

“Framed-up by the frame”:  
Deception and point of view  
in Peter Greenaway’s  
*The Draughtman’s Contract*

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## “Framed-up by the frame”: Deception and point of view in Peter Greenaway’s *The Draughtman’s Contract*

While doing my research for this essay some lines from Frank O’Hara’s poem on Billie Holiday’s death, ‘The Day Lady Died’, kept coming back to my mind: ‘It is 12:20 in New York a Friday/ three days after Bastille day, yes / it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine.’ (O’Hara, 146) The American poet records a succession of ordinary events until he reached ‘the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and / casually ask[ed] for a carton of Gauloises and a carton / of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it.’ (146) Those banal (non-)events that sooner or later would be deleted from his memory, are recorded by the mind and by the poem because something powerful happened; something powerful made them meaningful.

Everyone has been through this kind of survival of the ordinary by memory. Sometimes the pathos of losing someone dear; sometimes something in the community sphere – everyone reminds the non-events lived when the news of the twin towers attack reached each and everyone of us – fixes banality in our minds. Hopefully the survival by memory may touch us because of powerful aesthetic events.

One of the most powerful aesthetic experiences that I have been through, happened in the early 1980’s when I first saw Peter Greenaway’s *The Draughtman’s Contract*. It was a spring sunny afternoon – I can’t promise it was spring but that’s the way I like to recollect it. Anyway, I’m sure I didn’t forget the place I went to afterwards, the people I met and with whom I shared my perplexity. I may have written a review of this film, since in those days it was something I used to do every week. As I lost track of those pieces, I just cannot be sure if I did. Anyway, I remember the perplexity I felt, mainly because of the way Greenaway articulated the memory of discourses and genres (the historical film) with

unexpected ones (Agatha Christie's mystery novels) that functioned as a kind of subtext. Besides there was Michael Nyman's music. His music had a hybrid texture – revisiting Henry Purcell's with a minimalist rhythm – and functioned as an ironic counterpoint to the narrative eventually emerging as a subtext.

In this essay I will ponder on a specific topic that still remains for me one of this film most intense aesthetic dimension: how the frame and the space remaining outside its limits helps building a point of view. My analysis will be anchored on one chapter of Gilles Deleuze's *L'Image-Mouvement*, "Cadre et plan, cadrage et découpage".

In *Narration in Light – Studies in Cinematic Point of View*, George M. Wilson reminds how the viewer usually interacts with film: 'In most films, the film maker presupposes a commonplace perspective that is automatically and unthinkingly available to a standard, contemporary audience. The narrational strategies that are employed are correspondingly conventional and undemanding.' (Wilson, 7) Wilson stresses the innocent complicity between the viewer and the object; a complicity anchored on a tradition of seeing. In contemporary Western societies this tradition relies mainly in the so-called Hollywood aesthetics, with its own imaginary, rhythm, genre and narrative conventions, and foreseeable dénouements. Rhythm plays a determinant role in the interaction between the viewer and the object, since it has been connected with an increasingly accelerating process of perception. This process involves two dimensions: the movement of the camera, and the 'durée', the length of time of each shot. By the end of the silent era 'about one shot in ten involved a moving camera, whereas in 1935, one shot in three involved a moving rather than a stationary camera.' (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 91)

The stationary camera implied a considerable duration of each shot. Nowadays shots become even shorter, and the stationary camera may even be dynamized by the editing process. Pramaggiore and Wallis quote film scholar Michael Brandt on this issue: 'films cut traditionally [have] an average shot length of 5.15 seconds, compared to 4.75 seconds for the electronically cut films...' These technical and also aesthetic changes imply deep changes at the perception level: 'Other studies have shown that it takes an audience anywhere from 0.5 to 3 seconds to adjust to a new shot. If it takes the audience to adjust to a cut to a shot, what

happens when the average shot length is so short that the audience is never given a chance to catch up? ... Certainly, as each viewer picks and chooses the shots he or she pays attention to, there must be shots which audience members never fully absorb.' (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 166)

