

## AN ENCYCLOPEDIA IMAGINATION

### Peter Greenaway in the light of Jorge Luis Borges

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For anyone who sees 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 extravagance, eschatological images, explicit eroticism, visual delirium 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, opera, and literature, permits an association between the two. The elements which, in Greenaway, have affinities with the fictional procedures of the

Argentine writer are not few, especially in what touches the conscious practice of fictional artifices, the encyclopedic view of the world, the exercise of fantastic taxonomies, the authorial ruses, the dizzying citations, the conception of the universe as a "Library of Babel". These are procedures that Greenaway radicalizes and intensifies, making them visually baroque through a sophisticated technological apparatus, together with the intersection of various aesthetic 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 enclosed totality, but of an open, conjectural 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 non-existent authors; the writing of translations that are really inventions; and the production 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 indisputable links to modern literature, but which unveils 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 artifices of language, along with an ironic vision of predictable narrative forms, Borges adds his obsession for thematic series, duplications and doublings, unusual combinations, lists and enumeration. As Flora Sussekund asserts, in the Borgesian texts "there is a revision of the typical epic use of catalogues and lists," since he is not aiming at rationally classifying reality or the universe, but at revealing, through the imagination, the arbitrary character of all systems of classification. [1] The Borgesian lists, therefore, would be critiques of themselves, whose principal intrinsic aim it to deconstruct narrative linearity, the successive rhythm of the poem 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 ambitious word. If there is, then we must speculate on its purpose, we must speculate on the words, definitions, etymologies, and synonyms of God's secret dictionary." [2]

It is precisely from this perspective of the deceptive senses, of disconcerting 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 *oeuvre* 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 mentioned, 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 imploded by an intrinsically disordering, absurd logic.

Seduced like Borges by the "excitements of research, collection and collation," Greenaway converts his films, paintings, drawings, texts, and operas into a kind of a poetics of the catalogue. 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 panatatic 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."

As Greenaway explains:

"Linnacans systems of nomenclature, identification of color, scale, distance, type, size, are all subjective. Most systems are based finally upon forms of subjectivity. I do also enjoy that sort of list making - the Borgesian Chinese Encyclopaedia categories are salutary. But my main reason is to use numerical codes, equations and countings as an alternative to narrative dominance. I make catalogue movies..." [7]

In this search for alternative forms of narration, Greenaway would be thus creatively using the serial model Borges uses in the description of the "Chinese Encyclopedia" in the essay "El idioma analítico de John Wilkins," as in the poem-catalogues of "Los conjurados," in the accumulation of memories of "Funes, el memorioso," or in the taxonomist book *Manual de zoología fanática*. In this model, the rigor of classification is allied to the arbitrariness of the rules, functioning as a fictionalized parody of the classificatory 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 archivism, in the conversion of information into alphanumeric characters stored in dossiers, files and databases.

It is in the critical appropriation of this archivist logic, as well as in the creative assimilation of the disconcerting logic of Borgesian systems, that Greenaway constructs, for example, his first feature film, *The Falls* (1980), a false documentary, structured in the form of a catalogue. Composed of ninety-two names, whose surnames 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, provoking 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 Fallaize; we can find the following observation:

"The VUE Commission offered its own choice of ten possible pseudonymous identities, and Squaline Fallaize, the subject of biography 10, chose identity 10, a photograph of the American actress, Tippi Hendren, 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 Fallaize is a fiction." It is no coincidence, therefore, that the surname "Fallaize" is similar in sound to the word *fallacious*.

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

*Biography 66 (Joyan Fallicory):* "This is a directory error. Fallicory is the name of a place, not a person." (p. 89)

*Biography 80 (Ascrib Fallstaff):* "Pernicious inclusion of fictional character. Criminal charges are pending." (p. 109)

*Biography 89 (Grastled Falluson):* "Grastled Falluson has invented so much fiction about himself that the Directory is unable to vouch for any versions of his biography." (p. 120)

The filmmaker plays, in this way, with counterfeit identities of the characters, thus rendering as ironic his condition as author (by conferring this function to certain characters from the list) and exploits, via nonsense, the apocalyptic imagination of the end of the millennium. It was not by chance that the critic Harlan Kennedy defined the documentary as "a paean to pseudo-science; Edward Lear wrapped up in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*." [9] since the disconcerting element of the work lies not in the principles of its organization or in its documentary form, but in its constitutive elements, in the chaos created by its own symmetry.

