



# Drowning by Numbers

## A contemporary review

Peter Greenaway has become his own foremost exegete, although it is not yet clear whether this career move springs from a frustration that most English critics have little taste for decoding the intricacies of his plotting or merely from a wish to add a further level of absurdity to those already ingrained in his films. *Drowning by Numbers* arrives accompanied by a twenty-six-minute TV trailer, entitled *Fear of Drowning*, in which Greenaway the deadpan critic offers a faintly amused analysis of the structures, patterns and motifs in the feature itself: the endless sets of three (three Cissies, three drownings, three rebuffed seductions, three communal games), the number count from 1 to 100, the derivation of character names from the 'famous last words' of assorted luminaries, the painterly roots of certain key images, and so on. Its strengths as inspired, state-of-the-art promotion for the release of the film aside, this exegesis turns out to be almost entirely superfluous, since the film itself carefully foregrounds its own mechanisms and devices: no Greenaway film since *The Falls* has laid its organising principles so bare.

*Drowning by Numbers* rests on the same absurdist premises as Greenaway's other work, but it is all but devoid of the poetic mysteries and ambiguities that have sometimes suggested a secret kinship between Greenaway and Raul Ruiz as latter-day surrealists. This is a film of remorseless, Cartesian logic, in which every motive is open for inspection and every conflict can be reduced to the terms of a tug-of-war. If Greenaway's narrative features have represented a gradual etiolation of narrative, from the density of *The Draughtsman's Contract* (where the release version was a digest of a film originally much longer) to the inconsequential off-screen chicaneries of *The Belly of an Architect*, then *Drowning by Numbers* represents the point where the minimal exigencies of storytelling blur into the 'purer', non-narrative structures of earlier films like *Vertical Features Remake* and *The Falls* – the very films, as it happens, in which Cissie Colpitts got her first name checks.

Greenaway himself cheerfully describes the film as a sardonic morality play: '*Drowning by Numbers* is a black and comic fairy-tale for adults, half invented by children who are innocently obsessed with sex and death – especially death. It is a poetic, amoral tale told morally to support the belief that the good are seldom rewarded, the bad go largely unpunished and the innocent are always abused'. This makes it sound like the ironic and effete intellectual English counterpart to an ebullient Russ Meyer sex film, and it's true that Greenaway's schema of strongwilled women, unprepossessing men, marital strife and sexualised landscapes shares quite a few underlying assumptions with Meyer's parodies of Thornton Wilder. But Greenaway's left-liberal proclivities generate a 'world' without any of the moral certainties that Meyer so gleefully deflates, and *Drowning by Numbers* is finally serenely indifferent to its characters' moral plusses and minuses. If the film's post-Darwinian view of female ruthlessness and male helplessness can be said to have a 'moral' thrust at all, then it is simply the flipside of the amoral, voyeuristic pleasures of Greenaway's TV short *Making a Splash*, which showed people of all ages and genders 'at home' in water: a bleak, existential vision in which the only 'moral' poles are those labelled 'swimming' and 'drowning'. And since this is Greenaway's most Beaubourg-esque film, the one whose inner workings are most self-consciously displayed on its surface, it follows that it produces the most nakedly explicit images to illustrate those poles, from the flaccid penises

of the drowning men to the inviolable confederation of Cissies, by way of Smut's twin desires to virilise death and devirilise himself.

The effectiveness or otherwise of Greenaway's work *as cinema* seems to owe more than is commonly recognised to his collaborations with actors. The performances in Greenaway films are often written off as mere adjuncts to the general patterns of symmetry and asymmetry, but the Olympian detachment that hovers around Greenaway's grand designs is frequently offset by actors who contrive to 'humanise' characters written as little more than mouthpieces for attitudes and epigrams. The emotional nullity of *A Zed and Two Noughts* (ostensibly a film about grief and coming to terms with inevitable decay) was partly attributable to the film's pride in its own artifices, but also partly to the director's and actors' failures to generate palpable feelings of loss. Equally, the wallowing male self-pity of *The Belly of an Architect* (which agonises over the essential sterility of male creativity: the phantom 'pregnancy' that turns out to be a malignant tumour) never succeeds in maximising the emotional weight of Brian Dennehy's heroic performance because the director is unable or unwilling to make more of Chloe Webb's Louisa Kracklite than a cypher for mockingly natural fecundity—a cypher, moreover, who isn't even allowed her own close-ups.

