

Filming the Dutch Still Life: Peter Greenaway's Objects

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This article examines the symbolic and visual function of objects in four of Peter Greenaway's films made in the 1980s, a period when the filmmaker was exploring the relation between cinema and painting. It traces his references to the objects of seventeenth-century Dutch still life painting and, informed by art-historical criticism on the subject, argues for the objects' multivalent nature, varying from symbols and allegories to visual and material props. His treatment of decay and his study of the human dependence on material culture in films like *A Zed and Two Noughts* and *Drowning by Numbers* have their visual origins in the images of Dutch still life. In true Dutch mode Greenaway employs fruits, flowers and food in order to shift subject/object hierarchies and foreground the material aspect of being human.

Peter Greenaway's 1997 project involved a prop-opera entitled *100: Hundred Objects to Represent the World* that incorporated the artist's "shopping list" of the world's material. His last multimedia project *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* reconstructs the story of a man and the history of the twentieth century from the objects found in his 92 suitcases. Greenaway's fascination with the representational capacities of objects, their history, symbolic meaning and aesthetic qualities can be traced back to his early filmmaking where his cinematic language draws insistently on objects from the history of art, objects that function as props for his frames but also as material for constructing metaphors and allegories. Being a filmmaker with explicit influences from the history of Western art, Greenaway works with objects in the style of still life painting, employing the genre's destabilizing hierarchies between objects and subjects. Many of his films in the 1980s include an underlying text of still life themes and motifs evident

either through the citation of physical objects in the *mise en scène* or manifested in his explorations of materiality, symbolism and the condition of being human.

His still life references reveal an attachment to the Golden Age of the genre - the Dutch still life painting of the seventeenth century. The insistent presence of Dutch art in many of his feature films confirms Greenaway's fascination and suggests an interest that goes beyond the scope of pictorial allusion.¹ The director's words are indicative of this special status of Dutch art within his work:

I think the most successful of all painting has been that of the Dutch golden age - I refer to it in much of my work . . . It was the time when art became most democratic and so most understood by the most people on both its literal and allegorical level . . . I would like my movies to work the way Dutch painting did, on literal and metaphorical levels. (qtd. in Gras 108-9)

Along with an emphasis on the relationship of Dutch art with its audience and the conditions of its production, unique in their time, Greenaway foregrounds the ability of this art to function on both "literal and metaphorical levels." In the course of this paper I will trace Greenaway's use of objects from the Dutch still life tradition and identify their functions as both carriers of symbolic meaning and material for visual compositions. By employing the art historical debates that have shaped the reception of Dutch still life, my readings aim to promote the still life objects as a locus where this need for multiple levels of meaning is played out.

Notes on Dutch Still Life.

In Dutch seventeenth-century still life painting the representation of objects is mainly associated with abundance and material luxury. Still life canvases of the *pronkstilleven* style by painters like Willem Claesz Heda and Willem Kalf depict an over-filled pictorial space with the valuable objects crammed

1. Three films in the 1980s are structured around a Dutch painting. *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985) pictures Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* (1662-65) as its major *tableau vivant*, *Drowning by Numbers* (1988) includes the painting by Pieter Bruegel *Children's Games* (1560), and *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover* (1989) is set in front of an enormous reproduction of Franz Hals's *Banquet of the Officers of the St. George Militia* (1616). His forthcoming film *Nightwatching* (2007) is on the life of Rembrandt Van Rijn and is entitled after his famous painting *The Nightwatch*.

onto a table, providing a voluptuous visual experience. The development and high demand for such still life painting is attributed to the immense wealth that was brought into the Dutch Republic from its colonies all over the world. The Dutch Republic, though confined within its own close geographical borders, controlled an enormous expanse of land and wealth, and constituted, in Simon Schama's words, "a precocious cornucopia" (8). Being a society that was ruled by the middle class, Dutch society in the Golden Age did not possess the social structures, such as aristocracy and royalty, to consume the imported goods, and as a result this inability to absorb wealth and luxury created "one of the first surplus economies" (Bryson 98). This overwhelming colonial wealth finds pictorial representation in the still life paintings of the time through the depiction of exotic fruits and valuable objects such as tapestries, vases and expensive clothing. As Norman Bryson argues, "Dutch still life painting is a dialogue between this newly affluent society and its material possessions" (102). His discussion establishes still life as a space for the depiction of social and economic power of the people who commissioned or bought these paintings. It also foregrounds the moral anxiety hidden behind the luxurious items and exotic food, an anxiety that stemmed from the irreconcilability of the immense colonial wealth and the moderate life dictated by Protestant ethics.

Through detailed iconographical and iconological readings of the paintings by masters of the time, such as Jan Steen, Jan Davidz de Heem and Ambrossius Bosschaert, art historians of the 1960s-70s attempted "to determine the original intentions of the artists" (de Jongh 21). In addition to representing the material wealth of the bourgeois who commissioned them, paintings depicting exotic fruit, ornamented goblets and blooming flower arrangements invoked an intricate system of semiotic meanings, allusions and allegories, which the people of the time must have been familiar with. These elaborate semiotic systems were supposed to endow earthly compositions with symbolic meanings about life, morality and mortality. A particular style of still life called *Vanitas* employed highly allegorical objects in order to depict the ephemerality of life and the vanity of material collections. The presence of objects like skulls, watches, half burned candles and books are not meretricious images; rather they constitute symbols or allegories that embody abstract notions such as transience, moderation and vanity.

This iconological method dominated as an interpretational mode in the 1960s-70s. In 1983, however, Svetlana Alpers's *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* "struck the scene like a lightning

bolt" (Renger 14). The intention of her groundbreaking study was to link painting with the broader field of visual culture and visual perception and establish Dutch art as an art that appeals to the eye, an art where "meaning by its very nature is lodged in what the eye can take in, however descriptive that might be" (xxiv). Disassociating Dutch art from the discursive methods used to interpret Italian Renaissance art (the iconological method), Alpers launched a rigorous attack on the iconographic readings facilitated by emblem books. Her study rejects the iconographical readings "that have made it a principle of Dutch seventeenth century picture-making that the realism hides meanings beneath its descriptive surface" (xix), attempting instead to establish a new way of looking at the artistic production of this era that is informed by the specific conditions of its conception and production. For Alpers, Dutch art portrays a new kind of artistic sensibility that is not indebted to narrative and interpretation but to vision and representation as well as to the distinct visual culture developed in the Netherlands at the time. Alpers characteristically describes Dutch painting as "a reality effect - not . . . hiding moral instruction but . . . offering a perceptual model of knowledge of the world" ("Picturing Dutch Culture" 59). Meaning is not to be found in hidden allegories but resides on the visual surface of the paintings, in their formal properties and representational techniques.

In this paper I will be looking at four films from Greenaway's 1980s period that exhibit a concern with objects and their representational capabilities in ways that resemble the debates around Dutch still life painting. In the order of their production I will read material instances from *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985), *Drowning by Numbers* (1988) and *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover* (1989). The consideration of objects in these films is primarily an art-historical one, associated with the history of interpretation and the debate over notions of iconography and visuality. By employing Dutch still life images, Greenaway aligns his cinematic art with an art that (according to one school of interpretation) constituted an aesthetic space where allegories and symbols were employed to enrich material objects with additional meanings. Greenaway has explained his attachment to this aspect of still life in an interview with Alan Woods when he characteristically mentions his fascination with "the Dutch references to broken lute strings, women with caged birds, bitten pomegranates, peeled lemons - a vocabulary of proverbs, homilies, fables, edifying tales" (qtd. in Woods 264). Shaped by a long tradition of symbolic readings from art historians, Dutch still life emerges as an appropriate visu-

al language to express Greenaway's artistic intentions - as summarised by his statement: "The whole purpose of my cinematic effort is to explore metaphor and symbol" (qtd. in Gras 98). Judging from the above statement, one might assume that this symbolic function of Dutch still life painting is what primarily appeals to Greenaway. But what about the non-allegorical, visual approach promoted by critics like Alpers? Greenaway was making these films at the very time when the promotion of a revisionist project was taking place in art criticism. The allegorical function of objects in Dutch still life was contested precisely when Greenaway was employing them as visual signifiers for allegory. My close analysis of Greenaway's use of Dutch still life in the four films will trace the tension between the two antithetical approaches, while attending to some additional representational aspects of still life, thus opening up the interpretational opposition in order to capture the more complex and creative ways that Greenaway employs the objects of Dutch still life.

The Draughtsman's Contract: Realism or Allegory?

In his first feature film, *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), Greenaway explicitly addresses the art-historical debate, thematically embedding within his film the battle between visual and allegorical meanings. The film revolves around a murder in an English country house, where a draughtsman, Mr Nerville, signs a contract to execute twelve drawings of the house and gardens, as well as to meet with the lady of the house, Mrs Herbert, who is to "comply with his requests concerning his pleasure." In the course of the film the owner of the estate, Mr Herbert, is mysteriously murdered, while Mr Nerville is bound by another contract, concerning the pleasure of Mrs Talmann, Mrs Herbert's daughter. At first glance, the film seems to bear no explicit visual quotations from Dutch still life; its theme is essentially English. The discussions around certain objects, however, resemble the debates on Dutch still life. In the course of the film the semiological status of various objects is debated, with the characters arguing about their possible allegorical meanings and their perception as physical objects. There are "signifiers that lead lives of their own . . . the various fruits, animals and trees along with Mr Herbert's shirt, coat, boots, cloak and horse" (Walsh 246). The semiological status of these signifiers is open to interpretation in the same way that objects in still life painting oscillate between the allegorical and the visual.

The dominant presence of fruits in this film is a good starting point for

exploring the signifying status that objects have in Greenaway's cinema. *The Draughtsman's Contract* literally starts and ends with characters consuming fruit with the camera lingering upon plums, apples, pomegranates and pineapples. In Bryson's discussion of Dutch still life painting, the fruit featured there does not simply represent the surrounding physical world: "fruit is a luxury, not a staple . . . It marks an access to continental resources, a breaking with regional limitation" (122). In an era of colonial expansion, exotic fruit, like pineapple, imported from the colonies, becomes a signifier of material wealth and of access to precious goods and luxuries not widely available. The value of fruits within the Dutch society of the seventeenth century was not connected with their nutritional value; rather fruits were laden with symbolic meanings of a cultural, economic and sexual nature. Fruit paintings by the most famous artists of the genre (like Jan Davidsz de Heem's *Vanitas Fruit Piece* of 1653) have received iconographical readings that insist on the symbolic status of the pomegranates depicted in the painting. The sexual manuals of the time reinforced these readings, as Schama argues, with "the male testicles being nicely compared to pomegranates, full of seeds, and the ovaries being their counterpart in the female" (424). According to these interpretations, in de Heem's still life, for example, the pomegranates are not just an exotic fruit but also a symbol of sexual organs.

Greenaway is aware of the symbolic status of the pomegranate, as his comments in the Woods interview reveal, and its presence in the film instigates a game with the metaphorical potentials of objects. Towards the end of the film, Mr Nerville returns to the estate of Compton Ainsty bringing three pomegranates as a gift to Mrs Herbert. A little later and after their last sexual encounter, Mrs Herbert offers an explanation of the possible symbolic meanings of the pomegranate, and while she cuts it open, its juice becomes a signifier for "the blood of a newborn . . . and murder." These allegorical readings, however, are lost on the draughtsman, who sees the pomegranate simply as a fruit; he is "hesitant to acknowledge an unintended allusion." Mr Nerville's innocence or blindness in front of the allegorical meanings of objects is transferred to his own paintings, since the draughtsman only draws what he sees and not what he knows, refusing to acknowledge that his painting could possibly be read as providing clues to a murder mystery. As Amy Lawrence argues, "as a producer of art, Nerville resists interpretation, but his attempt to take refuge behind material reality fails" (63). Indeed, by meticulously transcribing reality, he fails to read the signs in his own drawings that implicate him in Mr Herbert's murder. At the end of the

film the draughtsman is severely punished for this failure, suffering a brutal murder by his enemies.

Greenaway's decision to punish the protagonist for his unwillingness to acknowledge the allegorical meanings of objects and paintings raises questions about the director's allegiance to the aesthetic values Mr Nerville represents. The draughtsman's point of view is insistently rendered through the drawing grid, which determines, as well as restricts, his vision (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The draughtsman's view through the perspective grid in The Draughtsman's Contract.

His art is committed to the faithful depiction of material reality, and the optical device he uses connects him with the Dutch artists and their attempt to paint the perception of reality. His mode of vision is resonant with the qualities of Dutch art foregrounded by Alpers and his resistance to allegory suggests this link even further. It might seem that with the final act of murder Greenaway condemns the draughtsman's visual perception, and thus Alpers's approach; but this assumption is contradictory to the degree of authority placed on the draughtsman's point of view. A significant number of Greenaway's shots assume the perspective of the grid, thus emphasizing the grid's relation to another optical device, the camera; as Charles Rice argues, "the selection of twelve incidental views of the garden mimics the positioning of the film camera, enabling the sections of matching between drawing and real scene . . . to compare representation and reality" (98). The draughts-

man's character and perspective are the main identification point for the spectator throughout the film and its severe challenge at the end leaves the viewer feeling betrayed. Making a decision about which is the best way to approach the film becomes complicated; one is baffled by an excess of clues, and the choice between visual and allegorical readings is not an easy one, as both approaches are validated and challenged in the space of the film.

