AN ENCYCLOPEDIA IMAGINATION
Peter Greenaway in the Light of Jorge Luis Borges

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For anyone who has seen a film like The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover - without any previous acquaintance with other works of the British filmmaker Peter Greenaway, it is difficult to accept a comparison between him and Jorge Luis Borges. Where would Greenaway's baroque extravaganzas, etymological images, explicit obscenities, visual delusions be found in Borges? Yet, a more comprehensive (and not less detailed) look at the work of the artist in the fields of film, art, prose, and literature, permits an association between the two. The elements which, in Greenaway, have affinity with the fictional procedures of the Argentine writer are not few, especially in what touches the constructed practice of fictional artifacts, the encyclopedic view of the world, the exercise of fantastic taxonomies, the national muse, the dizzying abstractions, the conception of the universe as a "Library of Babel". These are procedures that Greenaway naturalizes and intensifies, making them visually baroque through a sophisticated theatrical appearance, together with the intersection of various artistic languages and disciplinary fields.

It is well known that Borges was a master of fictional games. As well as having reinvented the metaphor of the world as an encyclopedia not in the sense of an encyclopedic totality, but as an open, continuous multiplicity he succeeded in taking to its ultimate consequences the practice of artifice for the sake of artifice in the context of Twentieth Century literature. Through strategies such as the forging of apocryphal writings attributed to actual or nonexistent authors, the writing of translations that are really inventions, and the productions of essays or book reviews that are truly short stories, Borges invented another concept of literature, as well as of the author, translator and reader. This is a conception that has indubitable links to modern literature, but which reveals another way of thinking and, above all, of reading, since Borges turns reading into an exercise of fictionalizing literary paternity, of converting the author into a creation of the reader himself.

To this regard for the artifice of language, along with an ironic vision of predictable narrative forms, Greenaway adds his obsession for thematic series, duplications and doublings, unaltered combinations, lists and enumeration. As Fredric Jameson asserts, in the Borjasian text "there is a repetition of the typical epic use of analogues and lists," since he is not aiming at semantically validating reality or the universe, but at revealing, through the imagination, the arbitrary character of all systems of classification. In his Borgesian lines, therefore, would be critiques of themselves, whose principal aim is to deconstruct narrative linearity, the successive rhythms of the poems and the referential intentions of the essay. They are based, in the end, on the famous principle of Borges himself that "there is no universe in the organic, unifying sense of that ambiguous word. If there is, then we must specialize on it, we must specialize on the world, definitions, etymologies, and synonyms of God's secret dictionary." [2]

It is precisely from this perspective of the deceptive aspects, of disconnect taxonomies and fictional games that I would like to take Peter Greenaway as a reader of Jorge Luis Borges and so make clear the presence of Borgesian literature in the contemporary European context.

Greenaway himself has admitted, in several statements and interviews, the resonance in his work of the source of the Argentine writer, whom he considers, along with Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, one of his 20th century "heroes", outside of the world of cinema. [3] He also has maintained, whenever provoked, the importance that the "Latin-American fantastic" has had for his artistic development, since, according to him, his style of cinema "recalls South American literature." [4] In one of these interviews, he points out:

"The works of art that I admire, even contemporary ones like One Hundred Years of Solitude or any three-page story by Borges, have the ability to put all the world together. My movies are sections of this world encyclopedia." [5]

Greenaway indeed constructs his fictional world as a composite of metaphors, allegories, quotations, pictorial images, erudite references, whose organization, rigorously made of symmetries and taxonomic orderings, is impelled by an intrinsically disorienting, absurd logic.

Seduced like Borges by the "excitement of research, collection and collision," Greenaway creates his films, paintings, drawings, essays, and operas into a kind of poetics of the catalog. His interest in every type of classification system justifies the obsessive presence of lists and enumeration in most of his works. With the purpose of breaking with the linearity proper to realist film, he uses paratextual forms to create another narrative model, choosing disturbing serial organizations. He believes, like Borges, that "there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural" [6] and for this reason dedicates himself to building his own schemes of classification, although, as Borges would say, "we know that these are provisional." [7]

As Greenaway explains:

"Listemas systems of nomenclature, identification of color, scale, datum, type, size, are all subjective. Most systems are based finally upon forms of subjectivity. I do also enjoy such sort of list making - the Borgesian Chinese Encyclopedia category are abstruse. But my main reason is to use numerical codes, equations and counting as an alternative to narrative descent..." [7]

In this search for alternative forms of narration, Greenaway would thus creatively use the erudite model Borges uses in the description of the "Chinese Encyclopedia" in the essay "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins" in the poet-catalogues of "Las confusias," in the anarchization of memories of "Lunes dislucentes," or in the taxonomic book Manual de zoología fantástica. In this model, the rigor of classification is allied to the abstractions of the rule, functioning as a fictionalized parody of the classification systems which, since Aristotle, have been developed to rationally organize and hierarchize the world. These are systems that today are seen in the form of institutional archivisms, in the conversion of information into alphabetical characters stored in desiccant, files and databases.

