

Peter Greenaway and the ethics of perception

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Peter Greenaway, representation and quanta physics

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The map is not the territory.
Drawing a map alters the territory.
Being witness to a phenomenon alters the phenomenon.
Representing a phenomenon alters the perception of a phenomenon.

E.g.:

- a. The autistic child pinched the "neutral observer" in order to test (as Bruno Bettelheim put it) whether she was autistic, too.*
- b. Behaviorist ethologists are so fond of maze tests *because* they have nothing to do with average performance conditions in a natural environment.*
- c. Quantum particles alter their course according to viewer presence.*
- d. Ghosts only appear to these who can recognize them.*

Re-present = to present again
Representation involves repeatability
That is: complete control on the elements of the situation.
What are the elements needed to represent something?
Many of these elements are living beings.

A Draughtsman's Contract

To produce the drawings, a strict adherence to orders of service is needed.
These involve a stop, i.e. a modification in the everyday habits of a lot of people and animals.
A murder is also needed.
And a servant painted as a statue and standing still in unnatural poses is needed to represent an Italianate garden.

A Zed and Two Noughts Carcasses.

Prospero's Books

The magician even creates magically real people to crowd the island on which he represents his own drama to his daughter and to the shipwrecked characters, as well as to perform his orders.
Poor Caliban, who will not agree to fit into the representation, is bound and hidden in a corner where he can't spoil the general effect.

The Baby of Mâcon

The representation on film of a representation of the representation of a myth.

Rosa

"What about the mare?"
No live horse is on scene, but representations of horses.

Now Greenaway, film-making abandoned, creates events projecting immaterial lights on buildings, providing unusual points of view in peopled cities or drawing intuitive links between objects commonly conceived as belonging to disparate classes.

No living being was harmed in the making.
No *living* being. Not while alive. After, it doesn't matter. Or does it?

(The Day of the Dead... I hope I am not being too otherworldly with these ideas of mine. Please note that I am making reference to ethics and to the useful label of "soul" without any reference to any specific religious belief --or disbelief.)

What hits me every time, in every one of PG's films and in his screenplays, is a razor-sharp moral rigour, so sharpened in fact that it is very subtle, easily missed by inattentive eyes and ears, and cutting painlessly – at first.

Such rigour is not aimed, as might seem natural, at his characters.

In fact each one of them, even the most wicked (e.g. the Thief) is looked upon with as much severe realism as compassion; and I do not mean with leniency or solidarity, but with awareness of the mortal destiny of all living flesh, nearer to a *memento mori* than to *homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*.

His rigour is not aimed either, as some have felt it to be, against women as such, not even the three Moirae in *Contract* and in *Drowning*. Gender differences are taken into account as aspects of reality, not as a ground for evaluation; indeed, equality in responsibilities as well as in strenghts and weaknesses between genders seems a given with PG.

Rather, his rigour is aimed at the spectator who does not ask questions, or who only asks any about the plot.

The needed questions, the urgent questions whithout which any play, any representation, fails its intrinsical reason for being made public, are not about the plot but about the representation; not about the images fleeting across a mirror, but about the mirror itself; not about what happens to characters on a stage, but about what happens within the polis.

-- Where did the dead animals filmed in *Zoo* come from?

-- What does the mare on stage in *Rosa* feel about the part she is asked to play?

-- Is a religious frame really enough to distract us from the meaning of the rape on stage in *Mâcon*?

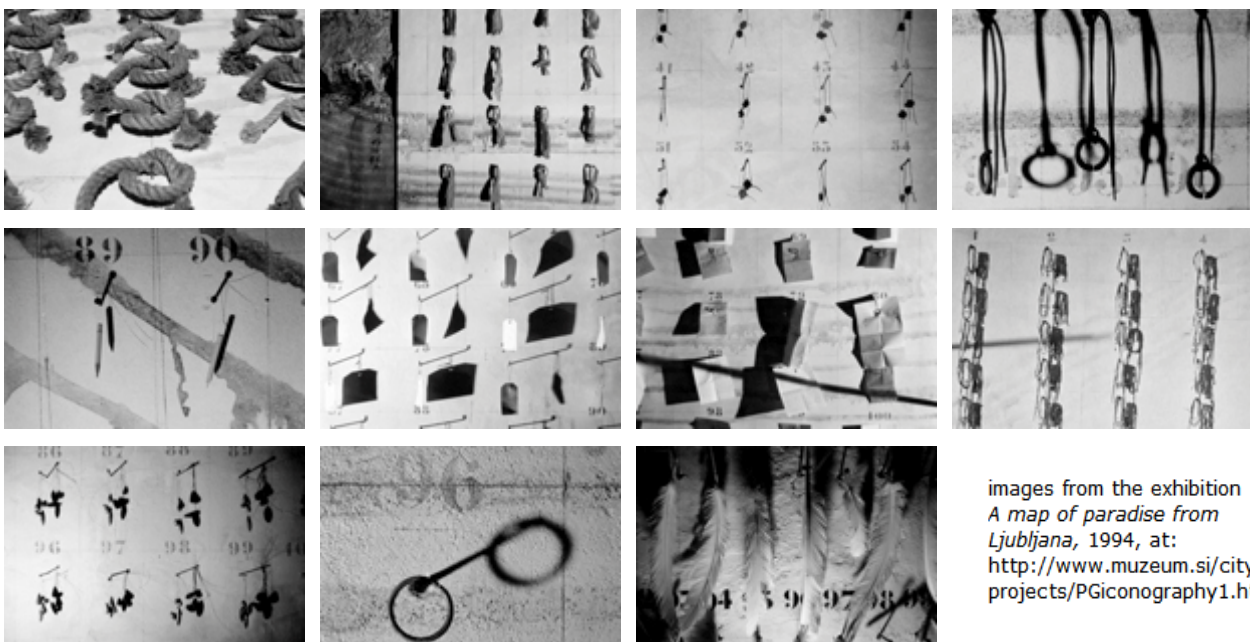
-- Can our souls afford to pass on with merely a glance at roadkill, or should we take into consideration the outcome of our everyday actions, like driving a car --or sitting into a cinema?

-- Should not we at the very least acknowledge the passing of a life with a minimum of fireworks, *in memoriam* for the light that has been extinguished?

-- Is Caliban really so wrong contesting Prospero's use of his living being (and of Ariel's, for that matter) as a mere prop in the play he is staging for his own ends?

We, the spectators, pay for a show. If the show doesn't move us to reflect on ourselves, the reflecting surfaces receiving the images, we are not only wasting our money. Perhaps we are wasting our chance to know more about ourselves; we pay for two hours' entertainment with a part of our souls. A price that may be too high.

Harro Troezke



images from the exhibition
*A map of paradise from
Ljubljana, 1994*, at:
<http://www.muzeum.si/city-projects/PGiconography1.htm>