One of the most ordinary comments on Portuguese contemporary cinema and on its most distinguished author, Manoel de Oliveira, deals with his 'theatricality,' meaning, among other things, a certain rhythm that definitely goes against the dominant current usually connected with American movies. Peter Greenaway's *The Draughtman's Contract* also goes against the current when he chooses to rely on the stationary camera as single eye observer instead of relying on editing (at this level he also goes against Eisenstein's editing aesthetic emphasis). The stationary camera in a certain sense juxtaposes its point of view with the viewer's: the film frame 'comes closer' to painting. This aesthetic option somehow reminds the aesthetic of the silent era: '... quelle était la situation du cinema au début? D'une part la prise de vue était fixe, le plan était donc spatial et formellement immobile; d'autre part l'appareil de prise de vue était confondu avec l'appareil de projection, doué d'un temps uniforme abstrait.' (Deleuze, 12) I wrote 'somehow' since Greenaway is not technically forced to follow that strategy; instead in a rather evident post-modern pastiche he *seems* to mimic those earlier strategies. His relying on the fixed camera demands an obvious attention from the viewer: 'alors le plan cessera d'être une catégorie spatiale pour devenir temporal.' (12) Each frame welcomes signs that are memories of previous events, and signs that foreshadow coming events. Besides each frame may enhance a dialogue with visual arts such as drawing and painting. In his 1950 essay 'Painting and Cinema' André Bazin focuses on the frame in order to distinguish these arts: 'The frame of painting contains a special world that exists exclusively by itself and only for itself. Filmic space, by contrast, moves outward, centrifugally, by reaching far into the deepest and lowest recesses of daily life.' (Vache, 21) Even in its stillness each frame is a microcosm diachronically dealing with a line in time: a past and a future. Each frame implies a continuum (time) and a macrocosm (place).

The framing process may have semiotic implications beyond the aesthetic level. Deleuze's definition unveils the system underlying the frame as semiotic soil: 'On appelle *cadrage la détermination d'un système clos,*

*relativement clos, qui comprend tout ce qui est présent dans l'image, décors, personnes, accessoires. Le cadre constitue donc un ensemble qui a un grand nombre de parties, c'est-à-dire d'éléments qui entrent eux-mêmes dans les sous-ensembles. ... Évidemment, ces parties sont elles-mêmes en image. Ce qui fait dire à Jakobson que ce sont des objets-signes, et, à Pasolini, des «cinèmes».*' (Deleuze, 23) How some of these notions work can be exemplified by the very beginning of *The Draughtman's Contract*.

When the initial credits show the name of one character and of the actor who plays it, the viewer may notice an apparently minor reference: 'August 1694'. The whole background is black, the name of the actor is written in white letters, and the character and the date in red letters. The color unifies these signs. Some details definitely matter. Many films have used the device of setting the action somewhere in time, quite often in the near future. *2001: A Space Odyssey* or *Jonas qui aura vingt ans à l'an 2000* even turn this setting into the title of the film. When Greenaway places the action in the summer of 1694, he was summoning both a specific natural light and a specific historical background.

As he reminds in his comments inserted in the DVD version<sup>1</sup>, the year of 1694 is connected with meaningful references that function as non-diegetic devices. The Dutch protestant aristocracy was firmly established in England. The Roman Catholic of the Stuart family had become a subtext in the main text of power (James II was put away from the throne). 'In Ireland, defeat at the Boyne in 1690 marked the final eclipse of the culture of the "Old English".' (Kearney, 170) The concern with inheritance and old values were changing: 1694 was the year of the first Married Woman's Property Act. Besides style and fashion were changing. With William of Orange a court built under French influence was replaced by a Dutch style, eventually by a German style. 1694 also was the year of the formation of the bank of England. As Greenaway says: 'The world in England had changed. Modern history begins.' (<http://greenaway.bfi.org>.

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<sup>1</sup> I shall rely on Greenaway's precious insights both on the film structure and meaning, and on his artistic-biographical profile, which are inserted in the DVD. Among these I stress the idea of 'framing-up', and the notion: 'draw what you see, not what you know.' (cf. <http://greenaway.bfi.org.uk>)

uk) A new *ethos* was emerging. Mannerism gave way to a new aesthetic, the Baroque, with its 'mighty katharsis by spectacle, by an expressive power aesthetic.' (Sypher, 185) Baroque 'law for exuberance' supported this emerging *ethos*. *The Draughtman's Contract* characters will mirror this exuberance.