With the death of the draughtsman, and through Mrs Herbert's allegorical readings, Greenaway makes very clear that nothing in his film is to be taken for what it seems, since everything is a comment on representation and on the process of making or imposing meaning. We encounter a battle regarding the ontological status of objects; is the pomegranate a physical object to be consumed, is it a symbol of blood and murder or an allegory for sexual organs? The use of objects from still life painting aligns Greenaway's concerns with the critical reception of this particular genre, divided between visual and iconographical readings. The latter seem to have a particular attraction for Greenaway but his art is ultimately open to its audience; Greenaway encourages an active reading of his films by letting the viewers play with the various interpretative possibilities. The intended symbols could become simple material forms for his viewers, as they are for the draughtsman, and their interpretations might favour the visual elements of his films, such as their careful composition and lighting, without acknowledging their art-historical citations. The interpretational ambiguity of the film is not, however, to be simply attributed to the distance between the film's production and reception. Rather, the open dialogue, or conflict, between iconography and visuality is explicitly addressed within the film, resembling the debate underlying Dutch painting of the seventeenth century.

A Zed and Two Noughts: Objects of Decay

In Greenaway's second feature film, *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985), the Dutch element is predominant; the film is shot entirely in Holland and funded by Dutch patron/producer Kees Kasander - who has produced Greenaway's films ever since. The employment of still life here departs from the clear-cut opposition of interpretational modes that characterizes *The Draughtsman's Contract* by incorporating still life objects in order to invoke decay. *A Zed and Two Noughts* is a versatile and intricate film, difficult to interpret, since it is "made with a conscious or unconscious knowledge of certain issues concerning analysis: the hermeneutic impulse" (Wills and

McHoul 9). The themes revolve equally around twinship, evolutionary theory and art history, synthesizing a dense filmic text. The film begins with twin brothers, Oswald and Oliver, trying to comprehend their wives' sudden deaths. Obsessed with their wives' imminent decomposition, the twins set out to measure decay by photographing the slow decomposition of dead organisms, starting from the lowest point of the evolutionary scale and moving upwards. Through the use of time-lapse photography, and by replaying the still images in fast-forward, the brothers are ultimately able "to record the motion of decay" (Schwenger 408), creating a movie through still images. In time-lapse photography Greenaway finds the perfect combination between the medium of photography which, like painting, freezes time and snatches the image away from its present, and the cinematic medium, which is bound to its unfolding in time.

The still image of a bitten apple is animated in the beginning of the film by fast-forwarding the time-lapse photographs. Its decay is not a process of motionless decomposition; rather the collapse of its particles and the changing of its colour are represented as acts of motion and change. The effect is more striking with the bodies of animals (a prawn, a baby crocodile, a swan, a zebra and a gorilla are recorded decaying), where the corpses are animated by the swarming worms and maggots that move about

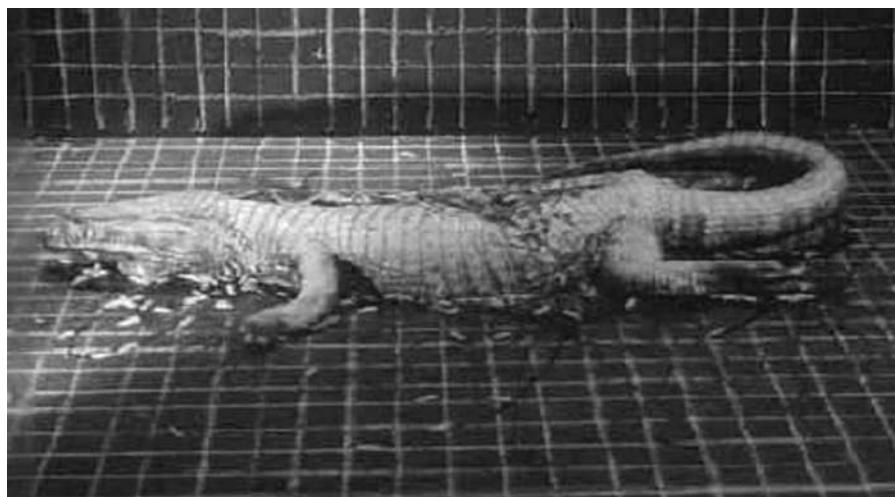


Figure 2. Movement in death (crocodile in zoo) in A Zed and Two Noughts.

(Figure 2). The movement involved in their decomposition endows the dead bodies with an uncanny life-like aspect, almost resembling breathing, and the paradox of movement in death is fully in operation. As Hal Foster

argues, “the insistence of such terms as still life, *still leven* and *nature morte*, all of which refer to the stilled state of the motif, suggests an anxiety that it might be otherwise - that there is an uncanny animation” (7). Playing with this idea, Greenaway illustrates that dead nature (*nature morte*) is not necessarily still life, but that death is a process that involves life/motion.

This treatment of still life as a depiction of the process of the decay of objects and animals addresses the common concern of still life painters, who see their subjects changing with the course of the days. In most still life painting, the living and dying aspect of the depicted objects is ignored, since the goal is the representation of eternal unchanging forms. In Dutch still life painting, however, the depiction of natural objects such as fruit, flowers, meat and fish is intended to convey symbolically the withering away of animate beings, including human beings. In the flower paintings of Ambrosius Bosschaert (Figure 3), for example, the flowers are slightly wilted and start-



Figure 3. Ambrosius Bosschaert, Flowers in a Glass, 1606.

ing to lose their vividness while their leaves and petals are falling off; at the same time the ominous presence of snails, butterflies and other insects reminds the viewer of their imminent death and decay. In paintings of meat and fish that were popular at the time, the problem of decomposition is even more prominent. What paintings like Pieter Aertsen's *The Butcher's Stall* (1551) and Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox* (1655) essentially depict is decay. The painting of flesh that is gradually rotting acknowledges the material and, therefore, ephemeral nature of any form of life. All these Dutch paintings of decay ultimately point to the fragility of human nature and through symbolism and allegory act as reminders of the fact that the human being is made from the same material as any other living being.

In his employment of still life, Greenaway utilizes the same symbolic principles that underlie the Dutch genre. The symbolic conflation of animal and human decay is explicitly represented through the twin brothers, who become the last set of decaying subjects. By stretching the capabilities of the genre through time-lapse photography, Greenaway explores the continuity between Dutch still life and his cinema, recognizing the former as a representational form that expresses the thematic and aesthetic issues of his film. Driven by the same concern with the material aspects of being, Greenaway moves comfortably from still life to human life that is bound to matter, unfolding the process in cinematic time.

Drowning by Numbers: Measuring Materiality

Greenaway's 1988 film *Drowning by Numbers* is obsessed with death, material culture and counting. The story of the three Cissie Colpitts, who drown their husbands, is a story told through numbers and games and features numerous other important and unimportant deaths. Accompanying these deaths are a number of still life tableaux that suggestively indicate the material relationship of the dead body to the nature that will assist in its decomposition. The conflation of humanity with matter that operates in *A Zed and Two Noughts* is continued and expanded in this film with more symbols and still life motifs, which expose the human dependence on material objects and demonstrate their use as emblems and extensions of human identity. Further, as Alain Masson argues, "Greenaway's style sets in motion a sensitivity to the formal structures that govern the perception of the world" (224); his compositions demand a particular type of vision that takes into account the formal properties of his images, and resembles the way one looks at paintings.

In the opening scene of the film on Amsterdam Road, while the skipping girl is counting the stars, a dead bird is pictured hanging upside-down from a pole in the foreground. This is a typical Greenaway opening scene, with its content neatly summarizing the themes of the film. The foregrounding of dead flesh that visually accompanies the act of counting is essentially what happens in the course of the film with the number of dead bodies increasing as the numbers that structure the film approach one hundred. In a film crowded with still life painting motifs, the dead bird is a visual allusion to the types of still life that depict game, usually birds and rabbits. Willem Van Aelst was a popular painter of that genre, and his art seems to be simultaneously fighting and embracing death and decay. In *Hunting Still Life* (Figure 4), for example, the dead animal, rendered in extreme de-



Figure 4. Willem Van Aelst, Hunting Still Life, mid 1660s.

tail, is juxtaposed to other textures like marble and velvet so that its “creaturality” is contrasted with the other material. That this is ultimately a

painting of its death is suggested by the careful painting of a fly on the bird's white feathers, implying imminent decay. This lively rendering of a dead animal has something sinister in the attentiveness of its execution, since the vividness of colours and softness of feathers are still visible even at the moment of death, eternally threatened, however, by the presence of the fly. Greenaway uses the image of the bird as a signifier of a corpse to foreshadow the corpses to come and their eventual decomposition. His characters are aligned with the dead animals, and there is a constant play on whether being human is really any different. The scene with Nancy and Jake naked in their bathtubs is structured around suggestive cuts that juxtapose the characters with still life images of flowers and insects. The images of butterflies, snails and moths are employed as established symbols of the frailty of life, exactly as they were used in Bosschaert's *Flowers in a Glass* or Balthasar van der Ast's *Still Life with Insects*; and in utilising their symbolic connotations, Greenaway effectively anticipates Jake's becoming *nature morte*.

