appears fully incorporated into a cinematic reality as the accouterments of theater disappear. In short, this film flirts with both the melding and separation of alternative ontological levels in the productions of both play and film, refusing us consistently ordered frames of reference, an effect enhanced by the loosening of conventional continuity editing that maintains a constant and stable sense of space. A first-time viewer, especially, often finds herself appropriately but confusedly wondering, “Is such-and-such backstage? On stage? Elsewhere?” and even “Did that ‘really’ happen?” in much the same way the actors and audience of the play’s production must be. In terms of incorporation and introjection within the film’s embedded diegeses, there are moments in which the customary theatrical situation of a play’s world introjected into the audience’s world reverses as the real intrudes on the performance. As we see when Cosimo buys relics and when the actress playing a midwife imbues the phrase “this town” with simultaneous dramatic and meta-dramatic meanings, the performance can incorporate or introject those intrusions in turn, most trivially on the level of unimportant interruptions of action and planned banter between actors and audience. More drastically, however, there is a transformative level in which the material world and immaterial illusion are incorporated into one another, with grave results for the material body.

Clearly, “giv[ing] life to icons,” to quote the daughter, is a dangerous business. If the play-within-the-film critiques the exploitation of ritual and bodies for personal gain, the film’s portrayal of the play’s production reinforces and extends that critique from ritual to the more general category of representation itself as it indict a series of related phenomena: Counter-Reformation propaganda and hypocrisy, Cosimo’s and the actors’ abuse of power, audience complicity therein, and the capacity for ritual and representation to take place at the expense of the material. The film offers an ironic, self-aware warning regarding the dangers of ritual and representation—not only of potential threat to the body within performance, but also of how particular representations can lead us to dismiss
the body as such in favor of appropriating it as sign. Ironically, the morality play-within-the-film, which sets out to be an allegory of the evils of exploitation, falls into the very error it exposes. Several parallel crimes, reinforced by the similarities between theatrical and religious pageantry, take place in which the condemners practice what they condemn: among them, the Church is as guilty as the daughter whose greediness and mistreatment of the Child it decries, and the production as a whole is as guilty of exploitation as daughter and Church.

RITUAL AND THEATER

The critical history of the term *ritual* in relation to such terms as *drama*, *theater*, and *theatrical representation* has maintained a dialectic between its distinction from and alignment with theater. Ritual has frequently been differentiated from theater by its efficaciousness or transformative function. Arguing that the use of the term *ritual* in theater studies is fraught with vagueness, Anthony Graham-White cites several anthropological definitions that concur on ritual’s efficacy or transformative properties and concludes that “ritual produces results that lie beyond the termination of the performance. It is this that distinguishes it from the performance of a drama” (321). Even if a play influences people to take social action, that action is effected by their initiative, not the performance *per se*. Suggesting the implications for good or ill in this aspect of ritual, Günter Berghaus points out that although “desires and anxieties are also objectified in other forms, e.g., dreams, myths, fairy tales […] in rituals they are acted upon” (44). Victor Turner describes ritual as “transformative performance” that effects “social transitions” such as birth, marriage, death, and the transfer of power (Turner, *Anthropology*, 75, 157). His terms *liminal* and *liminoid*, which apply to ritual and theater respectively, suggest their relation and difference: both terms derive from *limen* (Latin for “threshold,” but also suggesting “separation” or “margin”), indicating that both ritual and theater (among other liminoid activities such as games) are activities separate from day-to-day hierarchies and conventions (Turner, *Ritual Process*, 94). Generally speaking, however, liminal activities tend to be compulsory, collective, central to social structure, and conservative even when bringing about change—as in rites of passage—or when temporarily inverting the social order in the interests of containing subversion. Liminoid activities, on the other hand, are more often optional, associated with play and experimentation, individually created, marginal to social and economic mainstays, and can be critical of the status quo (Turner, *From Ritual to The-
In keeping with the notion of efficacy, Turner writes that ritual, unlike theatre, does not distinguish between audience and performers. Instead, there is a congregation whose leaders may be priests, party officials, or other religious or secular ritual specialists, but all share formally and substantially the same set of beliefs. A congregation is there to affirm the theological or cosmological order, explicit or implicit, which all hold in common, to actualize it periodically for themselves and inculcate the basic tenets of that order into their younger members. (112)

Theater, on the other hand, is characterized by a split between audience and performers. As Richard Schechner writes, “The paradigmatic theatrical situation is a group of performers soliciting an audience who may or may not respond by attending [...] if they stay away it is the theater that suffers, not its would-be audience. In ritual, staying away means rejecting the congregation, or being rejected by it, as in schism, excommunication, or exile” (Performance Theory, 126). Drawing on a fairly specific sense of ritual as an act in which a deity is prevailed upon to bring about a change in the world, Eli Rozik succinctly characterizes the two in semiotic terms: a “ritual is [...] an act and, therefore, an index of an action,” in the Peircean sense. Acting in the sense of performing in the theater, on the other hand, is “an iconic description of indexical behavior” (185). In other words, theater imitates (often quite exactly) rather than actually carries out an action, where “‘action’ aims at changing a state of affairs in the world,” and where “‘act’ [...] is the perceptible aspect of an action” (184). To put it crudely, theater merely represents, or shows, something, while ritual both represents and presents, or does, something. Even notions of ritual that go beyond invocation of the supernatural maintain this sense of efficacy: S. J. Tambiah offers an encompassing definition that expresses this sense of efficacy as performativity:

Ritual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication. It is constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized in varying degree by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition). Ritual action in its constitutive features is performative in these three senses: in the Austinian sense of performative wherein saying something is also doing something as a conventional act; in the quite different sense of a staged performance that uses multiple media by which the participants experi-
ence the event intensively; and in the third sense of indexical values—I derive this concept from Peirce—being attached to and inferred by actors during the performance. (119)

Except for Austinian performativity, Tambiah’s definition of ritual largely consists in qualities that theater and ritual share: symbolic communication, pattern, mixed media, convention, stereotypy, condensation, repetition, but most fundamentally, performance. And, in fact, many theorists of ritual and theater, from standpoints of both anthropology and theater studies, are more interested in what can be learned from their similarities and significant overlapping rather than their differences. Ritual, as we see in the Child’s mock canonization, can certainly use theater in its service: in fact, the point at which the preparation for the ritual (seen with theatrical equipment such as ladders in the background) ends, and the ritual itself—apparently taking place in a cathedral rather than on stage—begins, is unclear because the costuming of the Child seems to constitute ritual itself. The subtle move from theater to alternative cinematic reality underscores this sense of theater and ritual being one. Even the skeptical Graham-White acknowledges that fifteenth-century Japan used Noh dramas as curative rites (321, fn. 10). Conversely, J. Ndukaku Amankulor claims that “the nature of theatre is such that both sacred and secular rituals apply to it” and that within theater studies the term ritual “must reflect the variety of uses the word suggests [. . .] as they apply to the art of theatre, and not exclusively to anthropology” (53; 48–49).

In other words, some critics argue that theater can use, even become, ritual as much as ritual can become theater. In part because of the frequent difficulty in distinguishing theater and ritual functionally (not to mention the frequent near impossibility in distinguishing them formally), Richard Schechner suggests that instances of each lie variously on a performance spectrum with efficacy and entertainment forming the two poles. His explanation is worth quoting at length, for it offers an example relevant to how The Baby of Mâcon represents both ritual and theater:

Whether one calls a specific performance “ritual” or “theater” depends mostly on context and function. [. . .] No performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment. The matter is [further] complicated because one can look at specific performances from several vantages; changing perspectives changes classification. For example, a Broadway musical is entertainment if one concentrates on what happens onstage and in the house. But if one expands the point of view to include rehearsals, backstage life before, during, and after the show, the function of the roles in the lives of
Greenaway’s film, of course, takes precisely that expanded point of view as it explores audience, greenroom, the theatricality of ritual, the ritualization of theater, and the slippery question of what constitutes performance. As the director himself writes, “Since it has been said that a definition of a performance is any event witnessed by an audience, and delighting therefore in the axiom that audience and performance need one another as equals, my interest in the audience as ‘the performance’ has grown” (Stairs/Geneva, 92). The film shows the arrival of the audience, the social structure replicated in the different seating areas for different classes, and the power on display as Cosimo’s entourage ostentatiously parades onto the apron. We frequently see audience reactions and activity, such as breast feeding, fighting, eating, relieving themselves, and in one instance giving birth. Cosimo and his followers even change clothes for each act as if in acknowledgment of being part of the performance, as politically and culturally they are. The cathedral sequences and ritualized rape are, of course, staged as theater by the characters presiding by their studied use of elaborate sets, costumes, and props in the former cases and the curtained bed—its a miniature stage—in the latter. As the rape moves from representation to presentation, it disturbs our complacency in treating as performance “any event witnessed by an audience” and becomes a complex moment of a ritualized punishment within a theatrical production turned into a ritualized expression of male aggression against an ambitious and momentarily helpless actress. Subsequently, the rape is further ritualized as Cosimo’s aunt and confessor fashion it into a moral lesson that “fulfils [the prince’s] desire for sentimental guilt, the pleasures of remorse, the masochism and penitence and the sickly, sticky balm of universal forgiveness” (Baby, 8). Cosimo himself repeatedly turns theater into ritual as he buys relics, donates a cow, and participates in the cardinalization of its corpse in the interval.

Greenaway’s 1993 exhibit *The Audience of Mâcon* further highlights the film’s interest in audience as performance. Its tongue-in-cheek captions to the photographic portraits of extras dressed as 1659 audience members frequently suggest or specify the characters’ reasons for attending the theater, creating a sense of a highly individuated audience full of mixed motives and

(Performance Theory, 120–121)

each performer, the money invested by the backers, the arrival of the audience, the reason the spectators are attending, how they paid for their tickets [. . .] and how all this information indicates the use they’re making of the performance (as entertainment, as a means to advance careers, as charity, etc.)—then even the Broadway musical is more than entertainment, it’s also ritual, economics, and a microcosm of social structure.
responses. A cardinal with praying hands, for example, is an “expert in church law looking for blasphemy.” A middle-aged woman expensively dressed “donated money to the theatre in the belief that it morally educates the illiterate,” a function, of course, once associated with church theater. A choir-usher is “attracted to the theatre by loose women” (Melia, 95–96; Stairs/Munich, 26). Furthermore, by virtue of the photographs’ anachronism, the spectator becomes aware of her suspension of disbelief in enjoying them as portraits of seventeenth-century figures, and consequently of her position as audience. This realization returns her not only to cinema in general but to the film The Baby of Mâcon in particular, for, as Greenaway argues, “such demands for a suspension of disbelief are endemic and essential every time a viewer enters a cinema, whatever the nature of the film projected. Besides, in a sense, all films are about history, a history that is cut-and-dried, with its own built-in past, illusory present and so called future” (Stairs/Geneva, 24). Moreover, at the end of The Baby of Mâcon, we see yet another layer of the film as the camera pulls back to show the play’s audience bowing to a second audience beyond them, who are bowing to a third audience, and so forth. Each audience serves as part of the performance for the audiences beyond, and we are, therefore, pointedly reminded of our own status as audience and, possibly, as spectacle. By focusing on the context of performance,
implicating his own viewing audience in what they have witnessed, and dramatizing the different ways in which theater can be ritualized, in The Baby of Mâcon, Greenaway suggests even more specifically than Schechner how theater and ritual can be similarly efficacious. Both instances of cultural representation allow us to abdicate responsibility for the ideological and often material consequences of unthinkingly accepting cultural archetypes, such as the martyred saint, and accompanying narratives.

In its indictment of ritual abuse—in both (related) senses of the phrase—and suspicion of theatrical representation, the film is ultimately less interested in the differences between ritual and theater than in their formal and ideological similarities, particularly in the moments in which one incorporates the other. Appropriate to the content of The Baby of Mâcon, a tendency to see ritual and theater in terms of one another is not only specific to twentieth-century anthropology and theater studies but appears even in medieval writings on the Catholic mass. For example, O. B. Hardison quotes Honorius of Autun writing in 1100:

It is known that those who recited tragedies in theater presented the actions of opponents by gestures before the people. In the same way our tragic author [i.e., the celebrant] represents by his gestures in the theater of the Church before the Christian people the struggle of Christ and teaches to them the victory of His redemption. (40)

As Hardison explains, the rest of the passage describes the stages of the mass in terms of tragic drama with conflict, rising action, climax, reversal, and catharsis. In short, he argues that the ritual of the mass was in fact the living theater of the early Middle Ages, a time of little to no secular theater in Europe (41). This sense of religious rite as theater is even more appropriate to the 1659 Counter-Reformation setting of the film, for as Günter Berghaus argues, “one of the first organisations to avail itself of [the] specific ‘propagandistic’ possibilities of theatre was the Catholic Church” through its 1622 founding of the Propaganda Fide, or Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, designed to centralize and promote missionary work. A 1930 unpublished report to Mussolini draws a parallel between fascist and Catholic uses of “art operating ‘like a religion, which also overcomes the divisions in people’s principles and sympathies, and institutes [. . .] a kind of parallel to the Pope’s Propaganda Fide” (Berghaus, 53). Mission work and the inculcation of new saints were central to Catholicism’s Counter-Reformation efforts. R. Po-Chia Hsia discusses Tridentine canonization precisely as an incorporation of theatrical art and religion:
Canonization was theater. The very moment of the ritual itself [...] represented merely the act. A great deal went on before the stage performance: the script, flyers and broadsheets were printed, players found, roles rehearsed, and the stage constructed. [...] The audience came, attracted by a multitude of advertisements—the commemorative medals, paintings, engravings, and hagiographies. [...] canonizations honored the heroes and heroines of the Church, narrating their lives, casting them in action against demons, heretics, and other enemies of the true faith. (126)

In keeping with Schechner’s “efficacy-entertainment braid,” his term for the dual nature of performance, this description of canonization emphasizes the entertainment within ritualistic efficacy. As the historian casts the process, Greenaway’s portrayal of the daughter’s and bishop’s ceremonies begin to seem more realistic than caricatural. Hsia’s description of Baroque cathedral architecture creates an even more physical sense of religion as theater, which, in turn, seeks to incorporate divine and worldly, community and individual, representation and reality:

In contrast to the Gothic cathedral, with its cross-like plan [...] the Baroque church [...] focused space and light in a central realm where sermons were preached, mass celebrated, and communion dispensed. Capping this central space and stressing its dominance was a soaring dome, which both allowed in natural light and focused attention on the painted representations of paradise and divinity through the use of ceiling frescos. The combined effect of lighting and decoration seemed to highlight the theatricality of Catholic sacraments: what was the Catholic Church if not the theater of salvation, as suggested by numerous devotional and theological treatises of Catholic reform bearing titles such as “Theatrum vitae humanae” or “Theatrum sacrum”? [...] Indeed Jesuit theater itself suggested a continuity between mundane and divine matters, the natural and the miraculous. [...] In the 1650 staging of the forty-hour devotion [...] at Lent [...] the scenic architecture was placed in the choir of the church without a proscenium, with the result that the “false stage” continued into the “real nave,” giving the audience not a separation between life and stage, but a continuous spatial and visual experience between individual devotion and a representation of sacrality. (161)

This effect of literally and hence symbolically blurring boundaries is precisely what Greenaway creates repeatedly in The Baby of Mâcon in such moments as the transformation of stage into cathedral and the assimilation of audience into
play. The very ambiguities of the mass are appropriate to the film's own interest in the parallels between ritual and theater, the fluidity of symbolization, and representation's incursion into the material: as G. Ronald Murphy, S.J., writes,

The union of opposites and the "warping" of time, which in a sense is a union of opposites (i.e., ambiguity of time present and time past), is exemplified repeatedly in the ritual of the Mass. Ambiguity is an essential part of the union of oppositional dyads. For example, a believer is never sure if the priest or Christ is presiding at any given moment or if the priest or the "heavenly court" are totally distinct bodies. Similarly, one is never quite sure whether one is present at a church service in the twentieth century, at the last supper, at the crucifixion and resurrection, or for that matter before the Heavenly Throne. [. . .] The ambiguity is intentional. Furthermore, one is never sure whether the body of the congregants is united with the gifts of bread and wine or whether they are separate. There is also a psychological uncertainty about the status of the bread and wine themselves with respect to the body and blood of Christ. (319)²⁶

As we have seen, Greenaway repeatedly uses similar slippage in time and place in The Baby of Mâcon to quite different effect, in a sense turning ritual against itself. The equation of theater and ritual, for example, suggests that the daughter's staged rites are as valid as the Church's, or, more accurately, that theirs are as morally suspect as hers. The abusive results of ritual in the play point to a doubleness within ritual itself "as an entity that symbolically and/or iconically represents the cosmos and at the same time indexically legitimates and realizes social hierarchies. [. . .] [T]here is [in ritual] [. . .] a social constraint that allocates to persons in ranked positions and relations of 'power and solidarity' a differential access to and participation in a society's major rites, and a differential enjoyment of their benefits" (Tambiah, 153). In the same vein, Greenaway himself has said, "I am firmly convinced that all our institutions, whether they are political or religious or social or moral, are constructs which are created merely for local purposes, to support the establishments and vested interests of the time" (quoted in Sampson, 12) and that "in a sense, taboos are merely an organization that allow[s] certain people to exercise power over other people" (quoted in Shulman). The film certainly demonstrates repeatedly this social and potentially destructive potential of ritual used as a means to, or demonstration of, power.

The film's equation of theater and ritual highlights another more paradoxical doubleness in ritual, what Barbara Myerhoff describes as its claim to universal truth in the face of its own patent constructedness:
All rituals are paradoxical and dangerous. [. . .] Paradoxical because rituals are conspicuously artificial and theatrical, yet designed to suggest the inevitability and absolute truth of their messages. Dangerous because when we are not convinced by a ritual we may become aware of ourselves as having made them up, thence on to the paralyzing realization that we have made up all our truths; our ceremonies, our most precious conceptions and convictions—all are mere invention, not inevitable understandings about the world at all but the results of mortals’ imaginings. (86)

Unlike Myerhoff, however, Greenaway sees this paradox as a salutary fissure in ideological representation, opening up a space for reflection and awareness. Consequently, the film not only exposes this paradox in ritual—not to mention the economic and political interests that ritual serves—but also uses ritual and theater allegorically to interrogate a very similar aspect of cinema. This alignment is strongly suggested by the recurrent presence in the film of the bed, an emblem for theater (with its curtained proscenium), for the cinema screen (with the shadows of the daughter’s rape appearing on the drawn curtains), and for the world and its competing interests (with the daughter’s imprisonment of mother, father, wetnurses, and whores, that is, “incompatible prisoners [. . .] the world locked up in a bed”). The implied juxtaposition of ritual and cinema is not peculiar to *The Baby of Mâcon*: Turner, for instance, suggests that it is harder to sustain a comparison between cinema and theater than between cinema and ritual because of the latter pair’s relatively greater length of time and more elaborate process of production (*Anthropology*, 31). Greenaway points to the multiple media that cinema and ritual—according to countless anthropologists—share: in cinema “you get sound, light, costume, acting, sensation, chiaroscuro and all these other phenomena that Bernini would use so excellently at St. Peter’s” (quoted in Schulman). “I have the feeling,” he claims elsewhere, “that the cinema is the contemporary religion in a sense—it’s propagandising capitalism, happy endings, associations with wealth [. . .] giving a fairly obscene picture that really everything’s OK” (quoted in Roe, 54). Both cinema and religious imagery allow us to look without having to acknowledge our own desire or responsibility. In the context of cinematic representations of death, Alan Woods writes, “Religious imagery—Sebastian, Christ on the cross—acknowledges our desire, removes from it all (surface) trace of voyeurism, turns it into spectacle, demands that we look—and absolves us from all guilt” (177), a process displayed in *The Baby of Mâcon* when Cosimo’s aunt and confessor forgive his role in the actress’s death once he has exhibited
proper repentance. Consequently, Greenaway has repeatedly explained the anti-realism of his cinema in terms of his suspicion of cinema’s manipulative reality effect, which he, too, likens to religious ritual:

My cinema, deliberately, is very artificial. I draw your attention to the frame, to the artificiality of the editing—witness the association with music—and lately I have tried very hard to draw attention to the whole device and pretense of acting.

On a personal level, I feel very dubious about cinema’s use of deception and manipulation. That’s one of the reasons I’m so fascinated by the Baroque, the art form commandeered as propaganda for Catholicism, where, just as in cinema, there’s nothing in the middle and suspension of disbelief is imperative. (Sampson, 12)

Not only does *The Baby of Mâcon* deny us the illusion of voyeuristic innocence, it exposes this duplicity within religious imagery as well. *The Baby of Mâcon*, therefore, is a morality play about producing morality plays, an allegory of the dangers of allegorizing, as uneasily aware of its own medium’s culpability as it is of its audience’s complicity.

THE AUDIENCE

Given this moral stance, it is highly ironic that the film was considered too offensive for U.S. distribution. Like violent anti-war films, *The Baby of Mâcon* is itself in a paradoxical position. On the one hand, audience discomfort with the rape scene is in keeping with Greenaway’s desire to enable (some would say force) them to think critically about archetypes, social myths, and their own participation in supporting marketed representations: “*The Baby of Mâcon* is not violence and sensation and humiliation and exploitation of innocence for a quick cathartic giggle,” claims the director. “[T]his is cause and effect propositioning, and is intended to show and debate painful issues with a deep sense of seriousness” (quoted in Woods, 276). Thus, audiences who reacted with abhorrence or disgust to the violence were, in one sense, getting the point. But on the other hand, although the film may lack the distancing irony of *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (a film that uses theater’s framing to render the representation less, rather than more, real), it actually disturbs more than it elicits the suspension of disbelief. As the film repeatedly calls attention to the artificiality of illusion and the presence of an audience—especially with members as naive as Cosimo—its audience, one
would think, can hardly miss the obvious meta-commentary, especially after they see the succession of audiences of which they become a part at the end. Aside from the elaborate anti-realist staging of the rape, moreover, Greenaway suggests that the presence of a real baby, who cannot, of course, act, “places everything else into immediate artificiality. [. . .] It proves the lie. It humbles the actors—both as characters and as actors prating in a costume drama” (quoted in Woods, 277). Objectors to depictions of violence in Greenaway’s work, therefore, commit one of the errors against which the film warns: that of mistaking the representation for the thing itself, the immaterial meaning for the material body. Their objections are actually less symptomatic of a moral stance against the representation of violence, which appears in many other films more graphically and disturbingly, than of this film’s refusal to exonerate their guilty pleasure in looking.

To these discomfited viewers’ credit, however, they are as much subjected to this particular film’s horrifying violence as they are complicit in their more general support of the institutions the film critiques. Moreover, the film’s ambiguities place the audience in an uncomfortably paradoxical position. On the one hand, in its expose of exploitation in both play and production, the film cautions against forgetting the materiality of the body that grounds illusion. On the other hand, in its own status as cinematic representation rather than reality, the film cautions against mistaking the allegorical illusion for the thing itself. It can be difficult not to fall into one or the other of these alternatives, yet both are ways of confusing reality and representation, one at the expense of the material, the other at the expense of meaning. Moreover, the parallels between the intradiegetic audience and the film’s audience only go so far, rendering the question of culpability more figurative than literal. The film may tacitly hold the former responsible for not intervening in the various atrocities on stage, but cinema’s ontology as absent performance precludes the latter’s ability to interfere. In addition, the two audiences’ “knowledges” do not coincide: while the play’s audience (aside from Cosimo and his entourage) presumably does not know that the actress playing the daughter is being raped, the film’s audience does. And while the play’s audience must believe that the bodies displayed at curtain call are dead, the film’s audience does not really believe that the actors playing the dead actors died. This film, in fact, thematizes the customary disclaimers assuring us that no animals were hurt during filming. As Greenaway writes, “You know, when you’re watching this representation of gang rape, I haven’t asked those actors to rape that woman—you know that! Have you ever seen a snuff movie? I’ve never seen a snuff movie. I’ve never even met anyone who’s ever seen a snuff movie. We’re all dupes at the cinema” (quoted in Roe, 55).
Greenaway raises the logical extreme implied by the film’s thematic emphasis on possible abuses of the body in performance but dismisses it in the same breath, ultimately relying on our recollecting cinematic conventions of illusion, the legal scrutiny productions receive, and the decency of its director. His comment also alludes to the film’s final irony, which is that while the film’s audience assumes that it has the benefit of dramatic irony through close-ups and access to conversations and scenes denied the play’s audience, the play’s audience is aware throughout of its being part of the performance, information withheld from the film’s audience until the end. The point, therefore, is less to chastise a film audience for not interfering in a dangerous performance, than to caution that audience about the connections between representations and their impact, through the workings of power and ideology, on material bodies. The film calls for audiences paradoxically to realize that they are being duped at the same time that they acquiesce in the pleasure (or unpleasure) of that duping; in short, they are asked to accept responsibility for their participation in producing and consuming cultural archetypes and ritual performativity as well as in supporting political and religious regimes. As negative reaction to The Baby of Mâcon indicates, the film takes a risk in its positioning of the audience: in order to understand the allegorical meaning, a viewer hazards distancing herself from the visceral reaction of shock and horror upon which that very meaning depends. The film
demands equal emphasis on emotions and intellect, as well as the ability to
hold them in tension with one another even as each seems to betray the
other. This fragile equilibrium not only stems from, but is commensurate
with, the film’s equal insistence on allegorical interpretation and bodiliness,
for the process of interpreting meaning is allegorizing writ large, and emo-
tions are rooted in physicality. That is, we know what we “feel” emotionally
because emotion produces bodily sensation. To understand this film is to
think with the body and feel with the mind.

If the third term emphasized after theater and cinema in *Prospero’s Books*
is the author/director, whose act of creation we witness, the third term in
*The Baby of Mâcon* is the audience, who are as much a spectacle as the play
on stage and whose position we both occupy and reflect upon. A play more
about the author’s mind than the characters’ story, Luigi Pirandello’s *Six
Characters in Search of an Author* is to *Prospero’s Books* what, somewhat para-
doxically, Bertolt Brecht’s epic theater and Antonin Artaud’s theater of cru-
elty are to *The Baby of Mâcon*. On the one hand, *The Baby of Mâcon* calls for
a Brechtian separation of the elements of representation whose seamless
identifications can, the film suggests, yield such dire results. On the other
hand, the film relies for its effects upon elements of Artaud’s theater of cru-
elty that stress sensation over rationality, such as the emphasis on spectacle
over language, the expanded space of performance, the immersion of the au-
dience in that space—an effect enhanced by the frequent cinematization of
the theater—the incantational use of language, and the connection between
theater and ritual (Artaud, 124–125). And while Greenaway’s allegorizing
clearly calls for Brecht’s contemplative spectator, at the same time, like Ar-
taud, he seeks to shock that spectator with “that kind of concrete bite which
all true sensation requires” (Artaud, 85). Finally, Artaud’s desire to render the-
ater literally ritualistic—to make it real in some sense—is analogous to
Greenaway’s desire to render cinema material. That project, *The Baby of Mâ-
con* makes clear, however, should be carried out only through the restoration,
not the exploitation of the body. Hence, where *Prospero’s Books* disavows its
introjection of theater—as—text, seeking the incorporation of word and image
in order to restore theater’s presence to cinematic performance, the vulner-
ability of the body in *The Baby of Mâcon* renders the incorporation of bod-
ily presence and representation suspect, not only in theater but, by allegori-
cal extension, in other forms of representation as well. Consequently, it
stresses the introjection of theater by the film—our knowledge that it is
“only a [film], with music,” upon which our ability to read its allegory
relies—seemingly valorizing cinema’s immateriality as less susceptible to
such abuse.
Taken as a pair, therefore, *Prospero’s Books* and *The Baby of Mâcon* express an ambivalence about both theater’s materiality and cinema’s immateriality that complicates Greenaway’s complaints about the immateriality of cinema as a medium. It is precisely this impasse between materiality versus vulnerability that the exhibition *The Stairs* seeks to remedy. In the various exhibitions of *The Stairs*, spectacle and audience are embodied; moreover, the spectacle itself, in several instances, depends on the audience not only as observers, but also participants. In *Stairs Geneva: The Location* and the planned exhibition *The Audience*, for example, the audience is free to move between performance and audience spaces. Not only is “the world’s normal activity heightened by being made into a performance by conscious observation” (*The Stairs/Geneva*, 64), but from “modest positions of privilege” (Greenaway, quoted in Rockwell) the audience can survey itself. From the stairs in Geneva the spectator could watch the passersby, who in turn saw the gnomic sculptural presences of the staircases transforming the cityscape. Even more noticeable in the planned configuration of *The Audience*, the people occupying the groupings of seats will be as much spectacle themselves as spectators. In short, the audience’s necessary presence, freedom of movement, and multiple roles—spectator, performer, and co-creator—give these exhibits of *The Stairs* both the material presence denied in *Prospero’s Books* and the agency to resist exploitation denied in *The Baby of Mâcon*.

**NOTES**

1. To my knowledge, Paula Willoquet-Maricondi is the first to use the term *post-cinematic* in print to describe Greenaway’s exhibits and operatic productions; it appears in the 1999 Society for Cinema Studies conference panel “The Post-Cinematic Art World of Peter Greenaway” and in her dissertation. Using a similar designation, albeit in a slightly different sense, Thomas Elsaesser describes *M is for Mozart, A TV Dante*, and *Prospero’s Books* as “post-films” because “their concerns are neither narrative nor iconic-photographic. . . . [but] graphic, concerned with trace and body, with surface, rather than space, and (absence of) body” (8). Greenaway himself has used the term *mega-cinema* to describe his exhibitions that deploy “cinema language” (*The Stairs/Geneva*, 9).

   [Editor’s note: see Di Stephano’s essay in the present volume for a discussion of the exhibitions *The Stairs*. The term *post-cinematic* was first used by Greenaway in a lecture he gave in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in August of 1998, during the Latin American Premiere of the opera *One Hundred Objects to Represent the World: A Prop-Opera.*]

2. A point of clarification: Bridget Elliott and Anthony Purdy described Greenaway’s films as tending more or less toward one of two categories, the theatrical film—which uses proscenium-like framing, static camera, and audiences within the
action—or the museum film, which “explore[s] alternative logics . . . such as accumulation, saturation, seriality [and] taxonomy” through devices that interrupt and displace narrative progression and our investment in it (90). I agree with them that *Prospero’s Books* reflects that impulse to collect more than do the theatrical films, of which *The Baby of Mâcon* is clearly one, but given that *Prospero’s Books* is an interpretation of a dramatic text, its relation to theater is worth considering. In fact, if anything, Purdy and Elliott’s sense of the film’s non-theatrical characteristics reinforces my point about its emphasis on text rather than performance.