*The Draughtman's Contract* is thus anchored on a Historical subtext that may be perceived by a viewer who is willing to go through a veiled network of signs. It is here, in this network that different subplots of power, involving religion, culture, nation, and gender, emerge echoing in the main plot. This Historical subtext is hinted at by those small and yet meaningful words in red: 'August 1694'. Though remaining out of the frame, its relevance is determinant in the development of the narrative.

There are other ways of implying a historical subtext, namely through the depiction of certain *ordinary* signs in a rather staged composition. Later in the narrative the viewer witnesses a social ritual: two characters have tea. In its simplicity this is a rather beautiful picture: both characters sit in a virtually closed space – virtually because the space is opened up by the background window; a frame within the frame. This window also frames them thus providing a sense of theatricality inherent both to the ritual and to the situation depicted: 'il y a dans le cadre beaucoup de cadres différents. Les portes, les fenêtres, les guichets, les lucarnes, les vitres de voiture, les miroirs sont autant de cadres dans le cadre. ... Et c'est par ces enboîtements de cadres que les parties de l'ensemble ou du système clos se séparent, mais aussi conspirent et se réunissent.' (Deleuze, 26).

The interaction between the obvious vertical lines (the candle, the teapot, the window, the stained-glass, the lines of the bodies) and the more subtle horizontal lines (the window, upper parts of the tea set, the line in upper left background, the lines of arms and hands, the man's wig) emphasise a decorous balance and stability. Like in Leonardo the chiaroscuro generates a feeling of depth. But the ceremony needs further reading. Lucile H. Brockway's *Science and Colonial Expansion – The Role of the British Royal Botanic Gardens* unveils the connection between this

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<sup>2</sup> Greenaway informs that the ceramic used in this scene was actually manufactured in Delft, Holland.

ritual and wealth/power: 'Tea [was]... unknown in the West until the early seventeenth century when the Dutch had the reexport monopoly from their Indonesian bases. The first direct tea shipment to England was in 1699, and the British East India Company thereafter had a monopoly on the English and North American tea trade, which was heavily taxed.' (Brockway, 52) Five years before the first direct tea shipment to England this social ritual implied status, wealth<sup>2</sup>, and power. As I have previously shown by the elliptical Historical context the British aristocracy was discovering new cultural horizons. 'Décors, personages, accessoires' all build a cultural and social frame within the frame. George Wilson rightly reminds that '[a]s a film proceeds, an audience's understanding of narrative developments depends not only upon its assimilation of the information with which it is directly presented but also upon its grasp of an imposing complex of inferences that it must make, consciously or unconsciously, from the visual manifolds that it is shown.' (Wilson, 4)

At this stage one must put forward a concept of point of view that implies the unfolding of a whole semiotic system. I shall quote again from Wilson's *Narration in Light – Studies in Cinematic Point of View*: 'The concept of point of view should impose a categorization upon the domain of visual narration in actual films, a categorization that depends upon the structuring properties of the film's overall rhetorical organization, properties that determine the base from which an ideally perspicuous viewer assigns epistemic significance and value to the image track throughout its course.' (8)

Can we view this film on a strictly narrative dimension? The scene I have just briefly mentioned takes place close to the dénouement. At this stage the viewer is aware of the narrative aesthetic demands. The viewer already knows that he or she must be an active reader of each succeeding frame, of each composition, sign, micro-narrative, colour. As the tea ceremony has shown the composition functions as structural device in a formalist agenda which Greenaway anchored on a specific epoch: 'Here was formalism of another kind, using the stiffness and theatricality and artificiality of Restoration drama, using elaborated spoken texts that often, but never completely, threaten to defy comprehension because of their extended conceits and indulgent word-play, and using music that always announces its self-conscious presence as though it was a concert



piece existing on its own terms and not merely fulfilling the obligations of illustrative film-mosaic.' (<http://greenaway.bfi.org.uk>) The word and its vocal articulation should also be conceived of as nuclear elements in the narrative. The close-up emerges as a privileged rhetorical device in order to affirm their centrality.

The first frame of a character actually is a close-up: a face emerges in the screen filling the whole space. In his essay 'The Face in Close-Up' Jacques Aumont states that: 'A face that is filmed intensively is always in close-up, ... A close-up always shows a face, a physiognomy. «Close-up» and «face» are thus interchangeable, and what is at their common root is the process that produces a surface that is both sensitive and readable at the same time...' (Vacche, 134) In my view Aumont narrows this reading to the pathos consistent with artists such as Sergei Eisenstein. In *The Draughtman's Contract* the face actually functions as a social mask, thus concealing its readability. This close-up reveals a preface, an introductory story of deception and betrayal where gardens and gardening play a centre role: 'they discussed plum trees ad nauseam'. Ironically the story foreshadows certain dimensions of the narrative that the viewer is about to witness. This tautological dimension will play a structural role in the film.

Another aspect must be mentioned: the social setting deleted by the close-up. In the space surrounding the frame the viewer may perceive an audience whose attention is kept by the irony of the story. As Deleuze reminds: 'Tout cadrage détermine un hors-champ. ... il y a toujours hors-champ, même dans l'image la plus close.' (Deleuze 29, 31) There is a speaker who is seen by the viewer, and an audience whose presence is only felt. The viewer also becomes aware of an aesthetic built upon composition and theatricality. The artificial candlelight emphasises the idea of frame as composition. At the same time the candlelight creates an intimacy, a complicity between the speaker and the audience that is listening to his story. By the end of the narrative, there is a raccord with this close-up: the face emerges again full screen but now the mask has been fully assumed as theatrical social sign.

As I mentioned above the close-up frame implies an audience, an ensemble. In the next frame the camera depicts the ensemble: Mrs. Virginia Herbert, the lady of the house, tells a story; a story of (prosaic) tradition yet able to remind the viewer that the house belonged to her

father. Thus it subliminally implied that Mr. Herbert, her husband, 'inherited' the whole estate by marrying her. Gender, tradition, and power lightly emerge in the narrative. Greenaway consciously created 'a sense of artificiality and insularity by exaggerating the costumes, by the excessive wigs, by the great display of lace with the women going back to the Huguenot of the North of France: the more lace a woman could display the more wealth she showed.' (<http://greenaway.bfi.org.uk>) Baroque exuberance and theatricality enhance a sense of dramatic composition where characters play their own excessive roles.

In this frame the composition is spatially divided in two identical opposite fields: women vs. men. Like in Renaissance painting both spaces geometrically concur when they outline two diagonals that lead the eye of the viewer to a vanishing point: a mirror highlighted by two candles. The mirror is a rather relevant sign since it reflects the characters, simultaneously reproducing them and closing the space on itself. In an ostentatious postmodern context of explicit and subliminal dialogues, the viewer as reader should be aware of an artistic and semiotic echo: Velasquez' *Las Meninas*. Michel Foucault prefaces *Les mots et les choses* with a famous reading of this painting. He seems to foreshadow this scene when he writes: 'Au fond de la pièce, ignoré de tous, le miroir inattendu fait luire les figures...' (Foucault, 24) There is however another reference that strikes me by the way it illuminates a relevant cultural theme of *The Draughtman's Contract*; the connection between the representation of this sign and Dutch painting: 'Dans la peinture hollandaise, il était de tradition que les miroirs jouent un rôle de redoublement: ils répétaient ce qui était donné une première fois dans le tableau, mais à l'intérieur d'un espace irréel, modifié, rétréci, recourbé.' (23) When the mirror emerges as nucleus and reminder of the Renaissance vanishing point, it summons a whole tradition in its cultural and aesthetic diversity. Besides we shouldn't forget the importance of French aesthetic sensibility in England in those days.

Its relevance will be asserted a few frames latter. Mrs. Virginia Herbert and Sarah Talmann, her daughter, are depicted in a rather geometrical setting, framed by two candles in the foreground. The lines of their framed hair reinforce the vertical lines drawn by the candles. In the background three candles emphasize the whole visual geometry. The mirror plays an identical function in this virtually closed space. I used the word 'virtually'



because of a subtle but relevant difference: the women's eyes open up the space when they draw a line that goes beyond the frame, 'le hors champ'. The fruit in the foreground reminds the viewer of the story told in the first frame while, at the same time, subliminally stresses the garden theme.

I mentioned that the women's eyes draw a line that goes beyond the frame. They actually are focused on a man, Mr. Neville, a reputed draughtman. The next frame shows Mrs. Herbert and Mr. Neville in a rather elaborated and stable composition (the square) whose signs summon the previous frames: a frame divided in two fields (male vs. female; black vs. white); the candles drawing the vertical lines that frame the characters; the window (subtle reminder of the mirror) also framing them; the fruit in the foreground; implicit diagonals – an inverted triangle – creating a depth of field and driving the viewer's perception into a vanishing point; the *chiaroscuro*. The whole composition evokes a pictorial agenda – a 'pédagogie de l'image' (Deleuze, 24) – visually stressed by the stationary camera. I shall return to this topic a little further.

For the time being I must focus on Greenaway's pictorial aesthetic. His aesthetic runs through the film in three main directions: as structural device, as aesthetic sympathy, and as subtext. I will focus the structural device a little further. Now I just want to point out that the aesthetic

sympathy may summon '[t]he new anti-mannerist naturalism [that] appears in the early Caravaggio, who shows, in spite of his tenebrist somber vision, a concern to get back to «reality».' (Sypher, 188) The Baroque atmosphere consistent with *The Draughtman's Contract* background is thus subliminally hinted at by Caravaggio's memory.

There is another moment when Greenaway's hospitality towards painting becomes central in the building of a composition. In this scene/frame the characters, Sarah and her German husband, Mr. Talmann, have an argument on inheritance and betrayal. The 'wide shot' summons Dutch genre painting; both the door at end of the room and the chandelier remind Vermeer, namely in *The Art of Painting*.<sup>3</sup> The stationary camera brings a feeling of suspension, while the single shot lasts for several minutes during which the characters move in the scenery. This 'durée' emphasizes both the inner psychological tension of the characters and the pictorial dimension. The space outside the frame is hinted at by the open door in background and by the sunlight that comes through the window on the right enlightening Mr. Talmann. Greenaway's feeling for composition is also present in the different scenes depicting meals, which he shoots in a continuous single plan/traveling without any cuts. These scenes would become the author's signature.

The third direction I have pointed out above – the pictorial as subtext – may be represented in this frame. The picture behind the characters provides a subtext of betrayal and power, the betrayal of Samson by Delilah. Latter the viewer will understand how this 'innocent' image in the background actually emerges as a powerful signifier of a radical struggle for power, a symbol of women ascending to power. The sign ominous and ghostly presence may be summoned in a more conventional visual context; for instance when fire and smoke create an atmosphere surrounding Mr. Neville's return. Later the viewer will understand how fire is a source of radical cleansing and destruction.

Why? Well, so far I have omitted any consistent reference to the main plot. Actually the reader may wonder if I have been infected by any subspecies of structuralist virus. I think the moment has come for me to

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<sup>3</sup> Greenaway's comments inserted on the DVD version.

outline the main plot: Mrs. Herbert asks Mr. Neville, to make twelve drawings of her Jacobean house and estate while Mr. Herbert is away in Southampton. Mr. Neville is famous and busy, so he declines. However he will be persuaded when Mrs. Herbert agrees to meet some – should we say? – peculiar demands: twelve drawings will mean twelve sexual encounters. The house, sign of wealth and power, will be the centre – even if a subliminal centre – of Mr. Neville's drawings. But the house also was in those days an aesthetic centre from which a whole composition, the gardens, the estate, should emerge and be conceived of. In a treaty written a few years later, *De la composition des paysages*, René-Louis de Girardin stated: 'C'est autour de l'endroit qu'on habite qu'il faut conduire la nature à venir à habiter.' (Girardin, 24) Hence the analogy between architecture and painting, between geometry and gardening in the building of a balanced harmony: 'Tous les objets qui peuvent être aperçus du même point doivent être entièrement subordonnés au même tableau, n'être que des parties intégrantes du même tout, et concourir par leur rapport et leur convenance à l'effet et à l'accord general. ... C'est donc sur l'ensemble, ou le plan general, qu'il convient de réfléchir mûrement...' (25) It is important to notice the analogy between architecture and painting. The composition should depict an ideal ensemble where every single sign 'hors champ' would be perceived or hinted at by the centre. Mr. Neville will follow this notion when he starts drawing the house. Though he possesses the knowledge and the skills that allow him to reproduce the geometry of the place, in a certain sense, Mr. Neville is a stranger and he has a certain difficulty in understanding the atmosphere that surrounds him. So he definitely gets it wrong: when everybody dresses in white, he wears black; later, when he chooses white, the others choose black.