The object/subject hierarchies that the still life genre in the Dutch tradition addresses are also picked up by Greenaway in *Drowning by Numbers*. In the scene with Jake and Nancy discussed above, the attention devoted to the filming of the objects that surround the subjects problematizes the centrality of the human characters. As in Jan Steen's disorderly interiors with their overfilled domestic spaces and rooms strewn with food, shoes and household objects that Greenaway's composition evokes, the objects are as much the centre of attention as the subjects. The moral implications of sin and sexual promiscuity of Steen's genre images might be of some significance to Greenaway, but his interest lies mainly in the status of the human when the objects seem to be taking over the cinematic space. In his film objects and subjects are treated equally and the characters are part of a material culture that troubles notions of subjectivity. There is no assumption of subject superiority; rather the condition of being human is described as a condition of material existence. The objects of Dutch still life in their detailed and careful rendering foreground the same material existence that re-examines the central position of the human in pictorial representation.

All the characters in *Drowning by Numbers* are creatures bound to their earthly materials; they live among numerous objects that function as signifiers of their identity (Figure 5). In true material obsession, the objects used to populate the cinematic canvas are even selected to match the initials of each character: "the coroner's son is named Smut, which begins with the let-



Figure 5. Madgett's room over-filled with objects, in Drowning by Numbers.

ter S. So there are one hundred things in the film that begin with S" (qtd. in Gras 109). By the end of the film certain objects become emblems of characters in a game of metonymy; a pitchfork, a typewriter and a radio are thrown into the water after the ashes of the three dead men. This emblematic use of objects, as we have seen, is a major motif in still life and Greenaway plays with the same signifying processes. His attachment to still life painting recognizes the genre's devotion to the depiction of the trivial and overlooked objects that make up human existence. As Norman Bryson puts it, the value of still life painting is located exactly in this depiction of the materials that our lives are so intertwined with, because "no-one can escape the conditions of creaturely, of eating, drinking and domestic life, with which still life is concerned" (14). This condition of creaturely is ultimately what Greenaway's film is pre-occupied with; his characters eat, drink, have sex, and ultimately die. While they live, their existence is bound, and sometimes determined, by objects that become extensions of their identities, its matter and substance equated with the human.

Foregrounding cinematically the significance of objects, "Greenaway crams as much as he can of history's collectible objects into a single deep-focus shot" (Orr 333). One is indeed puzzled by the numerous arrays of use-

less objects that crowd the cinematic canvas. For example, in the scene when Madgett, the coroner, has his breakfast, the viewer is given enough time to observe the objects on the table. While we listen to the dialogue we can clearly distinguish the breakfast items on the cluttered table; we even have the time to notice a pair of candlesticks, ironically useless in the daylight but useful as vertical features and possibly evoking *Vanitas* symbols. This, however, is a rare occasion; in *Drowning by Numbers* Greenaway creates many more rich tableaux of objects that are impossible for the eye to grasp and identify. The viewer feels the need to freeze the frame and observe its contents with the attention one would look at a Dutch still life painting. As Roland Barthes argues, “the Dutch scenes require a gradual and complete reading; we must begin at one edge and finish at the other, audit the painting like an accountant, not forgetting this corner, that margin, that background, in which is inscribed yet another perfectly rendered object” (109-10). Greenaway’s dense tableaux demand a similar type of reading. Unlike the way we look at a painting, however, the time allowed for each cinematic frame is very limited and lies in the hands of the director. Denied the time to browse with leisure and take in the visual richness of the images, the viewer is ultimately frustrated by the inability to grasp the content and the formal properties of the frames, a frustration that leads to insecurity about the meaning. In this case the painterly fails to be translated in the cinematic, which is bound by time restrictions that prescribe immediate perception and appreciation.

The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover: Objects of Excess

In Greenaway’s most celebrated film, *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover* (1989), the Dutch still life references are much more easily identifiable. Here Greenaway has made a film about food, its material and allegorical qualities, its consumption and appropriation. The French restaurant *Le Hollandais* is the space where the film mainly takes place; there, among elegant *hors d'oeuvres* and desserts, and under the orchestration of Richard (the cook) unfolds the story of Albert Spica (the thief), Georgina (the wife) and Michael (the lover). Using seventeenth-century Dutch still life as the main source of visual images, Greenaway creates a dense filmic text intertwining beautiful surfaces with allegorical meanings. What is striking in *The Cook* is firstly the way the film looks and secondly how the spectacular still life tableaux are not just beautiful images but contribute to the creation of meaning. Through visual signifiers like the half-peeled lemon or meat and

vegetable arrangements, the director employs the allegorical meanings of food in Dutch still life in order to facilitate his own Thatcherite allegory. Utilising a genre of art that has been laden with iconographical readings, Greenaway constructs an elaborate parallel between the Dutch bourgeois society and Thatcher's *nouveaux riches*. As the director comments, "In seventeenth century Dutch painting, which I refer to in *Cook Thief*, food was also thought to reflect the civilizing forces of the era, the power and wealth of the high bourgeoisie" (qtd. in Gras 108). Greenaway examines and ultimately parodies the function of food as a civilizing force and a sign of refinement; by the end of the film food becomes a symbol of consumption and appropriation.

In tracing the visual references, Greenaway is again a great help since his screenplay confirms them explicitly. In the visual description of the first scene that takes place in the parking lot of the restaurant, Greenaway's "set directions" read: "The abundant food with its attendants are reminiscent of Dutch seventeenth century painting - opulent still life with attendant slaves" (Greenaway 10). The staging of the scene is reminiscent of paintings like Pieter Aertsen's *The Butcher's Stall*, where the meticulous depiction of meat products "relegat[es] the image of the Holy Family on their flight to Egypt to the background" (Riley 55) - a visual place traditionally reserved for still life images; or Joachim Beuckelaer's ironically titled *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* in the unorthodox attention given to the depiction of food rather than the religious narrative. Images like these had infuriated the iconoclasts of the seventeenth century, and their invocation in the opening of the film anticipates the significance food acquires in the space of the restaurant. In *Le Hollandais* the frames are dominated by the food arrangements in the foreground while the story and dialogue take place at a distance. Greenway's long shots and theatrical staging prioritize what is usually referred to as props. His food props are not decorative visual details adding to the reality effect. They interfere in the structure of the frame, making their symbolic and material significance apparent.

The film is divided into eight days, each one starting with a different menu adorned with still life objects. This combination of the written menu with the stylized food surrounding it is evocative of the type of still life painting exemplified in Joseph de Bray's *Still Life in Praise of the Pickled Herring*. This painting combines the detailed depiction of the bread and herring with the painting of a poem that verbally praises the object depicted; in the painting the verbal and the visual coexist and complement each other, as is the case in Greenaway's film. After visually insisting on the symbolic

weight of food, Greenaway makes the symbolism clear through the words of the cook at the end of the film. In the penultimate scene, where Georgina asks Richard to cook her lover, the allegorical meanings of food are explained by the cook: "I charge highly for anything black - grapes, olives, blackcurrants. People like to remind themselves of death - eating black food is like consuming death - like saying - ha, ha, Death! - I'm eating you." Eating is clearly equated with the appropriation of qualities and attributes related to the food consumed. These symbolic relations are strongly present in the depiction of food in Dutch painting, where, for example, the eating of herring and bread traditionally stands for abstinence and discipline whereas the luxurious oysters that feature in many genre paintings evoke licentiousness and moral decay. Greenaway explicitly makes the viewer aware of these symbolic undertones of food consumption in order to encourage a similar reading of material or cultural consumption. Food itself is used as a metaphor for consumption and appropriation and its symbolic readings facilitate Greenaway's political metaphor.

The interpretation of the film "as a self-conscious and self-implicating critique of a bourgeois ideology of consumption whose early manifestations Greenaway locates in the seventeenth century" (Willoquet-Maricondi and Alemany-Galway xix) departs from this allegorical reading of food. The images of Dutch still life do not just depict food and precious objects; rather they describe a society and culture that is highly consumerist (considering the relative historical standards) and that values material possessions so greatly that it incorporates them into artistic production. In these spectacular paintings we identify the image of a society torn between Protestant ethics and material consumption that in a compensatory gesture endows the images of material excess with moral and ethical meanings. Greenaway merges the newly-affluent middle class of the Thatcher era with the Dutch bourgeoisie by surrounding Albert Spica and his gang with the visual signifiers of this art of excess and positioning them in front of Frans Hals's group portrait. By placing his characters in frames overwhelmed with material objects, Greenaway finds an adequate language to describe a society that has reached the limits of excess and starts consuming itself.