3. Even readings that discuss bodiliness in *Prospero’s Books* suggest that the body is always used in the service of the immaterial rather than prominent in its own right. Doug Lanier points out that the nudity in the film is not thematic, but formal—the body is a medium to counter textual-ness—and is associated primarily with Prospero’s illusory spirits (199). Paula Willoquet-Maricondi argues that the bodies are lent to Prospero’s “creation of meaning” as part of the film’s critique of the “tyranny of authorship” (“Aimé Césaire’s,” 215).

4. For psychoanalytic work that distinguishes between incorporation and introjection in the sense in which I use the terms, see Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard.

5. Aside from discussing that sense of presence we associate with theater, my article on *Prospero’s Books* does not explicitly address the status of the body. Consequently, I am here interested in exploring the implications of that argument and the incorporation/introjection model for the status of the body in theater and cinema as represented in these two films.

6. See Peggy Phelan and Mariacristina Cavecchi on Greenaway’s radical uses of space and framing in the film.

7. For Greenaway’s description of the film’s layers, see the introduction to the book *The Baby of Mâcon* (5–10).

8. See Willoquet-Maricondi, *Peter Greenaway’s Post-Cinematic Art-World*, for a fuller reading of the townspeople’s culpability in exploiting the Child first by interpreting him as a sign of good fortune.

9. This manipulation is, perhaps, clearer in the published screenplay than the finished film (see 48).

10. See Marsha Gordon for a reading that emphasizes the elision of the mother and equation of “mother” and “woman” in the film.

11. Again, the published screenplay offers definitive information that the film leaves more ambiguous: it calls for inserts of the child being mistreated to produce fluids (94–99). The film simply retains the onlooking villagers unable to afford the relics commenting upon the abuse to which the Child has been subjected.

12. As many critics and the director himself have pointed out, Greenaway’s period films always function allegorically, drawing parallels between the twentieth century and the setting of the film. *The Baby of Mâcon* is a twentieth-century view of a
baroque view of the late middle ages. Each represented period finally says less about itself than the period in which the representation is (ostensibly) produced. The play’s commentary on its own era, for example, is emphasized when the bishop tells the daughter that there has not been a virgin birth for 1,600 years (rather than the 1,400 the play’s setting would demand).

13. My thanks to Paula Willoquet-Maricondi for pointing out this quotation.
14. This refrain, of course, aligns the Child further with the Christ Child as well as the crucified Christ, whose cry, “Father, father, why hast thou forsaken me?” paradoxically is taken as a sign in Christian doctrine that God has not forsaken humanity.
15. See, for example, Roe, 53, and Schulman.
16. The designation of these women as relatives and members of an order is less clear in the film, where they simply look like noblewomen with an unspecified connection to Cosimo, than in the published screenplay, which identifies them in a montage sequence of labeled portraits that was omitted from the film (34–38).
17. Typically, however, the film withholding the easy alternative of having the play be clearly “real”: the Child ages, and so the events must in some way be scripted and anticipated.
18. See David Pascoe for a reading of the head as a site of symbolization: “As the object that socializes those products of a human consciousness, the child’s head is the locus of power struggles conducted through farce, irony, transcendence, and of course, commerce. It is a space that rides on ambiguities, on unexplored assumptions, on a rhetoric that, like that of its mother, the virgin, barters the discomforts of full consciousness for the benefits of permanence and order” (204–205).
19. The screenplay makes these displacements even clearer than does the finished film, as the audience members are described seated within the settings rather than the auditorium and reacting to weather conditions as though outdoors (see 55–56, 66, 67, 69–70, 77–78, 84, 88).
20. All of these senses of “theater” refer to a medium of performance, of course, not to dramatic literature, a body of texts.
21. On p. 75 Turner credits Ronald Grimes’s characterization of Turner’s work as “transformative performance.” See also Turner, Forest, 95, quoted in Grimes, 150.
22. In a similar passage, Schechner goes so far as to say that “since ritual and theater are a double system, all theatrical performances have the ambition to affect action, and all rituals seek to entertain and stimulate thought. What distinguishes one from the other in any given performance is context, including what the audience expects, who the sponsoring agents are, and what the occasion for the performance is” (“Future of Ritual,” 56).
23. Greenaway wryly suggests that the captions “offer the gentlest of criticism that in a dominant literary culture we feel at a loss to address an image unless it has a caption, a commentary or an explanatory text” (Stairs/Geneva, 27).
24. See also 78–79 where Hardison discusses the ninth-century innovations of reading sacred texts with expression and theatrical mannerisms.


26. See also Hardison on similar ambiguities in the mass designed by Amalarius, Bishop of Metz (780?–850)—whom Hardison credits with initiating allegorical interpretation of the mass (41)—such as multiple levels of allegory, fluid roles of celebrant and congregation (44), multiple symbolic representations of Christ (47), as well as “sliding time” and timelessness (47, 67).

27. Not all anthropologists see reflection as inimical to ritual. Bruce Kapferer, for example, notes that participants in certain rituals, at least, can assume a wide variety of degrees of engagement with the ritual, which, by “provid[ing] moments of deep play and shallow play [enables individuals to] experience the world of their construction and then stand back and reflect upon its various meanings” (204–205). Ritual itself, therefore, can “structure” multiple “standpoints,” thus offering a more varied range of attitudes than Myerhoff would imply (205).

28. Obviously, no one was claiming that the performers were harmed when the film was shot, but the assumption underlying objections to any portrayal of violence is that the image does not need to be interpreted, that it simply produces imitative behavior. Such objections are, therefore, but one step away from the naive belief that what the image depicts is real.

29. See Gordon, 83–89, for a more extended discussion of this issue.
SKIN DEEP: FINS-DE-SIÈCLE AND NEW BEGINNINGS IN PETER GREENAWAY’S THE PILLOW BOOK

Bridget Elliott and Anthony Purdy

Ce qu’il y a de plus profond dans l’homme, c’est la peau. La vérité est nue, mais sous le nu, il y a l’écorché.

Paul Valéry

Just as westerners donate their organs after death, a Japanese wearing the work of a grand tattoo master may donate his skin to a museum or university. Tokyo University has three hundred such masterpieces, framed . . . What a marvel to see so many lives at full stretch, defined by needles and ink, so many people who wished to become their own text.

Diane Ackerman

Around midnight on New Year’s Eve in the year 1999, a Japanese publisher in Hong Kong receives Nagiko Kiyohara’s thirteenth book, *The Book of the Dead*, the text of which is written on the body of a sumo wrestler sent by the author to kill her publisher. As the publisher reaches the end of the book in a passage inscribed on the wrestler’s buttocks, he not only contemplates the end of the body in front of him but also the end of the series of body-texts that Nagiko Kiyohara has sent him and the end of his own life as he allows the sumo wrestler to slit his throat. The text that the publisher reads on the body of the wrestler convinces him that his death is both necessary and inevitable:

This is the writing of Nagiko Kiyohara no Motosuke Sei Shonagon, and I know you to have blackmailed, violated and humiliated my father. I suspect you also of ruining my husband. You have now committed the greatest crime—you have desecrated the body of my lover. You and I
These many endings—of days, years, centuries, millennia, bodies, books, lives, and cycles of abuse—are recurrent focal points in Peter Greenaway’s *The Pillow Book*, released in 1996 in the UK, 1997 in North America.

Taking place near the end of the film, the scene of the publisher’s death sets the stage for a number of new beginnings as we witness Nagiko freeing herself from the past, giving birth to a daughter and reaching maturity as a writer. By deliberately looping back upon itself and unsettling narratives of linear progress, the film creates a number of curious historical folds. Like most of Greenaway’s plots, *The Pillow Book* consists of a complicated bricolage of textual and visual fragments. The heroine, Nagiko Kiyohara, is modeled after the famous tenth-century Japanese writer Sei Shonagon, whose classic *Pillow Book* is read to her as a child by an aunt who frequently reminds the young Nagiko that Sei Shonagon’s book will be 1,000 years old when Nagiko reaches the age of twenty-eight in the year 2000. Parallels are drawn between the ends of the first and second millennia, since Sei Shonagon, a lady-in-waiting to the Heian Empress Sadako, wrote during the last decade of the tenth century. Sei Shonagon’s work takes the form of jottings informally recording her impressions of court life in a collage of lists and descriptive vignettes that seems disconcertingly (post)modern. Indeed, Nagiko is thought to have been Sei Shonagon’s real name (Shonagon was her name in the palace) and her father, Motosuke, was a scholar and poet who came from the Kiyowara clan (Morris, ix).

Peter Greenaway’s modern Sei Shonagon is born in Kyoto in 1972, the year in which Greenaway first read *The Pillow Book*, and the story of her life is told by cutting back and forth between significant events from her Japanese childhood in the 1970s and her adult life in the 1990s as she moves between Kyoto and Hong Kong. This doubled temporality is further complicated by overlaid excerpts from Sei Shonagon’s tenth-century diary, which are re-enacted by Nagiko and various members of her family and shown, thanks to the technology of multiple-screen editing, within small frames inserted in the main screen. We pick up the threads of Nagiko’s twentieth-century life on her fourth birthday, when her father, a writer and calligrapher, inscribes a birthday greeting on her face, signing his name on the nape of her neck as he utters the ritual words, “When God made the first clay model of a human being, He painted in the eyes . . . and the lips . . . and the sex. And then He painted in each person’s name lest the person should ever forget it. If God approved of His creation, He breathed the painted model
into life by signing His own name” (PB, 31). It is a tradition that will be repeated every year. Significantly, Nagiko’s family is supported financially by her father’s homosexual publisher, who takes his pleasure ritually once a year on Nagiko’s birthday—a sort of publisher’s contract, if you will. The calligraphic face-painting ends on Nagiko’s eighteenth birthday when she is persuaded into a disastrous arranged marriage with the publisher’s nephew. The marriage does not last long and Nagiko escapes to Hong Kong, where she eventually becomes a successful fashion model. There, she exchanges sex for calligraphy with her various lovers, whom she encourages to write freely on every part of her body.

The pattern is broken when she meets a young English translator, Jerome, at the Cafe-Typo and he tells her she ought to try doing the writing for a change. Nagiko does indeed become not only a writer on bodies but also a poet, but her first efforts are rejected by a publisher who scrawls over the formal, printed rejection slip, “Not worth the paper it is written on.” Angered by this rebuff, she goes to see the publisher in person and is surprised not only to recognize her father’s “benefactor” from Kyoto but also to discover that his new lover is Jerome. Nagiko and Jerome in turn become lovers, and he suggests that she write her opening text—promising thirteen erotic poems—on his body for presentation to the publisher. The publisher is delighted, as he is with subsequent male body-texts sent to him by Nagiko. Jerome, in the meantime, estranged from Nagiko, is talked into faking a suicide in order to regain her love. The fake turns out to be all too real and Nagiko is left with Jerome’s corpse, which she decorates with a love poem (Book Six—“The Book of the Lover”) before burying him and returning to Kyoto. The publisher, grief-stricken, has the body disinterred and flayed, and the skin made into a personal pillow book to be used for his own sensual communion with a body that is text and a text that is body. Learning this, Nagiko, pregnant with Jerome’s child, determines to fulfill her “contract” and supply the remaining seven body-books. The publisher becomes completely obsessed with this game, living only for the arrival of the next book. The cycle is complete when the thirteenth, a young sumo wrestler, arrives on New Year’s Eve 1999. He slits the publisher’s throat and retrieves the pillow book for Nagiko, who buries it beneath a flowering bonsai. At the end of the film we see her writing a birthday greeting on the face of her one-year-old daughter.

Of course, themes of decay, death, and rebirth have long preoccupied Greenaway, perhaps most conspicuously in earlier feature films such as A Zed and Two Noughts (ZOO) and The Belly of an Architect, as well as in television productions such as Darwin. In ZOO, the twin zoologists’ futile search for
origins and an explanation of their wives’ deaths leads inexorably to their own death, while in *Belly*, the architect’s artistic impotence and physical degeneration are systematically contrasted with his wife’s fertility. As Greenaway has often asserted, if one accepts a Darwinian logic there are no longer any moral, philosophical, or religious truths; the only remaining certainty is a biological imperative to reproduce. While many film-goers and critics have found Greenaway’s Darwinian reasoning disturbingly bleak insofar as it refuses any moral or spiritual consolation, Greenaway himself seems to find it curiously liberating, precisely because evolution seems so devoid of direction and purpose. “Darwin has given us a freedom that no social or religious programme has ever given us, for, if man is on his own, then all the checks we relied on to excuse or explain our own shortcomings and mediocrities have been removed. We are, at least, now free for what we want to be” (*Darwin*, Tableaux 16–17, cited in Woods, 65). Of course, as Alan Woods notes, Greenaway is aware that even such minimal beliefs are necessarily contingent: in the film *Darwin*, the words we have just quoted are accompanied by an image of Darwin posed as God in a tableau borrowed from Tintoretto. Indeed, Greenaway admits that Darwinian evolution may be, in the words of Van Hoyten in *ZOO*, only another “dreary fiction,” another story we repeat mindlessly to save ourselves the trouble of thinking: “And I can see—rewording Marx’s thoughts on Christianity—that maybe Darwin is my opium” (Woods, 270). However this may be, the closing images of *The Pillow Book*—the birthday greeting painted on the child’s face, the flowering of the bonsai tree—constitute what must be the most self-consciously optimistic ending of any Greenaway feature to date. In what follows, we will look first—in “Expositions”—at how *The Pillow Book* redistributes some familiar features of the Greenaway landscape, before considering, in “(Re-) Orientations,” how it goes on to point us in some new directions.

**EXPOSITIONS**

In *Architecture and Allegory*, we tried to delineate two tendencies present in varying degrees in all Greenaway’s feature films and to suggest that a rough and ready distinction between two very broad kinds of film might be based on the dominance of one or other of these tendencies in any given movie (chapter 5). The distinction we proposed there was between, on the one hand, films like *The Draughtsman’s Contract; The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*; and *The Baby of Mâcon*, in which the dominant structuring principle might be described as dramatic or theatrical, and on the other, films like
A Zed and Two Noughts and Drowning by Numbers, which seem to be structured more like Greenaway’s curatorial projects than like plays. Paradoxically, Prospero’s Books, despite being an adaptation of Shakespeare, would fall into the category of Greenaway’s “museum films” as opposed to that of his “theater films,” while The Belly of an Architect, the only film to explore through its plot the political economy of curating a major exhibition, might be thought of as relying more heavily on dramatic than on curatorial strategies, though both are probably present in roughly equal measure. It is probably worth pointing out before we go any further that, while there is no straightforward correlation between the distinction we are developing here and Greenaway’s notion of A and B films, it would be reasonable to assume that a film’s dramatic qualities constitute one (relatively important) factor among others in predicting box-office success.4

Of course, such a sweeping binary has severe limitations and should not be seen as proposing some kind of hard and fast distinction. Both tendencies are present in all the films, and our perception of the balance in any given film is modified by a number of contributing factors. It should be stressed, for example, that the distinction is based in each case on the finished film as released for distribution and not on the printed text published by Greenaway, usually in book form, to accompany the film, or on any longer, unreleased “director’s cut” that might exist for certain films.5 Longer versions would almost certainly dilute any dramatic intensity a film might have. Similarly, the published texts tend to foreground the curatorial aspect insofar as they often provide information about such things as the art historical sources for the “look” of the film; at the same time, they invariably fail to do justice to the film’s dramatic power, which derives in large part from the work of the actors on the set.6 The Belly of an Architect would not be as balanced a film as it is were it not for the acting of Brian Dennehy as Kracklite, and The Cook would lose much of its dramatic bite were it deprived of Michael Gambon’s Spica; on the other hand, Gielgud’s virtuoso voice performance in Prospero’s Books is swamped and assimilated by the film’s irresistible curatorial impulse, and the often truly engaging work of the cast of Drowning by Numbers produces little in the way of dramatic conflict or tension. So, clearly, the quality of the acting is only one factor among many in consigning a particular film to one category or the other. (For the most part, Vivian Wu as Nagiko and Ewan McGregor as Jerome seem to have little idea of what to do with the lines they have been given; as a result, any dramatic force the film’s plot might have on paper is not translated to the screen.) However, if we understand that we are speaking here in terms of dominants rather than absolutes, the distinction between museum films and theater films can be useful in helping us
situate *The Pillow Book* in relation not only to Greenaway’s other films, but also to his other creative activities.

So what exactly do we have in mind when we speak of curatorial as opposed to dramatic ordering principles? What do we mean by “museum films”? When we use these terms, we are thinking of those films that tend, in their representation of the world, to subordinate narrative or dramatic structure (and audience identification) to the exploration of alternative logics, such as accumulation, saturation, seriality, and taxonomy. In *The Stairs/Geneva: The Location*, Greenaway raises this perennial problem retrospectively, claiming that his “experiments with numerical systems, alphabetical sequence, color-coding, have all been attempts to dislodge this apparently unquestioned presumption that narrative is necessary and essential for cinema to convey its preoccupations” (12–13). In this respect, the inset frames that serve as cinematic display cases for the exhibition of cultural objects and “scenes of everyday life” are allowed, along with the serial display of the thirteen calligraphic bodies, to take on so much autonomy within *The Pillow Book’s* structure that the audience runs the risk of losing interest in the complicated but not particularly convincing tale of love, death, and revenge that ostensibly motivates their presence. Similarly, the catalogues of games and landscapes in *Drowning by Numbers*, the alphabets and Vermeers of *ZOO*,

**Figure 11.1  The Pillow Book. Photo Marc Guillamot. Courtesy of Peter Greenaway.**
and the embodied books and tableaux vivants of *Prospero’s Books* constantly
distract our attention from whatever narrative pull these films might have
and call for a more leisurely, contemplative form of spectatorship than is usu-
ally associated with the cinema’s “truth at 24 frames a second.” 

Greenaway was initially struck, on his first reading of Sei Shonagon’s *Pil-
low Book* in 1972, by the author’s apparently “arbitrary list-making obsession”
and mused at that time about the possibility of some day rendering her “ec-
centric taxonomic delights” in film form (*PB*, 5). He re-read the work in
1984 while preparing “the more orthodox alphabetical listings” for *ZOO* and
came up with a tentative cinema project to be organized according to the
twenty-six letters of the alphabet. While the alphabet structure is abandoned
in the film version, the pleasure in Sei Shonagon’s taxonomies remains very
much alive through the use of direct quotation from her *Pillow Book* (or, oc-
casionally, through Greenaway’s pastiche of the style), usually in conjunction
with multiple-screen inserts illustrating the spoken text, as in Nagiko’s list of
a lover’s physical characteristics she calligraphs on his body and then translates
with each item illustrated in a screen insert by a tenth-century “flashback”:

Earlobes like mistletoe leaves.
Hair like the hair of a ginger dog—the colour of faded ink.
Nipples like bone buttons.
Little fingers like flagpoles.
An instep like the entrance of a cave at low tide—or perhaps a half-open book.
[ . . . ]
A navel like the inside of a shell.
A belly like an upturned saucer.
A penis like a sea-slug or a pickled cucumber.
Not a special writing instrument at all. (*PB*, 70)

There are intertextual echoes, too, of some of Greenaway’s own
taxonomies—for example, the 100 red books of the *One Hundred Objects to
Represent the World* exhibition, where the color red is chosen arbitrarily to
preclude the kind of chaotically heterotopian orderings we might find in a
piece by Borges: “[ . . . ] books can also be catalogued by the total sum of
their pages, by the numerical proportion of upper to lower case letters, by
the number of times any particular word appears, by the evidence of mould
and the prevalence of yellowing paper” (*One Hundred Objects*). In *The Pillow
Book*, this is echoed in Nagiko’s sarcastic response to her husband’s insistence
that she should reduce her collection of books, limiting herself to 100:
“Should they be red ones? Or perhaps books that only have one hundred
pages? Or books with archers on the cover?" (PB, 47). We suspect that here, as often in Greenaway’s work, the “certain Chinese encyclopedia” that fascinated first Borges, then Foucault, is not so very far away (Elliott and Purdy, *Architecture and Allegory*, 29; Lawrence, 20–21; Woods, 20; see also Testa in the present volume).

In Sei Shonagon’s own *Pillow Book* we find, among many other marvels of everyday life, countless lists—lists of depressing things, lists of things about which one is liable to be negligent, of things that people despise, hateful things, things that make one’s heart beat faster, things that arouse a fond memory of the past, things that give a pleasant feeling, elegant things, unsuitable things, unsettling things, rare things, things not worth doing, things that make one sorry, things that give a pathetic impression, splendid things, graceful things, annoying things, embarrassing things, surprising and distressing things, regrettable things, things that have a long way to go, things that especially attract one’s attention on some occasions, things that lose by being painted, things that gain by being painted, moving things, gloomy-looking things, things that give a hot feeling, shameful things, things that have lost their power, awkward things, boring things, things without merit, outstandingly splendid things, frightening things, things that give a clean feeling, things that give an unclean feeling, things that seem better at night than in the daytime, things that should not be seen by firelight, things that are unpleasant to hear, things that look pretty but that are bad inside, things that give a vulgar impression, things that make one nervous, things with frightening names, squalid things, things that recall the past but serve no useful function, things that cannot be compared, things that one is in a hurry to see or hear . . . not to mention the lists of “words that look commonplace but that become impressive when written in Chinese characters” or of “words written in Chinese characters for which there must be a reason though one cannot really understand it” (Morris). The overwhelming impression created by such lists is of things wrenched from their original context in the world and articulated in spatial configurations determined by seemingly arbitrary and heterogeneous principles of classification. Seen in this way, Sei Shonagon’s book comes to resemble a slightly crazy, rhizomatic version of Foucault’s description of the modern museum as heterotopia, manifesting “the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place . . . ” (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 26). It is in this sense, too, that it seems useful to think about certain of Greenaway’s films as “museum films” exploring, in
their representation of the world, the possibilities offered by different curatorial systems of collecting and collating.

In *The Pillow Book*, Nagiko’s lovers themselves fall easily into lists describing not only their physical characteristics but also their calligraphic styles and preferences, thereby accentuating the materiality of writing as well as its close connection with sex. (Nagiko’s most obvious forerunner in this last respect is Venus de Milo in *ZOO*, who is more than willing to exchange sexual services and pornographic tales for an introduction to a publisher.) The lists rapidly take on a life of their own, creating once again the impression of being self-generating and self-referential:

Her lovers are varied. The modest calligrapher who will only write in near darkness. The myopic, middle-aged man who insists on writing with the cheapest of ball-point pens in letters so small a magnifying-glass is necessary to decipher them. The brash young man who writes like a child. The elderly widower who constantly makes corrections and rubs out his mistakes with spit, a damp sponge and his tongue. The accountant who covers Nagiko’s body in arithmetical sums, subtractions on the left breast, additions on the right. The brutal client who scratches her body with obscure graffiti, drawing blood. [. . .] There is a shy client who uses invisible ink on Nagiko’s body to hide his obvious talent. The woman attempts to develop the invisible ink by bathing in warm water, by standing as close as she dare to a hot fire, by washing her body in the juice of onion-skins until the onions make her weep and her tears prove to be the necessary solvent to reveal the writing. (*PB*, 7)

Of course, the metaphor of embodied books is not new to *The Pillow Book*, and when we read a list like this one it is difficult not to recall, for example, the descriptions of the books in the published text of *Prospero’s Books* (17–25; Elliott and Purdy, “Artificial Eye,” 179–183). What has changed is the degree to which an analogy underlying a number of metaphorical expressions drawn from very different registers—to read someone like a book, the body of the text, the word made flesh, and so on—has been isolated and literalized in the film’s central conceit: here the embodied books really are bodies.

The promiscuity of such lists, a chaster version of de Sade’s catalogues of couplings, is underscored by an element of heteroglossia quite at odds with the original Sei Shonagon’s reputation for linguistic purity (Morris, xiii): “She equated the highest sensual pleasure with the idea of words on her body. She asked it of her lovers. They humoured her. They complied. She
wanted to make love with real writers but there were few exiled Japanese writers in Hong Kong. She was obliged to negotiate her obsession with older men like her father. Then she starts to consort with non-Orientals, with French and Italian, and then American, writers. At first she was repulsed by their touch and their smell, and for the first time, her body was covered in alien languages, French, Italian, and English” (PB, 8). It comes as no surprise, then, that the man she eventually falls in love with should be—like his namesake, St. Jerome, the most learned and eloquent of the Latin Fathers and responsible for the first Latin translation of the Bible from the Hebrew—a translator, a polyglot who, by offering his services in several languages, makes it possible to turn their days and nights together into one long orgy of text: “The woman and the writer spend their days and nights together, making love, writing, bathing, making love, writing, showering, writing, making love. They conduct the correspondence of lovers on skin, in Japanese, in French, in Italian, in English, in Chinese, with kanji, hiragana, katakana, gothic script, exotic fonts, private handwritings. The sheets of the bed become a mêlée of print-off writing” (PB, 9).

The use of multiple languages in the film might be thought of as the verbal equivalent of multiple-screen editing, which allows for a form of simultaneity—in the cubist sense—difficult to achieve in cinema and which disrupts the film’s narrative linearity. Similarly, the coexistence of several languages distracts from the functional deployment of dialogue and voice-over for purposes of story-telling and character development, and instead foregrounds, for both ear and eye, the materiality of language in all its strange diversity, its sounds and rhythms as well as its visual shapes and forms. For Greenaway, the Oriental characters serve as an interesting template for a new cinema: “In the West we have painfully separated the notions of text and image, but Oriental ideograms still acknowledge the idea that the history of Japanese literature is also the history of Japanese painting.[ . . .] You’d imagine cinema to be the ideal place to marry these two things together, yet it hasn’t done so. In cinema, images are enslaved to the text. So the notion of picking up the ideogram, the hieroglyph, the Oriental character as a possible template for cinema could be a very interesting idea” (Elliott and Purdy, Architecture and Allegory, 123).

On a more practical level, Greenaway acknowledges the difficulties posed by his own brand of multilingual filmmaking for his (international) production team: “The problems of making The Pillow Book in three major languages, English, Japanese and Cantonese, with contributions also in Mandarin and Vietnamese, and at least a few words in Dutch, French, Yiddish and Latin, did require some adjustments in sympathetic collaboration with the calligraphers and translators in the manufacture of the body-texts. At least
seventeen actors were required to carry visual texts on their bodies as well as offer spoken texts” (PB, 12). But the difficulties, of course, do not stop there. If multilingual production presents problems, the challenge issued to an audience by this kind of film comes close to provocation:

To the irritation of many distributors, a lot of the Japanese and Oriental languages in The Pillow Book are not translated. This might be cavalier, but I’m quite sure that in three decades’ time, kids in Toronto and Chicago will never hear a foreign language, which is obviously disastrous to their placement in the world and leads to the demise of cultural ideas. Like depleting the South American rainforests of species by monoculture, it might even lead to a total breakdown of the whole cultural system. With The Pillow Book I wanted audiences just to listen—there wasn’t much chance of their understanding all the meanings—because people don’t seem to want to listen anymore to the sheer cadences and rhythms of these strange-sounding, foreign languages which are so beautiful and so fascinating. (Elliott and Purdy, Architecture and Allegory, 124)

Like the multiple screens and Nagiko’s serial lovers, the languages are there, in part, to serve as foreign bodies, heterogeneous elements injected into the film’s skin in order to prevent, or render difficult, the assimilation of the world’s infinite variety to a facile and sterile melting-pot globalism. (Similar techniques of hybridization can be seen at work in the soundtrack, which combines traditional Japanese gagaku, a Chinese pop song serving as leitmotif, Walter Hus’s “La Théorie,” and songs by U2 and others.)

As we have noted, Jerome, in life, is a translator and a lover, a privileged point of intersection for sex and text. But his most important role in the film, his ineluctable destiny, is, of course, to become a corpse. Every Greenaway-scripted feature has an allegorical corpse; indeed, it has been argued that allegory requires a corpse, preferably dismembered (Elliott and Purdy, Architecture and Allegory, chapter 1). For, as Walter Benjamin argues in his study of the German baroque Trauerspiel, if martyrdom “prepares the body of the living person for emblematic purposes,” the characters of the tragic drama are killed off “because it is only thus, as corpses, that they can enter into the homeland of allegory. It is not for the sake of immortality that they meet their end, but for the sake of the corpse” (Benjamin, 217–218). Jerome’s corpse is not dismembered but flayed. It is his skin that will serve as the vehicle or medium of allegory, while the rest of his body is dumped unceremoniously in a garbage can behind the publisher’s bookstore, from where it will be emptied along with the offal-bins of the neighboring restaurants.
This moment is crucial in the allegorical economy of the film, since it would seem, at least at one level, to represent the curiously symbiotic relationship between those two architectural emblems of modernity—the museum, with its preservation of the textualized skin of culture, and the slaughterhouse with its unspeakable “blooded bones, red meat and white fat” (PB, 87). Space constraints do not allow us to rehearse here the idea of the slaughterhouse as the shadowy “other” of the museum in modern (post–French Revolution) Western culture or its translation in *The Belly of an Architect* into an elaborately played-out allegory involving the stone bodies and monumental architecture of Rome and the all-too-human viscera of Stourley Kracklite (Elliott and Purdy, *Architecture and Allegory*, chapter 3). Suffice it to say that, in certain respects, Jerome might be thought of as Kracklite’s “other”: he is the taut skin to Kracklite’s cancerous belly, the surface to his depth, the outside to his inside.

But to what extent is Jerome an avatar of that line of thinking (running from Nietzsche through Kafka to Foucault and Deleuze) that “conceives the body as a surface on which social law, morality, and values are inscribed” (Grosz, 33)? Two clues would seem to point us in that direction. The first figures only in the published script, which describes Jerome as dropping a book as he hurries across a busy Hong Kong street with the publisher. “A close-up of the book on the pavement shows it’s Kafka’s *Penal Settlement*, the story of the possibility of a man’s crimes being written on his body by a writing-torture machine” (PB, 79). The second clue lies in his name. We have already pointed to Greenaway’s interest in St. Jerome and remarked on the appropriateness of the name for a translator. But as well as being a highly confrontational and controversial scholar with strong views on, among other things, the need for chastity, St. Jerome also spent part of his life as a hermit who took his mortification of the flesh very seriously. He is sometimes portrayed beating his bare chest with a stone.

