



FRAMES OF MIND: THE FILMS OF PETER GREENAWAY

Experimental Sound and Vision: Found Sounds, Lyrical Loops and Landscapes

+ intro by author and musician David Toop (Thursday 17 November only)

Greenaway's early films were made against the backdrop of the emergence of a new style of music, most vividly represented by the releases on Brian Eno's Obscure Records label. Greenaway collaborated with several of these musicians, as did other filmmakers, sharing an adventurous preoccupation with the eerie and the pastoral, as demonstrated in these works by Greenaway, Malcolm Le Grice, Simon Reynell and Stephen Dworskin.

Clocks of the Midnight Hour

Max Eastley creates mysterious and hypnotic music, in which he explores the basic characteristics and sound quality of various musical instruments, particularly in relation to the poetry of Jorge Luis Borges.

Water Wrackets

With characteristic irony, Greenaway has commented that the universal premise underlying his work is the desire to go out on a nice summer's day and film a beautiful landscape. Indeed, his vision would often appear to belong more to the idiom of the home movie than the avant-garde. The subjects of his early films include a family house (*Windows, H Is for House*), a holiday in Venice (*Intervals*) and such common-or-garden objects as the titles of *Train, Tree* and *Dear Phone* would suggest. This fascination with the physical landscape of the author's own experience constitutes the most significant leitmotif of the later and longer films, particularly *Vertical Features Remake* (but also *The Falls*, with its recurring references to the Goldhawk Road).

Water Wrackets, like the other Greenaway shorts, appears to set the primacy and privacy of the first-hand view (the presence of flowing water) against the subordinate and public role of language (the history of the water wrackets). Ripples on the surface of a lake conjure up all the innocent action and romance in childhood stories of past and future wars. But the precise subtlety of the film is predicated on our culturally acquired knowledge that sight is as much constituted by systems of thought as language. So, the essence of the water can only be imagined through the existence of the absurd history.

The tension in *Water Wrackets* between seeing and knowing (romance and structure) makes it a particularly close relation to both a successor (*A Walk Through H*) and a predecessor (*Intervals*). This film marks a significant advance on the latter because image and sound no longer run along parallel and separate lines, but weave in and out of each other in arabesque figures-of-eight. Just as the images of water exist outside any real time and place (neither the past one of the filming, nor the present one of the viewing nor, finally, the future one of the reviewing), so the history of the water wracket army takes place only in abstract Time and Space. But, crucially, there are, or so the film maintains, links to be found – however arbitrary – between image

and sound, time and space, past and future. When the voice-over story of the water-wracket army seems to bear least relation to the stream of watery images, a single word hooks itself to a particular shot. A 'lake' or a 'hill' appears, then, as words and images flow ineluctably on, disappears.

In conventional documentaries (such as those he worked on at the COI), the commentary-track is employed to cement together, post facto as in the Greenaway 'oeuvre', a flow of unnarrated images. The arbitrariness of conventional documentary's juxtaposition of the pro-filmic sound and image can be construed as a metaphor for the contingency of the relationship between the private personality (the reality of the author) and his public persona (the fiction of the text). It will be interesting to see just how Greenaway's avowed commitment in *The text* will affect this relationship. For, the key element in his best work (*Water Wrackets* ranks with *Dear Phone* and *Vertical Features Remake*) fits the 'public passage' of film less well than the 'private position' of photography. Almost every Greenaway shot creates a static *tableau vivant* of Time. His every image, like photography, is the certificate of a presence (subject and object together at a certain past moment) which possesses no overtly metaphoric status. A sentence from Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* best describes the effect and meaning of this 'simply' beautiful film: 'Impotent with regard to general ideas (to fiction), Photography's force is nonetheless superior to everything the human mind can or can have conceived to assure us of reality – but also this reality is never anything but a contingency ("so much, no more")'.

Robert Brown, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1982

Berlin Horse

Repeated grainy close-ups of a tied horse running in circles are seen to be re-filmed from the screen when the stark, abrupt image is distorted by changes of angle. Accompanied by a looped and phased soundtrack of melodic, hypnotic rhythms (by Brian Eno), the image is further transformed by reverse motion, different speeds, negative and roughly printed colour. Over the first image is superimposed a fragment of old film which shows a man leading a horse from a burning barn. This shot is also reprinted, solarised and coloured; the shot is flipped over and doubled, filling the screen with a dense contraflow of horses, men, flames and smoke in saturated colours, before the film ends as abruptly as it began.

The running horse in the first part of the film was originally shot in 8 mm. colour in the north German village of Berlin (not the city), and then blown up to 16 mm. black-and-white. The primary colours were added in printing with simple filters. The same process was applied to the second part, using a found fragment of Cecil Hepworth's *The Burning Stable* (1900). The film is assertively hand-made, drawing its rich tones and effects from the reworking of basic, even crude, elements. An early structural film, *Berlin Horse* today looks more a glorious celebration of the primacy of light and movement than a sober study of film-as-material. Its bravura colour is akin to post-Warhol Underground graphics, but more rough-edged and painterly beneath the glowing surface. Startling, jagged images pour over each other in bleached monochrome or vivid reds, blues and yellows. The heightened colours and seething shapes are underscored by a percussive soundtrack, leading (especially in multi-screen projection) to a unique mixture of cinematic delirium and structural logic.

