



Peter Greenaway's cinema: the quintessential paradox of British Art Cinema outside Britain

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L'œuvre de Peter Greenaway est considérée comme marginale car elle est à l'opposé du courant de réalisme social qui est propre aux cinéastes britanniques en général. Ses références sont pour la plupart liées à l'Art européen qu'il intègre subtilement dans ses films. Ainsi, *Le Cuisinier, le Voleur, sa Femme et son Amant*, film réalisé en 1989, est un hommage rendu par le cinéaste à l'Age d'Or de la peinture flamande. A l'instar de nombreux cinéastes européens, le cinéma de Greenaway repose sur une mise en scène très stylisée qui privilégie la forme et l'artifice par le biais de la distanciation qui écarte délibérément l'identification spectatorielle.

This paper will focus on Peter Greenaway as the ideal representative of the paradox which the artist himself incarnates. He subtly integrates European art in his 1989 production of *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover* to show how artistic creation embodies the essence of immortality and how the narrative structure becomes subservient to the artist's aesthetic vision. Despite his extreme 'Britishness', Greenaway cannot be compared with most of his British contemporaries whose films often veer on grim social realism. It is the very 'Europeanness' which makes Greenaway an outsider. He openly pays tribute to different periods in European art history: Franz Hals' table painting in *The Cook...* is the focal point of the diegesis. Greenaway shares other artistic preoccupations with European directors like Resnais or Ferreri in the use of deliberate distancing devices which render spectatorial identification and emotion difficult. His aesthetic principles totally belie the idea that film reflects reality. Artifice is hence central to an in-depth analysis of one of the major contributions to British art cinema.

In her 1996 book on painting and cinema, Angela Della Vacche focuses on different filmmakers such as Godard, Tarkovsky and Murnau, to name but a few. And yet she has omitted the work of Peter Greenaway simply because, as she says in her introduction, his work can be found in that of all

the eight filmmakers she has written on. She distinguishes the simple director from the author who does not “just apply studio priorities or release generic conventions but also works through and transforms the resources and the constraints of the individual to express his unique vision.”¹

Alan Parker once referred to Greenaway as one of those filmmakers who have “little understanding of what cinema can do because they are hidebound by an intellectual and literary tradition.”² For critic Philip French, Greenaway is an outsider who makes “his own kind of quirky art films, the films of an intellectual painter. There has been nobody quite like him in British cinema before.” Somehow the reactions to his work in general, and his films in particular, lead to polemical discussions about the high-brow pretensions of an artist who did not gain sufficient recognition as a painter, and for whom cinema became a mere refuge.

The question whether Peter Greenaway is a painter who films or a filmmaker who paints has been a source of controversy and fascination. His ability to combine collage, painting, photography and graphics among other techniques, makes his work powerfully visual, while taking into account the dialectic of the word and image, high and popular culture. An example of this cultural *potpourri* is making Milo sing *The Teddy Bears’ Picnic* in *Z.O.O.* (1985), or the Emmenthals singing *I’d like to get you on a slow boat to China* in *8 and a Half Women* (1999), or Pup singing psalm 51, *Allegrì Miserere* while he is doing the washing up or getting his hair cut in the kitchen of Le Hollandais Restaurant in his 1989 feature film *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*.

Greenaway’s marginality accounts for his being outside the norm of realism prevalent in British cinema : in fact, the fundamental concept of cinema based on tyranny of the narrative is unimportant to him and is what he calls a “cul-de-sac”. Quoting a short verbal exchange between the Cook Richard and the Wife Georgina would perhaps provide a clue to this enigmatic artist who deliberately goes against the grain:

Richard : What I saw was what you let me.

Georgina : Of course it was – how else could I know that it was real – unless someone else was looking.

Georgina’s reply to the Cook is significant in understanding this particular film on which this paper focuses, and it also forms the core of understanding any Greenaway feature film which abounds in examples of *mise-en-abyme*. In *The Cook...*, for instance, the lovers take overt pleasure in their exhibitionist love-making behind a flimsy curtain in the stage-like pantry while the kitchen staff continue their synchronized cutting, slicing and chopping cabbage, cucumber and red pepper in time to Michael Nyman’s baroque musical theme.

Despite his extensive knowledge and use of English literature, art history, mythology, black humour, derision, irony and a love for games, Greenaway’s films somehow tend to alienate him from his British counterparts who do not seem to share his self-reflexivity in cinema. His desire to explore new techniques makes his cinema rather difficult to classify: somehow, his very Englishness blends into the European cinematic landscape which he creates. His cinema is seen as “unique” by many as it is a far cry from the realism prevalent in British cinema which this provocative artist shuns:

Basically, my cinema likes to address the fact that the only legitimate relationship between a film and its audience does not have to be an emotional one.³

The choice of *The Cook...* for this paper is not gratuitous in that it is an atypical film although it is set in Britain and its inspiration stems from Jacobean drama and the Theatre of Blood. The film epitomizes Greenaway’s Europeanness and his specific mode of fighting the established norm of traditional British cinema although the 1989 film has been read as a violent criticism of Thatcherite philistinism and greed, and it even fits into the “gangster movie genre” according to Amy Lawrence.

The Franco-Dutch financing which enabled Greenaway to make the film includes Pascale Daumon, widow of Anatole Daumon who championed risky art-house projects, such as Alain Resnais’ *Hiroshima mon amour* and *L’Année dernière à Marienbad*, the latter being Greenaway’s reference film. Resnais’ name immediately brings to mind the association with cinematographer Sacha Vierny whom Greenaway affectionately refers to as the “master magician of illusion”. The pair worked on twelve films together. Jean-Paul Gaultier’s costume designing for the film was not surprising given the designer’s extravagant and sometimes anachronistic creations in haute couture.

¹ Della Vacche Angela, *Cinema and Painting. How Art is used in Film*, 1996, p. 15

² Hacker Jonathan and Price David, *Take 10 Contemporary British Film Directors*, 1991, p. 337.

³ *Cinema Papers*, n° 78, March 1990, p.38.

In some respects, a parallel can be drawn between *The Cook...* and Marco Ferreri's *La Grande bouffe*, 1973. Both films are set over a few days, in a confined space with the focus on eating, sex and the body. In Ferreri's film, one sees raw products being delivered by vanloads as well as the different stages of preparation under the chef, Ugo's supervision, and consumption of the dishes by the five protagonists.

In *The Cook...*, the preparation of food is filmed to heighten the theatricality of the scene.⁴ The dishes are served with great ceremonial in the dining room, but one rarely sees the food actually consumed as the Thief's logorrhoea prevails and the act of eating is a mere pretext. The kitchen and the pantries, however, are filled with rich, succulent products but there are rarely any close-ups on what is being served to the diners.

Ugo, in *La Grande bouffe*, and Richard the Cook, are artists and craftsmen. There is a very complex set of rules pertaining to the preparation and combination but the rules also apply with regard to how the food should be consumed. Greenaway plays on irony by making the Thief teach his cronies etiquette and table manners:

Why can't I have some bloody quality in my associates? [...] Henry, put that cigarette out – do you mind if I eat whilst you smoke?

Considering himself the epitome of «haute cuisine», the Thief also insists on how to eat the food served at Le Hollandais:

Mitchel [...] don't put the orange-rind on the edge of your plate – it's meant to be there you dolt. What you've got to realise is that a clever cook puts unlikely things together – duck and oranges, for example, or pineapple and ham – it's called "artistry".