Taken together, these two indications would seem to be clear signposts toward a “discipline and punish” reading of Jerome’s allegorical body. Certainly, Greenaway’s films can be said to participate in a Nietzschean skepticism when it comes to enlightenment claims about civilization: “For Nietzsche, economic equivalence, the capacity to exchange and to make contracts, does not derive from a sense of social justice, because justice itself derives from a primitive notion of ‘corporeal compensation,’ a kind of originary social violence by which damages are retrievable from the body of the guilty party. Debt is ultimately expiated by flesh and blood” (Grosz, 34). Indeed, it is precisely this skepticism that gives Greenaway’s films their bite. But in *The Pillow Book*—paradoxically perhaps, since of all Greenaway’s films it is
the one that takes up most explicitly the allegory of the intextuated, narrativized body as incarnation of the law of the father (the godlike signature on the nape of Nagiko’s neck)—the different elements of the allegory appear unusually difficult to resolve.\textsuperscript{10}

The first stumbling block for such a reading is that Greenaway’s Jerome does not share the saint’s penchant for self-denial or Kafka’s fascination with the inscription of pain. The body-writing he practices with Nagiko is a shared pleasure involving nothing more penetrating than the soft bristles of the calligrapher’s brush, and his transformation into allegorical body takes place \textit{after} his death and has nothing to do with the production of an interior subjectivity through surface inscription. The second difficulty is that, despite the best efforts of the publisher, Jerome’s skin—his allegorized body—is not ultimately “collected” (i.e., appropriated and rearticulated for personal display in a private museum) but is returned to the living earth to feed a tree in accord with the film’s ecological subtext and the foregrounded theme of regeneration. In this regard, the allegorist of the piece would be the publisher-as-surgeon who flays and stitches the allegorical body-book in a macabre metaphorical montage, only to lose it again to Nagiko, whose organicist vision and values prevail in the film’s final scenes.\textsuperscript{11} The third objection to a reading of \textit{The Pillow Book} as an allegory woven around Jerome’s intextuated body stems from the fact that the film is less the story of Jerome than of Nagiko, who revolts against the social inscriptions of a patriarchal society and finds a way out from under the name of the father through the mediation of Sei Shonagon. (We should not forget she has two birthday rituals—her father’s painted greeting and the aunt’s reading from Sei Shonagon’s \textit{Pillow Book}.\textsuperscript{10}) In the end, all the men in her life—father, publisher, husband, lover—are left behind. The new century, it would seem, belongs to mother and daughter.

In our reading of \textit{The Pillow Book}, we have foregrounded the continuities with Greenaway’s previous films and have tried to situate it in relation to some of the larger issues in Greenaway’s work as a whole. There is, however, one way in which the film breaks significantly with what we have come to expect from a Greenaway film, and it is onto this new ground that we would now like to venture.

\textbf{(RE-)ORIENTATIONS}

It has always been tempting to think of Greenaway as the most European of English filmmakers and the most English of European filmmakers. In this
respect, nothing in his previous work had really prepared us for the turn to
the East we see in *The Pillow Book* with its oriental settings, characters,
narratives, languages, and cultural artifacts. Of course, as Greenaway hastens
to point out, this does not mean that the European perspective has been
abandoned:

Human anatomy, clothed and unclothed, fills the screen, in a mixture of
decorative, flat-patterned, sharply-coloured, Japanese-style compositions
with added European chiaroscuro—a visual feast around flesh and skin
and words and calligraphy; Eastern and European, an Occidental, Orien-
tal mix. This is not a Japanese film, but a European film that owes much
to Utamaro and Hokusai and Hiroshige, and to the European painting
that has been influenced by Japan, a little Gauguin, a little Degas, a little
Whistler, some Schiele, some Toulouse-Lautrec, perhaps some Vuillard
and Klimt, and before them, not a little 18th century chinoiserie. (*PB*,
8–9)

In some ways, Greenaway’s remarks may have an old-fashioned ring or
seem nostalgic, invoking a nineteenth-century orientalism that has been in-
creasingly subject to post-colonial critique. In this section, we take up the
question of Japonisme, exploring the parallels and discontinuities between its
fin-de-siècle manifestations in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
Why does Greenaway want to revitalize a longstanding—and, in some re-
spects, discredited—European tradition of looking at Japan and what does
this signify in the late twentieth century?

If, as we have argued, *The Pillow Book* is a “museum film,” preoccupied
with exhibitory orders and pleasures, the centrality of Japanese culture seems
especially appropriate, given the history and circumstances of its reception in
the West. Turning to Japan, Greenaway finds not only new taxonomies to
manipulate (as we have seen in the case of Sei Shonagon’s famous lists) but
also a history of East-West cultural influence that, for the most part, was
based on imported representations of Japanese life rather than on firsthand
experience of that country. Although Greenaway had worked in Japan dur-
during the post-production editing of *Prospero’s Books*, which was done in stu-
dios of the Tokyo television corporation NHK, *The Pillow Book* foregrounds
the mediated nature of our knowledge of Japan, lingering over the books
about Japanese prints that we see on the bookshelves in Jerome’s apartment
and in the Swindon Book Company. The device serves to situate the film in
relation to a tradition of Japanese culture watching and to remind us that, for
the vast majority of nineteenth-century Europeans, including the artists that
Greenaway cites, the most important sources of information about Japanese life were cultural artifacts such as prints, books, and exhibition displays.

Japanese prints first started to appear in London and Paris during the 1850s. In the 1860s, early collectors of Japanese art, such as the Goncourts, started writing about their ‘finds’ in their journals. In 1867, some 1,308 artifacts selected by the Japanese government were displayed at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. Although after the exhibition these never-catalogued items were subsequently sold off to help pay the shipping costs, descriptions by visitors indicate that there were 50 prints of Japanese women illustrating their different occupations and classes, as well as 50 prints of views of Edo by various disciples of Hiroshige. Japanese objects were also included in exhibitions in Vienna in 1873, Philadelphia in 1876, and again at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1878. This last exhibition included a large display of artifacts in a pavilion in the rue des Nations as well as a separate Japanese garden, tea-room, and model farm. At these displays, guides brought over from Japan elaborated upon the introductory information provided in the catalogue. The enormous popularity of this exhibition generated a flurry of further exhibitions as well as books and periodicals devoted to Japanese art and Japanese-inspired decorative movements such as art nouveau in the 1880s and 1890s (Evett, chapter 1).

Most scholars agree that *ukiyo-e* prints of the Edo period greatly contributed to the revitalization of Western European painting in the last half of the nineteenth century. Seeing the prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige encouraged further Western experimentation with new forms of perspective, decorative patterning, and arrangements of human form. It is this avant-garde tendency that Greenaway refers to when he cites artists ranging from Degas to Toulouse-Lautrec. Most sources indicate that the fascination with Japanese art was based on the widely held belief that it was a simpler, more primitive form of culture. From our own point of view and with the benefit of hindsight, Japonisme is usually seen as one of a number of orientalist and primitivist tendencies that flourished during the course of the nineteenth century, including the Romantics’ attraction to North Africa and the Near East, the Pre-Raphaelites’ fascination for the medieval period, and the Cubists’ preoccupation with African artifacts.

Greenaway appears to be drawn to the same pictorial sources but for rather different reasons. Instead of admiring the primitivism of a charmingly naïve culture, he seems attracted to its complexities. The single most admired printmaker in nineteenth-century Europe was Hokusai, whose *Manga* series depicted the daily life of different social classes by representing various customs, rituals, and legends as well as the local topography and flora and fauna.
Scholars have demonstrated how often nineteenth-century painters turned to this particular source, which provided Western artists with a virtual encyclopedia or human comedy of Japanese life (Evett, 23–24). Given his own fascination with tracing and quoting from the history of Western painting in his films, one can see why the encyclopedic nature of Hokusai’s prints would also appeal to Greenaway:

I think there’s evidence in all my films of a sneaking admiration for the encyclopedic point of view. All the great artifacts, certainly of western art, have somehow been encyclopedic in their concept. Now there’s no way one can put all the world’s information in one place, but every now and again there are extraordinary landmarks [. . .] It’s an ambition which I suppose constantly mocks even the attempt to describe it. But it’s this total synthesis of many, many layers of meaning into some sort of cohesive whole which I am constantly entertained by. (Enright, 79)

In contrast to most nineteenth-century painters, Greenaway would probably see in Hokusai’s series not so much an attempt to represent the external world realistically as an ambitious, though ultimately self-deconstructing, heterotopian experiment in systems of cultural ordering. In this sense, there are similarities between the Manga and Greenaway’s own early experimental films, which involved the creation of highly idiosyncratic, self-referential worlds that functioned according to arbitrarily imposed organizing principles such as the collection of telephone boxes in Dear Phone, tall structures in the landscape in Vertical Features Remake, and numerical sequences in Goole by Numbers. The Pillow Book comes close to a direct quote from Hokusai as the camera catches Hoki’s absent-minded doodles during the course of a discussion with Jerome in the Cafe-Typo.

Although there are few references to Japanese culture in the films and curatorial projects preceding The Pillow Book, Greenaway has long admired those developments in the tradition of Western avant-garde painting that have been strongly influenced by Japanese art. Such developments include the use of experimental series, unorthodox perspectives, decorative detail, and a de-centering of the human form. Following in the footsteps of artists such as Monet, who observed the play of light on haystacks at different times of day, Greenaway also tends to work in highly disciplined temporal sequences, as in the filming of The Draughtsman’s Contract: “I knew I had to do 12 drawings and that the whole structure and narrative and plot of the film had to revolve around these drawings which took a finite time. We divided the day up into six parts of two-hourly intervals. Each one capturing a dif-
ferent aspect of light on the gardens and the house. So the structure is there. That’s what came first” (Januszcak, 21). Monet affords an interesting point of comparison because he experimented with the simultaneous display of multiple perspectives by incorporating downward- and upward-looking views into the same scene. Like Vuillard and some others, he also played with the fragmentation of a single composition into diptychs and triptychs. Similar techniques can be seen at work in the different camera styles used in The Pillow Book—hand-held cinéma-vérité, Hong Kong kung fu, Japanese static floor-level à la Yasujirō Ozu—as well as in the variable aspect ratio of the many inset screens. The various “looks” function as cultural shifters, marking the differences between, for example, the noisy street life of contemporary Hong Kong and the meditative courtly rituals of tenth-century Japan. Like the multiplicity of languages and musical forms that we have already discussed, the diversity of visual styles celebrates the lingering residues of cultural difference that continue to haunt McLuhan’s “global village.”

Such perspectival fragmentation and inconsistency were typical of Japanese three-part prints. In fact, some scholars have suggested that the adventurous cropping in many impressionist pictures by artists such as Manet, Monet, and Degas was based at least partly on the fact that many three-part Japanese prints reached Europe in broken sets (Dorival, 47). And when Hokusai’s Manga were first reproduced in European books on Japan, Western illustrators took considerable pains to “correct” them. As Elisa Evett explains, “Hokusai’s simple, unmodelled, line-drawn figures were given volume by Western shading techniques and were lifted off their plain-page backgrounds to be relocated in definite spatial settings complete with ground plane and scenic backdrop” (Evett, 3). Recalling that Greenaway describes The Pillow Book as “Japanese-style compositions with added European chiaroscuro,” we can conclude that he superimposes multiple systems of perspective, not to correct Japanese “errors” but to foreground the purely conventional nature of both Eastern and Western codes of representation.

Just as there was some critical anxiety surrounding the issue of perspectival experimentation in late nineteenth-century painting, the demands placed on the viewer by the multiple perspectives, fragmentation, and decorative overload of Greenaway’s recent work have worried some twentieth-century film critics, who find the visual complexity disturbing and distracting. As Jonathan Romney explains, Prospero’s Books “is organized so as to exhaust the viewer’s perceptive capacities. This is partly because of an extremely brisk cutting speed that is something of a departure for Greenaway [. . .] and partly because of the sheer proliferation of imagery. [. . .] By presenting too much to take in at a glance, Greenaway tests to the limit his ideal of a painterly cinema” (Romney,
Indeed, Greenaway’s films have frequently been described as baroque, visually obsessive, and highly artificial, possessing marble surfaces and deep velvety tones (Maslin, 138). One critic even described *Prospero’s Books* as “a baroque bird cage, a rococo jail cell, a weighty, highly ornamented gold-leaf frame” (Brown) and Greenaway himself willingly acknowledges his passion for embellishment: “The surfaces of my films from the *Draughtsman’s Contract* onwards, are very baroque. They use every device I can think of to indicate the richness and munificence of the world” (McFarlene, 41).

It is interesting that, initially at least, the multiple perspectives of the inset screens in *The Pillow Book* have been more favorably received, perhaps because the film’s imagery is, in general, considerably more restrained than the baroque extravaganza of *Prospero’s Books*, or perhaps because critics are getting used to Greenaway, or because the film has a more cheerful ending. Certainly, the hypothetically average member of a twentieth-century audience would be more familiar with the Japonisme of much Western nineteenth-century painting than he or she would be with the conventions of baroque art and literature from the seventeenth century. In addition to seeming more recognizably “modern” than the baroque excess of *The Baby of Mâcon*, the engagement with Japanese art enables Greenaway to streamline the “look” of *The Pillow Book* by setting scenes in relatively sparsely furnished interior spaces, avoiding crowded figural compositions wherever possible, and using large areas of unmodulated color that, along with certain views and decorative patterns, are repeated throughout the film. Certain *mises-en-scène*—such as the young Nagiko in bed framed by the sliding panels of her Kyoto home, or the views of her with a bright yellow umbrella, or the image of a young woman wearing a red kimono sitting under a red parasol in a boat that floats in an indeterminate expanse of gray sea and sky—offer particularly striking examples, vividly recreating the meditative spirit of certain *ukiyo-e* prints (*PB*, 15, 18). All of these factors make *The Pillow Book* easier to decipher visually and mark a reworking of some of the devices used in *The Cook* (color-coded interiors, smaller figural groupings) and a turn away from the crowded processions and complex gilded and reflected images of *Prospero’s Books* and *The Baby of Mâcon*.

Another highly visual device is the calligraphic decoration of actors’ bodies, which, at one level and quite apart from its thematic and structural role in *The Pillow Book*, recalls Greenaway’s and Sacha Vierny’s experiments on the set of *Drowning by Numbers*. Greenaway’s description is worth citing at length, not only because it demonstrates his interest in an artist, Vuillard, who was greatly influenced by Japanese sources, but also because it reveals the centrality of purely visual considerations in his style of filmmaking:
In making *Drowning by Numbers*, a country bourgeois drama of sorts—with great use of bright sunlight in interiors full of flowers, furniture and stuff, I wanted to use the painting characteristics of Vuillard. I enjoy the way that his people become etherealized up against wallpaper and upholstered furniture, so that the wallpaper and the clothing and the carpets and the characters become one in the same light. His people often become united with the armchairs and settees they are sitting in. Flesh and cloth melt together. But we couldn’t get it. Sacha made some tests. We did some experiments and it didn’t work. [. . .] The best bet was to rely heavily on the art department to over-emphasize pattern and texture with restricted colour. We considered painting people’s faces so that they were the same colour as the wallpaper. It was OK when Juliet Stevenson was still and in the appropriate light but as soon as she moved the artifice would fall apart. I know that the exercise was as much to do with capturing the cozy, comatose intimacy of Vuillard [. . .] as to do with abstracted cinema-painting language. [. . .] We abandoned the attempt but we’ll try again sometime. (Woods, 257–258)

Of course, the use of human bodies as visual forms or “superficial” compositional elements rather than “deep” psychological entities constitutes a major violation of certain Hollywood norms. Time and again, Greenaway has asserted that his cinema of ideas does not tell stories or offer anecdotal details to enable his audiences to identify with the characters on screen. This was particularly evident in the case of *The Cook*, where Spica’s obsessive character elicited a line of Freudian speculation on the part of critics that Greenaway repeatedly downplayed by insisting he was more interested in exploring allegorical meanings and visual surfaces (Rodgers, 13–14; Smith, 58–60). Along the same lines, in an otherwise positive review of *The Pillow Book*, Derek Malcolm critically observes that “[t]he weakness in almost all Greenaway films is that unless they are good of themselves, his actors receive little help to be better. They are figures on a more important landscape, as if manoeuvred by a brilliant puppeteer” (Malcolm, 33). It is perhaps no coincidence that this detached view of human beings as figures in a much larger, unspecified world was also something that troubled nineteenth-century Europeans when they looked at Japanese prints in which the human figures were often “de-centered” in a fashion that upset the anthropomorphic assumptions of Western humanism.

In *The Pillow Book*, as we have seen, the inset screens embroider the narrative of Nagiko Kiyohara’s life by illustrating the lists recited in Sei Shonagon’s text. Adding an extra visual layer to the action portrayed on the
main screen, Greenaway’s views within views draw attention to the filmic surface, to the film as skin, and to the flattening effects of representation. (It is worth remembering that, in some languages, the word for “film”—the film that is used in photography and cinema—means, literally, “little skin,” as in the French *pellicule.* Throughout *The Pillow Book* Greenaway stresses surfaces, drawing our attention to the skin of bodies, the pages of books, and the bed-sheets that Nagiko’s maid is constantly changing and that Nagiko and Jerome use to print their body-writing. At many points throughout *The Pillow Book,* Greenaway deliberately arranges the surface composition and texture of the film to resemble Japanese prints and poetry from the Edo period, as we see images through a screen of calligraphy on decorated paper. Even the small inset screens are positioned in a way that is reminiscent of the seals placed on many prints. It is this tendency to embroider, embellish, and layer, albeit in a relatively sparse Japanese style in the case of *The Pillow Book,* that has tended to alienate those critics who define depth in terms of psychological identification. The charge that Greenaway’s movies are emotionally cold or empty, despite their rich surfaces, can be illuminated by placing it in the context of debates that go back to the late nineteenth century concerning the relative merits of form versus content and decoration versus function. Emerging in a particularly lively form around the Western reception of Japanese art, such debates are worth briefly revisiting.

Among the problems facing Western observers of Japanese art in the late nineteenth century was how to account for the relative absence of three-dimensionality, anatomical accuracy, and illusionistic coloring. Equally disconcerting was the Japanese emphasis on linear and decorative values, often at the expense of human forms, which were seldom treated as more important than those of plants or animals. While many traditionalists tended to dismiss the decorative qualities of Japanese art as inferior to the illusionistic standards of Western art, others found the break with the Western hierarchies refreshing. One frequently voiced explanation for the stylistic simplification of Japanese art was that artists worked from memory rather than from the direct observation of nature. Hence, like children and other “primitives,” Japanese artists produced simplified, typical images. The merits of such “decorative” art-forms were fiercely debated. On the one hand, opponents such as Charles Dickens and Frederic Leighton considered decorative art inferior, incomplete, and without practical function, presenting a prettiness that appealed to the eye but not the mind. On the other hand, defenders such as Charles Aurier, Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and other symbolists claimed that decorative art was superior because it was practiced for its own sake and dealt with forms intrinsic to art that corresponded to universal ideas, principles, and feelings (Evett, chapter 2).
Scholars have recently argued that the notion of decorative art served as a kind of repressed “other” in modernist aesthetic discourses, forming a target for functionalist critics such as Adolf Loos, Theodor Veblen, Vladimir Tatlin, Walter Gropius, and Clement Greenberg to attack (Wollen; see also Gronberg). In response to such functionalist critics, expressions of modernist dissidence emerged in more or less curious places and celebrated values embodied in the feminine, the oriental, the unconscious, the excessive, the wasteful, the supplemental, and the decorative. Peter Wollen cites examples such as the orientalist fashions of Paul Poiret, the designs of the Russian ballet, and the art of Matisse, as well as aspects of the surrealist movement. What is perhaps of most interest to us in trying to place Greenaway’s filmmaking turn in The Pillow Book is the fact that Japanese art (and the example of Japonisme) allows Greenaway to ground a revival of the decorative in an alternative cultural space.16

One of the most interesting developments to emerge from Greenaway’s engagement with Japanese culture is the way it enables the filmmaker to rethink some of the most fundamental binaries of Western aesthetics—those that oppose depth and surface, word and image. Like Paul Valéry, Greenaway finds skin (whether of bodies or films) no superficial matter. Unlike most mainstream filmmakers, Greenaway refuses a notion of conceptual depth that privileges literary narratives at the expense of visual imagery:

My films could be better appreciated, better understood, if people applied the aesthetics of painting to them. A great delight is a concern for surface, in using two-dimensional organizations of objects across the screen as though they were three dimensional, a concern for the way in which objects shine, for the difference in textures. [. . .] This concern for surface, by and large, is not understood, is not a concern for any other filmmaker. Their prime concern is getting performances from actors and to hell with the picture making. This is greatly under-selling the cinema. (McFarlene, 68–69)

In Greenaway’s cinema, the literary and the visual are promiscuously mingled as the filmmaker delights in foregrounding a surface complexity that cannot be grasped instantaneously. Instead, the surfaces must be patiently read and re-read layer by layer. Continuing a long tradition of avant-garde painting, Greenaway fashions filmic mises-en-scène that constantly draw attention to their own artificiality by redirecting our attention away from the narrative towards the filmic skin, as exemplified by the sequential display of numbers in Drowning by Numbers; the photocopies, photographs, and
postcards in *The Belly of an Architect*; the color-coded rooms in *The Cook*; the mirrored reflections in *Prospero’s Books*; and the lavish quotation from paintings in all Greenaway’s films.

In *The Pillow Book*, Greenaway redeployed some of the devices used in *The Belly of an Architect* by repeatedly showing the spectator that our view of the world and our behavior in it are constantly mediated by representation. This is particularly apparent in the scene in which Hoki, after an encounter with anti-environmentalist kidnappers, photographs Nagiko on the rooftop parking lot of a Hong Kong supermarket, while in the background a jet noisily descends into the nearby airport. The scene dissolves into a montage of Hoki’s photographs. As we flash back and forth between the loud and crowded “reality” of Hoki and Nagiko on the rooftop and Hoki’s silent photographs, the visual and temporal flow of the narrative is broken. The ensuing sequence of stills gives us time to consider how our view of Hong Kong’s skyline has probably been mediated by photography and how the asymmetrical compositions and air-brushed, calligraphic texture of Hoki’s photographs have been mediated by a long tradition of Japanese print-making. As in Greenaway’s earlier films, the characters in *The Pillow Book* subscribe to Oscar Wilde’s view that life imitates art. Perhaps the most striking instances of this are the love-making scenes between Nagiko and Jerome, who assume the costumes and positions of characters from the erotica or *shunga* of the Edo period, which are reproduced in smaller inset screens. The full significance of these resemblances is underlined by Nagiko at the end of the film when she notes that at twenty-eight years of age, she has acquired enough experience of life to write her own pillow book. Among the experiences she plans to record are her afternoons of lovemaking in historical positions. Just as she has taken the writing of Sei Shonagon as a role model, the most intimate details of her daily experience have also been mediated by art and literature, to which they are now ready to return.

**FINS-DE-SIÈCLE**

The considerable Japanese impact on European art at the end of the nineteenth century coincided with a period of unprecedented imperial expansion by France and Britain and the other colonial powers. One of the most symbolically significant events of our own *fin-de-siècle* has been the 1997 hand-over of Hong Kong, widely seen as the city of the twenty-first century, from Britain to China, marking the end of an artificially prolonged postscript to British imperial rule and the delayed emergence of China as superpower.
In this sense, 1997 might be seen as marking the transition from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. The same could be said of Peter Greenaway’s *The Pillow Book*.

Seen in this light, there is nothing nostalgic or old-fashioned about the filmmaker’s turn to the East. The carefully developed counterpoint between Kyoto, the imperial city not only of Sei Shonagon but also of Edo Japan, and Hong Kong, the postmodern symbol of a triumphant, global capitalism rushing breathlessly into the future, is there to remind us of the complexities of today’s world, with its mosaic of historical fragments and polyphony of cultures, and not to resurrect the values of an earlier, colonial era. In this respect, the affair between Nagiko and the translator Jerome is less a reenactment of the originary colonial encounter than the condition of emergence of a quintessentially postmodern subject: “His writing in so many languages made me a sign-post pointing east, west, north, and south. I had shoes in German, stockings in French, gloves in Hebrew, a hat with a veil in Italian. He only kept me naked where I was most accustomed to wearing clothes” (*PB*, 115). The fact that Nagiko not only survives this encounter with the Judeo-Christian literary tradition, but lives first to rewrite, then to bury its body not once but twice, would seem to indicate a cultural resilience and a digestive capacity symptomatic of robust good health.
In some ways, however, the dichotomy exemplified in the film by the opposition between Kyoto and Hong Kong is not a new one. In Edo Japan (1615–1868) a similar tension existed between Kyoto and the fast-growing Edo (now Tokyo), which, by the early eighteenth century, had become the world’s largest city. “Residents of Kyoto affirmed and identified with the refined aesthetic traditions of the imperial court, which had for centuries resided in Kyoto. Those of Edo, which had no such legacy, took pride in their modernity, and were especially receptive to novelty” (Guth, 12). Edo’s modernity found its most significant expression in *ukiyo-e*, “pictures of the floating world,” prints celebrating the ephemeral nature of beauty and the brevity of human life. Not simply an evocation of universal transience, the “floating world” designated, first and foremost, the city’s entertainment and pleasure quarters and the fleeting attractions of sex and fashion they offered. So important was the conspicuous consumption associated with fashion that the wives of wealthy merchants would sometimes engage in contests in which they tried to outdo one another in extravagance, much to the delight of the public, though not, apparently, of the shogunal government, which frowned on such unseemly behavior (Guth, 31). But the true exemplars of the “floating world” were the *tayu*, high-ranking courtesans who embodied, in their dress and their accomplishments, a certain ideal: “They were expected to be skilled in music, poetry, painting, calligraphy, and other arts. Mastery of calligraphy was deemed especially important since the exchange of letters played such a key role in the game of love” (Guth, 29). Seen against this background, Nagiko becomes another kind of signpost, pointing back to the unbroken imperial tradition of Kyoto, city of monks, scholars, artists, and cultivated courtesans like Sei Shonagon, and forward to the brash, commercial, ironic “floating world” of Edo and Hong Kong. We started with Valéry. It seems appropriate to end with Baudelaire: “La modernité, c’est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l’art, dont l’autre moitié est l’éternel et l’immuable” (Modernity is the transitory, the fleeting, the contingent—one half of art whose other half is the eternal and unchanging) (Baudelaire, 553).

NOTES

1. What is deepest in man is skin./Truth is naked, but beneath the nude is the flayed body (our translation).

2. Another obvious parallel is between Sei Shonagon and Greenaway himself, as suggested in the following passage from Nagiko’s journal: “I sat in the garden until
eleven o’clock reading Murasaki Shikibu who accuses Sei Shonagon of smugness. She says that ‘someone who makes such an effort to be different from others is bound to fall in people’s esteem, and I can only think that her future will be a hard one.’ How true—how Japanese. In Japan we hate anyone to be different. We have not changed at all in a thousand years” (PB, 114). If we remember that Murasaki Shikibu, a much less adventurous writer, was the author of The Tale of Genji, the world’s first psychological novel, and if we substitute England and English for Japan and Japanese in Nagiko’s comment, it is not difficult to understand the basis for Greenaway’s identification (Elliott and Purdy, 1997, 119). We might even be tempted to speculate on Murasaki’s counterpart among contemporary English filmmakers.

3. Of course, the optimism may well be dictated by economic necessity rather than artistic temperament. Greenaway makes no secret of the fact that he has an agreement with his producer, Kees Kasander, that allows him to alternate between what he calls A and B films: “An A film, which is a little more popular and commercial, followed by a B film, which is more experimental. The Draughtsman’s Contract and A Zed and Two Noughts are examples. If we continue A/B, A/B, A/B, maybe we will stay alive creatively and financially. But we had two B pictures together—Prospero’s Books and The Baby of Mâcon. And so it has become necessary to make an A picture again. We feel now—and this has become very self-conscious, whereas before it never was—that maybe The Pillow Book will be an A picture . . . ” (unpublished segment of an interview with Greenaway, October 1996). [Editor’s note: for a problematization of the optimism of The Pillow Book, see Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, “Fleshing the Text: The Pillow Book and the Erasure of the Body.” Postmodern Culture: An Electronic Journal of Interdisciplinary Criticism 9.2 (February 1999)].

4. The notable exception would be The Baby of Mâcon, as self-consciously theatrical a film as one might wish for, but a box-office disaster for reasons too complicated to discuss here (Elliott and Purdy, 1997, chapter 6 and interview).

5. The published text of a Greenaway film always enjoys a certain autonomy, providing not only a (variable) amount of supplementary material (see, particularly, Prospero’s Books) but also a full script, as opposed to a simple transcript of the film. Greenaway makes the point once more in his introduction to the text of The Pillow Book, explaining why he chooses to publish the complete script as prepared for Kees Kasander in the summer of 1994: “It would not be too difficult to re-arrange this script to fit the outline and description of the final version of the finished film, but I am convinced that this current form of presentation is of greater interest, offering the reader/viewer a fuller exposition of the intentions for the film rather than a script-description of the film itself. It certainly demonstrates the gap that always ensues between script and finished film; scenes almost inevitably become re-ordered, with dialogue-sequences cut and changed, and events becoming condensed and deleted in post-production” (PB, 11). Behind and beyond this consideration lies Greenaway’s
frequently reiterated belief in the superior imaginative capability of the written word in comparison with cinema: “It is this very intimidating gap between text and image which is, in many ways, the subject and substance of the film of The Pillow Book” (PB, 12).

6. In one major way this observation needs to be reversed in the case of The Pillow Book, to the extent that the published script is entirely in English, thereby homogenizing the dialogue and reducing the materiality of the film’s use of language(s) in favor of dramatic intelligibility. In this sense, the film can be said to be more “curatorial” than the book.

7. The two Stairs catalogues published hitherto contain significant elements of Greenaway’s reasoned critique of what he calls the vocabulary of cinema through exhibition strategies (Greenaway, 1994, 1995; Elliott and Purdy, 1997, chapter 5; Pascoe, 214; Woods, 27; see also Di Stephano in the present volume).

8. The text “26 Facts about Flesh and Ink” that was written then (in 1984) is reproduced in The Pillow Book (PB, 6–10). Unfortunately, this short text uses the alphabet simply as a numerical equivalent (1–26) and has none of the wry invention or unexpected juxtapositions of some of Greenaway’s alphabet-based projects such as H Is for House and A Zed and Two Noughts. In the exhibition One Hundred Objects to Represent the World, the alphabet is reproduced along a long wall in letters at least half a meter high to remind us of the absurdity of our systems of ordering and organization: “By the English use of this system of codes, it is curiously possible to place the disparate concepts represented by Hell, Heaven, happiness, health, His Holiness, hysterectomy, Hitchcock, Hitler and hiatus in one bracket and under one section” (Introduction, no page number).

9. St. Jerome—via da Messina and Georges de La Tour—had already served as a pictorial model for Prospero (Greenaway, Prospero’s Books, 40, 50). At one moment in The Pillow Book, the publisher brings up on his computer screen the same de La Tour image for his (and our) contemplation. David Pascoe has some interesting pages on Greenaway’s interest in St. Jerome (Pascoe, 166–171).

10. As Foucault reminds us, the word subject is haunted by the specter of power and domination associated with its cognates subjection and subjected (Foucault, 1994, 227). The father’s signature on the nape of Nagiko’s neck, so crucial in her formation as a subject, is in this respect a clear gesture of subjection or subjugation. Its (partial) transformation into an affirmation of bodily pleasure is apparently accomplished by the aunt’s reading from Sei Shonagon’s own pleasure text.