It is in the critical appropriation of this archivist logic, as well as in the creative animation of the disorienting logic of Borgesian systems, that Greenaway constructs, for example, his first feature film, The Falls (1982), a false documentary, structured in the form of a catalogue. Composed of ninety two names, whose summates begin with the syllable "Fall" (which suggests the false catalogues to which Borges refers in the story "The Library of Babel") this catalogue appears as a kind of biographical list, in alphabetical order, of some
of the supposed victims of a mysterious event identified only as VUE (The Violent Unknown Event) and which would have affected thousands of people, providing strange behavior alterations in the survivors. Among the ninety-two names, which were taken from the last edition of a standard register published every ten years by the Investigating Committee of the VUE, some are pseudonyms of people who did not want to be identified, others belong to people with confusing biographies or forged lives.

In biography 10, for instance, which is concerned with a lady called Squaline Falaine; we can find the following observation:

"The VUE Commission offered its own choice of ten possible pseudonymous identities, and Squaline Falaine, the subject of biography 10, chose identity 10. A grotesque impersonation of the American actress, Tippi Hedren, who played the part of a bird-victim in Alfred Hitchcock's film "The Birds"." ([8]

And later we read: "It has been said that there is some evidence to suggest that Squaline Falaine is a fiction." It is no coincidence, therefore, that the name "Falaine" is similar in sound to the word "fallaciosa".

Furthermore, there are various passages of humor and absurdity in the list, such as the following:

Biography 86 (Usan Fallico): "This is a directory error. Fallico is the name of a place, not a person." (p. 89)

Biography 80 (Asoreh Falstaff): "Perennial inclusion of fictional character. Criminal charges are pending." (p. 109)

Biography 89 (Grzbad Falloon): "Grzbad Falloon has invented so much fiction about himself that the Directory is unable to voice for any version of his biography." (p. 120)

The filmmaker plays, in this way, with counterfeit identification of the characters, thus rendering as ironic his conclusion as author (by confronting this function to certain characters from the list) and explaining, via moments, the apocalypse imagined at the end of the millennium. It was not by chance that the critic Harlan Kennedy defined the documentary as "a poem in pseudo-science. Edward Lear wrapped up in the Encyclopedia Britannica." [9] Since the disconcerting elements of the book lies not in the principles of its organization or in its documentary form, but in its constitutive elements, in the frame created by its own enigma. Fallacious lines and catalogues such as those of The Fallis, structure several other works of the artist, like the opera-installation (a mixture of opera, museum, cinema, television, theater, narrate, poetry, and encyclopedia) entitled 100 Objects to Represent the World (1992.97), a parody of the audio-visual material sent into space by the Americans in 1977 for the purpose of acquainting potential aliens with life on Earth. They also serve as a basis for the film Prospero's Books (1991), in which Shakespeare's The Tempest is recast according to the description of twenty-four fantastic books, taken from the large and multidisciplinary library of the protagonist.

This film, in my view, gathers together many elements that could attest to the influence of Greenaway and Borges. As the title suggests, Shakespeare's play is recovered in the "books" that Prospero (played by John Gielgud) was allowed to take into exile, all of which have an infinite or magical feature (reminiscent of Borges' "book of sand"), and which compose a kind of fantastical library, a summary version of the "Library of Babel." Through these books, the exiled Duke of Milan is able to endure shipwreck and build a magical civilization on his island, made of mirrors and inhabited by spirits.

Inventories, encyclopedias, treatises, catalogues, maps, and bestiaries are presented through a baroque profusion of voices, images, and texts. The Shakespearean world of the 17th century is reconstructed in this way, through what the Brazilian critic Ivan Brunetti called "an audio-visual tempest," by means of which the filmmaker "makes an inventory of the Renaissance mind and of his desire to map out the universe." [10]

Among these twenty-four books of Prospero, the following are described and visualized: [11] The Book of Mirrors, in which "some mirrors simply reflect the reader, some reflect the reader as he was three minutes previously, some reflect the reader as he will be in a year's time, as he would be if he were a child, a woman, a miser, an idea, a text or an angle," The Book of Universal Topography, which "offers disciplined geographical figures, concentric rings that define and examine, table and lists organized in scripts, catalogues, (...) and attempts to place all universal phenomena in one system"; An Alphabetical Inventory of the Dead, which "contains all the names of the dead who have lived on earth, a collection of designs for tombs and columnarums, elaborate headstones, graves, seraphim, and other architectural follies." A Bestiary of Present, Past and Future Animals, which is "a large book, a thousand of animals, real, imaginary and spectrally", as well as The Book of Water, The Book of Games, An Atlas Belonging to Orpheus, The Book of Ulysses, etc. At last, there is the twenty-fourth book, which is nothing but Shakespeare's The Tempest. As Borges would say, "a fiction which lives in fiction".

