

## **From myth to brush, from brush to camera: Jan Vermeer-Peter Greenaway and the spectacle of life in *A Z.O.O.*<sup>1</sup>**

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On a first appraisal *A Z.O.O.* by Peter Greenaway does not appear as a film necessarily appropriate for study in the context of the seminar's subject: "Le cinéma se regarde : spectacle et spécularité." Certain categories of film were suggested as cases in point where cinema, or spectacle can be said to form the central preoccupation of the work. *A Z.O.O.* will not slot neatly into any of them, although aspects of each category do seem to apply.

The first category proposed concerns films on the cinema in which "the diegesis is related to cinema." We may finally be led to conclude that *A Z.O.O.* is in its way a film on the cinema but it is not "a film about the production of another film, or a film in which the action is centred within the cinematic industry."

In the case of the second category, the title, "Films on the world of spectacle," excludes *A Z.O.O.* if "spectacle" is taken in the sense of "a specially prepared or arranged display of a more or less public nature forming an impressive or interesting show or entertainment for those viewing it",<sup>2</sup> which no doubt would refer to the case of theatre, ballet, opera, etc., portrayed within the film. But the remarks following this title may prove relevant: "The diegetic world is not centred on the cinema but on parallel worlds which pose the problem of the real vs. the imaginary in a way which is pertinent to cinema." The presupposition here is that the examples of "parallel worlds" will be found in the "world of spectacle", as the latter has been defined above. In *A Z.O.O.* we will find "parallel worlds which pose the problem of

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<sup>1</sup> *A Z.O.O. : A Zed and Two Noughts*, dir. Peter Greenaway, with Andrea Ferreol, Brian Deacon, Eric Deacon, Frances Barber, B.F.I./Film Four International/Allart's Enterprises/Artificial Eye Productions, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961.

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the real vs. the imaginary in a way which is pertinent to cinema," but they are not worlds related to the notion of spectacle as so far defined.

The third category concerns films which "emphasize the notion of spectacle according to the opposition spectacle (a work within a work)/ spectacular (the image is given as an object of consumption). Ex.: the musical comedy (an artistic production is in preparation and the action stops for the display of spectacular acts)." At no point do our *Z.O.O.* characters break into a singing and dancing session, so this category seems to exclude the film. But, if we take into account the sequences where Van Meegeren photographs the woman in the red hat, and the series of shots centred around the reconstruction of Vermeer's *Concert Trio*, it cannot be denied that Greenaway does provide "a work within a work", from which individual images are picked out and offered for consumption. The process is brief and fragmented, but it is there. In this case, the word "spectacle" could be considered to stand not only for a piece of drama, dance, music, etc., but to stand for the notion of an individual offered as spectacle, as an object to be looked at.

The fourth and fifth categories also provide areas where a correspondence can be found between the theme of the seminar and the film in question. With the foregrounding of different forms of image, fixed images (painting, photography, advertisements) and moving images (feature and documentary film, 16' film, film on television), the term "reflexive" film would seem appropriate. With its establishment of a narrative thread interspersed with recurrent "public" and private viewings of a documentary film on the origins of life, we have indeed a film which "mixes the genres" and "insists on the heterogeneity of the image and spectatorial positions." But once again the correspondences are not without tension: the film does not present a clear case of "mise en abyme" of the cinematographic form, and "the mixture of genres" does not take place within the diverse genres of feature films. In relation to all the categories proposed, *A Z.O.O.* simultaneously calls for and resists inclusion.

Amongst the various concepts introduced by these preliminary remarks one of the most useful to follow up is that of "parallel worlds". "Parallel" assumes the positioning of two lines, shapes, objects, etc., side by side: they will be at the same time separate, distinctly apart, different, but related because they will be encompassed simultaneously by the eye: paradoxically there is a relationship between them, although they are separate.

The concept of parallels is omnipresent within the film:

- *A Z.O.O.* (*A Zed and Two Noughts*) can be read as *A Zoo*: the possibility of reading in two ways establishes a parallel around the title. It can also be said that *A Z.O.O.* combines an alphabetical and a numerical system of classification; it makes use of parallel systems of notations.

- A diegetised Zoo, which is located within the city walls of the film, establishes a parallel between the world of animals and the world of human beings.

- This in turn points to the parallel aspects of Man's nature:

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animality and spirituality.

- The twins Oliver and Oswald (two Os) establish the notion of parallel human existences. We may be led to think of the parallel between the feminine and the masculine. And so on...

This preoccupation with parallelism is mostly translated visually, in particular through the abrupt juxtaposition of sequences strongly contrasted in their content, and through an insistence on symmetry in the composition within the frame, sometimes going so far as to suggest mirror reflexions.

This paper will begin by examining yet another form of parallel, the instance of a "parallel world" to that of film offered by the paintings of Jan Vermeer. On a first viewing of the film it is not obvious to perceive that there is any relationship which could even be termed as "parallel" between the paintings of Vermeer, which glow with light and harmony, conveying an impression of peace and optimism, and the cinematographic universe created by Greenaway. His visual representation in *A Z.O.O.* is characterized by its abundant use of sequences shot in semi-darkness, its aggressive flashing lights in a scientist's laboratory, its disturbing woman actants, as well as by the omnipresence of death, pain and distress. Watching the opening sequence of the film and comparing this with reproductions of Vermeer's paintings, we may ask ourselves what this universe created by Greenaway has got to do with that created by Vermeer.

Vermeer's most typical work comprises what are known as "genre scenes" in which, in his case, there is hardly any narrative at all. The models, among whom women are predominant, are engaged in everyday tasks. The major characteristic of Vermeer's art seems to be his preoccupation with the treatment of light, colour and volume. In a certain sense, he paints over and over again the same subject: one model replaces another wearing the same dress, or we see the same model who appears with a different dress, or else one instrument replaces another to the same purpose. The models are often placed in the left-hand corner of the same room, near the window, to such an extent that it could be said of Vermeer that he is concerned with capturing to perfection in paint that particular corner of that specific room and all that occupies it. One gets the impression of a constant battle with the subject to render with yet more precision the play of light on the skin, on the silk, blue or yellow, of the model's dresses and jackets.

The universe which surrounds these women is one where geometrical order reigns: from the black and white rectangles of the tiled floor to the rectangles of the windows, from the frames of the paintings and of the mirrors depicted within the painting, to the rectangles of the chair backs and seats, and to the rectangles of the open doorways revealing to the on-looker the subject, Vermeer's paintings can be decomposed into a complex of geometrical compositions.

He imposes order on the universe, re-presents experience

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in this form. In this universe there are no "holes", no undefined empty spaces: space and experience have been controlled and ordered. Attention is paid to detail: the intricate pattern of threads in a tapestry, the play of light on a milk jug, on the women's silken dresses.

These are often blue (*Woman with a Water Jug*, *Woman in Blue*, *The Studio*, *Lady Sitting at the Virginals*) or yellow (*Woman Playing a Lute*, *The Love Letter*, *Woman Playing a Guitar*, *Servant Handing a Letter to her Mistress*) or yellow and blue (*Lady Standing at the Virginals*, *Milkmaid*). The constant recurrence of these two colours has led them to become associated with the work of Vermeer. However, equally important is the use of black, white and grey. Black and white appear regularly in the famous tiles (*Concert Trio*, *Lady at the Virginals with a Gentleman*, *Lady Standing at the Virginals*, *The Love Letter*, *Allegory of the New Testament*, *The Studio*, in which black and white also appear in opposing stripes on the top half of the artist's tunic). The most interesting from the point of view of the combination of black, white and grey is *Woman Weighing Pearls*.

Now, to turn to Greenaway's film: what relationship exists between the film and the paintings? The film opens with the huge letters "Z.O.O." in blue, in front of which two children pull and are pulled in their turn by a Dalmatian dog. A cut reveals a tiger walking up and down behind bars; another cut shows a dead zebra's head; a further cut foregrounds a hand with a chronometre timing the tiger's movements. At the moment when we see the man whom the hand belongs to, we hear a noise off, which a further cut will show to be that of a car accident: two women, the wives of two behaviourist scientists, are killed.

Several important notions are introduced by visual means: Nature is imprisoned, whilst the laborious second by second analysis of scientific research attempts to find order, or impose order on Nature. This search for order is interrupted by death. A little later, on the wall behind the place of the accident, a team of workmen cover up the tiger advert for Esso with sheets of white paper. Two lives are wiped out as easily as the image of the tiger on the wall, leaving a blank white surface.

If we follow the diegesis, we discover that, due to their wives' deaths, the two scientists, twins called Oliver and Oswald (2 Os) become fascinated by the process of death: leaving the study of animal behaviour, they turn their attention to trying to fathom the mystery of death, the place of death in life, the mystery of life itself. In order to do this, they view with obstinate perseverance a documentary film which provides a scientific explanation for the origins of life. They watch it in various forms and places. Firstly, in an auditorium of the zoo. We, spectators of Greenaway's film, see extracts of the documentary on a cinema screen alternating with shots of Oliver sitting watching it. Later we again see extracts but this time on a T.V. screen, with, in the same way as previously, extracts, directly projected on "our" screen, again in alternation with shots of one of the twin brothers watching.

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The purpose of this viewing and re-viewing, Oliver explains, is that, knowing how life ends: "with a swan, a car and a woman with flaming red hair", he now wishes to know how life begins. The zoo manager suggests the documentary will not be adequate: "Then I'm afraid you'll find this film inaccurate." But Oliver is determined to penetrate the secret:

Oliver: Don't ruin it for me. I'm going to take it in stages. It needs absorbing. I'm sure I must have got it wrong before and I'm on the look out for clues.

Zoo manager: What sort of clues?

Oliver: I'm going to try to separate the true clues from the red herrings. "

Interspersed with sequences showing a fragment of their viewing of the film, are sequences showing Oliver and Oswald trying to analyse the nature of death by scientific means. This consists in photographing — with the help of a flashing light — living organisms, first an apple, then prawns, and a zebra's head, that is to say, increasingly large and complex organisms, in the hope that the recording of their progressive decomposition may enlighten them as to the mystery of death. Although apparently nothing is revealed, with true scientific perseverance, the brothers pursue their experiment to its logical conclusion: after using ever larger animals, they propose to expose a human body to the analysis of photography. First they think of using Alba's body, but finally they use their own, inflicting death on themselves, after installing themselves on a grid. But the experiment comes to nothing. At dawn the camera is invaded by snails which block the mechanism, and bring to an end this analysis of death. Nature, which is imprisoned, analysed and controlled at the beginning of the film, regains its freedom from, and its mastery over, Man. There is indeed a loophole in Man's, or at least in the twins', scientific methods of enquiry. They are unable to penetrate the mystery of death in this way. Just as the documentary film is "inaccurate", so the brothers have got "something wrong", and clearly missed the point.

With this first appraisal of the film, what has been observed which may be relevant to Vermeer? Of course the use of colour: blue predominates from the first view of the blue colouring of the "zoo" letters throughout many sequences. Yellow is also frequently used. Both blue and yellow bathe the shot of Oliver at what is presumably the place where his wife is buried. Black and white are also much in evidence: united in the zebra, the panda, the artist's tunic, a tiny touch on Venus de Milo's dress, but also divided between Milo, predominantly dressed in black and Alba, in white.

Beyond the use of colour, we also noted in Vermeer the imposition of visual order on his universe. Oswald and Oliver attempt to impose order too, but through their scientific analysis. There is further evidence for order as Alba's daughter Beta is taught the alphabet in relation to all the different animals: naming all that surrounds us is the beginning of classification, of

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ordering of experience, and of understanding.

Visually, the notion of order is introduced on Greenaway's screen by the insistent use of symmetry. The screen itself is often divided into two equal parts with a character on each side of a central dividing line: Oliver and the zoo manager in the auditorium; Milo and Oswald sitting on each side of a doorway as Milo tells her story; Oswald and Oliver portrayed on each side of Alba with identical objects (tables, pillars, bunches of flowers) beside each of them.

However, these elements are not sufficient to explain the degree of relevance of Vermeer's art to Greenaway's film. It is still difficult to see a link between the harmonious visions of women and the universe in Vermeer, and the dark, threatening universe of Greenaway.

Let us return to the accident. The accident is caused by a swan. Why a swan? If it is read as part of a symbolic code, what contribution would this bring to the problem in question? It might be considered as a reference to the Greek myth of Zeus and Leda: Leda, having been raped by Zeus, gave birth to twins, Castor and Pollux. Zeus, according to Plato, cut the original beings on Earth, who were whole, into two separate parts, enforcing division on humanity for evermore. The swan, like many symbols, is ambivalent: its whiteness and light are taken to represent either the masculine and solar daylight or the feminine and lunar light, or it can represent an androgynous synthesis of the two: the death of the swan would imply the failure of synthesis, of union. It has also been used as a symbol of the force of the poet and of poetry: it stands for the poet who is richly inspired. In the film the swan, a female, was pregnant, but the egg was not laid, and the swan is now dead. Has the possibility of perfect union been destroyed? Has the force of the poet, the artist, been killed, ending thus the process of fecundity?

On the advertising hoarding behind the accident, the tiger is covered by a blank sheet of paper. The tiger is an animal image linked to the world of light and life, the world of superior beings, in opposition to the world of inferior beings (reptiles and dragons), symbols of the under world. A symbol of light is replaced by a blank space at the same time as a symbol of the artist's force and inspiration is killed. The death of the swan and the blank space suggest perhaps the end of synthesis and also the fragility and the transitory nature of artistic representation. A form of artistic representation can come to an end. The artist can be faced by a blank space: although there is something underneath, he has to start again.

Oliver and Oswald's flashing light, in Greenaway's words, was intended as a homage to Vermeer's use of light. In the experiment, it reveals no secrets. Does this not, as it were by extension, suggest that Vermeer's use of light, although remarkable, did not provide the last and ultimate solution to the secret of the representation of light?

So far we have observed references made to Vermeer

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through "indirect" means. However, the film also includes direct references to Vermeer through reconstitutions of his paintings, shots of his paintings and use of characters dressed similarly to his models. It is of interest to examine how and why Greenaway introduces these forms of reference.

The first appearance of a Vermeer model in the film occurs in the hospital by Alba's bedside. Greenaway uses an actress wearing a red hat, referring to the painting *Girl in a Red Hat*. The hat is an exact replica, as are the pearl earrings. In other ways the model has been changed, the painting adapted. Greenaway ages the model, dresses her entirely in red. Later in the film he gives her a sexual content which is not apparent in the original Vermeer model and he portrays the artist petting her. He introduces her, like any other character, at different moments in the film, and she is reintroduced as a model into another of Vermeer's paintings, *The Studio*.

Greenaway's reconstitution on the screen of Vermeer's painting, *The Studio*, is a fairly exact copy of the original as the following icons suggest: a characteristic Vermeer map on the wall behind the model, brass candelabra, and the artist himself seen from the back. The replica is divulged little by little. Over the artist's shoulder, as in Vermeer's painting, we see the female figure, but the original young girl swathed in blue has been replaced by the lady in the red hat, portrayed in the nude. Like the original, she is holding a trumpet and a book, but the artist is now a photographer. His camera flashes at regular intervals, like the scientists' camera. The artist is no longer Vermeer but Van Meegeren, the famous faker of Vermeer's paintings. The artist is no longer shown creating an entirely original work: he is shown recreating a new work on the basis of the work of another.