11. In his Theory of the Avant-Garde, Peter Bürger makes the connection between Benjamin’s theory of allegory and the avant-garde’s use of montage, which he sees as a phase of allegory. The distinction between organic and nonorganic works is paramount to his argument: “Artists who produce an organic work [. . .] treat their material as something living. They respect its significance as something that has grown
from concrete life situations. For avant-gardistes, on the other hand, material is just that, material. Their activity initially consists in nothing other than in killing the ‘life’ of the material, that is, in tearing it out of its functional context that gives it meaning” (Bürger, 70). The avant-garde work is thus deliberately and ostentatiously nonorganic, in that it makes no attempt to hide the fact that it has been stitched together from fragments isolated from their original context. (On the filmmaker as allegorist/surgeon, see Elliott and Purdy, “Technologies of Representation.”)

12. Monet’s experiments with Japanese perspectives are discussed by Bernard Dorival (47–48), who reproduces a number of paintings, such as *Barques à Hivernage* (1885) and *Femme à Ombrelle* (1886), to illustrate upward- and downward-looking perspectives. In Western art, diptychs and triptychs were traditionally used in religious altarpieces that depicted a number of separate self-contained scenes. Usually the most important central scene was flanked by side panels of patron saints or donors. Artists such as Monet and Vuillard departed from these conventions by dividing a single secular scene into different canvases. See, for example, Vuillard’s *Les jardins de Paris* (1894), which uses a triptych format (Dorival, 58).

13. Derek Malcolm considers *The Pillow Book* a great advance on *The Baby of Mâcon*, since it is better suited to Greenaway’s “concern for detail and the expressiveness of decoration” (Malcolm, 33).

14. It is interesting to compare Greenaway’s film surfaces with the prints of Ando Hiroshige, Yosa Buson, and Tanomura Chikuden (plates 76, 98, and 108 in Guth).

15. It should be pointed out that East-West influence in the nineteenth century was not all one way. As a result of the Kyoho Reforms of the early eighteenth century, the ban on the importation of foreign books into Japan was lifted, and Edo print artists started to experiment with Western perspective and European illusionistic techniques that the public found very exotic (Guth, 102–103).

16. Despite the fact that Greenaway has been repeatedly charged with cultural elitism, *The Pillow Book* explores many aspects of the decorative arts and popular culture that have been dismissively feminized as superficial in Western cultural discourse. There has been much recent interest in the hierarchical gendering of different genres, media, and artistic practices in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western culture. In addition to the work of Peter Wollen, the writings of Andreas Huyssen, Naomi Schor, Deborah Silverman, Penny Sparke, and Christopher Reed offer a number of suggestive avenues for considering Greenaway’s engagement with the decorative.

17. The narrative flow is broken in similar ways throughout the film. A particularly striking example is in the opening sequences, where the child’s birthday ritual of face-painting is overlaid with tenth-century snippets from Sei Shonagon’s diary describing the fashions of the Empress Sadako and images of the adult Nagiko on a cat-walk in Hong Kong.
III

“TOO MANY PROOFS SPOIL THE TRUTH”

“Give me matter and motion, and I will construct the world.”

René Descartes
I and my collaborators have just opened an exhibition at the Juan Miró Foundation in Barcelona—an exhibition called *Flying over Water*, which concerns itself with Icarus as the first pilot and Icarus as the first flying disaster. Its larger fascinations are to do with the dream of flying. There are few cultures, historically and geographically, that have not expressed a desire to fly. And to fly as a metaphor steps over any boundaries of wings and feathers, engines and the flapping of arms, to embrace larger notions of ambition always coupled with extreme hubris—to fly in the spirit as well as in the body—and these become the urgent themes of the exhibition.

We broke the bank, making a very expensive and delightful catalogue, a mixture of text and image elegantly arranged and typographed to capitalize on ideas of flight and movement and water, confirming me still further in a desire, after the calligraphic experiments of the film *The Pillow Book*, to use typographers as major collaborators on the next film. I have long been fascinated by the possibilities of a lengthy collaboration on screen between text and image that has only usually been the preserve of magazine and advertising arts but is seldom seen in cinema. The catalogue has a short introduction, supposedly written by a stranger, but undoubtedly written by me. Forgive the ironic egotism. Writing in the third person is invigorating. I’d like to quote the first couple of paragraphs:

Peter Greenaway is a film maker trained as a painter. He has long been sceptical about the restricted boundaries of cinema and you could not say that his films were obsessive about the traditional characteristics of cinema. The cinema that we have arrived at after a hundred years based on plot, narrative, story telling, the demands for an emotional involvement between audience and screen, psychologically drawn characters, and a cinema that can justifiably be describe for the most part as illustrated text.
Some commentators have said that his films are anti-cinematic and that he is not a film maker at all. He might not disagree with that. He is disquieted by the inability of the cinema that we now have, to give us all the rich potential excitements of the late 20th century world. No touch, no smell, no temperature, short duration. Passive, sedentary audiences, no real audience dialogue, overloaded technical specifications in set piece High Street architecture, limited to a single frame at a time, visible from only one direction. Excessive desire for reality, temporary sets, actors trained to pretend, flat illusions, little comprehension of a screen as a screen. Omnipotent financial vested interests, and the tyrannies of the frame, the actor and text. And most disturbing of all, subject to the tyranny of the camera.

The list of disenchantments is long. He’s far from being alone in holding these views. His present particular strategy to investigate and change these shortcomings, as he sees them, is to invest much time in extra cinema activities, if only in the hope of bringing those activities back in to cinema to find ways to reinvent it. For reinvention of the cinema is surely long overdue and very very necessary. A medium without constant reinvention is doomed to perish. Many say now that there are no great inventors working in cinema any more. They have gone elsewhere. Perhaps they are right.¹

Out of this general present testimony of a current disquiet about the conditions of the cinema, for the purpose of the new film *The Pillow Book*, my prime and present anxiety centers around the Tyranny of the Text.

In the few minutes needed to read these paragraphs, I suspect there have been more images created in the world than in the entire sixteenth and seventeenth centuries put together. There are twenty-four images manufactured every time one second of movie film is exposed to the light. But in a curious way, up against the dominance of the text of the world, in which we regale ourselves with splendid degrees of sophistication, are we so equally adept at making and interpreting the image? I am often persuaded we live in deserts of visual illiteracy. Our ability to make, see, and **read** the image is curiously low in the scale of our values. I make this statement with especial reference to the cinema. I believe the cinema we have after 100 years seems to support such an argument. In pessimistic moments I feel we haven’t seen any cinema yet, we have only seen 100 years of illustrated text. If your name is Spielberg or Scorsese or Wenders or Godard, you must have text before you have image. That does not seem to me a satisfactory way at all to invent cin-
ema. Cinema deserves better than to be merely an adjunct of the bookshop industry. Although the irony does not escape any of us that far too many bookshops seem all to ready to be an adjunct of the cinema industry.

It would be my argument that an object or artifact conceived in text ought to be received in text. What is this notion we have that insists we turn works of literature into cinema? Why do we feel so culturally insecure about the notions of cinema that we do not essentially make cinema cinema but illustrated literature? Godard rather famously said that the best thing you can do with a script, as soon as you convince the financiers and the producers to invest, is to throw it away.

So, my particular anxiety would be the notion of what the French might call the primacy of the text versus the primacy of the image. It has been a persistent anxiety for all of the time I have been manufacturing films. I was trained as a painter. It was with difficulty that I had to finally accept the fact that, up until the 1850s, by far the majority of images that were made in the Western world, were illustrations of text—the Bible or ancient classical literature, fable, literary homily, or some form of written national history. The mid-nineteenth century revolution in the plastic arts changed all that. Cinema is still very young indeed. It would be churlish to demand an instant non-narrative revolution in the cinema—but I believe we should set our sights upon it. Let us help its evolution. Do we really want to continue to acknowledge that the text is king in cinema, and that the image is only its slave?

We can be very much aware in the West that we have separated out two traditions. Literature on the one hand, painting on the other. You would think that cinema would be the ideal place to put the two together in a very satisfactory and happy relationship. It’s my feeling that that has not happened.

In my search to find and organize a notion of a happy marriage between image and text, toward a non-narrative cinema, away from stereotypical feature film orthodoxy, I have made many movies. The Pillow Book is the latest. Although indeed I am fascinated by the potential of the new technological languages, there are many aesthetic-technologies of great age and endurance that might offer solutions. I have recently spent much time regarding conventions of representation that have existed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. And earlier. Much earlier. There is a system of representation that involves the ideal marriage of both text and image operation in tandem in the Orient, in the idea of the hieroglyph, the calligraph, the ideogram. My Japanese friends have been at pains to often tell me that the history of Japanese literature is synonymous with the history of Japanese painting. In the activity of the hieroglyph, text and image are conjoined.
When you read text, you see image, when you view the image you read text. Would not this be an exciting module, a template, a basis on which to reconsider some cinema practice? This central metaphor created the impetus for the manufacture of a new film. It is appropriate that the oriental metaphor should be used in association with an oriental theme, plot, and idea.

Many years ago I read a classic work of tenth-century Japanese literature, written by a woman, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*. There were four particular characteristics that excited me about this work. First, it read like a piece of science fiction, describing an aristocratic world infinitely removed from our own. A privileged society of some 5,000 individuals supported by a population of some 5 million, with a system of rituals, behavior, ceremonies, and rigid observances that would make the court of Louis XIV at Versailles seem sloppy and casual. The systems of acute perception in this leisured society were elaborate. Whereas chrome yellow is a recognizable, repeatable, and reliable color to a contemporary painter, a tenth-century Heian Dynasty artist could, it seems, equally depend on *tiger’s breath on a winter’s morning looking east*. A courtier walking the courtyards of the Kyoto Imperial palace wearing the wrong color kimono that did not chime in sympathy with the particular seasonal imperative associated with the phases of the moon and the state of the Emperor’s health, risked perpetual and everlasting social ostracism.

A second reason for me to be intrigued by the original *Pillow Book* was that its author was a great list-maker. She formulates much of her information in poetic lists. It is a characteristic I have more than several times employed to make an encyclopedic view of different worlds. And, curious to a Western temperament whose lists are so apparently substantial, being an urgent control-mechanism to understand and capture objects and facts with scientific method, Sei Shonagon’s lists evoke the most ephemeral and insubstantial—*things that travel south, things that travel east, things that are red, things that are a little redder, things that I like, things that I dislike*. This list-making becomes endemic in the structuring of the film of *The Pillow Book*—in actions, events, people, stuffs, materials, details, and, of course, calligraphic marks.

A third characteristic that I transposed from the original book would be the notion of its fragmented text. It is a journal rather than a diary. It is not chronological. It arranges its material in irregular sections. Present tense, history, quotation, fantasy, imagination, introspection—all interwoven and interlayered. The film of *The Pillow Book* has a reductive narrative, simply posited but structured often not chronologically and constantly changing its
emphasis in an attempt to escape the compulsive narrative rigors, conventions, and boredoms of the contemporary film, which apparently is obliged to be a slave to continuous chronological narration.

The fourth reason is the author of the work itself, Sei Shonagon, a lady-in-waiting to a fifteen-year-old Empress, defending her independence rigorously in a patriarchal community, witty and ironic about the gender wars, equal, if not superior in erudition to her male social superiors. Many of the feature films I have made center the female as main protagonist, often having to battle socially debilitating restrictions and curbs to attain her independence but refusing to limit her sexuality and determined to use and enjoy it.2

The wish to enthuse, homage, and appreciate a piece of literature in the service of developing a metaphor for cinema is not contradictory to any desire that cinema should not be illustrated text. In the instance of The Pillow Book, Sei Shonagon’s book is the regenerating background against which it may be possible to set up many ideas around the disquiet about the relationship of image to text.

There is one further strategic idea related to the appreciation of the book that helped to invigorate the film and that lies in the way that I first encountered it. I do not read Japanese, even after considerable private and professional contacts with Japan and the Japanese. I read the original in its first English translation of the 1920s, written by the polyglot translator Arthur Waley. Waley had the task of introducing the book to a public almost entirely ignorant of early Japanese culture. He began by describing the community of the Heian Dynasty, quietly introducing Sei Shonagon quotations to illustrate and authenticate his descriptions. Gradually, his own material was balanced and then entirely superseded by direct Sei Shonagon translation.

Something of this method of presentation is made in the film. And furthermore, the balance of human relationships in the film is conceived in something of the same order, if only in reverse, for the film describes a relationship between a heroine who identifies herself with Sei Shonagon, an identity made truly possible by the introduction of a Western translator who encourages her to cease to be merely the paper for writing and to become the pen that writes. We thus have a relationship between a contemporary Oriental female author and a contemporary Occidental male translator that mirrors Sei Shonagon being translated by Arthur Waley over a historical period of 1,000 years.

Just as it has been said that in the film Prospero’s Books there was too much Greenaway and not enough Shakespeare, detractors might say in The
Pillow Book that there is too much Greenaway and not enough Sei Shonagon. Though this might be an ironic plea for a contemporary to utilize his sources with honor, it would also grossly misinterpret the intention and vastly underplay the truth. For there is very little indeed of the original Pillow Book in the film. Of what there is, I regard the most important and essential two pervading sensibilities—Sei Shonagon’s enthusiasm for writing and her abiding excitement of physicality, or one might simplify by saying her continuing enthusiasm for text and sex—as valuable and important now as then. And the particular combination of these two excitements is the raison d’être for the film, whose essence is simple to describe. This is the story of a young woman who wants her lovers to write on her body. When we view and experience text in this film, we view and experience sex; when we view and experience sex, we also see text. Sex and Text. In English, the most polyglot of languages, happily guilty of excessive and rampant global intercourse to make it the hungry animal that it is, there is an X in sex and an X in text. The letter X has conventionally implied the dangerous, the taboo, the forbidden but has also been used to indicate the legitimate mark of the totally illiterate. X marks the spot, X stands for the identity of the unidentified.

One of the great interests for me in the manufacture of The Pillow Book was to erect a Tower of Babel. There are some twenty-six languages featured in written and heard communication in the film. Text and language are ever-present. Our visual urban world is full of text. The Pillow Book reflects such a world in the streets of Hong Kong, massively heavy, like no other city in the world, with continuous overhead street-hoardings visually screaming aloud in Chinese and English. The structure of the film relates to a diary whose pages are ever-present, certainly in visual form written in many languages, and often in spoken from, read aloud by its author. The inroads of text in our lives are forever extending. The last bastions of the unwritten are falling. We all carry text on our clothes, in some cases, next to the skin, imprinted on a damp T-shirt, as close as possible to a pumping heart. It is intimated in the film that before very long the newborn baby will emerge already texted from the womb. It is a surprise that as yet there have been no large sums of money exchanged for human tattooing on body prime sites in the service of Coca Cola.

There is a long tradition of writing on the body. Many communities in Australasia and South America, India and Northern Asia have practiced various forms of ceremonial and religious body adornment using text. Often the texts are made permanent by tattoo. Visits with the film in Jerusalem and Munich, cities at both ends of the horror of the Holocaust, evoke extreme negative ideas about body writing. We have been at pains
in the film to insist on writing in a non-abusive, non-penetrative way with brush and ink, infinitely washable, as is made evident several times in the plot of the film. In the pursuit of many English figures of speech like *I can read you like a book, your life is an open page, every man contains his own novel*, the central metaphor for the film is to view the body as a book, the book as a body. This is pursued in as many ways as we could conceive of bringing body and text together. Of prime significance and from a religious incantatory point of view, the father writes on his child’s face, relevant to so many religious beginnings, certainly exemplified in Christianity, with the notion that in the beginning was the word and the word was God. Pursuing the notion that as a thing is named so it becomes a possession, like Adam giving all things a name, Nagiko writes the names of her body parts on her own anatomy. And the most casual and ephemeral jottings of telephone numbers on the back of a wrist alludes to a most cursory everyday event of using the flesh as paper.

The problems, satisfactions, and paradoxical difficulties of communication across the language barrier are encouraged and not ignored in this film. We have deliberately eschewed those filmic conventions that makes all races and nationalities in an international plot speak the same language, but with contorted attempts to nonetheless stress differentiation by the use of accent, slang, or dialect. In English-language versions of the film, much of the Japanese is not translated, to persuade a viewer to listen to the music, cadences, and rhythms of a language he/she cannot understand. Much film, under the pressures of American distribution colonization, will steadily become exclusively English language. We insist on championing language in the film at the expense of direct translatable communication to demonstrate, first of all, its very existence, its requirement for life, and to de-centralize our egotism as being the only arbiters of sense through the language we ourselves speak. We demonstrate what we have already lost in the use of Latin and Sanskrit and push the interest to extremes, using ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs for the cult of the dead at the death of Jerome. An area of language ephemerality is also encountered in the simple-complex use of Yiddish written on Nagiko’s breasts. Yiddish, until comparatively recently, being an entirely aural language, was often under severe political interdict and was used as a secret language for communication among the illiterate. When first committed to paper, it was exclusively written in Hebrew and therefore written from left to right, or, to a politically sensitive Western eye, looking for subversion if not wholly fearful of heterodoxy, it was written backwards, an aberration. Yiddish was also forbidden to be so sensually used as to describe body parts. All these
characteristics have been subverted in the film—Jerome writes from right to left, in English and across the flesh of the breasts. This use of Yiddish makes a parallel with the state of the language as perceived in, and subsequent to, the Heian Dynasty. Heian Dynasty literature was officially Chinese, albeit an archaic Chinese no longer practiced on the mainland. Literate Japanese males wrote in cumbrous Chinese, full of necessary quotation, a form of communication now rarely studied even by the most exacting of scholars. Women, considered as participators in a lower form of communication, wrote in the vernacular. It is nicely ironic that female writing at this period formed the basis of all subsequent Japanese language and literary communication.

An overall larger language communication characteristic of the film resides in its use of a very new, television-based language of text and image to describe and contain a 3,000-year-old language of Oriental calligraphy, itself a language of text and image. But beyond this notion is a greater communication characteristic. All the world’s languages have been invented with a special relationship existing between the imagination and the brain communicating to the shoulder, the arm, the hand, the fingers, the pen, and the paper. A combination of imagination and physical gesture. The texts of the world have been made and shaped by the body. Where better place to put those texts than back on the body?

The thought, of course, is offered in irony. But there is a current disquiet that, having broken that important bond of body and text by, first, the invention of the printing-press, then by the invention of the typewriter, and now by the invention of the ubiquitous word-processing keyboard, we have set up for ourselves a bundle of trouble. It intimates a yet further denial of the physical self to the conveniences of the non-corpo-real world and even greater reliance on the machine. Come the collapse of artificial energy, we will be bereft, no longer knowing how to write by hand. Or, fixed into the confines of the machine, the letterforms and written codes become indelible, incapable of development, certainly incapable of development by quirk and idiosyncrasy and happenstance and the conveniences of the body. Or indeed, we might fear the opposite; the demands of quicker and slicker and more economic communication letter forms and textual parameters. I, and the film offer no judgments on these matters. It is surely obvious that together we are both fascinated by the propositions. But in an overall strategy that could also be a continuing characteristic of much of my cinema, The Pillow Book and I believe the body must be up there earnestly and vigorously rooting for its supremacy, text or not text.
EIGHT AND A HALF WOMEN: A LACONIC BLACK COMEDY

_Peter Greenaway_

If every man thinks of sex once every nine seconds, what on earth does he think of in the other eight?

A beautiful woman only serves to frighten the fish when she jumps into the water.

The story of the film is not so complicated. A fifty-five-year-old English-speaking, wealthy, architect-banker, living in a large, well-appointed lakeside Geneva mansion, obtains eight and a half High-Street Japanese Pachinko Gambling parlors as a by-product of an insolvency deal. He is persuaded to keep them as valuable collateral by his twenty-five-year-old son, who moves to Kyoto to become the manager of the Pachinko Parlors and to become himself addicted to the gambling machines—and addicted also to the excitement of earthquakes.

The father’s wife and the son’s mother—after a thirty-year faithful marriage—dies, and the son returns to Switzerland to console his father’s grief. Eventually, they sleep together in a ritual of humorous mutual
curiosity to help console the father. As a further possible distraction—the son introduces his father to the films of Fellini. The father takes the distraction and becomes interested in Fellini women.

Father and son return to Kyoto and the son “rescues” a Pachinko Parlor gambling-obsessed young woman from her family and in-laws. Eventually, out of sympathy for the father’s continuing loneliness and grief, all three share the same bed and are brought closer together by an earthquake. The father wants to settle for a ménage à trois, but the son persuade his father to find a woman of his own. Together back in Geneva, they “rescue” a Norwegian bank employee accused of embezzlement. Japanese mistress and Norwegian bank-clerk, along with a devoted Renoiresque house-servant, with the example of the Fellini women, begin to give the men ideas to agree to consolidate a private bordello with eight and a half women. In various accidental meetings and rendez-vous, the women are assembled. The house is run smoothly—servants, tradesmen, nurses, wet-nurses—are all variously paid and coerced as a support structure. Each kept woman is given rich accommodation in numbered rooms in the Genevian lakeside mansion. Each woman fulfills a different characteristic: nun, horse-lover, secretary, pregnant mother, devoted servant, passive Madame Butterfly heroine. Inconveniences such as pregnancies, escapes, babies, and return-passions are dealt with philosophically. All this time we see nothing—or virtually nothing—at all of sexual excess. We are usually kept outside the rooms—in the afternoon sun–filled corridors, in the garden, in the kitchen, outside the bathrooms—understanding what might be going on by innuendo and the philosophical gossip of father and son, by witnessing their intimacy, their quarreling, and their mutual affection.

Things cannot last; the bordello begins to fall apart. The women themselves inaugurate the break-up, beginning to establish their independence both financially and socially, turning the tables on the men, who gradually and lazily acquiesce. There is a poignant dawn–lit suicide on the lake, the forced abandonment of a too-fertile woman, the possibility of murder, the self-incarceration in a convent, a death by earthquake, a forced abduction, a poetic escape on horseback. Soon the bordello is reduced to just one and a half women—the “one” woman who is deliriously desired by both men as being the ideal sexual fantasy, and the “half” who is a mystery. When the father dies happily in the arms of this ideal woman, the son in turn, like his father before him, is struck with inconsolable grief.

After the death of the father, the last woman is too bored to stay. She leaves, hitching a lift on the Geneva-to-Lausanne road with an old lover who quotes Godard’s celebrated statement that the most beautiful women in the
world are to be found on the road between Geneva and Lausanne. The son throws out all the Fellini tapes, films, and photographs and takes up studying the women in Godard films. He considers making a film of his own experiences—though he could never imagine getting either a backer or an audience, and he knows that to tell the tale truthfully would make him liable for criminal prosecution and public ignominy, let alone accusations of misogyny and deep political incorrectness. Maybe this film of eight and a half women is the film he wanted to make.

The son finds some dubious comfort with the remaining “half-woman” whose characteristics we never really discover, but who—we are led to suspect through local gossip of servants—might, unbelievably, be the sexual product of father and son. The son’s last gesture is to lock us out of the bedroom where he decides, in homage to Godard, to change the name of the “half-woman” from Giulietta, after Giulietta Masina of La Strada and Giulietta degli spiriti, to Karina, after the Anna Karina of Le petit soldat and Pierrot le fou. Incredibly, in Geneva and not in Japan, an earthquake destroys the house with both the earthquake-loving son and the “half-woman” inside.

The film is thus the story of this bordello and its eight and a half women that lasts some three years before being broken up and finally destroyed in an earthquake. It is told episodically and elliptically and with laconic black humor, continually moving back and forth across its narratives in Geneva and Kyoto, punctuated with poetic, laconic descriptions of the desirable women, contemplative reconstructions of the effects of earth tremors, and appropriate excerpts from Fellini films and, at the end, from Godard films.

The idea for the film Eight and a Half Women originated in various places. First, I have long been suppressing a cherished need to homage cinematic heroes. After contemplating so many other visual cultural inheritances, most especially the heritage of painting in all the eight feature films I have made so far—particularly to homage draughtsmanship in The Draughtsman's Contract, a film that could perhaps have been called The Filmmaker's Contract; and architecture and photography in The Belly of an Architect, a film that could almost have been called The Belly of a Filmmaker, it might be about time to come out into the open and homage film.

This project patently homages Fellini, and especially his masterpiece of self-reflexive filmmaking—Fellini’s Eight and a Half. To lose this particular title would be most unfortunate, for the title sets the tone for the objective of the film—a self-conscious baroque fantasy of women influenced by the dream machine of cinema that so frequently engages in male sexual fantasy.
There is an irony in initially homaging Fellini—one of the cinema’s consolidating geniuses in that very rich middle twentieth-century period of cinema at its peak—only, in the finale of the film, to reject Fellini in order to homage Godard instead—Godard, the filmmaker who essentially unraveled much of what Fellini consolidated and paved a way, in effect, for the dissolution of cinema. However, trenchantly, the Godard quote is still circling around the notion of male sexual desire. Godard said: “The most beautiful women in the world can be found on the Geneva to Lausanne Road.”

This quotation also introduces a second genesis for the film: Geneva. I was privileged in 1994 to manufacture in Geneva a city-wide exhibition, called *The Stairs*, on the question of “The Frame,” especially as the frame is related to the way we contemplate the framed image of the cinema. I became familiar with the city and stayed a number of times in a most splendid house overlooking the lake—a house that features very strongly in this script as the house of the Emmenthals, father and son, whose sexual fantasies have their European base here. It is a house that reminds me of Giulietta Massina’s house in Fellini’s *Giulietta degli spiriti*, of the house in my own *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, of the mysterious magical house of *Le Grand meaulnes*, and with touches of Resnais’s Marienbad chateau.
Geneva is, supposedly, a rich man’s paradise. Switzerland—apparent land of order, neutrality, and perspicacity, is full of curious contradictions. In my stay in Geneva, I was made aware of the trade in Russian, Polish, East German, and Eastern European women. This house on the lake is a remi-
niscence of Bluebeard’s Castle.

A third origin for the film arises again through personal observation in the business of making films, this time from working in Tokyo and Ky-
oto. I have been fascinated by the Japanese Pachinko Parlor—where ap-
parently innocuous machine-arcade gambling has been made respectable for working- and middle-class families, and especially women. The gam-
bling has become a national obsession, making Pachinko Parlor propri-
etors wealthy and powerful and spawning a highly developed and frivo-
rous architecture—utilizing the excesses of postmodernism with the greatest possible variety of architectural materials and visual effects of lighting—fascinating variations on a single theme creating exciting archi-
tectural photogenic images. The obsession with pachinko gambling has made not a few female victims open to blackmail of every description, as they strive to financially feed their gambling habit. This characteristic pro-
vided the initial impetus for a plot-line—a woman whose gambling debts are to be paid for with sexual services.

Figure 12.3 Eight and a Half Women. Photo Jaap Buitenkijk. Courtesy of Peter Greenaway.
My visits to Japan with two films—the post-production of *Prospero’s Books* and the production of *The Pillow Book*—had, curiously, as a bizarre by-product, introduced me personally to the effect of earthquakes. On practically every visit I have made to Japan I have experienced an earthquake—happily, each time, of small significance—but always with marked observable visual signs. My curiosities, fascinations, and anxieties about earthquakes have been passed on in a sublimated form in this film to become the obsession of the film’s second male lead.

Another and different factor that generated the energies for this script is a desire to write again complicated and excess dialogue. I wanted to get back again to the dialogue writing of *The Draughtsman’s Contract* and *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. Because of the many communicating complications of the last film, *The Pillow Book*, excesses of dialogue in that film were largely suppressed and made very functional. I wanted to make a change. This film undoubtedly will be a “talkie.” With one character exception that will dramatically emphasize the rule, all the characters are great talkers—this being most especially true of the two male leads.

So, this film script encompasses a film homage, especially to Fellini and Godard; a concentrated revisit to Geneva, a rich man’s paradise, in a house of great delight and excitement; a fascination with the phenomenon of architecture and drama of Japanese Pachinko Parlors, and with the Japanese earthquake; and a desire to return to writing complex and very English dialogue, full of innuendo and understatement, to be delivered with great irony. These are some of the background fascinations that set up the film.

But all this is perhaps to be discursive and a little disingenuous, for the desire of the film is to deal in male sexual fantasy—how it arises, according to these particular circumstances of the plot, how it develops, changes, can be channeled, made manifest, and how it focuses and finally disintegrates. It is undoubtedly a fantasy, in the spirit of Mastroianni’s fantasy in Fellini’s *Eight and a Half*, but perhaps taken a little further as befits another forty years since that film was made.

This is no social documentary. In this film there is no mention of AIDS or sexually transmitted diseases; there is no overt physical brutality to make a critical point of male supremacy or paternalism. The film is non-judgmental in grand plan, though the tone is finally mocking of male aspiration, and the females, for the most part, find a form of redemptive freedom or resolution to their various degrees of imprisonment and subjugation. It is intended to film the narrative with no overt vulgarities, to stay within the fantasy bounds as espoused by the Fellini original. On the page, it is appar-
ent that the eight women of the title are eight apparent different feminine types—to that extent, it is schematic, though the actresses may well modify this in performance.

I suspect that accusations of political incorrectness and misogyny will be on the critical agenda. So be it. To deny male sexual fantasy is naive. Male sexual fantasy has been responsible for much of the Western cultural landscape—to bring in the self-evident credentials: Rubens to Shakespeare, Cranach to Vermeer, Wagner to Byron, Goya to Helmut Newton, Canova to Modigliani, and as mentioned in the film, Renoir to Maillol. Male sexual fantasy has obvious and inevitable Darwinian implications. Despite private and public denial, extremes of feminism, accusations of laddishness, new sexual polarizations, and journalistic exploitation, male sexual fantasy is a “given” and is to be reckoned with.

Having said that, the tone of the film is laconic, and ironic, and if indeed “men think of sex at least once every nine seconds,” as the adverts suggest, then indeed also, according to Confucius and oft-quoted by John Cage, “a beautiful woman only serves to frighten the fish when she jumps in the water.” The manners of mankind and womankind are equally bizarre.

NOTES

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2. For further commentaries on Greenaway’s position vis-à-vis female characters, see the two interviews in chapter 13 [Editor’s note].
Would you speak about your first film, Death of Sentiment?

It is a work of juvenilia made with a friend, Brian Love. It was made on super 8 in black and white, about church yard furniture, crosses, flying angels, typography on grave stones . . . filmed in four large London cemeteries, the most famous being at Highgate where Karl Marx is buried. It was also filmed in a graveyard close to where William Hogarth used to live, so his tomb is in it; there are references to painters as well—a romantic essay in melancholia.

One hears that many first films tend to be shot in cemeteries.

Yes, and at train stations or water falls. I made this film when I was about eighteen. I wanted to use the imagery of Millais in the Ophelia and attempted to reconstruct death as he appeared in Bergman’s Seventh Seal.

You were very influenced by The Seventh Seal, correct? I also heard you say, though, that you no longer like the film.