Like Peter Greenaway when he took his first lessons in painting and drawing, Mr. Neville follows the dictum: 'Draw what you see, not what you know.' An optical device similar to the one used by painters like Canaletto supported his rigorous approach to his object. This device also provides a theoretical approach to film narrative: the point of view which plays a structural role in Greenaway's 'pédagogie de l'image.' The draughtman's point of view, his vision field, coincides both with the viewer's and with the director's. The draughtman and the director are metonymies of painting/drawing and of cinema. The analogy between

these two identities demands a readjustment of the viewer's perception. The viewer is visually influenced by the 'Hollywood dynamic', with its sometimes-schizoid rhythm. *The Draughtman's Contract* 'pédagogie de l'image', its pictorial dimension, point towards suspension. This suspension is emphasised by the stationary camera and by the 'durée' of long shots that tell the viewer to act in the movie theatre as if he or she were before a painting in a museum. Each succeeding frame functions as a picture at an exhibition enjoyed and read by the viewer/ beholder while he or she builds a narrative succession: each frame/picture is a microcosm that summons the memory of previous frames/pictures, anticipates the frames/pictures to come, and inscribes itself in the main plot/gallery. I must remind André Bazin's words: 'Filmic space, ..., moves outward, centrifugally.' Hence the strength of the pictorial analogy provided by the grid, both in terms of artistic creation (draughtman – director) and of artistic perception (viewer of the film as beholder of a painting). The empty space between each picture in the wall of a gallery becomes identical to the ellipsis rhetoric in the editing process. This is another empty/void space that must be summoned and filled; an intensifier of the 'hors champ' inherent to each frame.

I mentioned above that Greenaway's pictorial aesthetic runs through the film in three main directions: as structural device, as aesthetic sympathy, and as subtext. I already approached the second and the third, now I must approach the first, pictorial aesthetic as structural device. The draughtman's rigour made him capture with his grid all the changes that eventually took place in the different sceneries. Like his grid the drawing sheet is also symmetrically divided in squares. Mr. Neville's fidelity to a mimetical principle would lead him into a dangerous process of revision of his drawings: he actually inserted signs that were not present when he first drew the different sights. When he was starting his first drawing a maid opened the window and unfolded a white sheet. He stopped for a moment to think about what had just happened, and draw the new emerging reality. Mr. Neville's depiction of the gardens adorned with a row of large obelisks – artificial forms framing nature geometry – follows the same mimetic notion. In this shot Greenaway almost juxtaposes the grid with the screen, creating a frame within the frame. The viewer is reminded that his or her perception and the draughtman's coincide. Both

perceptions also coincide with the director's: 'on dira du plan qu'il agit comme une conscience. Mais la seule conscience cinématographique, ce n'est pas nous, le spectateur, ni le héros, c'est la caméra.' (Deleuze, 34) Framing deals with power, since it means capturing some signs and deleting other signs, 'le hors champ'; these deleted signs will remain as ghosts in the viewer's memory. Then Mr. Neville enters stage and saturates the frame powerfully concealing the whole scene from the viewer. He reminds the viewer that he is in charge. When he inserted himself in the narrative/picture he also became part of it; he became an actor/an extra and summoned not only Hitchcock but a whole filmic tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Mr. Neville also exercises an obvious power over the landscape. He even criticizes the way man dealt with nature's inner geometry: 'the angles between the branches are not correct.' According to his instructions all the spaces that he is drawing must be kept clear of servants and household. Nevertheless he concedes that 'animals are allowed to stay.' Mr. Talmann asserted that Mr. Neville had the power of emptying nature. His wife, Sarah, sharply replied that 'for Mr. Neville nature is strictly material'. There is however some irony moving beyond his despotism. The innocent eye of the child who mimics him somehow represents this irony. Like Mr. Neville he tries to draw what he sees. The child may be innocent when he is trying to reproduce reality. But Mr. Neville, who is an adult, cannot be innocent. He is blinded by his hubris. And hubris leads to deception. The child also introduces another sub-text: the subliminal tension between Catholics and Protestants. Because of his father's death Mr. Talmann took him under his protection. 'He was an orphan', Sarah says. 'An orphan?' Angrily replied Mr. Neville. 'Because his mother is a Catholic?!' This episode concurs with the sub-text of religion and power that will underline Mr. Neville's status as Other among 'la morne figure du Même' (Foucault), the Protestant dominant ethos.