Claude Fischler notes:

Le cuisinier est l'homme de choix et non plus seulement du tour de main... Il appose sa marque sur les produits en les élisant et en les « respectant » et non seulement en les transformant radicalement. En se mettant à l'écoute des éléments, des saisons, des terroirs, il annonce l'avènement de la cuisine poétique.⁵

Both films have a double-bind relationship between creation and destruction: food and artistic creation become the common denominators. Both chefs create their masterpiece for a memorable last supper: Ugo's cathedral-like paté with which he stuffs himself to death literally, and the Lover's body cooked and garnished is presented to the Thief so that the latter may keep his vow to eat the Lover.

For Claude Lévi-Strauss, man and beast differ because man generally cooks his food. He further examines the link between edible flesh and desirable flesh, and eating and copulation are so closely connected that certain cultures use the same word for both.⁶ Albert the Thief explains somewhat crudely to his men that "the dirty bits and the naughty bits are so close together, it just goes to show how sex and eating are related." Sociologist Willy Pasini refers to the stomach and the kitchen as magical places, similarly to the mouth.⁷ The latter symbolizes a three-dimensional space: the mouth is the passage where food is in-re-gurgitated, it makes language possible and it is an erogenous zone. Georgina, the wife in *The Cook...* and Andrea the whore in *La Grande bouffe* transform culinary space into space for carnal pleasure in both films.

As Claude Fischler aptly remarks: « il y a des correspondances constants, sinon une continuité profonde entre la table et le lit, entre la chair comestible et la chair désirable. »⁸ The first time Georgina eyes the Lover, she bites into asparagus, a prelude to their love feast. Later, food is brought to the lovers who are hiding in the book depository with the same ceremonial as it is in the restaurant : food functions as the classic Eros-Thanatos conjunction. When the Lover's cooked body is brought into the bare dining-room of the Hollandais, on the last evening, all of the Thief's victims walk in a funereal procession, some wearing black arm-bands. The Wife dressed in black with the long train of

⁴ For Greenaway, "the pursuit of realism seems to [him] a dead end", *Film Comment*, vol 26, n° 3, p. 59.

⁵ Fischler Claude, *L'Homnivore*, 1987, p.131.

⁶ Lévi-Strauss Claude, *La Pensée sauvage*, p.129.

⁷ «Le ventre et la cuisine sont des lieux magiques, de même que la bouche, espace à la symbolique tridimensionnelle puisqu'elle est à la fois lieu de passage de la nourriture et du langage et zone érogène.» Pasini Willy, *Nourriture et Amour*, 1994, p.120.

⁸ Fischler Claude, op cit, p.130.

her dress carried by Adèle (perhaps a nod to Truffaut's film *La Mariée était en noir* ?). For the occasion she calls the «anniversary» which is the Thief's last supper, the Wife is *l'Ange exterminateur*⁹: St. George slew the dragon, she is Georgina.

It is undoubtedly Greenaway's credo that cinema is at its most successful when acknowledging its own artificiality.¹⁰ This idea further alienates him from most British filmmakers : his work comprises an excess of distancing devices, symmetry and theatricality among several other "visual thoughts" to borrow Alan Woods' term.¹¹ Greenaway makes no apology for "moving into areas which are perhaps not the normal common places for cinematic practice."¹² The common practice of the linear flow of the narrative is often disrupted since narrative is subservient to style and form and, as he puts it in the introduction of the screenplay of *ZOO*, "cinema is a far too rich and capable medium to be left only to storytellers."

The Cook becomes an interesting example of Greenaway's Europeanness. The French restaurant is significantly called Le Hollandais. The name refers to *sauce hollandaise* which becomes "salty custard" to the Thief's uncultivated palate as well as being a signifier for two extremes : debasement and refinement. In the Middle Ages Holand (Hole Land) represented the organs below the belly. But Le Hollandais is above all a tribute to the Golden Age of Dutch painting. In the introduction of *Prospero's Books*, Greenaway states : "the history of painting is one of borrowing, reprising, homage and quotation."¹³ The author fully achieves this in his production of Rembrandt's *Nightwatching* which is both about the artist and his creation.