Let’s say that I haven’t seen it in a long, long time and I think, generally, in my new position as, I suppose, an antitheatrical, anti-narrative filmmaker, there is a way I am beginning to realize that Bergman . . . I am not so sure is really an intrinsic filmmaker; he is basically a man of the theater, and I think he would admit that, too, because, after all, he gave up practicing the cinema but still practices the theater. If you run your finger down his list of effects, and the jobs, the works he’s done, the amount of theatrical work is far in excess of that of the cinema. And I think there is a way that the apogee of his art concerns very much his handling of actors, so I wonder sometimes about his sense of mise-en-scène. I wonder
sometimes whether he is truly, truly cinematic. I always remember the greatest and most amazing thing I ever saw, was the . . . I don’t know what it was called . . . I forget what it was called . . . but it was a three-part television series about the collapse of a love affair from three different positions. He is brilliant at handling actors, but I don’t feel that he is intrinsically cinematic. I haven’t seen the films for some time; I need to keep re-addressing my opinion. But, it is absolutely true that he was the catalyst, the changing point, the road to Damascus phenomenon that really basically said . . . this is what I’m going to do.

Your films are, consistently, very much about the failure of our systems of control. Interestingly, Prospero is the only male protagonist who willingly gives up control.

You must remember, of course, that I needed to feel that I was being fairly faithful to Shakespeare. There is a lot a disagreement about the position of females, vis-à-vis Miranda, and the appalling notion that one should destroy information. Maybe I tried, in some senses, to subvert the first by writing a play called Miranda, about what happens as she turns the tables on everyone when they go back to Milan; and second, at least I indicated the possibilities that we should watch out about the destruction of books. Shakespeare says that the books would be drowned, but I also burned them in order to remind us of Salman Rushdie’s being burnt, the KKK burning books and, of course, the great pre-Holocaust situation of burning books in Nuremberg as well. But I think that since I took The Tempest and I utilized Gielgud, who is a great Shakespeareanist, there is a way that I was pretty faithful to the tenets of the original argument. But, as regards everything else, we are into fruitful guess. You must know also that in England a lot of people said about Prospero’s Books that there was far too much Greenaway and not enough Shakespeare; and it was also considered absolutely anathema that I should introduce material of my own! I don’t think Shakespeare would have objected.

Are our systems of controlling chaos putting us out of control?

I wouldn’t be dogmatic about that, I would just argue that all our systems are very much constructs, even systems that are held very dear—like religious belief—and that they are only useful in small pockets, either for individuals and communities, historically and geographically, they fit time and place, they are conveniences; it is extraordinary that a few instructions to a few Jewish shepherds on a hill in Palestine have created the whole mess of Christianity. But it has to do with need and desire for systems, I suppose. And it could be said that some systems fulfill obligations
much better than other systems do. Mithras, for example, came into being as a religion exactly at the same time as Christ and became an extraordinary religious concern for the Roman armies; but it obviously did not satisfy sufficiently because, ultimately, it was religion that Constantine chose and not the cult of Mithras. So there is an indication that some systems are more applicable, more attractive, fulfill more notions, but ultimately they are still constructs.
Why, do you suppose, were the Baconian and Cartesian systems the ones to take hold in the seventeenth century?

Again, it is a complicated position, but there is a way in which the increase of knowledge always tends to break down systems fastest, and I suppose the whole final post-Renaissance excitement about knowledge permeated down from the upper echelons of the academicians and moved down into moneyed classes; and moneyed classes could see the ideas would be very profitable to them. So I think it’s a mixture, as always—as I’m sure Marx would say—the connections of information and money, ideas go where money is; language dies when the power to talk about money in that language goes. Welsh, well, Welsh is non-existent because nobody talks about money in Welsh.

Do you think of yourself as Welsh?

My mother is Welsh. I suppose in Great Britain you would take the nationality of your Mother. It’s difficult if we follow the generalizations . . . beer drinking, alcoholism, Celtic fringe, rugby supporters; none of these things are particularly characteristic of my way of life; French intellectuals always try very hard to draw a parallel in terms of my fantasy, my sense of romance, and slight sense of melancholia, but I think they are trying to twist the case around their own particular theory. But it’s interesting, in France you would get the Breton versus the rest of France, and a lot of Bretons would make a comparison of Brittany to France, Wales to England—and even stronger, maybe, in terms of Catalonia and Spain—but I think they are probably overpushing under the circumstances. It is interesting now because in the European Common Market the Welsh are very good Europeans, much much better than the English; I think it’s because they are a minority, they see the value of Federalism, they can understand the fact of polyglot communities, so I don’t think they want to become members of the European Community just to hit England over the head. I think, intrinsically, they are better as a Federalist people.

But before we talked about Welshness, you were saying something else that was interesting . . . what where we saying? We were talking about systems . . . Well, I prefer to be a Darwinist, certainly, than the new neo-Darwinism. You’ve read the Selfish Gene, Richard Dawkins. There is a big wash now of new thinking about Darwin, but it does not particularly change the notions of evolutionary theory or alter the Origins of Species, but it’s coming back again because we have new information, primarily about the computers as a methodology to explain the world, and also even more important, the DNA . . . we’re now being able to push Darwinism, in terms of the evidence, much much farther forward, so I think, finally, among intellectuals, certainly in Western Europe, we can grapple really
importantly with Darwin’s central message—which is far too difficult and far too reductive for most people to grapple with—the basic notion that man is eminently very material and materialistic, and the only conceivable reason we are down here is to procreate, and that basically life is totally and absolutely purposeless; so finally, for the first time, we can forget God, Satan, the Communist Party, Freud, and our mothers. We are on our own, which I think is FANTASTICALLY liberating, and which would also prove that all the other checks, all the other codes, all the other organizations of our lives are human constructs, which we have attempted to invent in order to attack the notion of purposelessness.

You have often been accused of antihumanism, particularly in relation to your treatment of characters as props.

They are ciphers, they are coat-hangers on which to hang ideas. I have repeatedly complained about the tyranny of the actor who uses cinema as an exhibitionistic playground for his own virtuosity. And going right back to Draughtsman’s Contract where Anthony Higgins, after he’s seen the film, said, “Very nice film, Peter, but where the hell am I?” That’s an anecdote that describes the egotism of the actor, but also fairly propositions the sort of cinema that I am interested in. It’s part Brechtian alienation, it’s part distance; but I want to make cinema a total form and not just a vehicle for psychoanalytical examination, because I don’t think it’s any accident that four months before the Lumières invented, or patented, the camera, Freud wrote his first essay on female hysteria; and proto-Freudianism and the psychodrama have continued with a history all the way through, all the hundred years. But we all know there are so many other ways to tell stories, so many other ways to develop notions of an idea, that we shouldn’t all just get stuck in this local mode of operation, which I feel, going again back to part of your question, has stopped us, literally, seeing the woods for the trees.

The advent of writing, and later of print, changed the nature of storytelling. Do you see an attempt on the part of postmodern narrative to break out of this mold?

I am sure you would agree with me that the best way to tell stories is orally. So, the great traditions, which would start pre-Homer and have filtered out now to responsible parents telling their children bedtime stories . . . I don’t know about American radio, but there is a big tradition in the UK about reading stories on the radio; that tradition is very largely gone, apart from the anecdotal conversational stories that we tell one another in the course of an average day. But that, for me, is the most powerful way in which to express a story. Second, again, related to your question, text is most
responsible for changing that tradition. Gutenberg’s first revolution. We’re now in Gutenberg’s second revolution, I would like to think, but I would certainly argue that film is a poor narrative medium; it insists on giving finite images. I would use Jonathan Miller’s comparison, about the notion of reading the words “she opened the window”; it allows everybody to interpret that exactly as they wish, according to their own imaginative cultural baggage. Whereas I, if I had to utilize that as a phenomenon, to communicate, I’d have to make finite images, I would have to show the audience whether the woman had a part in the middle of her forehead, whether her eyes were blue or pink, whether there were clouds in the sky, how the fenestration was worked out, whether in fact there was a little wasp trying to get out; so there is a way in which I make a very finite image, which somehow, to me, does not have the empowering possibility to excite the human imagination. Of course, cinema is very, very powerful, but it can be more powerful doing other things than telling stories. And what’s also tragic, if you are going to organize your cinema on the novel, why not at least make it the contemporary novel? Cinema hasn’t discovered or understood James Joyce, as indeed it hasn’t understood or discovered cubism, two huge influences, not just in their own sphere, but as cross-over philosophies for the organization of thought in the twentieth century.

*How about Georges Perec?*

*The Falls* was started in 1978, which is the year Perec began work on *Life: A User’s Manual*. It was, in fact, Michel Ciment who pointed this out to me, and Michel Ciment reckons *The Falls* is an equivalent of Perec’s *Life: A User’s Manual*.

*How about Marienbad and Alain Robbe-Grillet? There are strong connections for you.*

Absolutely. The very first film script I ever wrote is called *Quadruple Fruit*, and it was intimately based on a combination of the script for *Marienbad* and his novel *La Jalousie*. I always remember being very excited by the first English translation, which had a diagram on the front page that explained the relationship of the house and the shadows going across the floor, and I was very excited by the notion that an adult piece of fiction would have a map as a frontispiece. The *Quadruple* is quite slavishly an examination of all the ideas that are contained not only in those two books, but some of the other writings as well. I think Robbe-Grillet also returned the compliment. He has written extensively on my films, often expressed a wish to meet me; we’ve sometimes crossed paths at various festivals. But I can’t say I am particularly excited about his cinema.
Were you mostly influenced by the visual quality . . .?

Everything. The concept. It is as near as an abstract film as you can ever get; it is beautifully narrative-nonnarrative; it strips away psychodrama. My general feeling about cinema is that it is too young, too much of a mongrel, too much of a hybrid, and could very, very easily be deconstructed back into its component parts. What we are looking for is the totally autonomous film that cannot be deconstructed. Let me put it another way: most films, as I already mentioned, basically exist as pieces of literature. We need to find a film-film that is wholly and typically a film and nothing else; I have found it extremely difficult to find such a proposition and Marienbad, for me, is the closest to a sheer exciting piece of cinematic intelligence I have come across. It has all the right qualities that would fulfill my obligation for a film-film and also, intrinsically, it has an incredible emotional impulse, which is quite startling and surprising if you think that it has deliberately subverted all the notions of what cinema must and must not want to be. To me, it just shines with cinematic intelligence.

Your films are filled with human bodies. There is a density, a materiality that comes forth with the presence of these bodies. What is the human body for you?

It’s the center of our existence. Without it, we can make no perspectives. Religious notions, acts of faith, intellectual ideas change every afternoon. In my filmmaking activities, when I first started, there was a basic concern because . . . well, let me put it another way. The BFI, British Film Institute, was really the center of experimental film making—that and probably the ICA, Institute of Contemporary Arts—and there was only a certain amount of funding going around and, I suppose, when I first entered this business of finding money to make movies, there is a way in which the establishment is pervaded by certain intellectual premises that are often quite local; so it was basically Marxist Feminism when I first went in; then, it was taken over by Semioticians; and then, I suppose, Structuralists, and then Deconstructionists. So, I can see, Aha! here comes the new rhetoric, here comes the new dogma. And in some sense, I’ve always been an outsider and I refuse to get involved in those little local appreciations of the world that are very fashionable and fancy for so many years. Of course, they thrust out fascinating ideas, but they should not be there at the exclusion of all else.

When I first started making movies, there were people around, like Sally Potter, who absolutely, thoroughly detested what I did. They thought I was playing with whimsy, that I was an intellectual exhibitionist, et cetera, et cetera. I put it in this context because, in a sense, we were all basic pragmatic competitors; we all wanted the same slice of the cake and the cake was not
very big. And she did her damnedest to make sure that I would never make a film. What also appalled me is that when she finally made Orlando, she tried . . . I’m being very bitchy now . . . she, first of all, tried to take Kees Kasander, my producer; then she tried to get Sacha Vierny, my photographer; then she asked Michael Nyman, my long-time composer—this is all when we were working together—and finally she asked Ben Van Os and Jan Roelfs, who were my scenery designers. It was very funny because Sacha said, “Look, this woman, she’s asked all your collaborators, she must be incredibly in awe and deeply impressed with what you do; why didn’t she ask you to make a film?” Of course, she produced Orlando, which is a Greenaway film without any spunk, without any ideas, without any drama. Of course, it was Princess Diana’s favorite film. It’s a rather bourgeois movie, without any sort of grip or gripe about it.

But by the time I made Draughtman’s Contract, I had become far too commercial for them. On practical levels, I’ve always been extremely lucky; there’s always been the right circumstance when I needed it, starting off with the personal push of Peter Sainsbury at the BFI and then Channel 4 helping us to pick up the expensive tag because, although the Draughtman’s Contract was made for only a piddling sum of money, it still was expensive for the BFI to pay. And then I’ve picked up all sorts of other funding situations, just as they’ve arisen. So, right people at the right time. Dead lucky.

However, to go back to this other notion, I’ve noticed, you know, the funding situations are often political situations, and if you are wearing the right hat, and you are appended in some sense to the right philosophical thinking, it does, for a few years, help you out a lot. And I’ve always felt very much outside of that.

I’ve heard you suggest that The Pillow Book was not the film you would have wanted to make.

Indeed. I mean, I always would have liked to make it. People are sometimes surprised, but we have something like sixteen or seventeen scripts on the shelf, in various forms. Some I really need three months to complete, but some I need four or five days. There is the other phenomenon that since some of these scripts were written several years ago, I have to revise them if I want to make them now because my thoughts have changed. But there is a way that The Pillow Book, I don’t want to suddenly make the suggestion . . . maybe I’m anticipating your question too much . . . that it was deliberately there to fill the space that was created by the demise of our latest film [The Baby of Mâcon]. There was a trilogy intended. Our next film was going to be Augsbergenfeld—it’s the name of a little tiny hamlet of a few houses not
very far away from Muenster, in Westphalia, in Northwest Germany. And Muenster . . . the signing of the treaty at Muenster that ended the Thirty Years War. And you probably know Gunter Grass’s novel *Treffen in Telgte*, a brilliant novel that brings together, hypothetically, a whole series of intellectuals right about the 1650s, and organizes them as though they took part in the treaty at Muenster. Gunter Grass is interested in this because he is thinking about the treaty of Versailles, as well, so he wants to encourage all the German intellectuals to come together again to form a parallel with the political sentiments at the end of the Second World War. A series of treatises, aesthetic and artistic sentiments, so he’s making a parallel. All the time I was thinking about *Augsbergenfeld*, I sort of had this novel in the back of my head, more like a general inspiration.

*Could you speak about your references to environmental issues in The Pillow Book, and about what I perceive to be an ongoing concern in all your films, a concern with mastery and, ultimately, with the havoc on the world that this commitment to mastery is bringing about?*

Certainly. That would certainly fulfill the general premise of what my sense would be. To put it even crudely, I’ve said it many, many times, the world is the most extraordinary, beautiful, wonderful place, and man is just fucking it up. And film after film after film, my distrust, I suppose, of the male hero, the macho behavior, the vulgarity, the philistinism . . . I suppose you could take these theories a lot further. Basically, I would support the notion of the female over the male; I always find females far more exciting and entertaining. Females are on the cusp now of the greatest revolution that is happening in the world; it’s not political, it’s not capitalistic, it has to do finally with some sense of emancipation of the female that has never been present before in our civilization.

About ecology . . . my father became, I suppose through the influence of his father, a . . . I wouldn’t call it an “ecologist” . . . in those days we would simply call them “naturalists.” He wasn’t a particularly well-educated man, but he had an enormous amount of observation knowledge. I have all his books, and they are annotated, hundreds of tiny notes. He wanted seriously to become a professional naturalist, which was extremely difficult to do in the 1940s and 1950s. Not so uncommon now, because you can earn your money through television or being associated with natural history films, you know, become a David Attenborough. But he did associate himself with quite influential naturalists of the period. You’ve heard of the explorer Scott; he had a son called Peter Scott and my father helped him set up two bird reservations, one not very far away from where we shot *Drowning by Two Interviews with Peter Greenaway 309*
Numbers and the other where I have a house now at this present moment. He was a businessman, had to keep the mortgage, the family, his wife, and his two children—me included—so he couldn’t do it professionally, there was no way to earn a living. But that was the one thing he really, really wanted to do—and insofar as I constantly had him as an image . . . you know, a lot of the men, the central characters who have not been able to fulfill their ambition . . . and the prime person in this group is, of course, Stourley Kracklite. The connections are even more personal and powerful because my father died of stomach cancer. And Kracklite is a deeply dissatisfied man who had great ambitions to build a lot, in the same way that my father had great ambitions to become a naturalist. And just when my father was in a good financial position to retire, he must have been in his early sixties, I think, maybe he was in his late fifties, he contracted stomach cancer. It took him about five years to die very miserably; my mother followed afterward very, very quickly, in the exact circumstances. I could sense that this man had not realized his interest, so I suppose you could call the film *The Belly of an Ornithologist*, really, or *The Belly of a Filmmaker*.

I come from a long line of gardeners; I have the most beautiful garden now in Wales, and I have a big garden in London. And you know, in England, there is a way that every house has to be accompanied by a garden; we are a nation of gardeners, it’s endemic. So, finally, just to say that your theorizing about notions of ecology sits very comfortably on my shoulders.

In regards to ecology in *The Pillow Book*, you seem to be critical of the book publishing industry for its contribution to deforestation. Or were you being ironical?

Well, I was being ironical; but it really serves the purpose, more important, to indicate that poor old Hoki—who is, even after Jerome’s death, desperately in love with Nagiko—now regards the publisher as being Satan, or evil. So he’ll do anything; he’ll accuse him of anything in order to discredit him. But you also notice that he has been tarred with a simple brush of street politics, because the woman he is associated with is the same who wanted to spray Nagiko earlier in the film. So it’s a reprising again, of political activity for political activity’s sake. But nonetheless, of course, I was being gently sarcastic. It mentions a defoliant, agent orange, which was responsible for destroying so many trees in Vietnam—and people. And a lot of those trees before that were used by the French in the paper mills. So there are a lot of connections running down, I suppose.

But in irony, there is not smoke without fire. So, there is a way in which I’d like people to suddenly think: here we have been enjoying the notion of pen on paper, the idea of this possibility that flesh could be an alternative—
and I think even more critically with the Holocaust, when the Jews were made not just, as most people know, into lampshades but into book covers as well. There is a collection of books at Nuremberg made of human skin. And, obviously, the notion of tattoos and the fact that also some of this human skin is made into gloves, which seems the most extraordinary thing of all, the glove of human skin over a hand. But it’s not just the Nazis, or some Nazis, that were attributed this; there are other examples in all sorts of societies all over the world. Certainly of writing on flesh, there’s a considerable tradition in Australasia, certainly among the Maoris. There is a big tradition in terms of Mayans and Aztecs in your part of the world; the North American Indian, too, practices this, and you still find even now a lot of tattooing of texts in religious sects in Calcutta, for example. And this is obviously a very dangerous and sensitive area. And it was very, very important for us to make sure that all the tattooing, or rather all the body painting, was the very opposite of tattooing, because tattooing is permanent; apart from that gesture at the very end when Nagiko tattoos the final text onto her body—and it’s particularly significant then . . . we catch her, we see her body tattoo when she is breast feeding—implying the sense of knowledge going through from the final absolute immemorial text that was originally on Jerome when he was buried, she puts it on herself. It’s like wearing the skin of somebody else. The tattoo on her body was the same tattoo that existed on . . . I think it’s number five, when the body of Jerome is tattooed. If you look closely, it has all the words in it, too; it’s based on a full-scale classical Japanese body tattoo, but interwoven in it are all the texts written on Jerome’s body. So, we deliberately made sure that the writing on the body was non-penetrative and non-abusive; it’s done with a delicate brush and I made pains in the course of the film to deliberately show you it can be washed away. So, it’s the notion of writing on skin; the skin is only temporary paper.

This is, of course, not the case with Jerome.

Indeed. But even if you consider that the worms, the damp, and the soil would necessarily wash the body away, anyway. And we go to great lengths to try and demonstrate how the body itself can often accidentally be used as a paper. Remember the sequence with the first husband, when Nagiko turns his hand over and finds he’s written a telephone number on the back of his hand. And there is also a little tiny anecdote somewhere that would suggest that before very long we will be able to produce babies out of the womb already texted. Remember the sequence around the table when all the girls get together to discuss Nagiko’s need of a meter and a half of flesh, one of her friends says, “Why don’t you make babies?”
Would you comment on your use of languages in The Pillow Book.

There are over twenty-six different languages, a series of oriental languages, and a series of dead European languages, ancient Egyptian, Latin, Sanskrit. Did you notice how, as Jerome dies with the pills, the projection in the back of the room . . . the languages are all dead languages, and they are going back and back and back in time, so in the end you get the necrophiliac language when he dies, which is first-dynasty Ancient Egyptian. So there are patterns going on explaining my feelings about the death of languages. And also the birth of languages. There’re two languages that are born in this film: there is, of course, the notion of Nagiko’s use of language and original Heian dynasty Japanese; the female writers working at that time, exclusively female, are progenitors of contemporary Japanese, because all the males used to write, I suppose, in a form of Chinese that is extremely pedantic and bureaucratic. There is a peculiar way in which Japan, off the main continent of China, is a bit like Great Britain, off the main continent of Europe. For the Japanese reading Chinese and for the . . . you can hardly call them English . . . for the people who live on the series of islands, the notion that Latin, primarily, was the universal language for the communication of serious thinkers. Well, in Japan, the women were allowed to speak the vernacular, and these writings, of course, were the basis for the way in which Japanese developed.

Another interesting thing . . . you know the word for “breast” in Hebrew—Hebrew basically was a vernacular language right up until the beginning of the nineteenth century, hardly anybody spoke it because it was a clandestine language; if I can make the analogy, it was like Cockney in London, it was a secret language, which you kept to yourself, basically working-class people. What is peculiarly interesting about Hebrew—I had a lot of correspondence about this—is that I wrote it in Arabic Western letters, and a lot of purists from various parts of the world said Yiddish should only be written in Hebrew, and, of course, Hebrew is written backward as well, which is contrary to the way of the Western world. Like Polanski would say, you must bring your heroes from the left and your villains from the right because that’s the way we read a film or read a book. The notion, I suppose, which I was trying to suggest, was that the whole of this film is about linguistic births and deaths. Beginnings and ends. In the English version, we often refused to translate in subtitles all of the foreign languages because I wanted the people to listen, I wanted the people to understand the music, and the cadences, and the rhythm. Because I have a terrible feeling—and this is obviously a political gesture—that thanks to the American monoculture of the world we shall soon have one huge English-language cinema. We can see it happening in Spain already: 50 percent of Spanish film production is now
deliberately made in English. But it’s happening in France now, and it’s been happening for some time in Germany.

For me, what is particularly moving and exciting is the final death speech of the publisher as he reads the sumo wrestler, which is deliberately not translated—you guess its meaning, if you are not Japanese.

*Did you purposefully use his buttocks for this message?*

Well, that’s what a homosexual would be interested in. The tail-piece, the coda. It’s applicable to the sexual interests, but it also implies the tail, the finish.

*One final question? Speaking of births and deaths, at the end of The Pillow Book, I see two types of births, or perhaps “flourishings” might be a better way to put it: the one-year-old child and the Bonzai tree. You kept the image of the tree on the screen as the credits roll up. The tree blooms and changes color, but it is also a Bonzai tree . . .*

You know the origins of that . . . The strategy that’s used by Hoki to bring about the end of the film is a suggestion that Jerome should be aware of the Romeo and Juliet mythology. How the two young people are ultimately destroyed by a silly mistake: one feigns death, the other one believing it’s a real death, commits suicide; the one who is feigning death wakes up, sees what she’s done, and commits suicide. So, there is a way that Hoki is so jealous of Jerome’s relationship with Nagiko that he suggests that Jerome should follow that path. So there is always a slight ambiguity whether in fact Jerome died deliberately, or whether in a sense Hoki spiced the drugs, or whether in fact he did it by taking too many pills. There is a nice ambiguity there. But you probably know that Romeo and Juliet originally came from Bocaccio, the story of Isabella. Isabella and her lover were in the same situation as Romeo and Juliet. Ultimately, it became a different tragic ending because the equivalent of Juliet’s lover was killed. She goes and finds the body and decapitates it. And she puts the head in a pot of basil and the tree flowers afterward. There is a famous poem by Keats called *The Eve of St. Agnes*, written about 1812 [1819], that again reiterates the story. So, the natural finding back again of roots, literally roots, in terms of being radical, of picking up where Shakespeare got his material . . . so there is a continuity there. And, very obviously, we have changed the head in the pot of basil to the flesh of the book in a Bonzai tree.

*Fertilizing the tree . . .*

Indeed. Human flesh is very strong in nitrogen.

*The Bonzai tree is also stunted.*

Stunted growth. We had high ambitions to do a lot more. We wanted to make the bloom . . . well, we were going to put it in a special situation in
time-lapse, so we could have seen that as Nagiko watered it, it flowered and bloomed. But at the end it was just too difficult. We were at the wrong time of year, and these Bonzai trees are outrageously expensive.

AUGUST 9, 1998—RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

Could we begin with the opera One Hundred Objects to Represent the World, which premiered just a few days ago here in Rio? This is your second opera. You seem to be revitalizing the genre. In the case of One Hundred Objects, was it your intention to make it more “popular,” or “democratic,” as some local critics have put it? I was surprised that it was staged outdoors, with the audience sitting on bleachers and with no assigned seating.

Well, that sort of thing, I think, has got more to do with the actual organization rather than to do with me. This opera has now been seen . . . I think last night was its fiftieth performance, so it has already been seen in Salzburg, Palermo, Naples, Paris, Münich, Stockholm, Oslo, and now it’s here in Rio and also São Paulo; and then it goes to several other places. And we always planned it to be an opera that you could pack away in a box, into a container, and ship around the world. The opera I did previous to this, Rosa, in Amsterdam, was so fixed to the particular opera house, with all its special technologies and all its huge crew, that it was almost impossible to move. And you know, operas are crème de la crème and very, very expensive, almost as expensive as making a feature film. And it seems a tragedy since even in a large opera house there cannot be in excess of 2,000 seats . . . 10 performances, 10 times 2, so that’s 20,000 people maximum. When you reckon with a film, you can reach 30 million people; even I can reach 30 million people in a comparatively short amount of time. So it’s always a great regret that a lot more people cannot see the operas, so here is an opportunity to turn things around. In terms of democratization and seat numbering, that must be very, very different from going to see Puccini’s Madame Butterfly at La Scala, but I don’t really have a great sort of sense of egalitarianism. It has basically to do with the organizers here. They thought it might be interesting to do it in the open air, but it will probably rain anyway . . . it did rain a bit on the first night.

Luckily, there were plenty of umbrellas being distributed. What a perfect opportunity to demonstrate one of the 100 hundred objects! (laughter)

Why have you and Saskia Boddeke called it an opera?

Actually, opera . . . there is nothing musical to do with it. It is simply Latin or Italian for “a work,” and I think it’s only through convention that
we made the association with singing. OK, maybe it’s stupid to fight convention in that sense . . . most people do know that an opera is basically drama with music. But I think “drama with music” can be very, very wide. If you take the analogous position: What is a painting, nowadays? A painting is anything you want to call a painting.

Our opera has no on-stage singing, but we do have singing on tape, and we do have a lot of spoken words, neither of which are unfamiliar in opera houses. Certainly, ever since Varese there have been taped parts of performances, and certainly there have been, since Debussy and before, notions of spoken texts as well, so that’s not unfamiliar. But, here, certainly you don’t get a female soprano standing in the middle of the stage singing you an aria. But I think ever since Phil Glass and Bob Wilson did Einstein on the Beach, we are now open to all sorts of musical experience. When they took up the genre, opera became quite a different activity than that imagined during Puccini’s time, for instance. So it is a drama with music. Whether it’s opera, whether it’s music theater, whether indeed nowadays it’s simply something on MTV, it’s all part of that exciting experience of putting drama with music.

During Monteverdi’s time, the opera was elitist, aristocratic; it was everything but a performance for a large audience. I think the relations between the public and the arts have undergone constant change, and opera is

Figure 13.2 One Hundred Objects to Represent the World. Photo Tilde de Tullio. Courtesy of Peter Greenaway.
no exception. I think this constant change is beneficial to the arts. Music, for example, has left the concert hall, gone to the theater, and then to television, via MTV.

You have collaborated with Saskia Boddeke on two projects, Rosa and One Hundred Objects. Will you be working together on Christopher Columbus?

We are indeed, yes. I am basically a filmmaker and she has a long opera experience. She has worked with people like Peter Stein; she is now working with Peter Sellers; she has worked with Bob Wilson and all those people. So, it’s very, very useful for me to have a relationship where she understands opera stage craft. All the operas, the one you saw last night and Rosa, do deal with film, so there is a sharing of the two media. So, with her skills, and my skills, I hope that we begin to make a team to do many things in the future.

Can you tell us a little bit about Christopher Columbus?

Yes, it is an opera written by a French composer, Darius Milhaud, in about 1930, I think, when there was an enormous enthusiasm in France among French intellectuals for the cinema. He had a libretto by Paul Claudel, who had done a lot of stage work and who, too, was passionately interested in cinema. When you look at the libretto, you realize it’s a cinema of great sense of illustration, so for us it’s not particularly useful to follow their instructions too well. They will say, virtually, “Columbus comes into the room.” There is no point of putting that on film, if you’ve also got an actor on stage who can come into the room. So it’s very repetitious in a rather boring way. We stripped away a lot of those ideas and have tried to use non-narrative contemporary ideas of cinema, which are much more familiar to my vocabulary.

We are shortening the libretto because it’s very long. It’s two acts. When it was first performed—it’s only been performed four times—I think the original conservative German audiences were confused about the idea of opera and cinema together. But it also has a very complicated polemic and a strange and convoluted narrative. One of the things we have done for a start is to reverse the two acts. Now, that sounds very strange, because if you were telling the story of the Little Red Riding Hood, you would have problems if you reversed. But this is so loose in its structure, that I think you can do that.

You are also working on another opera, Writing to Vermeer?

I made a film, as you well know, called A Zed and Two Noughts, many years ago, which is very much about light and the frozen moment, which re-
lates to the first cinematographer who could conceivably be called Vermeer. But, on examination of his paintings, and I suppose, stealing ideas from *A Zed and Two Noughts*, I feel there are only twenty-six fully authenticated Vermeers. There are some disputed attributions and some possible fakes, but if you look at the main body of twenty-six Vermeer paintings, they are almost all about women. They come in three groups: the first set are about women drinking; the second group are all about women writing and receiving letters; and the third group are about women playing musical instruments. So, it would seem, if we put drinking to one side, that Vermeer seems to be as fascinated about writing and about music as he was about painting. So maybe he is in fact a writer and a musician *manqué*. Perhaps he is in the wrong medium altogether! And, when the big exhibition of Vermeer’s paintings came from Washington to The Hague three years ago, a Dutch national newspaper asked me, because of my interest, to deliver a lecture. Well, in a John Cagean way I didn’t simply want to deliver a lecture on a podium. We created a drama. I took three women from the paintings of Vermeer, put them on the stage, and they were writing letters, in costume, with the spotlight, in the circumstances of Vermeer furniture, while I was delivering the lecture.