The film displays its optimism – in the first flush of the structural movement – in the way small bits of rough footage are exploded into new patterns and colours, and in the simple, direct manner in which these are then built up and reformed into new complexities. It shows its ambition, as an act of film-making, in the contrast of its two main sequences; the first section using a hand-held camera and off-screen re-filming (hallmark of the personal statement combined with elements of performance art), the second based on a piece of found footage that dates from the dawn of cinema and the parallel birth of modernism. This assertion of ‘back to basics’ is partly structuralist myth, partly a claim to historical status by what is still the only native British avant-garde school since the 30s, partly a commitment to minimalist art, and partly a stab at imagining (as did Hollis Frampton) a different kind of film history, which ambitiously bypasses popular narrative cinema and links the early British film pioneers with contemporary art.

While the Hepworth shot invokes the history of film and the search for origins, in its reclaimed and altered vision it reaches out to wider and more archaic ideas, the stuff of legend, in its visual themes of beast, man and fire, or power, dependency and disaster. Moving between specific and general associations (even in the ambiguity of the title’s ‘Berlin’), the film remains one of Le Grice’s strongest and most exciting works. A few years later, structural film became enmeshed in ideological dogma. Flashes of this film’s vision linger to haunt the later and more elaborate Le Grice, as in the luscious colour negative of *Blackbird Descending* (1977), or the tight harmonies of *Finnegans Chin* (1981). *Berlin Horse* got the closest to the lyrical expressionism of Len Lye, and it shared the same fate – its implications were resolutely ignored.

A. L. Rees, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, November 1987

H is for House

A woman and a small girl, Peter Greenaway’s wife and daughter, are observed going about their business at home in the English countryside: what we see roughly covers the course of a summer’s day. On one level, Greenaway offers a straightforward celebration of his family, country life, the beauty of a greystone house in a setting of cows, apple trees, large, uneven and very un-urban lawns. The apples might almost be Russian apples so lovingly are they treated by the filmmaker. There is too a homely, optimistic disorder about the place. On top of this agreeable prospect, Greenaway has overlaid his own version of a child’s alphabet, except that he seems stuck on the letter ‘H’ – ‘H is for Health, Happiness, Hearse, Hepatitis, Heretic, Heave, Hell, Holocaust and His Holiness... H is for Cigars, Havana Cigars... H is for Bean, Haricot Bean and Has-Been’. His daughter chips in with definitions, linked to her universe, of the other letters. And an ornithologist offers still more precise information.

The film’s third level, which is loosely though suggestively tied in with what we see, consists of three scatter-brained anecdotes relating to time and the points of the compass: a naturalist is thrown into confusion when the world starts spinning anti-clockwise; a countrywoman scans the horizon awaiting the approach of the City and is effortlessly foiled by the developers; rival sun-watchers fall to squabbling (‘Controversy arose, the rift between those who looked east in the morning and those who looked west in the evening led to argument and abuse and ultimately to blows. Cynical observers began to look west in the morning and east in the evening and a group of satirical opticians

began to look north and south in the middle of the night'). The mixture is irresistible.

The precision of Greenaway's spoken effects, the weaving of the three voices (with bursts of Vivaldi following the girl's interpolations), produces a pleasurable frisson; the anecdotes spiral away into absurdity; meanwhile, Mrs Greenaway cuts the grass, a cat pokes among some abandoned plates, a tortoiseshell butterfly flutters against a window. The contrasts are extreme; the connections precise. One may just as fruitlessly try to penetrate the world of the *Owl and the Pussycat* as that of *His for House*. Determined seekers-after-meaning, however, might consider the fact that in a first draft of the third anecdote the 'satirical opticians' were 'blind satirists'.

John Pym, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1982

Jesus Blood (Never Failed Me Yet)

The singing voice of the last of a London drunk as the orchestra raises him to heaven.

CLOCKS OF THE MIDNIGHT HOURS

Director: Simon Reynell
Production Company: Steel Bank Film Co-op
Sponsor: Arts Council of Great Britain
Producer: Simon Reynell
Photography: David Falconer Rea
Editor: Dinah Ward

Cast:

Kazuko Hohki
Evan Parker
David Holmes
David Toop
Steve Beresford

UK 1986
27 mins

WATER WRACKETS

Filmmaker: Peter Greenaway
Production Company: Peter Greenaway
Title Design: Kenneth Breese
Music: Max Eastley
Sound Mixer: Tony Ancombe

UK 1975
11 mins

BERLIN HORSE

Filmmaker: Malcolm Le Grice
Production Company: Malcolm Le Grice
Music: Brian Eno

UK 1970
8 mins

H IS FOR HOUSE

Filmmaker: Peter Greenaway
Production Company: Peter Greenaway
Title Design: Kenneth Breese
Cast:
Colin Cantlie

UK 1970
8 mins

JESUS BLOOD (NEVER FAILED ME YET)

Director: Stephen Dwoskin
Music: Gavin Bryars

UK 1972
30 mins

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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

Peter Greenaway Shorts Programme 1 Thu 10 Nov 20:40

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

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

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

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

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