In making the gigantic reproduction of Hals' painting the focal point of the diegesis and combining it with the deliberate use of artifice, he enhances the *mise en abyme* in the narrative. The *Banquet of the officers of the St. George Civic Guards*, Franz Hals' first table painting of 1616, becomes, as Greenaway aptly states, "the central forming image of *The Cook*... All the film's colour schemes come from it."¹⁴

Sacha Vierny's meticulous lighting effects enhance Hals' chromatic palette and reveal the narrative by using Hals' models as observers or the silent audience of the play staged by Greenaway, and performed by the Thief and his henchmen. The group is seated at the central and of course the most important table in the dining room of the Hollandais restaurant. The portrait dominates the garishly over-decorated, claustrophobic, red dining-room. The St. George civic Guards are the silent observers like the other diners in Le Hollandais who never intervene despite the Thief's constant ranting, coarse language and violence. The models in Hals' painting are dressed in black which was the colour of the Dutch bourgeoisie at the time. The white table cloth on the painting is copied by one in a richer fabric for the Thief's table.¹⁵

In Hals' painting and at the thief's table in the restaurant, food seems to be a pretext for conversation. The seating arrangement in the portrait gives the impression of a group of actors performing for an audience, and yet, the «actors» barely look at the audience. Hals' painting is in the background but it is obviously meant to be seen, and its spatial arrangement heightens the effect of a play within a play. Greenaway models his *mise en scène* on Hals' to produce the appropriate theatrical effect by making the Thief's table front stage central to the drama on stage. The lighting initially focuses on the left side of the portrait hanging in the dining room where the Colonel – the guest of honour at the Civic Guards' Banquet – and the standard bearer behind the Colonel are placed.¹⁶ Vierny's lighting shifts from the Colonel and the standard bearer in the portrait to focus on the officers

⁹ A pun on Luis Bunuel's eponymous film.

¹⁰ Woods Alan, *Being Naked Playing Dead. The Art of Peter Greenaway*, 1996, p.240.

¹¹ The visual thoughts also comprise recurrent framing devices and the nude among others.

¹² Le cinéma britannique d'aujourd'hui: cinema des francs-tireurs, La Sept/Arte, 1998.
¹³ 1991, pp 12 &13.

¹⁴ *Cinema Papers*, Spring 1990.

¹⁵ Greenaway attempts to explain this rather curious choice of inspiration for the film:« The St. George Civic Guard were a rather emasculated group and they were really more like a club of drinking men [...] all dressed up in what was virtually a sort of macho fancy-dress, to have a roistering good time in rather macho circumstances." *Royal Academy Magazine*, Spring 1990, p. 34-35.

¹⁶ One cannot help noticing the Colonel's and the standard bearer's resemblance to the Thief and his devoted minion Mitchel respectively.

placed on the right once the Thief's death warrant has been signed by the Wife and the Cook, obviously foreshadowing the Thief's fate.

After the Lover has been murdered, and once the Cook and the Wife sign the Thief's death sentence, the camera pans horizontally from the empty kitchen out onto the car park where the fires burning in the braziers give a hellish atmosphere to the cold blue of the deserted car park from which even the dogs have disappeared. The camera slowly pans the area and freezes on Hals' portrait which now dominates the space that no longer belongs to the Thief. The Wife's plaintive wails are accompanied by the strings playing Psalm 51 *Alleghi Miserere*. And once the final credits roll, the portrait, the only visible object on screen, is partially lit right to the end of the film, is accompanied once more to Nyman's leitmotif heard in the opening credits.

Greenaway's cinema is corporeal and his obsession with bodily functions is antithetical to the norms of propriety in British cinema. All the body orifices are used for different acts : sodomy, penetration, vomiting, urinating, belching, and stuffing – the Lover's mouth with pages and Pup's mouth with buttons. He refers to the body as “an image of the alimentary canal wrapped around with flesh”. He has played with this image thereby subverting codes to create his own filmic syntax.