I was so fascinated by this that I began to examine it a little bit more and was very curious about the letters that these women were reading, writing, or receiving. So I decided to write those letters, and the libretto is based upon eighteen letters. There are six letters from three different women. First of all is his mother-in-law, who had a great influence on his life; there is his wife—he had fourteen children; and also one of his models. So, these are love letters, not necessarily carnal love levers, but love letters from three different women, which were all sent to Vermeer, who was a very domestic man and very rarely left Delft, where he lived and worked. But on one occasion, I think in the summer of 1672, he went from Delft and traveled about 40 kilometers, to The Hague, to authenticate a series of fake Italian paintings. He was sorely missed by his women folk, by his children. So they are writing letters. And these are the letters that were written. Now, they are very domestic, very low key; I wanted to make a work about serenity, about calmness, about that day-to-day sense of domesticity, which on some levels could be extremely boring but is the way most of us live our lives—however high we climb, whatever else we do, how public a figure we are, we are rooted, or want to be rooted. Maybe it’s the big domestic quest and dream: we need to be rooted in a spot where we feel safe and loved. It is extremely difficult to write works about serenity. Just think about all the attempts to render the life of Christ, for example. You either have something that is extremely boring
or somehow ineffectual, because we can’t believe, intrinsically, in notions of goodness and serenity. It’s pretty difficult. Most of the world’s literature and drama is about evil and revenge.

And the opera house, it’s the same opera house, with the same Dutch composer, Louis Andriessen; we are coming together, along with Saskia Boddeke, and we are going to make this for the millennium, the year 2000. It’s particularly interesting also, that the subject matter of the opera, which has to do with domestic serenity, in 1672, is played with an enormous violent backdrop: the wars with Spain have finished, Holland is independent, but there is still great antagonism between the Protestants and the Catholics and considerable political upheaval. Louis the XIV is just across the border, wishing to annex the low countries, to make them part of Northern France. The Dutch retreat and they flood Holland; they pull the plugs out of the dikes and they flood Holland. This really seems basically the end of the Dutch empire; they continue to be quite prosperous, but the golden days are over . . . the golden days of painting are finished, the golden days of Northern Dutch posterity. At the end of the opera, we flood the stage, we flood the opera house, we flood all the surroundings. End of era.
And you are also planning an outdoor event to be staged at the Piazza San Pietro, analogous to the Cosmology at the Piazza del Popolo you did in 1996?

Yes, that is planned. It is difficult; there are so many projects for next year. We are still trying to organize for Vatican permission, because there are so many political and religious problems. But there is a big event in Ghent Cathedral based on Van Eyck’s *Adoration of the Lamb*, which I hope to do next summer. And we have another exhibition on the series of *The Stairs*; this one is called “One Hundred Archetypes to Represent the World,” which is occurring in Osaka, Nagoya, and Kyoto. In most drama, whether it’s painting, or television, or cinema, you always get the same characters coming around and around, and this is an attempt to personify 100 of them. [This project has since been canceled due to lack of funding sources].

Tulse Luper Suitcases. *Are you still pursuing this project?*

Yes, the script is all ready to go. It’s quite difficult to finance because it’s eight hours long, it’s appearing as a silver screen picture, a sixteen-part television adaptation, two back-to-back CD-ROMs, and it’s also going on the Internet... so, it’s a large project. And the reason the film we are working on now is *Eight and a Half Women* is... it’s really the film between number eight, which was *The Pillow Book*, and number nine, which is *Tulse Luper*. So, you see, it’s really eight and a half. Apart from all those associations, there is a homage to Fellini. At one level, it’s like a reprise of one of those sexual comedies in the 1930s, but it’s very much advanced. So I think its attitudes toward sexuality are very much contemporary. But it starts by being an homage to all the women in Fellini films, and it finishes with a nod toward the females in Godard’s films—for me, I suppose, the two poles of my early interest.

*How is the film structured? In five acts, as in a classical drama?*

It has more to do with the Godardian notion of the intertitles, like the set up, the presentation, exposition, conclusion, and the coda. And there is a lot of writing on screen, a lot of text on screen, because it’s about a film being made about a film. One of the characters is making a film of his experiences, so when you watch the film to begin with, you think you are watching his experiences, but then you realize that’s not true; you’re really watching the film of his experiences.

*So there are continuities with The Pillow Book, in terms of exploring the word as image.*

It’s still a continuation, to try to make the screen vibrant and exciting, and to use text, to consider the notion of what is text text, and what is image image.
And the style? Similar to Drowning by Numbers?

I thought it was, initially. But as we are getting into it . . . I suppose it’s a bit like Drowning by Numbers, but it does have this self-reflexive text overload.

Do you think you will be pursuing your cinema increasingly with Godard in mind after this?

Well, he’s always been a great hero . . . the three for me . . . the triumvirate . . . there’s Eisenstein, who created cinema; Orson Welles, who consolidated it; and there’s Godard, who throws it away. And now we haven’t got any cinema. Cinema is now dead.

Do you see yourself as the “remaker” of cinema?

It’s homaging. For me it’s developing the language, examining the vocabulary, seeing where we can take the language. Let’s see if we can take it into new and exciting places.
“Man’s dubious creations are indeed like so much writing on water.”

Peter Greenaway
Peter Greenaway’s *Tulse Luper Suitcases* has been conceived as a work in progress over a timespan of three years, or, more precisely, 1001 days, under construction during this period and ever expanding to new domains and new corners of media. Thus, one could pragmatically pin the project down to 2003–2005. The centre and carrier of the suitcase project is the figure of Henry Purcell Tulse Luper, a fictitious geologist, journalist, traveller, archivist, writer with graphomaniac allures, and an alleged alter ego of Peter Greenaway himself. Luper has appeared in earlier Greenaway projects as well, such as *The Falls* (1980), *Vertical Features Remake* (1978), and *A Walk through H* (1978). Due to his strange aptitude to get himself imprisoned, Tulse Luper has become convinced that the human condition comes down to imprisonment; deciding to make the best of it, he has elevated this condition to an art form. In the process of travelling from prison to prison, he has been involved in many artistic, historical, and scientific endeavours—writing stories, doing research, modelling for painters—while trying to “imprison” the world as well, in ninety-two suitcases.

Luper, in this way, has not only become the centre of interest of jailers from all over the world, but he has also become the centre of the geographical, political, and artistic history of the twentieth century, at least in Greenaway’s version of it. As he travels from Wales through Utah, Antwerp, Turin, Budapest, Moscow, Shanghai, and Kyoto to Xanadu, his “story” covers a substantial part of the twentieth century, from 1929 to 1989, or from the discovery of uranium to the break-up of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. Consequently, nuclear power and uranium have become thematic guidelines, with the atomic number of uranium, 92, as the main numeric cataloguing element (ninety-two suitcases, ninety-two speaking characters). The story of Tulse Luper could hence be said to constitute its own network of historiographic metafiction through a maze of media.
While *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* project could be said to constitute a network of historiographic metafiction, a mosaic of media, it is so ambitious in intention and proliferous in scope that the explorer of the labyrinth is faced with an impossible enterprise. Nevertheless, two concepts, like Ariadne’s threads, are able to guide the bedazzled explorer through the Luper maze: *history* and *media*. The maze in question, unfortunately, turns out to resemble a cardiovascular network, with the threads pumping through the tissue, feeding it and making it grow in unexpected directions. Instead of finding one’s way out, one risks becoming more and more entangled.

**MEDIA MOSAIC**

Peter Greenaway—generally known as a film director but actually more of an *artisto universalis*—claims in his Cinema Militans Lecture that film has become an outdated medium, with over one hundred years in age and having reached its expiring date decades ago. The medium’s artistic possibilities, according to Greenaway, have been drained by the dictatorship of actor, camera, frame, and text. This is no reason for mourning, however; digital technologies and new media aesthetics stemming from television and web design are able to supersede film or breathe life into it again, leading to its death and to the rebirth of an aesthetic at the levels of production and distribution. Greenaway thus wants the new millennium to do away with the old gospel of film language and make way for a new mediatic diction.

The creation of a new media language envisioned in *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* takes shape at two different levels, leading to a macro/micro-mirroring structure. At a macro level, Greenaway has chosen to expand the project over a network of different media and different instances of these media. Originally, the project was meant to encompass a trilogy of feature films, sixteen television episodes, an interactive CD-ROM, ninety-two DVDs, books and exhibitions, but had to be readjusted along the way. Four feature films have been produced, recounting the life and travels of Henry Purcell Tulse Luper: *The Moab Story* (2003), *Vaux to the Sea* (2004), *From Sark to the Finish* (2004), and *A Life in Suitcases* (2005). The first three films form the originally conceived trilogy, *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*; the fourth is a concise theatrical release version of the trilogy. The musical score by Borut Krzisnik, also called *A Life in Suitcases*, was released on CD in 2006.

Different websites have been constructed, explaining the project while at the same time developing the Luper myth further, adding story elements, reworking footage, and guiding the explorer to earlier Greenaway/Luper
projects, such as documentaries within his *The Falls* project. These websites should not be conceived as just side effects of the project, as they constitute the very core of it, encompassing links to the other elements in the network, but also incarnating the network structure itself. The site www.tulseluper.net offers a “prologue” to the project, with a short introduction and a timeline of ninety-two days, each “day” providing ten characteristics of personas to be featured in the project. Another major site, www.tulselupernetwork.com, offers explanatory information to the Luper saga. In addition to the required introduction accompanied by sound effects, it contains stills from *The Moab Story* and *Vaux to the Sea*, along with a massive archive. Contrarily to what the name suggests, these “archives” are not storage rooms for dated web material, but contain rich databases with information, thus constituting an important part of the site. In them, visitors can scroll a timeline from 1911 to 1946 listing the main historical events of the era relating to uranium, along with Tulse Luper’s adventures and the locations where he was kept prisoner, and access many links to related websites. Luper’s adventures and the information about his whereabouts are recounted in a fragmentary manner that do not so much make sense on their own as they do in relation to the other information dispersed over the site and in the other parts of the project. The same can be said about the feature films and the other parts of the network: they gain in “transparency” through being connected to the other information in the network.

Another section on this site, called “Category,” compiles essentials to the project in an inventory: the ninety-two suitcases and their contents, the characters and their background, the experts or storytellers who appear in the movies, the atomic table, the archetypes formulated by Luper (e.g., archetypes of health: doctor, quack, nurse), and the properties of uranium. The next section claims to contain ninety-two narrative characteristics for each of the ninety-two characters, resulting in 8,464 fragments of characters and stories. A final section contains stories whose relation to Luper is not clear, but since he is known to have been a graphomaniac, it is to be suspected that he has written them as well.

Another Internet part of the project is the Webler tour, which combines immersion and information in offering its explorers a digital walk through Luper’s prisons in the *Vaux to the Sea* episodes of his life: the world of the Vaux le Vicompte palace, Mme De Moitessier’s estate, and the Arc-en-ciel cinema. Visitors can enter different rooms in which different experiences await them (music, explanations, pictures, moving images). Further on, two books/drawing exhibition projects have been released, each accompanied by their own website: “Tulse Luper in Turin” and “Tulse Luper in
Venice.” In these projects, two extra episodes of the Luper saga centre on the Mole Antonelliana in Turin and on a splintered Stradivarius violin in Venice (in ninety-two pieces, of course) through a screenplay, ninety-two drawings, collages, and paintings. A final element worth mentioning in the network is the online game, “Tulseluperjourney,” where explorers can gather fragmented pieces of information that construct Tulse Luper’s life.\(^7\) The different fragments in the network at times may, however, contain conflicting information: e.g., the Tulse Luper network site may claim suitcase 67 to be filled with green apples, while according to the Turin site it might be a dog’s coffin.

In its structure, the project mirrors Scheherazade’s network of stories—a reference that is made obvious by the 1001 days during which the “Luper Network Site” was to be under construction. Somewhat like the tales, all media refer to the others, overlapping in their use of materials, reworking them or taking over a thread that has been left dangling somewhere else. The work hence cannot be contained within one medium, but spreads over an archive of different locations and different media. What is striking here is thus not so much the sheer diversity of media involved in the project, but the mix of compatibility and incompatibility they expose: they repeat, supplement, and contradict one another in equal measure. In this sense, the Luper myth, while taking shape, remains elusive, its story morphing and changing over time. In this way, it becomes something like Wolfgang Ernst’s anarchive, as the Luper network does indeed constitute an anarchist archive, a strange mix of utter rigidity (the mania for the number 92, for filing, for lists) and utter chaos, with redundant lists and scattered, contradictory information.\(^8\)

Not only at a macro-mediatic level, but also micro-mediatic, does the project instigate a new mediatic diction. Crossovers and hybridity mark each medium in its web to the extent of questioning the concept of medium specificity. This happens on a syntagmatic as well as a paradigmatic level. The Turin and Venice books contain script text and images consecutively, while drawings, photographs, text, and painting overlap in the collages. The same is true for the websites, the Webler tour, and the game, which are all inherently multi-medial, enabling the exploration of still or moving images, paintings, lists, audio fragments, written text, sounds, and music in one digital space.

The Tulse Luper Suitcases feature films, however, deserve special attention since the project appears most groundbreaking in its renewal of the filmic language. The Moab Story, as an example, does not merely show the fictitious story of Luper in Moab in a montage of filmed scenes and sounds, but consists of a patchwork of materials from different mediatic traditions
and cultural forms. Filmic scenes of the adventures and travels of Luper (reminiscent of the picaresque novel) are interwoven with documentary footage from WWI food drops in Antwerp, 3D digital reconstructions of ancient Mormon cities in the Utah desert, and minute examinations of the objects within the ninety-two suitcases Luper has collected. The stage-like aesthetics of nineteenth-century *tableaux vivants* are evoked, as props and scenery in the films acquire meaning beyond their functional status, turning the actors into compositional elements. The minute attention to composition, colour, and light, on the other hand, calls to mind associations with the paintings of different masters from different ages. In the copious Antwerp boudoir of Martino Nockavelli’s mistress, Rubens is not far away, nor are the majority of the baroque, Renaissance, and even premodern European masters. There are references to musicals and operas, with a group of characters bursting into a song about the Flemish fox Reynaert, and the farm being a model of agriculture in a strange mix of *Heimat* marches and school rhymes. Calligraphic attention to textual signifiers comes to the foreground when words and texts appear on the screen, at the same time or after having been uttered by the characters. The most prominent references, however, are theatrical in nature. The stage-like presentation of the scenes and other scenic arrangements are obviously borrowed from the theatrical tradition, as are the eminently dramatic acting in which the actors recite their lines while addressing the audience.

Nevertheless, more important than the syntagmatic juxtaposition of different media traditions is the paradigmatic superimposition of techniques and aesthetics, making the Luper language itself thicken into a choir of mediatic discourses. The different languages are superimposed and windowed; shots, drawings, paintings, texts, writing, and digital models intermingle and overlap, or open up different windows in which different sorts of material are shown, repeated, and displayed, mosaically.

**BRECHTIAN REMEDIATION?**

The overlaps, the windows, and the patchwork of different media languages turn *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* into a beautiful mosaic of fragments rather than a coherent narrative universe. When focussing on *The Moab Story*, one notices that the inclusion of try-outs and auditioning tapes (or what looks like it) adds an estranging, Brechtian note to the whole, just like the echoing voice-track by which the same lines are repeated through different voices and in different intonations. The absence of décor, or the digital on-the-spot
construction of it, prevents viewers even more from becoming immersed in
the fiction. The Luper films could, just like Lars von Trier’s *Dogville* or *Man-
derlay*, be said to question the so-called “ontological” difference that would
exist between film and theatre. But whereas *Dogville* manages to immerse
the viewer in its intrigues in spite of the Brechtian décor, *The Tulse Luper* trilo-
gy discourse is so thoroughly different and estranging that it ensures the de-
tachment of its viewers throughout.

The combination of “Brechtianism” and “theatricality,” together with
the project’s opposition to ontological difference, however, reveals the am-
biguous position of the *Suitcases* in the media landscape. On the one hand,
the possibility of schematic construction in film opposes the difference the-
sis. On the other hand, schematicity turns out to be still a marked device in
a film, turning *The Moab Story* into a “theatrical” specimen of the film type.
The use of so many “theatrical” devices, together with aesthetics from other
mediatic traditions, contributes to the perception of Greenaway’s project not
so much as an intertextual film, but as a true hybrid, indeed disturbing all the
conventions of the old film language.

The Brechtian dimensions, in this respect, are most revealing of Green-
away’s intentions. Brecht intended his audience to take distance from the
bourgeois ideologies inherent in theatre by revealing the mechanism of con-
struction, in this way turning both actors and audience into critical observers
of the spectacle. Nevertheless, in today’s theatre, Brechtian devices almost
seem to have become the default case, wearing out the intended denatural-
izing effect. In the filmic context, however, where realism is still the domi-
nant ontological paradigm, the mechanism is still able to obtain the desired
effect. For Greenaway’s agenda of disturbing the old film language, Brecht-
ian pro-filmic and new media devices are thus most effective tools (absence
of décor; people driving a car when there is no car; the addressing of the
camera; windowing, overlapping, collages).

More than anything, the *Tulse Luper Suitcases*’ explicit use of new (and
old) media languages is self-reflexive, focusing on its construction and on
its explicitly being digital. In this way, the films (and the entire project)
constitute a work of metafiction. Next to being a self-reflexive multi-me-
dia *Gesamtkunstwerk*, *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* project seems an investiga-
tion, even a mediatic essay, into the nature of *immediacy, transparency, and
hypermediacy*.¹⁰

*Immediacy* and *transparency* are modalities that could be attributed to the
dominant film language, the classical model as described by David Bordwell
but also the more recent discourse of the neo-baroque Hollywood films as
defined by Sean Cubitt. Peter Greenaway is so explicitly bored with these
modalities that he eagerly fights them. When defined by these attributes, mediatic languages are designed to maintain an illusion of direct access to the reality they (re)present, in order for the confronted subjects to forget mediation altogether and to be mentally absorbed by content instead of surface (i.e., mentally equating content with surface). Film as an analogue photographic medium is taken to gradually become more and more transparent and immediate, referring indexically to a filmed reality, but also providing a seemingly perfect iconic copy of that reality in real time. Strangely enough, digital technologies do not seem to counter this teleological move toward ever more reality, but push the medium even further toward what could be termed the “hyperreal.”

Evidently, transparency and immediacy in film are not absolute, since the filmic language is constructed out of semiotic material and thus contains a symbolic dimension as well. It is a language that first needs to be learned in order for it to be forgotten afterwards. The creases and cracks in filmic transparency come to the surface when viewers are confronted with old or foreign movies in which outdated or bizarre conventions lay bare the filmic apparatus. Nevertheless, generally, the symbolic and semiotic nature of film will remain masked. Virtuality, as Lisa Cartwright observed, is more connected with the reality of the experience than it is an attribute of the object itself. One could add that it is only because viewers mistake their experience for the mediatic object itself that immediacy becomes possible. It is the experiential absorption into the constructed but naturalized reality of the medium that enables the Hollywood film language to get its viewers hooked and, as Marxist or feminist critics observe, injected with its dominant ideology.

In the mechanism of hypermediacy, as opposed to transparency and immediacy, signs focus attention on themselves, hence on the medium’s reality as being a construction. Typical examples of hypermediacy can be detected in web design, with its flickering patterns and multiple windows and frames, but also in TV aesthetics such as those featured on CNN, with text bars and index notations scrolling by, correspondents communicating from two different frames, and logos appearing on the surface of the screen. The illusion of one coherent virtuality gives way to a feast of signifiers and mediations. The viewers of a hypermediate screen will be less inclined to be absorbed into the coherent virtuality of the framed worlds, as they are constantly being reminded of the existence of other flickering virtualities whose juxtaposition annihilates the absolute status of the parts. In this way, viewers are stimulated to more easily shift attention from one text to the other, to zap between the different windows on the screen.
It is not difficult to decide in which direction Greenaway envisions his new media language evolving, since *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* films, with their multitude of overlapping media and frames, are a landmark of hypermediacy, at least in respect to the medium of film as we know it. The *Luper* project is “windowed” almost in the Microsoft sense of the word and indulges in its own being-layeredness, its own being-digital. Different windows are opened at the same time and become superimposed, so that it is no exception to see actions in a “stage frame” against a calligraphic background while, in two symmetrical frames, a guide angled from the right or the left side respectively provides the viewer with further information. Footage material of all sorts is collaged together as props appear, disappear, or are even being constructed on the spot. The construction of the medium is stressed to such an extent that viewers can see the contours of a schematic car change into a real one or a focal square scan over a scene of soldiers, “revealing” a similar but different reality underneath. Sequences are shot from different angles, mirrored, mosaically juxtaposed, and repeated over and over again.

Behind the self-reflexivity of Greenaway’s hypermediate new-media language stands an agenda that is strongly emancipatory, and it is in this respect that Brecht’s approach comes to mind again. Whenever viewers risk being absorbed into the reality of the staged events, the medium will throw them back to the surface, distancing them emotionally from the story world by providing comical music, encyclopaedic information, and exhibitory material, by numbering and indexing physical actions, or by drowning the viewers in the multiplication of frames. In this way, it becomes quite impossible to forget that what one is looking at is a mediated series of events and a mediated exhibition of so-called historical material. This mechanism could obviously be interpreted as a critique on the reign of Hollywood aesthetics by which viewers are absorbed into a universe of dominant, often reactionary, fiction. 

Next to its self-critical dimension, the emancipatory aspect of the project has a truly educational touch that is incarnated by the CD-ROM-like feel of the entire project, and the neo-Enlightenment obsession with filing and mapping out twentieth-century knowledge and art. These elements can be observed in the websites (the Webler tour, especially, has an Encarta feel to it), the game, the exhibitions and accompanying books, and also, to a high degree, the films. Rather than inducing a “feature film” experience, the *Luper* DVD mimics the effects of a CD-ROM guided tour, or an Encarta exposition, taking the user through stories, art, geography, and history, while also wanting to educate them in the new media language envisioned for the future of film.
HISTORIOGRAPHY METAFIGTION

The Tulse Luper Suitcases, aside from its use of new media languages, provides an investigation into the relation between history and media. Rather than limiting the mediatic focus to the signifier side of the project and the historical focus to the side of the signified, Greenaway proves the two to be intrinsically intertwined in a more complicated fashion. It is in this respect that his work mirrors the poetics of historiographic metafiction, as Linda Hutcheon has defined them. According to Hutcheon, this artistic incarnation of postmodernism is formally parodic, but overtly historical and political, constituting a contradictory enterprise through the installment of conventions that are instantaneously destabilized. Greenaway’s engagement with the depiction of the history of the twentieth century seems a highly contradictory enterprise as well, given the fact that the Suitcases project is presented as largely fictional while being an explicit construction of hypermediacy. There are seemingly irreconcilable binarisms at stake, such as the opposition between the reality of history and the fiction of the Luper project; the truth and stability of what really happened and the playful construction presented by Greenaway; the unincarnated omniscience of objective reality and the awkward contextualization provided by the Luper point-of-view. The fact that the whole project is structured around a fictitious figure and the arbitrary number 92 seem to turn The Tulse Luper Suitcases into an extremely inept enterprise for the reproduction and representation of the history of the twentieth century. Figures should be contextualized by history, not the other way around.

Nevertheless, the apparent contradictions and aporias lay bare the inherent contradictions in all representations of history, whether they are immediate, transparent, or hypermediated. The Tulse Luper Suitcases does not so much position its own mediacy against the absolute stability of history, but on the contrary, it dissects history as itself a mediated construct, while at the same time stressing the self-legitimizing truth value of art. In Hutcheon’s words: “What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past [. . .] In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past ‘events’ into present historical ‘facts’” (89). It is Peter Greenaway’s view as well that history does not exist in an absolute, unmediated form, but always will be filtered through the perceptions, interpretations, and values of subjects as experiencers, filing instances, historians, and readers.15 The original truth does not exist, not so
much because it gets lost in mediation, but because there is no truth prior to mediation and experience. The event “as it was” can thus never be recovered in an absolute form.

*The Tulse Luper Suitcases* poses an indirect accusation toward so-called historical media that claim to provide the truth “as it was,” but which are no less constructed and mediated than the Luper project. This is especially true of the traditional historical film, but also of the hypermediate history books, documentaries, educational CD-ROMs, and news reports; even historical material exposed in museums cannot be absolute. Nevertheless, the historical conscience of twenty-first-century citizens is largely defined by what has been featured in films, mixed with history lessons, documentaries, websites, CD-ROMs, and visits to the museum. Greenaway’s explicit mixing of fiction and facts in the media through which we have come to know history, puts our knowledge in a new light. In its use of these channels, *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* mirrors the way we think about history while also destabilizing our certainty about it.

Greenaway’s game with history in *The Tulse Luper* project provides an interesting perspective toward both the New Historicist paradigm and the Historizismus paradigm as described by Fredric Jameson, although it cannot be situated in either of these camps. It is the New Historicist paradigm that has been particularly valuable in stressing the importance of the historical context in the appreciation of texts and objects, thus in stressing the changeability of their interpretation. The human condition, from this perspective, is just like Luper’s condition: one of imprisonment. Everything is determined and coloured by the epistemic discourse in which it is situated. In this view, Luper, in addition to being imprisoned by the brick walls of his cells, is of course also imprisoned by the epistemic powers that position him. To the German-American Mormon masculine power in Utah, he is a British underdog, an enemy at war, and a sexual rival; at the same time, he is thought to be the Messiah on a white horse. The difference between Greenaway’s approach and the New Historicist one, however, is that the latter still searches for interpretations that come closest to the way “it really was,” looking for remnants of cultural energy, trying to read objects through the epistemic lenses of their originating period.¹⁶

*The Tulse Luper Suitcases* celebrates the archaeological search of New Historicism through history (Luper, as well, searches for lost cities), and the importance of archiving seemingly unimportant objects as traces that possess the energy of the period (Luper’s obsession with collecting); at the same time, the Luper project (as well as the Luper persona) nostalgically and ironically abandons this search and turns history into a toy for creativity and
imagination. The contestation of the ability ever to know the ultimate objects of the past incorporates this project into the postmodern paradigm again. To the great disappointment of his German jailers, Luper’s documents, written during his WWII stay in Belgium, do not contain political and historical evidence, but are mere creative scribbles. Also, the project itself does not rebuild history as it was, but takes it as a stepping stone for something else, for the creation of an artistic network. The main imprisonment Greenaway talks about is not physical, discursive, or historical in nature, but mediatic and personal. Contrary to the New Historicist conviction, he stresses not so much how discourse is shaped by its historical period, or how a historical period is shaped through its discourse, but how our perception of history is shaped through the discourses of our media. According to the highly arbitrary and bizarre personal profile that is provided of Luper, it also becomes clear that every person is imprisoned within their own subjectivity.

Luper is defined on the website as a man with extremely bizarre, personal, and most of all arbitrary convictions, such as “drank himself insensible every night,” “drew breasts on the back of envelopes,” and “had a gross prejudice against Muslims, Japanese, Belgians and women who made mouth to mouth contact with dogs.”17 These convictions become even more haphazard when it turns out that Luper’s values have been intermingled with those of other filmic characters (the most obvious ones being those where the first person is indicated with “she”) so that we cannot form a consistent filter through which to view the events. The framed “guides” that address the viewers and provide extra information from their side seem completely detached and objective teachers, since they are not presented as belonging to any historical reality; even their validity is mocked by the fact that they mix historical information with trivia about the fictive Luper.

Another element laying bare the arbitrary and constructed nature of history is the disproportionate importance that is attributed to the banal and seemingly arbitrary number 92. Nevertheless, there is logic in Greenaway’s madness, since 92 turns out to be the atomic number of uranium and uranium could be taken to be the central element in the twentieth century. After all, the twentieth century was the “atomic century,” with Nagasaki, Hiroshima, Tsjernobyl, the arms race, and the Cold War. The logic behind what seems at first pure haphazardness reveals the haphazardness behind the logic we use to date historical events. If the birth of Jesus Christ is a valid event to start a new era, why could the atomic number of uranium not be a valid number to build a historical account of the twentieth century? Where does the seeming naturalness of our decimal system come from? How is it that
10, 100, and 1,000,000 have become legitimate numbers for counting, collecting, assembling, and filing, and not 92, pi, or the binary system? Greenaway hence acknowledges the human urge to make order, while pointing out that the order that is being created is just that, a human construct; in this acknowledgement he once again parallels the poetics of historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon, 41–42).

Greenaway’s appropriation of history to his own artistic ends and creative whims could also be taken to be exactly the opposite of the New Historical approach, and reminiscent of historicism as described and criticized by Fredric Jameson. A historicist approach allows for borrowing freely from history, without bothering about the original truth or context (a practice present in literature and film, but even more so in fashion and design). It is true that Greenaway indeed uses history as his playground, but he is far less irreverent than it may seem at first. Although the project abandons the search for the always already lost truth, it shows great passion for the artistic and sociological history of humanity, for its works of art, its stories, and its architectural gems. The project radiates encyclopaedic ambitions despite its mythomania; in this respect, Greenaway resembles a humanist rather than the postmodern hysterical envisioned by Jameson. His parodic mix of fact and fiction, of different discursive systems, should not be perceived as a trivial play, especially when the Brechtian dimensions are brought into mind. *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* hence fit Hutcheon’s picture of postmodern poetics better than the Jamesonian one, as Greenaway’s enterprise is clearly engaged, critical, and emancipatory. “Like Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*, parody works to distance and, at the same time, to involve both artist and audience in a participatory hermeneutic activity. Pace Eagleton and Jameson, only on a very abstract level of theoretical analysis—one which ignores actual works of art—can it be dismissed as a trivial and depthless mode” (Hutcheon, 35).

**SIMULACROUS MEDIA UNIVERSES**

The postmodern paradigm hence remains useful to the project when envisioned in Hutcheonian terms, in its engagement with the poetics of historiographic metafiction, its commitment to history, its demystification of the everyday process of structuring chaos, and its acknowledgement of its own discursiveness. Nevertheless, in its use of different media, the project manifests aspects that come closer to the postmodern paradigm as Jean Baudrillard has envisioned it; next to approaching the construction of history, it focuses attention on the reality of media. Not only do the films, the websites, the
games, the exhibitions, and the books comment on the creation of our opinions about the past or about reality, they also shape a reality.

In the logic of Jean Baudrillard’s “Simulacra and Simulations,” media in a first phase could be defined as maps that indicate what happens on the terrain, how to interpret the information, and which logic and laws to position behind them. Nevertheless, within this conceptualization, gradually, doubt arises as to whether the map is truthful, and whether it does not distort reality. As has been discussed in relation to historiographic metafiction, the representationality of the map (or of any discourse) and the way the terrain itself is questioned by it (or by the notion of discursiveness) can be foregrounded. Still, Baudrillard takes the process one step further, as in his view the map will eventually be turned into a simulacrum, operating on itself without reference to the original terrain. A similar impulse can be observed within Greenaway’s *Tulse Luper* network. Where in a first impulse the parodic and Brechtian mechanisms could be taken as critical engagements with discursiveness and history still linking the project to the outside reality, the network, in some sense, may come to constitute a universe on its own.

The language in this media universe is critical and emancipatory in intention, but also highly idiosyncratic, embalming the viewer or surfer in mediation. Originally, due to the utter novelty of the network’s poetics, the viewer or surfer is denied access to it, is ejected by it. The Brechtian mechanisms ensure that users and experiencers will not become immersed, as is the case in regular Hollywood movies, but are stimulated to reflection and contemplation. Users are made to notice the mediation rather than the universe, which thus becomes “inaccessible” in a sense. The project itself becomes almost “inaccessible” too, as its language is self-consciously counter-filmic and hypermediate, but also as the project demands a commitment from the audience that is unheard of in the world of filmic or new media entertainment. The languages of the different parts are new and in this way difficult, while the different parts of the project are at times contradictory. At the same time, these parts do not make sense on their own in the same way they do in relation to each other. The explorer of the network who wants to make sense of it all (or not) will hence have to explore the entire territory, but due to the scope of the project that is no sinecure. The trilogy in itself lasts five hours and forty minutes, and in its entirety it has only been shown at a few film festivals or in an occasional art house cinema. Only *The Moab Story* is available on DVD while the other films remain frustratingly elusive on the market. Also, the other aspects of the project demand several hours of scrolling, clicking, reading, viewing, and making sense.
One could say that it is impossible to become immersed in the project when being confronted with it for the first time; paradoxically, in order to make sense of it, one has to engage oneself in it, spend time and effort in such a way that making sense implies becoming immersed after all. Making sense of the network implies exploring, searching for contradictions, discovering. Exploring implies becoming a researcher, learning how to read the Luper languages. Although at first the project might thus deny the researcher access in a Brechtian manner, after having spent hours discovering the network the explorer is not refused admittance anymore, but sent from one site in the network to the next one, becoming more and more entangled in the process. The network in this sense becomes a prison again, stressing how media in general and the Luper network in particular cannot offer an escape from that human condition which Luper has pinned down to imprisonment.

The explorers, while researchers in the Luper anarchive, will be given the chance to expand it as well. They are invited to generate new sites and to create art-works extending the Luper saga. In some sense, the Luper network cannot be read, it can only be written. Understanding the Luper network thus means becoming engaged with it and immersed in it. The explorer is like an imprisoned Daedalus who, however, has never been able to read the architectural blueprints to the network from an outside point of view; such blueprints have simply never existed and the maze can only be constructed from the inside. The only way of constructing, expanding, and understanding the network is by becoming a prisoner inside its confines. It is in this sense that the network resembles Baudrillard’s simulacrous map, which is territory as well: the only architectural map to the emerging maze is the maze itself; rather than referring to something in the extra-mediatic world, the network has come to stand on itself, generating its own, however contradictory, reality (which Peter Greenaway would call “unreality”).

*The Tulse Luper Suitcases* has come to constitute a contradictory postmodern enterprise: on the one hand, engaging with the representation and discursiveness of history in a critical and Brechtian way; on the other hand, constituting an idiosyncratic simulacrous universe where a few converts can become more and more entangled and imprisoned in the web, while helping it to expand. The *Tulse Luper* network should be situated at the intersection of fact and fiction, mythomania and brilliance, idiosyncracy and critique. Peter Greenaway has built and maze that is difficult to enter, but even more difficult to escape from.
NOTES


2. www.tulseluper.net.


4. “A Life in Suitcases is the two-hour theatrical release version of the story of Tulse Luper as portrayed in *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* trilogy. Different from his earlier thoughts, Peter Greenaway now presents the entire story in a single feature, which in reality creates a whole new feeling and look to the film; it is lighter, faster paced, less dense. Furthermore, it includes a lot of footage never before seen in the *Tulse Luper Suitcases* films” (my italics): http://www.fortissimo.nl/catalogue/title.asp?filmID=270 (April 16, 2007).

5. Many of the databases on the site—like the characteristics, stories, and film stills—appear to be under construction: instead of 8,464 characteristics, one finds only ten; only twenty-one of the supposedly ninety-two stories are listed, and only three of them are accessible. The site mainly features *The Moab Story* information, while *Vaux to the Sea* and *From Sark to Finish* are still under construction.


8. See Wolfgang Ernst, *Das Rumoren der Archive*.

9. The ontological difference between film and theatre indicates that whereas in the theatre non-realistic or schematic devices can be used in the construction of a reality (e.g., a cardboard box to represent a castle, a broomstick to represent a horse), such uses in film are considered ridiculous. Ed Wood’s depiction of plastic UFOs dangling against a cardboard sky can therefore not count on the viewer’s willing suspension of disbelief.


11. It must be observed that media do not necessarily have to be either one-dimensionally transparent and immediate or hypermediate. Practically all media reconcile both modalities so that the classification of a certain media product can only happen relative to the tradition from which it stems or against which it is positioned. In comparison to the average feature film at the beginning of the twenty-first century, *The Moab Story* is more hypermediate and less transparent and immediate. Compared to a sixteenth-century emblem book, it is more transparent and immediate to us, but maybe it would not be so to a time-travelling sixteenth-century monk.
12. In this context, I take virtuality as a synonym of the duo transparency and immediacy.

13. Theorists that fight against such implicit dominant ideologies want to reveal the systems and the signs by which these are constructed. Laura Mulvey’s dissection of the triple cinematic male gaze (in character, apparatus, and viewer) is a case in point, but also Jean-Louis Baudry’s analysis of film as inherently conformist and reactionary in essence, even when it features black lesbian terrorists burning down the Pentagon.

14. See Jean-Louis Baudry’s “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus.”


16. See Stephen Greenblatt’s and Catherine Gallagher’s *Practicing New Historicism*.

Smoke from a late summer bonfire, mixing with the mists left behind after early morning rain, drifts through a copse fenced against a meadow by a rickety wooden hurdle. A stooping gardener rakes together dead leaves and newly weeded divots to add them to the smouldering flames. From the depths of the wafting grey smoke, there emerges a man dressed entirely in white astride a bay horse. Carrying a small wooden box, he dismounts and walks stealthily toward a couple dressed in black, deep in conversation, conspiracy even. As the elegant horseman, Mr. Neville, nears them, he bows ostentatiously to Mrs. Talmann, his patron, and to her companion, who is wearing a black wig and an austerely styled hat; they, in turn, allow him to enter their discourse.

It presently emerges, in this scene from The Draughtsman’s Contract, that Mr. Neville, the itinerant draughtsman who some days earlier had been contracted to create thirteen images of this Wiltshire estate, has been away for a short time at Radstock, the seat of the Duke of Lauderdale; he has returned to the Compton Anstey estate with a tribute of hothouse fruit: “three pomegranates from Lauderdale’s gardener, reared in English soil under an English sun.” His absence means that he has missed the pompes funèbres of Mrs. Talmann’s father, Mr. Herbert, whose bloated corpse had been found dead in the moat at the backside of the house, his white powdered perruque, when he was dragged from the water, looking for all the world like the fleece of a drowned sheep. By way of respect, Neville asks after Mrs. Talmann and her widowed mother, with both of whom he has been sleeping. “We are both thriving,” Mrs. Talmann responds. Yet that “both” is ambiguous since it might not simply refer to the two women, but also to Mrs. Talmann and her
guest; at this point, she introduces the man in black, a Dutchman with a common name:

Mr. van Hoyten is to consider for us a new management of the grounds in an entirely fresh approach. He has come at our request to soften the geometry that my father found to his taste, and to introduce a new ease and complexion to the garden. Mr. van Hoyten has worked in The Hague and he has presented Mr. Talmann with some novel introductions which we will commence next spring. He is a draughtsman too.

The final sentence of her introduction carries a lethal barb; here is a foreign draughtsman who doesn’t simply draw what he sees in black and white, which has been Neville’s method, but offers “a fresh approach” and some “novel introductions.” Specifically, he has plans to make a dam and flood the lower field, so creating an ornamental lake.

Immediately after this introduction, Mr. van Hoyten’s face is seen in close up, framed by the wide brim of his hat, the sneering curl of his black wig, and the white knot of his cravat. Out of his mouth comes a short speech in barely audible Dutch, in which Mr. Neville’s name is uttered. As he speaks, Mrs. Talmann nods in approval, clearly understanding the import of his message: the Talmanns’ grand designs for the estate will give Mr. van Hoyten “no problem.” And on this optimistic note the pair break away from Mr. Neville and walk down toward the river, the Dutchman flapping his arms animatedly, as if he is trying to fly over the water he is planning to introduce to the nether lands of the estate. As Mrs. Talmann and van Hoyten fade into the distance, imagining the inundation of lower fields, Mrs. Herbert approaches; the draughtsman, peeved at the demeanour of this soberly dressed foreigner, asks her facetiously: “Why is this Dutchman waving his arms about? Is he homesick for windmills?” To which Mrs. Herbert offers this withering rejoinder: “Who knows? He’s a man with new ideas. . . . New ideas demand new methods, perhaps.”

When asked why van Hoyten appears in the film, Greenaway responded: “He’s the new man, a shadow of Mr. Talmann, one of the Northern Europeans appearing for the first time in English politics and life. He turns up all in black, looking like a Puritan” (Gras, 17). But not behaving like a Puritan, intent as he is on demonstrating how the verdant English countryside might augment his own nation’s embarrassment of riches, a massing of cultural capital that possibly reached its zenith with the development in 1685 of the royal palace at Het Loo in Apeldoorn by William III—the future king of England—whose efforts transformed the estate into “a work of
prodigious expense, infinite variety and curiosity,” distinguished by its arrangements of orange trees, its shady arbours, its view from the banks over the statues amid the parterres. A similar ethos might be found in the gardens of Heemstede, near Houten—perhaps the provenance of one van Hoyten—where the highlight was a walk through a garden arrayed with statues and fountains, culminating in an ornate passage into the orangerie, which held a fantastic collection of fruit trees and exotic plants (Harris, 42).2

Certainly, at the time, new ideas were emanating from the low countries of northwestern Europe, flowing out, in particular, from the Dutch Republic. “The Dutch are great Improvers of Land,” wrote William Mountague in his Delights of Holland, a jovial account of a journey of several months made in 1695 (70). The Netherlands, shot through with an abundance of water and lying a couple of metres below sea level, immediately made an impact on the consciousness of the traveller from abroad; the English poet, Andrew Marvell, characterised Holland as the “indigested vomit of the sea” (252). Yet the canals in the towns, the ditches in the meadows, the waterways that were travelled by horse-drawn barge, the embankments and dams, the windmills that pumped the polders free of water, and the locks between the Haarlemmermeer and the river Lj all bore witness to the Dutch Republic’s affinity with water, its expertise in hydraulics, and its drainage techniques that turned reclaimed land into a truly cultivated landscape: “Maps and views of the Dutch countryside in the 17th century image it as vast tracts of drained land, reticulated by canals, in which the ordered squares of pleasure gardens seem diminutive moments of control that owe their fragile existence to the systematic control of the larger landscape” (Dixon Hunt, 43).

Yet it was precisely these reclaimed lands that filled some travellers with alarm at the thought of the dangers and the threat of flooding. The Dutch Republic’s extraordinary ability to generate wealth was grounded by the need, equally pressing, to maintain a watertight unity of provinces. If the Dutch regarded their history as the transformation of catastrophic deluge into good fortune, then the struggle with the elements of land and water commanded grudging respect, especially from English travellers who came to realise that the considerable technological knowledge the Dutch employed in mastering the waters was a highly marketable commodity.3

Hence, while the German Mr. Talmann has great plans for the estate, the Dutch van Hoyten has the skills—and the culture—to execute them. Yet, beyond his supplanting of Mr. Neville in The Draughtsman’s Contract, the Dutchman enacts a larger role in Greenaway’s oeuvre. He represents the nation whose distinctive achievements have played a fundamental role in the creation and maintenance of Greenaway’s own aesthetic, based as it is on
“new ideas” of cultural history inundating prior narrative forms, the softened geometries so created demanding and receiving “new methods” of apprehension. Using *The Draughtsman’s Contract* as a point of departure, the present essay examines the role of Dutch political and art historical references in Greenaway’s 1999 opera, *Writing to Vermeer*, and his 2006 installation and 2007 film, *Nightwatching*.

**DUTCH DOUBLES**

“It is the peculiar genius of the Dutch to seem, at the same time, familiar and incomprehensible”: so begins Simon Schama’s monumental account of seventeenth century Dutch culture (3). And Greenaway, too, seems to be invoking that familiar incomprehensibility of the Dutch in *The Draughtsman’s Contract*. It is striking that, in every version of the film, van Hoyten’s speech referred to above is deliberately left untranslated; instead, unmediated by subtitles, it stands proud of comprehension, the Dutch phrases undubbed into English. Even in subtitled versions of the film, the speech is left well alone, as if the Dutch language—the language of commerce, of enterprise, of the mightiest commercial city in the world—lives free, on its own terms.

The Dutch language was, according to Hendrik Laurensz Spieghel, “richer than all the tongues known to us” (Spieghel, 103) in part because it was becoming synonymous with enterprise and venturing capital. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the great Dutch poet Joost van Vondel would claim that “our speech is now spoken in the council of state at The Hague and in Amsterdam, the mightiest commercial city in the world, by merchants who exclude all un-Dutch terms” (quoted in Schama, 626). By having van Hoyten speak on his own terms, Greenaway seems to be providing the Dutch language with the space it might need to grow beyond the narrow plot of the Golden Age of Dutch culture in the seventeenth century into a postmodern aesthetic.

Greenaway has explained why *The Draughtsman’s Contract* is so explicit about the historical framework: “This time of changing values gave me an opportunity to fictionalise and invent characters and attitudes, which are not perhaps totally historically correct but do have some basis in historical fact” (Gras, 21). This is a nice distinction as Greenaway took many historical liberties; plausibility is lent to the plot, but only on a temporary basis. For instance, the premise for Mr. Talmann’s adoption of his nephew, Augustus, orphaned when his father was slain at the Battle of Aus-
bergenfeld, is rendered open to question when one realizes that the battle never took place. In a similarly duplicitous vein, the design of the ubiquitous full-bottom wigs is exaggerated and belongs to eighteenth-century France rather than the England of the previous century, while the mantilla headdresses announce Spanish tastes, a style unlikely to be flaunted by such a staunchly Protestant family as the Herberts. Indeed, in terms of the historical record, Greenaway’s Compton Anstey is anything but matter of fact. Mr. Talmann may well sound like an arrogant foreigner; at the time, there really was a Talmann, neither German nor Dutch, but an Englishman, the Comptroller of the Royal Works—“an argumentative man with an inflated idea of his own worth”—and the country house draughtsman par excellence.

Nonetheless, the context of The Draughtsman’s Contract is almost academically precise, as the date of the action is inscribed in a firm-handed blood red italic, as part of the opening title sequence: 1694. As every English public schoolboy once knew, this was the year of the founding of the Bank of England, “the old lady of Threadneedle Street”; the death of the English Queen Mary; and the passing into law of the Married Woman’s Property Act. It was, as Greenaway states, “a crucial time for English history, a moving in of a Protestant-inspired, basically mercantile nouveau-riche aristocracy from Northern Europe” (Gras, 21). The historical markers placed around the Wiltshire estate of Compton Anstey, and scattered across the brittle dialogues contained by its grounds, are no less precise: Mr. Neville’s friendship with the Duke of Lauderdale marks him out as a Catholic, or at the very least a man with “Scottish sympathies.”

Realising his allegiances, Mr. Talmann goads him with the observation that Ireland had been crushed “four years ago” at the Battle of the Boyne by the armies of William of Orange. As the monarch of the time, William of Orange had ascended the throne on the back, and at the head, of the “Glorious Revolution,” a coup d’état that had toppled the last Stuart monarch, James II, and replaced him with the Anglo-Dutch/German husband and wife “consortium.” This development marked the point at which England could once more assume the mantle of head of the Protestant cause in Europe and march with Germany and Holland, as one. Moments into the film, there emerges the motif of the orange, simultaneously a measure of the wealth of the landed gentry, a symbol of the political change of 1688, and a metaphor of dangerous sexuality:

In the present company of thirteen that offers a fair slice of England, two parterres and a drive of orange trees is a beginning, and being a lady of
Despite the presence of “Italian fashion,” notions of taste are spat out, for all that matters in this new world is “value.” Set against the English apple is the new orange, colonial and Dutch; against the English orchard, one of which Mr. Neville’s father managed, stands the hothouse—the orangerie—with its hundreds of panes of glass and artificial heat: the state of the horticultural art. The plant, laden with fruit and flowers, symbolised the results of the Stadholder of Orange’s great efforts to defend and secure dynastic, political, and religious interests. Out of this precise historical context emerges the Dutch man of ideas, van Hoyten.

Greenaway has lived in the Netherlands since the late ’90s, and has described himself as “a very happy honorary Dutch citizen.” He first came to know the country as a young art student, travelling over from Essex on the ferry across the North Sea, particularly interested in the cultural history of the Golden Age, in “the flat skies, two-thirds sky, one third land, characteristic of Dutch painting,” (Greenaway, Fear of Drowning, 75) and eager to overcome British preconceptions about the country: “A bit like Kafka, who had never gone to America yet used it as a basis for his novel from reading travel brochures, I had an imaginary knowledge of Holland: a country where children put their finger in the dam to hold back the floods, where people speak ‘double Dutch’ talk” (Gras, 31).

Despite his fondness for the nation he describes as “the wise old man of Europe,” Greenaway has rarely featured Dutch landscape in his work. It does, however, emerge in some of the bucolic scenes in A Zed and Two Noughts. As the brothers walk by across the meadow at L’Escargot, Alba’s country estate and “a watery world where canals cut through deep grass,” the landscape seems perfectly neutral: “its exteriors unreal and place-less, an unidentified landscape that is either shrouded in fog or seen at night” (Lawrence, 97). Even though its name sounds typically, cryptically, French, in fact the sylvan arcadia was filmed in “one of the Queen’s Parks between Amsterdam and Haarlem”; once it is recalled that the film was filmed entirely in Holland, the most artificial—and urbanised—country in Europe, then these scenes of supposed “wilderness” gain further resonance (Lawrence, 97). In the background, as the brothers row down the river, an artificial mound can be seen, its pointed tree line touching the horizon—a viewing point for the garden, as complete a folly as the main location for the film, the Blijdorp Zoo in Rotterdam, designed by Sybold van Ravesteyn and constructed between 1937 and 1941; a folly presided over by a sinister man dressed in a
dark suit, black scarf and hat, and a Walt Disney Pluto badge on the lapel of his coat: van Hoyten is his name, the Keeper of Owls.

As well as appearing in *The Draughtsman's Contract* and *A Zed and Two Noughts*, van Hoyten featured in several biographies in *The Falls*, living with Stachia Fallari in biography 17, and then turning up in biography 70 as the historian who believes that the VUE was a hoax. More recently, he appeared in *The Moab Story*, the first of the Tulse Luper trilogy, where in Antwerp in 1938 he is the stationmaster, “running a happy sunfilled terminus,” and the leader of the local Fascist party. However, van Hoyten emerged first in *A Walk through H* as the Keeper of the Owls at the Amsterdam Zoo and the original owner of the Amsterdam map, a “repetitive darkly stained grid” that “polarised the antagonism of Luper (me) and Hoyten (all there is to fear like greed, disloyalty and the unequal distribution of luck).” With the map, Greenaway claims, “a great deal started” between Tulse Luper and van Hoyten, but the status of that “great deal” is darkly ambiguous, the phrase implying both feud and connivance (*Papers*, 60).

Such conspiracy, the possibility that everything is connected, somehow, even when it seems separate, is a common motif in Greenaway’s work, which depicts, as a matter of fact, conspiracies against draughtsmen, artists, composers, tyrants, dukes, husbands, and even nature. In any event, whenever van Hoyten appears in Greenaway’s work, he seems to be at the heart of such unnatural and cultural activity; certainly, in *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, the flooding of the estate amounts to a conspiracy enacted against the landscape, in the name of art.

Amy Lawrence has gone so far as to suggest that, in Greenaway’s work “Conspiracies (planning and carrying out frauds and hoaxes) become models for how artists work and, in return, for how spectators make sense of fact and fiction. In watching a film, we reconstruct characters, events, and their authors by imaginatively fusing the evidence presented into a coherent unified whole” (43). That is, notions of structure depend on the effacement of alternative possibilities: the flooding of a fiction by historical detailing. Schama regards this postmodern fusion of fact and fiction as one of the central facets of the nature and survival of the Dutch in the seventeenth century, and asks: “Was there not, after all, something conspiratorial about the Dutch actually wringing out their waters so the English would be left gasping on the dry mud flats?” (*Embarrassment of Riches*, 262). A conspiracy might mean, perhaps, that beneath a seemingly simple surface, powerful currents might be flowing in and out.

By his own admission, Greenaway’s passion for seventeenth-century Dutch art stems from the fact that it carries “a heavy overload of metaphor-
ical meaning,” and that “painters were probably closest to their audience then, much more than they were before or have been afterwards” (Gras, 79). Hence, Dutch painting is eminently bourgeois, celebrating domesticity and plenty, privacy and gezelligheid, such that even the simplest detail is imbued with larger significance. As Simon Schama famously puts it:

By illuminating an interior world as much as illustrating an exterior one, [Dutch art] moves back and forth between morals and matter, between the durable and the ephemeral, the concrete and the imaginary in a way that was peculiarly Netherlandish. And the paradoxes crowd in so thickly that the culture seems almost to be designed as a contrapuntal arrangement. (Embarrassment of Riches, 10)

At the heart of that “culture” is Rembrandt’s Night Watch (1642), the militia painting beyond par, so profligate in its appearance that, according to Greenaway, it was “likely to maybe alienate the Dutch sense of modesty and their sensitivity over the concept of the embarrassment of riches”; nonetheless, except for a few years during World War II, it has always hung in a public building in Amsterdam.

A commission undertaken for the officers and guardsmen of the Amsterdam Musketeers’ Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq, Rembrandt’s painting “speaks of an impressive continuity in Dutch culture.” Schama’s account, in the magisterial Rembrandt’s Eyes, is for once almost breathless: “It is the acme of Baroque painting because it does so much, because it is so much. It is group portrait, quasi-history painting, emblematic tableau, visionary apparition, and not least [. . .] a personal statement about the transcendent, living quality of painting itself” (Rembrandt’s Eyes, 495). This is so eminently positive; yet it seems to ignore the sheer murkiness of the canvas, the shadowy corners in which indistinct forms mass and merge. It is a controversial genre picture, naturally; Paul Claudel felt that militia pieces such as this represented the désagrégation of the group, both a setting off and a coming apart; over the last three centuries, critics have objected not simply to its sprawling mess, its turbid tones, its sheer size, but the possibility that lying beneath its varnished surfaces was a submerged narrative, a conspiracy (Claudel, 31–32).

Recently, Greenaway has turned his gaze to this canvas. In the summer of 2006, on the four hundredth anniversary of Rembrandt’s birth, he was commissioned by the Rijksmuseum to create an audio-visual installation, Nightwatching, about the Night Watch. The following year, a companion piece was completed, a feature film with the same title, Nightwatching (2007). The rationale for both these works was that the canvas, like Mr. Neville’s draw-
ings, framed a murderous conspiracy. Whereas in *The Draughtsman’s Contract* the artist is the victim, his body found drowned in the stagnant moat at Compton Anstey, here Greenaway suggests that Rembrandt—the artist he would later describe as “a figurative, unheroic, republican, a democrat, humanitarian, post-Freudian, pro-narrative, antimisogynist, pro-feminist and certainly postmodernist [. . .] a history-remaker, an eclectic, an ironist, with bags of self-reflexive knowledge and know-how”—is in absolute control of his materials, and his subjects. Hence, “the painting is a demonstration of murder with the murderers all picked out in detail,” the veritable crime scene of the slaying of Piers Hasselburgh, the previous captain of the militia (“Genius Dissected”).

Rather than a static pose, as was customary, the picture depicts thirty-four figures rushing about in an apparently organized mêlée, seemingly on their way to musket practice, theatrically on home guard. At its heart is the figure of Frans Banning Cocq, the newly elected captain of the company, flanked by his lieutenant, the professional soldier Willem van Ruytenburch, a man of small stature dressed in brightly-lit angelic gold. “In particular he was gambling that Banning Cocq and his colleagues would be ravished to see themselves as if caught in the flickering light of a great drama rather than in an additively contrived, formulaic group portrait” (Schama, *Rembrandt’s Eyes*, 489–490).

However, these central figures are linked by the barrel of a musket, a temperamental weapon even at the best of times; certainly not one to be brandished at such close quarters as to risk friendly fire. Greenaway suggests that, in order to divine its secret, we should also listen to the soundtrack of the painting:

> Amongst all the hullabaloo, the dogs barking, the drummer drumming, the clattering of thirteen pikes, the harrowing of Banning Cocq, the loudest sound is of a musket shot. You can see the flame of the firing, bursting forth behind the head of the foreground shining figure in yellow, who carries the head of his halberd where his prick should be, and whose belly is groped by the shadow of the hand of his companion.

> Where did the bullet go? We should investigate, and when we do, in the end, with a little ingenious adventuring, we can plainly see [. . .] the whole gaudy endeavour of this painting [. . .] Rembrandt’s great subversive act, his *J’accuse*. (Nightwatching Script, 1)

It is an intriguing possibility, and Greenaway’s installation set out the evidence for the shooting in a dazzling presentation in which a series of images,
with accompanying sounds, was projected onto Rembrandt’s canvas, in a four-minute loop. Over the image of the militia, he projected torrential rain, blazing conflagration, and an inundation of blood, in recognition of the greatest fears of the city: flood, fire, and pestilence. But there was a greater fear still, since *The Night Watch* formed a backdrop for Greenaway’s conspiracy theory about the workings of Amsterdam high society of the 1640s, and its real terror: public exposure. In the final sequence of the installation, the colour was washed out of the picture so that it resembled a grainy black and white photograph, and the central conspirators were outlined in white, like murder victims chalked out at a crime scene, at which point Rembrandt’s canvas regained its colour, and the room was plunged into darkness.

This critically successful installation was complemented by a sumptuous catalogue, consisting of a detailed reading of the Rembrandt painting, a series of biographical sketches of the thirty-four figures arrayed across the canvas, and a large number of high-resolution close-ups of them showing the texture of the impasted paint, its various hues and exquisite highlights. The first question the accompanying text poses is unexpected, but the figure to which it applies is not unfamiliar: “Is it significant that Banning Cocq wears a satanic black outfit?” asks Greenaway. Certainly, it is a civilian outfit, and typically Dutch: “black hat, black doublet and black tasselled breeches, black hose and black shoes with bold black rosettes” (*Nightwatching* Catalogue, xiii), and white ruff, so in terms of costume, at least, this is another van Hoyten.14

At the right of the canvas, dressed in the same outfit, stands Rombout Kemp, the second sergeant-at-arms, a deacon of the Dutch Reformed Church and, in Greenaway’s view, a figure central to the engine of the conspiracy. He is governor of the Amsterdam City Poorhouse and Orphanage, and in Greenaway’s version he was accused of having created circumstances for the orphanage to be used for child labour and prostitution, a secret that Rembrandt has uncovered. Furthermore, the artist paints him pointing an accusatory finger at the main instigators of the conspiracy to murder, whilst turning his head away, perhaps in some parody of the Christian concept of “turning the other cheek.” In which case, Greenaway asks, are the pointing hands, the gestures, the vanishing points more than just compositional? Are they all in fact accusations, part of a frame-up? For instance, is the fact that there are exactly thirteen pikes in the picture, thirteen being an unlucky number in the mid-seventeenth century, significant? Or is it accidental that, as Schama has suggested, the pikes create a series of St. Andrews Crosses to reflect the arms of Amsterdam, or even that the “heavy engineering” of the painting itself follows that form? (*Rembrandt’s Eyes*, 496).
And if a little of the canvas is sliced away from the left-hand side of the painting, the characters excised become even more central, as happened to the canvas in 1715 when, still under the control of Banning Cocq, it was relocated to the Town Hall in the Dam Square. According to the preserved copy made by Gerrit Lundens of the original and intact composition, the canvas was cut on four sides so that it might be accommodated in its new surroundings. The tyranny of the framer may account for the cut to the top that reduced the arch, the one on the right that eliminated a pike and a part of a tambourine, and the one to the bottom that reduced the frontal area; however, the excision on the left-hand side is the most important since it made three figures disappear.\(^{15}\)

Greenaway claims that these cuts were made not simply to accommodate its new location, but deliberately, for the three expunged figures on the far left, hovering on the bridge over the canal in front of the Kloveniersdoelen, are the two perpetrators of the murder: Clement van Torque, “a banker and moneylender [. . .] the owner of five ships habitually anchored in Brest,” and his son, Floris “a reckless playboy [. . .] who was killed in the Hague in 1653 by a jealous husband” (\textit{Nightwatching Catalogue}, lxxv, lxxvii); and, finally, the son of the victim, Carl Hasselburgh, whom Rembrandt substituted for his father in the completed tableau.\(^{16}\)

Greenaway claimed that \textit{Nightwatching} is “an interpretation that fits the rules and the observations and the history (most of the history)” (\textit{Nightwatching Script}, 3). That parenthetical qualification is barely the whole story since he simply projected a series of personal histories onto the figures in the picture, inundating the viewer with biographical accounts about the subjects of Rembrandt’s canvas, some expansive, others skimpy. Furthermore, Greenaway reports that “it has been suggested that [Kemp] fathered two of its inmates who may be the half sisters Mareike and Marita” (\textit{Nightwatching Catalogue}, lxii). That phrase, “it has been suggested,” attempts to render the facts more objectively but is unable to disguise the probability that these facts are pure fabrications. Attached to the painting is a medallion (not painted by Rembrandt) that lists the eighteen officers and guardsmen in the painting; the remaining sixteen names are Greenaway’s invention, including the identities of the supposed assassins, the father and son. Furthermore, even if over half the names are genuine, the Rijksmuseum’s official guide coolly point outs that “only a few of the known sitters can be identified with figures in the painting”: Banning Coq, the captain; van Ruytenburch, his lieutenant; Visscher, the standard bearer; the sergeants Engelen and Kemp; Wormskerck, with shield and sword; Jacob de Roy, a pikeman; and one Jacob Jorisz, a drummer (Schwartz, \textit{The Night Watch}, 48). In other
words, most of Greenaway’s ascriptions of name to image are pure specula-
tion; he floods Rembrandt’s canvas with biographical “facts” about the sit-
ters, yet the overarching fiction—the murderous conspiracy—is protected
from the assault of truth.