Fallacious lists and catalogues such as those of *The Falls* structure several other works of the artist, like the opera-installation (a mixture of opera, museum, cinema, television, theater, narrative, poetry, and encyclopedia) entitled *100 Objects to Represent the World* (1992-97), a parody of the audio-icnographic 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 recreated according to the description of twenty-four fantastical 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 confluence 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 (reminding us 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, compendia, treatises, catalogues, maps, and bestiaries are presented through a baroque profusion of voices, images and texts. The Shakespearean world of the 17th century is reconstituted in this way, through what the Brazilian critic Ivana Bentes 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 monster, an idea, a text or an angel"; *The Book of Universal Cosmography*, which "offers disciplined geometrical figures, concentric rings that circle and counter-circle, table and lists organized in spirals, catalogues, (...) and "attempts to place all universal phenomena in one system"; *An Alphabetic Inventory of the Dead*, which "contains all the names of the dead who have lived on earth, a collection of designs for tombs and columbariums, elaborate headstones, graves, sarcophagi, and other architectural follies"; *A Bestiary of Present, Past and Future Animals*, which is "a large book, a thesaurus of animals, real, imaginary and apocryphal"; as well as *The Book of Water*, *The Book of Games*, *An Atlas Belonging to Orpheus*, *The Book of Utopias*, 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 artifice of animation and are turned into the main inhabitants of Prospero's fabulous island, converted in this way into a kind of "Tlön," the absurd and artificial world of Borges' story "Tlön, Uqbar y Orbis Tertius," where "incredible systems abound" and which can be seen as a set of volumes 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 superimposing screens. Confused with Shakespeare himself, it is he who appears as the screenplay's author, since almost throughout the film he sits in his cell writing the play we are watching. As Peter Greenaway says, "there is a deliberate amalgamation or confusion 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 intersections and juxtapositions between text and image. It can be said that Greenaway exploits the latest technologies with the purpose of creating alternative cinematic forms. 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 creates the infinite cinema, the encyclopedia of encyclopedias." [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, experimentation), 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 daring articulation between cinema and literature. Contrary to linear narrativity, Greenaway turns the original plot of film away from its sequentiality, fragmenting it, taking it less as content than as a mosaic of images, voices, letters, and citations. 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 exploring its visual and sonorous 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 reevaluates the relation between cinema and literature, criticizing the idea of art as representation of reality. He even discusses the concept of "virtual reality," to 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 ought 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 artificialist practice, 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 pastiches of "postmodernism". In Greenaway's work, artifice is an aesthetic conception, a language. As a good reader of Borges, he demonstrates that fiction is fiction, that art is "falsification". But, as Maurice Blanchot stated apropos the Argentine writer, words like "trick" or "falsification," 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 trickery, games of deceit, risks, impostures, counterfeit lives, citations, and fictional ruses. In the work of Greenaway, these elements are not only packaged in baroque language, but intermingle with other components, originating from diverse aesthetic and disciplinary fields. They clearly point to the conscious, critical insertion of the artist in the contemporary cultural context, notable for, among other aspects, the assemblage of cultures from various eras and origins as well as the accelerated proliferation of the so-called "technologies of the virtual" in daily life.

As he incorporates aesthetic procedures and erudite references extracted from high culture (in the fields of literature, art, music, dance, scientific treatises, old encyclopedias, visual arts, etc.), and articulates them in the context of mass culture, with the visible purpose of reinventing cinematographic language, Greenaway refuses the clichés arising from the complacent and indiscriminate use of electronic and informational technologies. He also adopts an ironic position with regard to the idea of art as entertainment, as well as the contemporary cult of the "politically correct". It can be said that he seeks both to undermine current commonplaces and to disrupt the established boundaries of the systems of knowledge, producing an alternative, overflowing, collection/collation of images and effects. He uses the raw material that contemporary technologies 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)

#### NOTES

1. Sussekind, 1998, p.139.
2. Borges, *OC* 2, p. 6.
3. Greenaway apud Woods, 1996, p. 18.
4. Greenaway e Almeida, 1998, p. 59.
5. Greenaway apud Lawrence, 1997, p. 2.
6. Borges, *OC* 2, p. 86.
7. Greenaway, in interview with Allan Woods. Cf. Melia and Woods, 1998, p. 135.
8. Greenaway, 1993, p. 19.
9. Cf. Hacker & Price, 1991, p. 198.
10. Bentes, 1998, p. 8.
11. Cf. Greenaway, 1991, p. 17-24.
12. Greenaway, in interview to Jonathan Romney. Cf. ROMNEY, 1991, p. 29.
13. Greenaway e Mourão, 1998, p. 72.
14. Greenaway apud Woods, 1996, p. 235.
15. Greenaway e Mourão, 1998, p. 67.
16. Rosset, 1973, p. 114.
17. Blanchot, 1959, p. 132.

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[CLICK HERE TO GO BACK TO THE TOP OF THIS PAGE](#)

**CONTENTS**