The image of the canal has been transformed by him into stage space and reverses the functions attributed to each area in the film : eating, digestion and evacuation. Each specifically recognizable colour-coded area is reserved for a specific use :

The blue of the car park is used for the arrival of the Thief and his gang as well as the two vans containing meats and other raw products which will not be granted entry into the Cook's area – the kitchen – and will consequently rot.

The raw products found in the Nile-green kitchen are transformed by the artist-cook into exquisitely refined dishes which are transported through the swinging doors into the overpowering red dining room where they are presented to the diners. The immaculate white toilets are generally meant for the evacuation process that follows consumption.

Greenaway's fascination for games, a typically British trait, results in a provocative reversal of codes within this alimentary canal/stage space. Hence the Wife and the Lover discover their appetites for each other in the dining room begin their preliminaries in the hypnotically white toilets, devour each other in the different areas of the kitchen, and they flee naked from the car park in a van full of rotting flesh driven by Eden.

The combination of stage and wings in the theatre is Greenaway's mode of expressing his credo in artifice : cinema is not “a frame around a window on the world, it is not a slice of life”, and this is somewhat analogous to the Lover telling Georgina that “it was only a film”. By means of long, slow tracking shots, few but significant close-ups and various distancing devices used by Greenaway, the viewer has the impression of watching a juxtaposition of a series of paintings. These devices combined with an absence of psychological depth in his characters are part of the artist's specific strategies to avoid spectatorial identification and emotion. Hence, artifice becomes a very effective mode to deal with taboo subjects and the absurd.¹⁷

In *La Grande Bouffe*, one of the many examples of the absurd used by Ferreri is at the end of the film when the second and final vanload of meat arrives at Philippe's mansion. Andrea simply tells the delivery men to put the meat in the garden; the scene cuts to carcasses scattered everywhere with some placed on the trees. In the last scene, Andrea leaves Philippe's dead body on the bench, walks across the garden into the house and disappears from the frame.

Greenaway often resorts to the absurd and of course, *The Cook...* is no exception: the kitchen of the Hollandais restaurant is, according to the artist, “reminiscent of a cathedral”. While doing the washing up, Pup, the kitchen lad, sings Psalm 51 which is usually sung on Ash Wednesday: a period of fasting and penance. And yet flesh in all its splendour abounds: the fresh meat and fish in the vans parked in perfect symmetry outside the restaurant, the rotting meat in the van, the meat carcasses in the cold room, the game and poultry in the pantry, as well as the lovers' naked flesh in different areas of the vast kitchen. After Pup has been tortured by the Thief and is lying unconscious in the hospital, Georgina, scantily clad in a dress of black feathers, carries an enormous dish of food for Pup and hands the platter to a nurse who is wearing an exaggeratedly ornate wimple.

¹⁷ The absurd has been commonly used by Luis Bunuel, Marco Ferreri but also by David Lynch whom Greenaway refers to as a “European American”.

The use of the absurd and derision implies that cinema as a medium should not be used to express reality but, on the contrary, to create illusion. In *The Baby of Mâcon*, Cosimo Medici weeps because the daughter is raped to death and the child is dead ; one of the spectators of the play tries to console him by saying Cosimo should not take it seriously as it was only a play; furthermore, Cosimo should be grateful as the play also has music!

To conclude, Greenaway's vision of aesthetics somehow brings to mind Francis Bacon's who could not understand people being shocked and horrified by his paintings whereas, for the painter, real life was far more violent than any of his paintings could ever be. The same vision is shared by Picasso whom André Malraux quotes in *La tête d'Obsidienne*, 1974: *Il faut réveiller les gens. Bouleverser leur façon d'identifier les choses. Il faudrait créer des images inacceptables. Les forcer à comprendre qu'ils vivent dans un drôle de monde. Un monde pas comme ils croient.*