Greenaway seems keen to admit history into his exhibition space so as
to protect his own fabrications, and to allow the plot sufficient space to
breathe. He does not admit to the necessity of its fiction, even though at the
very back of the crowd, in the centre of the canvas and peering over every-
one’s shoulder, there is a one-eyed man. “Is it a Rembrandt self-portrait?”
Greenaway asks; one might even go further and inquire if the figure is even
winking at the viewer: “An examination of Rembrandt’s many self-portraits
suggest that he had a condition of amblyopia in his right eye—a lazy eye,
sometimes referred to as the inward-looking eye, the eye of imagination and
introspection” (Nightwatching Catalogue, xlv). Other than Rembrandt, the
only figure looking directly “at the camera,” and at us, is Jacob de Roy, an-
other man in black who stands at the back of the picture, at the centre right,
with a pike in his hand, and whom Greenaway imagines as “a refined aes-
thete from Utrecht, a writer never satisfied with his own literary effort, so
that he never published anything. But he enjoyed imagining that his plots
and narratives could be enacted in real life” (Nightwatching Catalogue, lxi).

In the script of Nightwatching, it is this man who offers an explanation
of the conspiracy and who recommends that Rembrandt be commissioned
to paint the company: “He is not exactly an honest man but I like him. But
I also like scenarios, plots, narratives interpretations, and I am always curious
to know where they will lead. I think the painting may prompt some of these
scenarios” (Nightwatching Script, 123). In his fondness for “plots and narra-
tives,” there is much of Greenaway (and Tulse Luper) about de Roy; like
him, their narrative trajectory is ever inward, to the dark worlds where only
fiction can survive the inundations of history.

TRIALS BY WATER: THE FLOODING OF (ART) HISTORY

Despite his recent work on Rembrandt, the Leiden-born master has not re-
placed Vermeer as Greenaway’s favourite Dutch artist. Just over a decade af-
ter his homage to the Delft painter in A Zed and Two Noughts, Greenaway re-
turned to Vermeer in the ’90s, lecturing at the major exhibition at the
Mauritshuis in The Hague in 1995. And then, his imagination having been
sparked further, he approached Louis Andriessen with a suggestion for a new
opera on the life of Vermeer, *Writing to Vermeer*, that subsequently had its premiere at Het Musiktheater in Amsterdam in December 1999. The libretto of *Writing to Vermeer* is based on a real episode in the painter’s life: in May 1672, Vermeer travelled from his home in Delft to The Hague, where he spent fourteen days helping to authenticate a group of twelve Italian paintings whose authenticity was doubted. He was one of more than fifty painters called upon to do the same, between the twelfth and twenty-third of the month. Greenaway, however, decided that Vermeer was in The Hague on this piece of business from May 16 to May 28, and that he was too far from home to return even for a weekend; therefore, Greenaway’s libretto consists of letters supposedly sent to the painter during his absence by his wife, Catharina Bolnes, his mother-in-law, Maria Thins, and the fictional housekeeper, Saskia de Vries, who poses for his paintings.

Since no letters to Vermeer are known to exist, Greenaway fashioned eighteen of them himself. They recreate six scenes, and report the vicissitudes of domestic life, children’s birthdays, and illnesses; the only event they narrate is the return of Saskia, who was sent away to be married to a suitor arranged by her father, but came back to Delft after an alternative candidate was found, closer to Vermeer’s household. The texts of these letters were back projected in long lines across the floor and up a vast screen behind the stage, rolling at the rate of an autocue, and merged into images of paintings by Vermeer that appeared and disappeared on screens above the stage, and video sequences of the actors onstage taken from different angles.

These intimate letters, the fabric of the libretto, are set against the violent upheavals then shaking the Netherlands. The historical flux of the Dutch Golden Age, events that never disturb the serene surfaces of Vermeer’s canvases, is also projected over the heads of the singing women, rupturing their domestic calm. As Andriessen observed, these were “‘windows’ that break into the domesticity and serenity of Vermeer’s home life, and […] allow the viewer to see what was going on in the world at the time, in the same way that the painter Lucio Fontana slashes his canvas with a knife.”

Hence, a vast translucent screen would drop in front of the stage, picking up the projected image of one of the singers or of a detail of action, while the rest of the scene continued behind. On the back screen, Greenaway displayed images of war, or fire, or flood, accompanied by detonations and screams. The footage depicted sectarian unrest between Catholics and Protestants; the explosion in Delft on October 12, 1654, when a gunpowder store exploded, destroying much of the city and killing over a hundred people, including the artist Carel Fabritius; the crash of the tulip market in 1637 that crippled the Dutch economy for decades; and the orgy of blood in 1672...
when a new prince of Orange, William III, the posthumous son of William II, regained his father’s offices, and conspired to have an outraged mob tear the leaders of the States Party, the Grand Pensionary Johan de Witt and his brother Cornelis, limb from limb.¹⁹

At that moment of national peril, and under the pressure of a simultaneous invasion by France, England, Munster, and Cologne, the Netherlands’ new ruler opened the Oude Hollandse Waterlinie, which ran from Muiden to Woerden, through Schoonhoven, toward Gorinchem, and westward from the city of Utrecht, so inundating large areas of the country and halting the French advance.²⁰ This last vignette, illustrating this drastic means of defense, is the most dramatic: a filmed projection of the French troops invading from the south is juxtaposed with a musical quotation of Lully’s “Turkish March” from *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (1670), the sound becoming increasingly distorted to simulate the effect of the inundation on the enemy.

Gary Schwartz has suggested that, in the course of writing the libretto, Greenaway was captivated by the opening chapter of Schama’s *Embarrassment of Riches*, which offers a fascinating account of the Dutch Republic’s “Trials by Water”: “The director apparently decided that the watery ‘moral geography’ of Holland is what the country is all about” (“Some Literary uses of Vermeer,” 106). However, the conceit of the opera is subtler than that:

> Whilst Vermeer is absent, the women defend their household against the potential erosion of five liquids: ink, from an excess of writing; varnish, which threatens the life of a child; milk, which endlessly pours from the milkmaid’s jug; blood, which demonstrates the violence of political assassination; and finally, water, which ultimately sweeps them, their household, their children, and the stage, away²¹

Furthermore, Greenaway suggests that the events of 1672 had a direct effect on the Catholic Vermeer; the inundation closed off the ready supply of patronage he had always enjoyed. A ruined man, he died of a heart attack—a broken heart, some might say—in 1675. Hence, in the last moments of the opera, the three female figures stand, clad in black, the opulent mix of blues and yellows that composed their earlier costumes now dyed out, as the wire-frame skeletons of their once beautiful dresses roll down the stage through the columns of water, and the sounds of a deluge drown out the orchestral fortissimo, washing away all the music and leaving only the women’s words: “For ever and ever. And always for ever and always and for ever and always and always.” Those last words are also directed in the face of history, invoking as they do an eternity not bounded by hard fact:
The irony of history, which the staging articulates with such didactic zeal, implies the futility of human attempts to build a sensible, safe and loving world. Time is a voracious monster, death—a gaping abyss, love—does not “conquer all.” There is no hope in the world of violence, the world that Vermeer himself lived in but chose not to represent; yet this world submerged the voices of the women in the opera about him. (Trochimczyk, 274)

In material terms, this submerging demanded that at each performance thousands of gallons of water be poured out onto the singers, and then drained off into a canal surrounding the raised stage, an effect that “overwhelmed the audience,” according to Schwartz (“Some Literary uses of Vermeer,” 106). Yet, as Andriessen has pointed out, “When the Dutch opened the dikes to flood their country against the French invasion, it was very peaceful; the water quietly rose and the inhabitants were prepared for it” (Trochimczyk, 232). It was a quiet, almost secret design, not so much a deluge as a seeping conspiracy. Other historical inaccuracies exhibited by Writing to Vermeer have annoyed critics such as Schwartz, who notes that, in the libretto, Greenaway writes that “Delft and The Hague are some forty kilometres apart,” a misstatement which should have been corrected by his Dutch collaborators. The distance is in fact 14 kilometers. Today’s train ride from Delft to The Hague takes seven minutes; a coach in Vermeer’s time might have taken 70 minutes and a barge two hours. If Vermeer had gotten up early in the morning on May 23, the day of his deposition, he could have been home again for lunch, and no one would have missed him. The more the opera insists on its historical verisimilitude (the program book contains texts by John Michael Montias on Vermeer and Anna Pavord on tulipomania), the more ridiculous it makes itself. (“Some Literary uses of Vermeer,” 106)

In describing the creative team who worked alongside Greenaway—Louis Andriessen, the composer; Saskia Boddeke, the staging designer; and Michel van de Aa, who wrote the electronic music that accompanied the projections of the images—Schwartz employs a strangely evocative term, “Dutch collaborators,” so heavily freighted with the history of the most recent invasion of the Netherlands, during which some elements of the local population conspired with the Nazi occupiers to deport the Jewish community. However, to imply some form of betrayal, or to criticize Greenaway for errors of
map-reading, is to willfully ignore a fundamental aspect of his aesthetic, since he has habitually generated his own cartographies, just as he has created his unique “histories” of Northern Europe at war in, say, *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* (2003) or *Gold* (2004).

Indeed, to find fault with his work over the matter of fact seems similarly ungenerous, for the distinction of his achievement in film, musical theatre, and curation over the last four decades is precisely that it floods itself with historical verisimilitude to promote its own unique forms and fictions. Inevitably, one recalls van Hoyten’s plans, on the commission of Mrs. Talmann, to flood the lower field at Compton Anstey. The inundation will “soften the geometry” of the estate while preserving its underlying structure, making it easier to manage and “giving it a new ease and complexion.” Like Greenaway’s Netherlands, the project is less a landscape of the mind than a fluent possibility. And like van Hoyten’s flooding of the land, Greenaway’s inundation of his own artistic landscape with Dutch cultural history is precisely calculated both to protect his vision and secure its future. As such, it amounts to grand designs in the face of hostile natures.

**NOTES**

1. Jill Forbes’s review of the film sees the bigger picture: “After the political revolutions, the foreign expeditions and the French and Dutch expansionism of the seventeenth century, the dawning age will be one of peace at home and imperial consolidation. The gentry will embark on a regime of clearances and enclosures, agricultural innovation and ‘improvement’.” “Marienbad Revisited: The Draughtsman’s Contract,” *Sight and Sound* 51.4 (Autumn 1982): 301.


4. The place does not exist in any gazetteer; the nearest destination might be Ausbergen, a small village in Lower Saxony, an hour’s drive from the Dutch border. Over the years, Greenaway has frequently announced his intention to make a film entitled *Ausbergenfeld*. After *The Cook* and *The Baby of Mâcon*, he announced a project of this name that would have been the third installment of the triptych concerned with the
baroque, with art in the service of capital. The intention was to explain this point of view in a biographical film about Ausbergenfeld, an anatomist, who around 1610, set about dissecting bodies to find material proof for the existence of the soul, which according to him was physically situated in part of the brain. As material for his dissections, he collected up the dead from the field of battle.


6. Greenaway’s history is mischievous here, as it is everywhere. The Duke of Lauderdale, a Scottish politician, had died without issue, and so the estate passed to his brother Charles, whose son Richard, Lord Maitland, would have been the Earl of Lauderdale whom the draughtsman may have known in 1694. However, he wouldn’t have been in England by that date, since he fought at the Battle of the Boyne on the side of King James II, after which he retired to Limerick and subsequently went to the exiled court of James II at St. Germains. The following year he succeeded to the earldom of Lauderdale, but was outlawed by the Court of Justiciary in July 1694, a matter of weeks before Mr. Neville claims to have met him. He died in 1695, in Paris.

7. Private communication with the artist, June 2007.


9. Greenaway identifies the location of the scene in the director’s commentary included on the *Zed and Two Noughts* DVD (BFI, 2004).

10. Though he was associated with the Dutch *Nieuwe Bouwen* movement, van Ravesteyn (perhaps like Greenaway, in his turn) discovered in the dynamism of baroque the “secret of captivating the eye through many plastic details, which grow out of the main organism and have the power to bind all the parts together.” See Hoos Blootkamp and Erik de Jong, *S. van Ravesteyn* (Amsterdam: Stichting Architectuur Museum, 1977), 32. Hence, his employment for the Rotterdam Zoo project, of “ornament and curved lines in two and three dimensions, to create a silhouette” that “oriented the viewer and, imbued with fluid contours, created architectural lyricism.” See Helen Searing’s review of this volume in *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 40 (May 1981): 159–161.


15. Schama comments on the cut to the left of the painting: “Though it’s been argued that the far left of the painting was its least important area, the preserved copy of the original and intact composition, made by Gerrit Lundens, shows just how critically important those additional spaces were to Rembrandt’s intention of situating his figures in a credible urban space. The additional length of the canal railing at left (alongside which the powder monkey runs) together with the edges of the flagstones are, in fact, the orthogonal lines of Rembrandt’s perspective, leading to a vanishing point in the centre of the great arched doorway from which the company is emerging” (*Rembrandt’s Eyes*, 496).

16. Schama suggests that “Those lines at the left give a far stronger sense of the concrete location […] than is possible in the reduced painting we now see. This is crucial not just for the formal energy of the painting but for the reinforcement of its moral *raison d’être*: the personification of a company entrusted with the protection of Amsterdam, with guarding its gates, bridges and canals” (*Rembrandt’s Eyes*, 496).


20. In order to obstruct the enemy, a waterline could not be passable or navigable. However, variations in the landscape (for example, rivers and dikes) left some areas dry, and thus passable by the enemy. These access points were defended by forts, batteries, and bunkers, where troops were housed and artillery was positioned. In 2006,
Greenaway was commissioned to create an installation in Fort Asperen, a late eighteenth-century military facility in southern Holland, and his account of the subsequent work has much relevance to my argument here:

Fort Asperen can be appreciated as a man-made mountain in a flat landscape prone to flooding. It was built as a fortress to defend a large section of the Dutch landscape against enemies, and to control and supervise the management of the water in the surrounding areas. A Dutch interpretation of the Genesis myth, where Dutch and Flemish painting have a long tradition of localising Biblical mythology (just think of Breughel), could reasonably see Fort Asperen as a Mount Ararat, the traditional resting place of Noah's Ark after the Flood. But we can also realise Fort Asperen as that legendary place where Noah's preparations to spend forty days and forty nights on the ocean, will begin. The project re-interprets the Biblical mythology in Genesis, in a before and after flood situation. We are building Noah's Ark, his boat, his Dutch barge, on the roof of the fort in preparation for the next coming Flood. The polar ice-caps are melting, the world is getting warmer, the sea is rising, and we all know that much of the landscape of the Netherlands is close to, or below sea-level. Curiously, the Americans, still reluctant to take responsible action in the face of the new climatic changes, have told American businessmen not to invest finance in Holland because within ten years, the Netherlands will be flooded and their investments will be wasted. We, along with our contemporary Noah, must prepare for the eventualities, taking our example all over again from the Biblical story of the Great Flood. So we build our boat on the roof of Fort Asperen, using all the traditional expertise of Dutch boat-building. And on the deck of the boat, we construct a high platform tower so a visitor can see all the surrounding countryside for many kilometres across the tops of the trees.

For a fuller synopsis, see: http://www.fortasperenark.nl/.


WORKS BY PETER GREENAWAY

FILMOGRAPHY

1962
Death of Sentiment [1959–1962]

1966
Train, 16 mm, 5 minutes
Tree, 16 mm, 16 minutes

1967
Revolution, 8 minutes
Five Postcards from Capital Cities, 35 minutes

1969
Intervals, 7 minutes
  DVD: The Shorts (Zeitgeist Films)

1971
Erosion, 27 minutes

1973
H Is for House, 10 minutes
  DVD: The Shorts (Zeitgeist Films)

1975
Windows, 4 minutes
  DVD: The Shorts (Zeitgeist Films)
Water, 5 minutes
Water Wrackets, 12 minutes  
    DVD: The Shorts (Zeitgeist Films)

1976
Goole by Numbers, 40 minutes

1977
Dear Phone, 17 minutes

1978
Eddie Kid (“This Week in Britain,” Central Office of Information [COI])  
    5 minutes  
Cut above the Rest (“This Week in Britain,” COI), 5 minutes  
1–100, 4 minutes  
A Walk through H, 41 minutes  
    DVD: The Shorts (Zeitgeist Films)  
Vertical Features Remake, 45 minutes  
    DVD: The Falls (Zeitgeist Films)

1979
Women Artists (COI), 5 minutes  
Leeds Castle (COI), 5 minutes  
Zandra Rhodes (“This Week in Britain,” COI), 15 minutes

1980
Lalock Village (COI), 5 minutes  
Country Diary (COI), 5 minutes  
The Falls, 185 minutes  
Director and Screenwriter: Peter Greenaway  
Cinematographer: Mike Coles and John Rosenberg  
Editor: Peter Greenaway  
Score: Michael Nyman  
    DVD: Zeitgeist Films

1981
Act of God, 25 minutes  
Terence Conran (“This Week in Britain,” COI), 15 minutes

1982
The Draughtsman’s Contract, 108 minutes  
Director and Screenwriter: Peter Greenaway  
Producers: David Payne and Peter Sainsbury
Cinematographer: Curtis Clark
Editor: John Wilson
Score: Michael Nyman
Cast: Anthony Higgins, Janet Suzman, Anne-Louise Lambert, Hugh Fraser
   DVD: Fox Lorber

1983
_The Sea in Their Blood. Beside the Sea_ ("This Week in Britain," COI), 30 minutes
Also known as _The Coastline_
_Four American Composers_ (John Cage, Robert Ashley, Philip Glass, Meredith Monk)
in 4 parts, 55 minutes each
   VHS: Mystic Fire Video

1984
_Making a Splash_, 25 minutes

1985
_Inside Rooms—26 Bathrooms_, video, 25 minutes
_A TV Dante. Canto 5_, video, 15 minutes

1986
_A Zed and Two Noughts_, 112 minutes
Director and Screenwriter: Peter Greenaway
Producer: Kees Kasander and Peter Sainsbury
Cinematographer: Sacha Vierny
Editor: John Wilson
Score: Michael Nyman
Cast: Andrea Ferreol, Brian Deacon, Eric Deacon, Joss Ackland
   DVD: Zeitgeist Films

1987
_The Belly of an Architect_, 105 minutes
Director and Screenwriter: Peter Greenaway
Producers: Colin Callender and Walter Donohue
Cinematographer: Sacha Vierny
Editor: John Wilson
Score: Wim Mertens
Cast: Brian Dennehy, Chloe Webb, Lambert Wilson, Sergio Fantoni
   DVD: MGM

1988
_Drowning by Numbers_, 108 minutes
Director and Screenwriter: Peter Greenaway
Producers: Kees Kasander and Denis Wigman
Cinematographer: Sacha Vierny
Editor: John Wilson
Score: Michael Nyman
Cast: Joan Plowright, Bernard Hill, Juliet Stephenson, Joely Richardson

VHS: Artisan
*Fear of Drowning*, 26 minutes
*Death in the Seine*, video, 44 minutes

1989
*A TV Dante. Cantos 1–8*, video, 10 minutes each
*Hubert Bals Handshake*, 5 minutes
*The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, 120 minutes
Director and Screenwriter: Peter Greenaway
Producer: Kees Kasander
Cinematographer: Sacha Vierny
Editor: John Wilson
Score: Michael Nyman
Cast: Michael Gambon, Helen Mirren, Tim Roth, Ciarán Hinds
   DVD: Zeitgeist Films

1991
*Prospero's Books*, 123 minutes
Director and Screenwriter: Peter Greenaway
Based on *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare
Producer: Kees Kasander
Cinematographer: Sacha Vierny
Editor: Marina Bodbijl
Score: Michael Nyman
Cast: John Gielgud, Michael Clark, Michel Blanc, Erland Josephson
   VHS: Video/Media Treasures
   *A Walk through Prospero's Library*, video, 12 minutes
   *M is for Man, Music, Mozart*, video, 30 minutes
   DVD: Image Entertainment

1992
*Rosa*, 35 mm, 15 minutes
*Darwin*, video, 52 minutes

1993
*The Baby of Mâcon*, 118 minutes
Director and Screenwriter: Peter Greenaway
Works by Peter Greenaway

Producer: Kees Kasander
Cinematographer: Sacha Vierny
Editor: Chris Wyatt
Cast: Julia Ormond, Ralph Fiennes, Philip Stone, Jonathan Lacey

1994
*The Stairs/Geneva*, documentary, 100 minutes

1996
*The Pillow Book*, 123 minutes
Director and Screenwriter: Peter Greenaway
Adapted from the book by Sei Shonagon
Producer: Kees Kasander
Cinematographer: Sacha Vierny
Editors: Peter Greenaway and Chris Wyatt
Cast: Vivian Wu, Ewan McGregor, Yoshi Oida, Ken Ogata
DVD: Sony

1997
*The Bridge Celebration*, 11.5 minutes

1999
*Eight and a Half Women*, 122 minutes
Director and Screenwriter: Peter Greenaway
Producer: Kees Kasander
Cinematographers: Reinier van Brummelen and Sacha Vierny
Editors: Elmer Leupen
Cast: John Standing, Matthew Delamare, Toni Collette, Amanda Plummer
DVD: Lion’s Gate

*The Death of a Composer: Rosa, a Horse Drama* (TV), 90 minutes
Director and Libretto: Peter Greenaway
Producer: Kees Kasander
Score: Louis Andriessen
Cast: Lyndon Terracini, Marie Angel, Miranda van Kralingen, Roger Smeets

2000
*Bologna 2000*, 35 minutes

2001
*The Reitdiep Journeys*, 56 minutes
2003
*The Tulse Luper Suitcases 1: The Moab Story*, 127 minutes
Director and Screenwriter: Peter Greenaway
Producer: Kees Kasander
Cinematographer: Reinier van Brummelen
Editors: Elmer Leupen and Chris Wyatt
Score: Borut Krzisnik and Eduardo Polonio
Cast: JJ Feild, Jordi Mollà, Caroline Dhavernas, Scot Williams

2004
*The European Showerbath*, 5.5 minutes
*The Tulse Luper Suitcases: Antwerp Part Two*, 107 minutes
Director and Screenwriter: Peter Greenaway
*The Tulse Luper Suitcases 2: From Vaux to the Sea*, 121 minutes
Director and Screenwriter: Peter Greenaway
Producer: Kees Kasander
Cinematographer: Reinier van Brummelen
Editors: Elmer Leupen and Jaap Praamstra
Score: Architorti, Borut Krzisnik and Eduardo Polonio
Cast: JJ Feild, Jordi Mollà, Raymond J. Berry, Scot Williams
*The Tulse Luper Suitcases 3: From Sark to the Finish*, 123 minutes
Director and Screenwriter: Peter Greenaway
Producer: Kees Kasander
Cinematographer: Reinier van Brummelen
Editors: Elmer Leupen and Chris Wyatt
Cast: Roger Rees, Stephen Billington, Jordi Mollà, Ana Torent

2005
*Tulse Luper: A Life in Suitcases*, 121 minutes
Director and Screenwriter: Peter Greenaway
Producer: Kees Kasander
Cinematographer: Reinier van Brummelen
Editors: Elmer Leupen and Jaap Praamstra
Score: Borut Krzisnik
Cast: JJ Feild, Andre Schneider, Yorick van Wageningen, Scot Williams

2007
*Nightwatching*, 134 minutes
Director and Screenwriter: Peter Greenaway
Producer: Kees Kasander
Cinematographers: Reinier van Brummelen
Editors: Karen Porter
Score: Wlodzimierz Pawlik
Cast: Martin Freeman, Emily Holmes, Michael Teigen

STAGE

*Rosa: A Horse Drama*
  Music by Louis Andriessen, co-directed by Saskia Boddeke
  Amsterdam

1998
*One Hundred Objects to Represent the World: A Prop-Opera*
  Music by Jean-Baptiste Barrière, co-directed by Saskia Boddeke

*Christopher Columbus*
  Music by Darius Milhaud, libretto adapted from Paul Claudel, conducted by Philippe Jordan, co-directed by Saskia Boddeke
  Berlin

1999
*Writing to Vermeer*
  Music by Louis Andriessen, co-directed by Saskia Boddeke
  Amsterdam, New York

2001
*Gold: 92 Bars in a Crashed Car*, with Saskia Boddeke
  Schauspielfrankfurt, Frankfurt

2004
*Wash and Travel: Luper at Lile*, with Saskia Boddeke

2005
*Writing on Water*, with David Lang
  Great Britain

2005/2006
*The Children of Uranium*, with Saskia Boddeke and Andrea Liberovici
366  Works by Peter Greenaway

2007/2008
Rembrandts' Mirror, with Saskia Boddeke and Vincent van Warmerdam
Milan

SOLO SHOWS

1964
Lord’s Gallery

1988
Broad Street Gallery, Canterbury

1989
Arcade, Carcassonne
Palais de Tokyo, Paris
Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris

1990
Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York
Australia Centre of Contemporary Art, Melbourne
Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, Australia
The University of New South Wales, Paddington
Cirque Divers, Liège
Shingawa Space T33, Tokyo
Altium, Fukuoka
Dany Keller Galerie, Münich
Video Galleriet, Copenhagen
Kunsthallen Brandts Klaedefabrik, Oddense
Galerie Xavier Hufkens, Brussels

1991
Watermans Gallery, Brentford
City Art Centre, Dublin

1992
Gesellschaft für Aktuelle Kunst, Bremen
Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York

1994
Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe
Gesellschaft für Max Reinhardt Forschung, Salzburg
1995
Centre PasquART, Biel-Bienne
Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York
Dany Keller Galerie, München

1996
Le Case d’Arte, Milan
Galerie Fortlaann 17, Ghent
Lamont Gallery, London
Mylos Art Gallery, Thessaloniki Film Festival

1997
Museo Rufino Tamayo Contemporaneo Internacional, Mexico City
Istanbul Film Festival, Istanbul
Doon Soong Art Centre, Seoul
Galerie Sollertis, Toulouse

1998
Centro Cultural Banco do Brazil, Rio de Janeiro
SESC Vila Mariana, São Paulo
Cornerhouse, Manchester
Talbot Rice Center, Edinburgh
Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki

EXHIBITIONS, INSTALLATIONS, AND PERFORMANCES

1991
The Physical Self, Boymans-van Beuningen Museum, Rotterdam

1992
One Hundred Objects to Represent the World—Hundert Objekte zeigen die Welt, Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Vienna
Flying Out of This World—Le Bruit des Nuages, Le Louvre, Paris

1993
Watching Water, Palazzo Fortuni, Venice
Some Organising Principles, Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea
The Audience of Mâcon, Ftoto Gallery, Cardiff
1994
The Stairs/Geneva: The Location, Geneva
Du Cadrage au Public, Musée d’art et d’histoire, Geneva

1995
The Stairs/Munich: Projection, Munich

1996
In the Dark, part of Spellbound: Art and Film, Hayward Gallery, London
Cosmology at the Piazza del Popolo, Rome

1997
Flying over Water/Volar damunt l’aigua, Joan Miró Foundation, Barcelona

2000
Bologna Towers 2000

2000/2004
Wash and Travel: The Bathroom Suitcases, Milan

2001
Grand Terp at Groningen

2004
Luper at Compton Verney, Warwickshire

2005–2008
Tulse Luper VJ Performance, Club 11 in Amsterdam and other international venues

2006
Fort Asperen Ark: A Flood Warning

2007
Repopulating the Palace, Venaria Reale, Savoy Royal Palace, Turin

2008
Leonardo’s Last Supper, Santa Maria delle Grazie Church, Milan
BOOKS AND CATALOGUES

1984
Meurtre dans un jardin anglais/The Draughtsman’s Contract [English/French] L’Avant-Scène du cinéma 333, 47–117

1986
A Zed and Two Noughts, Faber and Faber, London

1988
The Belly of an Architect, Faber and Faber, London
Drowning by Numbers, Faber and Faber, London
Fear of Drowning by Numbers: Règles du Jeu [English/French], trans. Barbara Dent, Danièle Rivière and Bruno Alcala, Dis Voir, Paris

1989
The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, Dis Voir, Paris

1990
Papers/Papiers [English/French], trans. Guillemette Belleteste, Dis Voir, Paris

1991

1992
Flying Out of This World/Le Bruit des nuages [English/French], Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris
One Hundred Objects to Represent the World/Hundert Objekte zeigen die Welt [English/German], Verlag Gerd Hatje, Stuttgart
The Physical Self [English/Dutch], Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam
Prospero’s Subjects [no text], Kamakura, Yobisha, Japan

1993
The Audience of Mâcon [English/Welsh], Wales Film Council; Ffotogallery, Cardiff
The Falls, Dis Voir, Paris
Rosa, Dis Voir, Paris
Some Organising Principles [English/Welsh] Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea
Watching Water, Electa, Milan
Works by Peter Greenaway

1994
The Baby of Mâcon, Dis Voir, Paris
The Stairs/Geneva: The Location [English/French], Merrell Holberton, London

1995
The Stairs/Munich: Projection [English/German], Merrell Holberton, London
The World of Peter Greenaway, with Leon Steinmetz, Journey Editions, London

1996
The Pillow Book, Dis Voir, Paris

1997
Flying over Water/Volar damunt l’aigua, Merrell Holberton, London
One Hundred Objects to Represent the World. A Prop-Opera, Change Performing Arts, Milano

1998
One Hundred Objects to Represent the World: A Prop-Opera, Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, and SECS Vila Mariana, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo
One Hundred Allegories to Represent the World, Merrell Holberton, London
The Belly of an Architect, Dis Voir, Paris
Drowning by Numbers, Dis Voir, Paris
A Zed and Two Noughts, Dis Voir, Paris
Christopher Columbus, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Berlin

1999
Eight and a Half Women, Dis Voir, Paris
Writing to Vermeer, Amsterdam

2001
Gold, Dis Voir, Paris

2002
Tulse Luper in Turin, Volumina, Turin

2004
Tulse Luper in Venice, Volumina, Turin
Luper at Compton Verney, Compton Verney, Warwickshire
2006

Peter Greenaway: The Children of Uranium, Charta/Change Performing Arts

2007

The Historians: The Rise and Fall of Gestures Drama, Book 39, Dis Voir, Paris

Fort Asperen Ark, Veenman Publishers, Rotterdam

Nightwaching, Dis Voir, Paris

Nightwaching: A View of Rembrandt’s The Night Watch, Veenman Publishers, Rotterdam
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CHAPTER 2


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Rodgers, Marlene. Interview with Greenaway. Film Quarterly 45.2 (Winter 91–92): 18–19.


CHAPTER 4


CHAPTER 5


CHAPTER 6


### CHAPTER 7


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