The first moment of deception is depicted in this scene. Mr. Neville had drawn the sheets drying in the sun. In the following day when he returns determined to complete his drawing, he realizes that a coat had been inserted between those sheets. After some inquiries and some

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<sup>4</sup> I owe this reading to Professor Mário Jorge Torres.



suspicion concerning who put it there and who the owner is, he decides to insert it in his drawing. The same thing will happen later. He starts a drawing with a tree that somehow frames the house. When he returns to this drawing, he looks through the grid – his point of view is also the viewer's – and realizes that a shirt is hanging on the branches. He stands up and walks towards the tree with the purpose of removing the shirt. At this stage the grid frames him. The viewer's point of view replaces his. Then he looks at the grid – like the painter in *Las Meninas* his eyes touch the viewer's – and decides to insert the shirt in his drawing. Sharply Mrs. Talmann notices: 'The shirt is very strong in your picture.' The prosaic Mr. Neville replies: 'Madam, I try very hard not to destroy or disguise.'

Without being aware of it, he is now framed-up. The next situation happens with another drawing of the house. When he returns to complete it, he looks through the grid and notices that a ladder had been placed there. This ladder actually leads to Mr. Herbert's office. Although he suspects that something strange is happening, since 'he draws what he sees, not what he knows,' he decides to insert the ladder in his drawing. Deleuze writes that: 'Le cadre est inséparable de deux tendances: à la saturation ou à la raréfaction. ... des images raréfiées se produisent, ... lorsque tout accent est mis sur un objet.' (23-4) When Mr. Neville fills the frame he is saturating it. When the viewer is directed to the ladder he or she is involved in a process of rarefaction. Both processes have implications beyond an aesthetic level. As Deleuze also reminds: 'des deux côtés, raréfaction ou saturation, le cadre nous apprend ainsi que l'image ne se donne pas seulement à voir. Elle est lisible autant que visible. Le cadre a cette fonction implicite, enregistrer des informations non seulement sonores mais visuelles.' (24) I wrote above that the frame must be read as a microcosm that deals with a macrocosm, with a space that remain concealed, forgotten, outside the frame, 'le hors champ.' Like Agatha Christie's mystery novels, the film becomes a 'mystery narrative.' The coat, the shirt, and the ladder are 'crucial objet-signes' or 'cinèmes' in this mystery.

When Mr. Neville returns in order to finish a panoramic view of the house, he notices that a pair of boots had been left close to his seat. He turns to Mr. Talmann and says: 'You forgot your boots, Mr. Talmann.' Mr. Talmann replies: 'They are not mine. I thought they were yours, Mr. Neville.' The riding boots had been ominously mentioned before when



Mrs. Herbert asked her servant: 'Did my husband take the riding boots?' Also rather ominously she further asked: 'Do you know which road he will take back?' At this stage the viewer already is aware of several signs pointing to some mystery. And so does Mr. Neville. Since he draws what he sees, not what he knows or thinks he knows, these signs became a kind of puzzle that he had depicted in his drawings. He recorded proofs and created a subliminal plot that actually leads to a murder. Like the most perceptive characters the viewer must face the revision process of the drawings as a narrative that is in the process of being built and fulfilled.

This is the turning point of the narrative: Mr. Neville's method, his devotion to rigor and to the mimetic principle framed him-up. Mr. Neville previously tried to interpret the events depicted in a painting of a garden inside the house. His attempt was ironic since the painting mirrored what was happening to him. He asked: 'Do you see any narrative in these unrelated episodes? ... What intrigue is here? ... What infidelities are here portrayed? Do you think that murder is being prepared?' The next scene reveals Mr. Herbert's horse coming back home alone. 'Painting requires a certain blindness. A partial refusal of certain options. ... An intelligent man knows more of what he's drawing than what he sees.'

As this frame shows, his point of view doesn't coincide with the viewer's. He is no longer in control. Standing, Mrs. Sarah Talmann is now in charge. Sitting, in submission, Mr. Neville will accept the terms of a new contract; a contract under her terms. So far her marriage has produced no heir, and Mr. Talmann impotency has been previously suggested. The new contract will imply that Mr. Neville should meet Mrs. Talmann demands. Without being aware of it he will help her to produce the heir that will allow them to keep the estate in their hands. When Mr. Neville keeps on recording the gardens he is also forced by his own method to insert the signs of another betrayal, Sarah's.