By contrast, *Drowning by Numbers* finds Greenaway back at work with English actors for the first time since *The Draughtsman's Contract*, and slipping easily into a 'theatrical' idiom in which both the director and his players seem comfortable. Hence the potency of Cissie 1's summary of the reasons for drowning her husband, the charm of Madgett's scout-masterish enthusiasm for impossible games, the acid cruelty of the sexual oneupmanship games between Cissie 3 and Bellamy. The sheer presence of actors like Joan Plowright, Bernard Hill and Joely Richardson adds flesh to the bones of Greenaway's caricatures, creating moments of depth in scenes that pull all the right emotional triggers. Of course, Greenaway the iconoclast also delights in outraging the good manners of the theatrical tradition on which these 'human' vignettes depend. Just as one never expected to see a veteran character actor like Bryan Pringle playing a nude sex scene, so it comes as a mild shock to find Joan Plowright drowning him in a sordid tin bath. There is an element in Greenaway that is close to Joe Orton.

In the accompanying article [see *Monthly Film Bulletin*, October 1988], Thomas Elsaesser argues for seeing Greenaway's work in a wider context than the normal auteurist perspective, which inevitably reduces judgments to subjective likes and dislikes. It is, indeed, both possible and desirable to relate Greenaway's films to other work in contemporary cinema and theatre, but it is also impossible to avoid the insistently self-referential quality that permeates everything he does. His close collaborations with Michael Nyman (here developing variations on Mozart that he began in *The Falls*), his on-going partnership with Sacha Vierny in the quest for transcendently surreal images, the pointless and endless elaboration of the 'Greenaway mythology' — these are all the essential signs of work that aggressively defines itself as *sui generis*. Just as much as Terence Davies, Derek Jarman or Phil Mulloy, Greenaway works in isolation and tries to turn his antipathy towards mainstream British culture into a strength. As long as this situation obtains, Greenaway dooms himself to constructing weird mixtures of theatricalised passion and avant-garde film poetry, mixtures that can only be sold under the brand name 'Greenaway'. As such mixtures go, *Drowning by Numbers* is his most considerable entertainment for some time: an autumnal pleasure dome, with caves of ice.

**Tony Rayns, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, October 1988**

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## FEAR OF DROWNING

*Directors:* Peter Greenaway, Vanni Corbellini

*Production Company:* Allarts Enterprises

*Producer:* Paul Trybits

*Script:* Peter Greenaway

### Cast

Peter Greenaway, Joan Plowright, Juliet Stevenson, Joely Richardson

UK 1988

26 mins

## DROWNING BY NUMBERS

*Directed by:* Peter Greenaway

*Production Companies:* Allarts Enterprises, VPRO, Nederlandse Omroep Stichting, Elsevier-Vendex Film Beheer, Channel Four

*Assistance:* Progrès Film, Recorded Releasing, Movies Filmproductions, prokino-Filmproduktion, BAC Films