In *The Cook* everything is edible, even the human body. The act of cannibalism in the final scene portrays the ultimate form of appropriation, where through consumption the qualities of a person are symbolically absorbed by the consumer. Critics and the director himself have pointed out how the film in its final scene "suggestively conflate[s] cannibalism with consumerism" (Bartolovich 205) in order to critique modern society's atti-

tude towards material consumption. His filming of an act of cannibalism in the end lays out a complex net of interconnected significations concerning the interpretative possibilities of the act as appropriation and as consumption. Greenaway himself is appropriating-cannibalising the images of Dutch still life painting in order to construct a cinematic canvas of excess that critiques consumerist tendencies. The relationship between the cannibal and the object of appropriation or consumption is problematised in the ambiguous relationship in which the critic of consumerism, Greenaway, is the cannibal-appropriator of still life images. This paradoxical relationship ultimately implicates the viewer, who consumes the film and enjoys its visual and verbal excess in the same way the gang consumes the food. In the end the gun is turned towards the spectator and having assumed the position of the thief, s/he becomes the cannibal. Through this unfavourable identification the viewer is made aware that watching the film is ultimately a form of consumption/cannibalism.

Conclusion

In the course of this article I have examined the presence of Dutch still life in four of Greenaway's films in the attempt to demonstrate the variety of meanings he achieves by employing a range of motifs in the depiction of objects: objects as vehicles of allegorical meaning, as emblems of the act of consumption, as beautiful items that decorate his filmic tableaux, as descriptions of a realistic visual surface. Informed by the art historical debate over Dutch art that posits allegorical and visual/material functions as antithetical, I have attempted to keep the two modes separate, establishing each time the meanings Greenaway adopts from the two approaches. In *The Draughtsman's Contract* the tension between the iconological and visual reading of objects constitutes not only an external theoretical interpretation, but also a central theme of the film that is explicitly addressed but not resolved. In *A Zed and Two Noughts* and *Drowning by Numbers*, the antithesis is abandoned, and the two functions co-exist without the suggestion of an underlying conflict. In *The Cook* Greenaway has come a long way from the opposition of modes in his first feature film. Here, the visual surface of his film facilitates his own political metaphor and attack on consumerism.

Considering Greenaway's attachment to allegory, it would seem reasonable to argue that the director's main purpose in employing Dutch still life is to invoke the emblematic, allegorical meanings in order to enrich his films with multiple layers of meaning; and to a certain extent he does, using

the images of decay, the symbols behind the depiction of food and the tendency symbolically to conflate animal and human, matter and spirit, object and subject. But he is ultimately a product of his time, and the visual qualities of Dutch still life explored at the time of his filmmaking find their way into his images; the attentive gaze Dutch still life requires, its ability to address the material aspects of being, as well as its verisimilitude that points to a mode of perceptual knowledge, are all aspects that are equally important in the films. This simultaneous employment of the two theoretically antithetical approaches questions their either/or relation. Do we really need to ignore the allegorical potential of the still life images in order to marvel at their realistic description? In the use of still life objects Greenaway's cinematic practice suggests a synthesis of interpretational modes rather than an antithesis, a synthesis that aims at a creation of multiple levels of signification and modes of consumption, with this interpretative plurality ultimately signifying the plurality of pleasures spectators can derive from Greenaway's cinema.

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Filmography

- The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover.* Screenplay by Peter Greenaway. Dir. Peter Greenaway. Perf. Michael Gambon, Helen Mirren, Richard Bohringer and Alan Howard. Photography by Sacha Vierny. Miramax, 1989.
- The Draughtsman's Contract.* Screenplay by Peter Greenaway. Dir. Peter Greenaway. Perf. Anthony Higgins, Janet Suzman, Anne Louise Lambert, Hugh Fraser and Neil Cunningham. Photography by Curtis Clark. United Artists, 1982.
- Drowning By Numbers.* Screenplay by Peter Greenaway. Dir. Peter Greenaway. Perf. Bernard Hill, Joan Plowright, Juliet Stevenson, Joely Richardson and Jason Edwards. Photography by Sacha Vierny. Film Four International, 1988.
- A Zed and Two Noughts.* Screenplay by Peter Greenaway. Dir. Peter Greenaway. Perf. Andrea Ferreol, Brian Deacon, Eric Deacon, Frances Barber and Joss Ackland. Photography by Sacha Vierny. Artifical Eye, 1985.

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