So far the main scenes of deception have taken place in the gardens. The reader may remind that the first close-up was connected with a story of gardens and gardeners. Another relevant subplot is implied in this theme, the one that opposes Mr. Neville to Mr. Talmann: Catholics vs. Protestants. Mr. Talmann didn't like carps because they lived too long. So they reminded him of Catholics. On the other hand Mr. Neville told Mr. Talmann that God had planned the Garden of Eden for Ireland. Later

the Catholic agenda will be definitely deleted when the Dutch puritan Mr. Van Hoyton will be hired in order 'to soften the geometry in the garden.' Mr. Van Hoyton who worked in the Hague (the same place Mr. Neville was supposed to be appointed to), talks in Dutch with Sarah. Since his words are not translated the viewer will share Mr. Neville's status as outsider. Despite the fact of being 'at home', he actually becomes what he always had been: a stranger, the Other. The landscape – the garden – is thus a text subjected to cultural changes, to different inscriptions, and readings according to the main representations of power. Consequently, its parts, its signs – fruits, for instance – also play a textual role in the changes of the narrative. Eventually the garden is a reminder of the Original Garden, the Garden of Eden: its geometry should remind Its primeval Presence.

In the beginning of the narrative the child's perceptress told him (in German) the story of Persephone. Following a tautological structure this episode anticipated another one close to the end of the narrative. When Mr. Neville returned to the estate after having met his contract demands he had another sexual encounter with Mrs. Herbert. They were lying on the bed – actually on a Persian carpet (these carpets came from the Middle East and were very expensive; the Dutch considered them far too expensive to put them on the floor so put them on beds, and hang them on walls; with William of Orange these Dutch habits were imitated by the British aristocracy) – and Mrs. Herbert told Mr. Neville about the Persephone's myth and reminds him of the fruit associated with it, the pomegranate. Looking to the left lower foreground the viewer notices three pomegranates on the floor. When she finished her story, he questioned with a clumsy irony: 'A cautionary tale for gardeners, Madam?' And she wisely replied: 'No. A cautionary tale for mothers with daughters, Mr. Neville.' The pomegranate is a symbol that functions in the main plot as 'objet-signé' or 'cinème'. The reader must bear in mind that at this stage women are in total command even when their power is subliminally exercised. The women had learned a lesson from Persephone's cautionary tale and they acted accordingly in a functional and rather pragmatically way. They knew that one could be fooled by illusions, even the attentive eye of the painter could be deceived by colour: the pomegranate juice looked like blood. Mrs. Herbert showed him this illusion

while her daughter Sarah entered the room and stood behind them. Because they have learned from Persephone's myth both women are associate in this plot for survival; a plot that may provide them an heir that will assure the ownership of the estate. Then the women left the frame and placed themselves somewhere 'hors-champ'. Though absent they remained a real presence. Mr. Neville looked puzzled since only then he started to realize that he had been an instrument of their designs. Significantly... and symbolically he is on his knees looking to the space outside the frame, first to the left, then to the right, then to the left again and so on. In this space 'hors-champ' the viewer senses powerful presences, the presences of both women who now control the whole situation. Then in the next shot, the stationary camera is placed behind Mr. Neville. The viewer sees the two women in a rather geometrically balanced setting, aesthetically framed by the plants. Sarah dressed in black, and Mrs. Herbert, in white, are not two fields of a dichotomy, but two parts of a whole.

Mr. Neville had fulfilled their wishes, but he also had been a victim of his own method: his drawings were filled with compromising signs. A perceptive reader could recognise in those twelve drawings two narratives: a narrative of a murder, and a narrative of sexual betrayal. Mr. Neville and his drawings were too dangerous so only one solution remained: the death of the author, and the burning of the evidences.

Despite the Historical setting and background it has become clear that this plot echoes Agatha Christie's murder mysteries. Actually like in *Murder in the Orient Express* all the family is responsible for the murder. The perceptive viewer has gathered information from successive signs: textual signs, objects, colours, settings, dialogues with other arts. The stationary camera and the prolonged shots allowed the viewer to ponder on their presence, and on the relation that they established with the powerful absence of the signs outside the frame. With this dialogue between drawing and filming *The Draughtman's Contract* puts forth a brilliant 'pédagogie de l'image'. The perceptive viewer will be enriched by its powerful aesthetic emotions.

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