These books come to life through computerized animation and are turned into the main inhabitants of Prospero's fabulous island, converted in this way into a kind of "Isle," the absurd and artificial world of Borges's story "Elón, Obras de Obras Tron casa..." where "miraculous systems abound" and which can be seen as a volume of an encyclopedia. Within this world, Prospero appears as a composite of his reading and writing, so much so that in several scenes his body is covered with words, by a visual effect of superimposition seen. Confused with Shakespeare himself, it is he who appears as the playwright's screenwriter, since almost throughout the film he is the only one writing the play we are watching. As Peter Greenaway says, "there is a deliberate amalgamation of confusions between Shakespeare, Gielgud and Prospero they are, in effect, the same person." [12] That is to say, the director converts into film the Borgesian maxim that all men who repeat a line of Shakespeare are William Shakespeare.

The film sophisticated visual resources, attained through the use of high definition video technologies and computerized animation, allow for the play of intertextual and juxtapositions between text and image. It can be said that Greenaway explores the latest technologies with the purpose of creating alternative cinematic form. It is in this sense that he also announced his project of making CD-ROMs, since, according to him, "there is something in the technology of the CD-ROM that seems the ideal medium for the encyclopedia of encyclopedia." [13] This is evidence of the artist's proposal to reinvent, in a digital context, Mallarmé's project of the "Great Book."

Thus, Prospero's Books can not only be considered a film with an avant-garde viewpoint (for its explicit, radical, experimentalism), but one that makes of the technological art a means of dialogue with tradition, here represented by Shakespeare and the cultural imagery of the Renaissance. Furthermore, it prefigures, in my opinion, a dating situation between cinema and literature. Contrary to linear narrativity, Greenaway turns the original plot of film away from its sequency, fragmenting it, taking it less as a moment than as a mosaic of images, voices, letters, and images. The text, which comprises the five acts of The Tempest, is read almost entirely, in the powerful voice of actor John Gielgud, throughout the film, without necessarily corresponding to the multiplicity of juxtaposed images intersecting the reading. We can say that the director uses the literary text by explicitly exploiting its visual and sensory aspects.

By not considering the image a mere illustration of text, nor cinema as a necessarily narrative medium "(sequence is inevitable in cinema, but narrative might not be)," [14] Greenaway thus neutralizes the relation between cinema and literature, eliminating the idea of art as representation of reality. He even discusses the concept of "virtual reality," in which he prefers the concept of "virtual unreality," when it is a question of defining his own work. In his words:
I decided a long time ago that if I were to make films, they might deliberately not to look like films, only artificial artifacts. They are not windows on the world; they are a reconstruction of the world. They are deliberately artificial, as painting is artificial. [15]

This artificiality, which Clément Rosset associated with many writers and philosophers of the Renaissance (for him "Shakespeare is the most artificialist of all writers") [16] has been a constant of contemporary literature and philosophy, particularly in the work of Jorge Luis Borges. I believe Greenaway has made use of it in a special manner: he does not take artifice as a mere ornament, nor as the superficial façade that can be found in Hollywood's cinema of entertainment, and in the literary manner of "postmodernism". In Greenaway's work, artifice is an aesthetic concept, a language. As a a good reader of Borges, he demonstrates that fiction is fiction, that art is "falsefiction". But, as Maurice Blanchot stated apropos the Argentine writer, words like "reel" or "falsefiction" instead of negating the dignity of literature (or of art), in fact confirm it [17].

Writer and filmmaker would therefore meet in this place of tickery, genre of deceit, risk, impotence, monstrous lives, citations, and fictional races. In the work of Greenaway, these elements are not only packaged in the language, but intermingle with other components, originating from diverse aesthetic and disciplinary fields. They clearly point to the conscious, critical intention of the artist in the contemporary cultural context, notable for, among other aspects, the assimilation of cultures from various areas and origins as well as the accelerated proliferation of the so-called "technologies of the virtual" in daily life.

As he incorporates semantic procedures and erudite references extracted from high culture (in the fields of literature, art, music, dance, scientific treatises, old encyclopedia, visual arts, etc.), and articulates them in the context of mass culture, with the variable purpose of renovating cinematic language, Greenaway refuses the dichotomy arising from the complement and utilization of the use of electronic and informational technologies. He also adopts an ironic position with regard to the idea of art as entertainment, as well as to the contemporary cult of the "potionally correct". It can be said that he works both to undermine current conceptions and to disrupt the established boundaries of the systems of knowledge, producing an alternative, overflowing, collection of patterns and effects. He uses the raw material that contemporary technology and systems of classification offer, at the same time as he ironically subverts the ideology that underlies this very material.

(Translation from the Portuguese: Tom Burns)

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NOTES
1 Sussekind, 1998, p.139
2 Borges, OC 2, p. 6.
5 Greenaway and Lawrence, 1997, p. 2.
6 Borges, OC 2, p. 86.
17 Blanchot, 1959, p. 132.

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BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES