

The Draughtsman's Contract

After taking out the eyes and ripping off the shirt of a picaresque artistic hero, a band of aristocratic gentlemen proceed to murder him while haughtily asking the question, "What is a man without foresight and property?" The answer, aptly illustrated by their victim's swift demise, is, of course, "nothing." This final scene from Peter Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract* suggests one reading of the film's meanderingly intelligent and erratically economic narrative, which cleverly entertains a suite of themes ranging from the primacy of property and power, to the encapsulation of the libidinal within the monetary (and vice versa), to how artistic practice is prescribed by formal conventions and proprietary extravagance.

Set in the English countryside of the late 17th century, the film depicts the arrival of a draftsman, Mr. Neville (Anthony Higgins), on the Herbert estate. Here, in the absence of Mr. Herbert, he is recruited to execute 12 drawings of the property. In exchange for this task he will receive a modest fee, which is then supplemented by Mrs. Herbert (Janet Suzman), who offers him her body. This generosity is later mimicked by her daughter, Mrs. Talmann (Anne Louise Lambert). A contract is drawn up and the renderings begin. But as the assignment proceeds, a certain dissembling aspect begins to invade the drawings: objects appear that don't belong, and strange clues suggest oncoming rude awakenings that finally result in the discovery of Mr. Herbert's body. So *The Draughtsman's Contract* is a tale of murder which slithers into a yarn of adultery, struts into an outline of patrilineage, flourishes into a scrutiny of artistic patronage, drifts into a consideration of allegory, and tumbles back into a tale of murder.

But while constantly threatening to do so, the film just misses dissolving into merely a suave salute to the good life, an uncritically adoring puff of historicism. Rather, it casts a satiric eye on convention and its invasion of the social life of the period, from the delicacy of a curtsy to the binding rigor of a contract. This is not only conveyed through the use of tableaux and anecdotal hesitations, but also voiced in an insistently intelligent and witty dialogue. The narrative advances through a series of structural demarcations, a procedure present in many of Greenaway's prior films; these stanzas begin with a long shot of the area of the estate to be sketched, proceed to the actual drawing, and broaden into tightly orchestrated bundles of incidents, retorts, and positionings. Combining a virtuoso display of language with an amusingly lascivious sexuality (a forbiddingly formidable coupling), the film reminds us of the ability of capital to define who is ravished, and when and where. *The Draughtsman's Contract* is embroiled in the narrative relationships of seemingly unrelated incidents and ingeniously details the conspiracy of inheritance. Esthetically, the film is a smashing attractive conceit about the smashing attractiveness of esthetic conceit.

So one might wonder how a film as thoughtfully wrought as this has managed to become a popular item both on the festival circuit and in commercial venues. In America *The Draughtsman's Contract* emerged at an opportune moment—that of the cresting of a kind of filmic Anglophilia which threatens to submerge the colonies like a tidal wave of tea and

crumpets (*Ghandi*, *Brideshead Revisited*, *Chariots of Fire*, etc.). Another enhancement is Greenaway's ability to cloak his criticality in a costume of seductively palatable mastery which has proven irresistible to the culture vultures. And this exotic foreign morsel has slightly postgraduate PBS leanings—there is a pronounced self-congratulatory lilt to the entire proceeding which constantly foregrounds the director's cerebral prowess while also seeming to flatter the spectator who has the "good taste" (and class?) to appreciate the refinements at hand.

Nevertheless, *The Draughtsman's Contract* reminds us why intelligent cinema remains such an astonishment: we almost never see it. Without the support of the British Film Institute and Channel Four this film and many other independent British works could never have been made. One can only hope for equally ambitious funding procedures and distributive capabilities on this side of the pond.

—Barbara Kruger