*Producers:* Kees Kasander, Denis Wigman

*Production Manager:* Evelien Jansen

*Production Co-ordinator:* Alison Owen

*Production Co-ordinator (Netherlands):* Eljo Embregts

*Production Assistant:* Jurgen Ambrosius

*Assistant Directors:* Gerrit Martijn, Peter Jaques

*2nd Assistant Director:* Chris Martin

*Continuity:* Marietta de Vries

*Casting:* Sharon Howard-Field

*Screenplay:* Peter Greenaway

*Creative Adviser:* Walter Donohue

*Director of Photography:* Sacha Vierny

*Camera Operator:* Adam Rodgers

*Stills Photography:* Stephen Morley

*Pyrotechnics:* Derek Langley

*Editor:* John Wilson

*Production Designers:* Ben van Os, Jan Roelfs

*Set Dresser:* Constance de Vos

*Set Dresser (Netherlands):* Allard Becker

*Environmental Sculptures:* Daniel Harvey, Alex Vermeulen

*Costume Supervisor:* Heather Williams

*Wardrobe Mistress:* Dien van Straalen

*Chief Make-up:* Sara Meerman

*Hairdresser:* Mary Sturgess

*Rostrum Camera Titles:* Frameline

*Music Composed and Conducted by:* Michael Nyman

*Musicians:* Michael Nyman Band

*Musician (Violins):* Alexander Balanescu, Jonathan Carney,

Miranda Fulleylove, Rosemary Furniss, Briony Shaw, Jackie Shave

*Musician (Violas):* Kate Musker, Joe Rappaport

*Musician (Cellos):* Tony Hinnigan, Andrew Shulman

*Musician (Double Bass):* Robin McGee

*Musician (Clarinet/Bass Clarinet):* David Fuest

*Musician (Soprano/Alto Sax):* John Harle

*Musician (Alto Sax):* David Roach

*Musician (Tenor/Baritone Sax/Piccolo):* Andrew Findon

*Musician (Trumpet/Flugelhorn):* John Wilbraham

*Musician (French Horn):* Michael Thompson

*Musician (Bass Trombone):* Steve Saunders

*Musician (Piano):* Michael Nyman

*Music Producer:* David Cunningham

*Music Recording:* Bob Butterworth

*Sound Recording:* Garth Marshall

*Additional Sound (Netherlands):* Lucas Boeke

*Sound Transfers:* Hackenbacker Sound & Video

*Dubbing Mixer:* Peter Maxwell

*Sound Editor:* Chris Wyatt

*Dialogue Editors:* Bridget Reiss, Sarah Vicker, Shirley Shaw, Heather Holden

*Additional Sound Effects:* Tony Fish

*Sound Effects Treatments:* Nigel Heath

*Sound Effects Editor:* Trevor Holland

*Foley Artists:* Beryl Mortimer, Bill Garlick, Felicity Cottrell

*ADR/Foley Recording:* Ted Swanscott

*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Peter Brayham

*Entomologist:* John Young

### Cast

Joan Plowright (*Cissie Colpitts 1*)

Juliet Stevenson (*Cissie Colpitts 2*)

Joely Richardson (*Cissie Colpitts 3*)

Bernard Hill (*Henry Madgett*)

Jason Edwards (*Smut*)

Bryan Pringle (*Jake*)

Trevor Cooper (*Hardy*)

David Morrissey (*Bellamy*)

John Rogan (*Gregory*)

Paul Mooney (*Teigan*)

Jane Gurnett (*Nancy Gill*)

Kenny Ireland (*Jonah Bognor*)

Michael Percival (*Moses Bognor*)

Joanna Dickins (*Mrs. Hardy*)

Janine Duvitski (*Marina Bellamy*)

Michael Fitzgerald (*Mr 70 Van Dyke*)

Edward Tudor-Pole (*Mr 71 Van Dyke*)

Natalie Morse (*skipping girl*)

Arthur Spreckley (*Sid, the gravedigger*)

Ian Talbot (*police detective*)

Roderic Leigh (*policeman*)

Vanni Corbellini (*The Hare*)

José Berg (*skipping girl's mother*)

UK/Netherlands 1988

119 mins

Please note that for the screenings on 19 and 27 November we will now present a brand new 4K restoration courtesy of Film 4 and approved by Peter Greenaway. The screening on Sunday 23 October will be presented on 35mm, as originally advertised.

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## FRAMES OF MIND: THE FILMS OF PETER GREENAWAY

**Drowning by Numbers** Sun 23 Oct 18:00; Sat 19 Nov 14:30; Sun 27 Nov 18:00

**Peter Greenaway Shorts Programme 1**

Mon 24 Oct 18:10; Thu 10 Nov 20:40

**Experimental Sound and Vision: Found Sounds, Lyrical Loops and Landscapes** Thu 27 Oct 18:15; Thu 17 Nov 18:15 (+ intro by author and musician David Toop)

**Prospero's Books** Tue 1 Nov 17:40; Sun 20 Nov 18:00

**Peter Greenaway: Pioneer of Cinema** Sat 5 Nov 12:00-17:00

**A Zed & Two Noughts** 5 Nov 17:40; Sat 12 Nov 17:40; Mon 21 Nov 20:40; Sun 27 Nov 12:15

**The Unreliable Narrator: Adventures in Storytelling, Documentary and Misinformation** Sun 6 Nov 12:40; Fri 25 Nov 21:00

**The Falls** Sun 6 Nov 14:40

**The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover**

Sat 12 Nov 14:55; Mon 28 Nov 17:50

**A TV Dante: Cantos 1-8** Tue 15 Nov 18:20

**The Baby of Mâcon** Wed 16 Nov 20:30; Fri 25 Nov 18:00; Mon 28 Nov 20:30

**The Belly of an Architect** Fri 18 Nov 18:20; Tue 22 Nov 18:10; Sat 26 Nov 15:30

**The Pillow Book** Fri 18 Nov 20:30; Thu 24 Nov 20:30; Tue 29 Nov 17:40

**8½ Women** Sun 20 Nov 12:50; Wed 30 Nov 20:35

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