The original painting offers a comment on the act of representation. The artist's canvas is as yet almost empty, but the elements already portrayed on it indicate that less will appear on the canvas than we can actually see in the room, from our position as spectator behind the artist. We are reminded that all representation is selection, and as such is always incomplete, in a sense, imperfect. The map, often present in Dutch paintings of the period, serves a similar purpose: it is a reminder of all that is not within the frame. A whole typology of attempts at and means of representation is suggested here. The model has been said to be Clio, a reference to representation through muses and myths. She is holding a book said to be either the work of the Greek historian Herodotus or of Thucydides, History being another form of representation of human experience. She is looking at a plaster sculpture said to represent Thalia, the muse of Comedy: sculpture and theatre are also forms of representation. All these forms and means are then included within that of painting which is given visually the most prominent position in the whole construction.

In Greenaway's reconstruction, the artist has been replaced by the photographer and the film-maker encases all these forms of representation within the frame of the screen: photography and film are thus included in this chain of attempts at representation.

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However, the artist in Greenaway's construction has changed and so has the model and her apparent nature. She is no longer willing and docile, as Vermeer's models seemingly were. The girl in the red hat throws down the trumpet and the book. She refuses to be at the service of the artist. On throwing them down she accuses Van Meegeren of "infidelity". Should we understand infidelity to her as a female character in the diegesis? Or infidelity in his copy of Vermeer's painting? Or is it infidelity because the artist no longer represents women in the classic tradition? Unless it is infidelity in the spectator who no longer agrees to believe in this form of artistic representation, the naturalist scene?

No doubt a little of all of these. The film cuts abruptly to a shot of a crocodile in the rain.

A few shots later begins a sequence where two of Vermeer's paintings are actually shown. We see first, filling the whole screen, *Concert Trio*. There is a cut to the second painting, *Lady at the Virginals with Gentleman*, but the foreground has been cut out and we are closer to the two models than in the original. We cut back to *Concert Trio* in such a way that the gentleman in the *Lady at the Virginals* appears to have been looking at the girl sitting playing in the *Concert Trio*. If the spectator does not know the paintings well, the two become confused: we have once again, but in a different way, a remodelling of Vermeer.

Van Meegeren's voice off explains that he has reproduced almost all of Vermeer's models' dresses.<sup>3</sup> The rest of the sequence shows that Van Meegeren, the faker of Vermeer's paintings, but also the surgeon who amputated Alba's leg, has Alba zipped, with some difficulty, into a Vermeer model's dress. She is then installed in front of a piano in order to reconstitute a cross between *Concert Trio* (Alba is sitting playing) and *Lady at the Virginals with a Gentleman* (she is reflected in a mirror above the virginals, with Oswald on her right). Alba wishes to get out of this situation. Like the lady in the red hat in the previous reconstitution, she is not willingly a model (to Oscar and Oswald). She is heard to say: "I am an excuse for medical experiments and art theory. You must get me out of here and out of the hospital ... I am stitched and sewn to the music stool. I'm imprisoned."

This sequence raises a number of issues. Firstly, that of the relation between an "original" work of art and a "fake", that of the "manipulation" of one work of art to create another. With the covering over of the image of the tiger, we realize that this picture will remain beneath the white sheets of paper, so one representation is laid over another, is built on what went before. Artists use the work of their predecessors as a basis for new creation. It is of interest to note that Vermeer himself, like most

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<sup>3</sup> Rapid cuts reveal one after another the dresses from *Woman With a Water Jug*, *Gentleman and Woman Drinking*, *Girl Reading a Letter Near the Window*. Of these dresses we see only the bodices.



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artists, played at the game of "artistic reconstructions." His painting: *Gentleman and Woman Drinkin*, is a re-working of Pieter de Hooch's<sup>4</sup> two paintings: *Women and Soldiers* and *Lady Drinking*. Greenaway has therefore, in relation to *The Studio* and to *Concert Trio/Lady at the Virginals*, done what Vermeer himself did.

Secondly, what is to be made of the fact that Alba is mutilated in order that she be symmetrical and fit into the frame? If this is taken as a comment on Vermeer's representation of women it suggests that in order that he represent them he in a sense deformed them. It provides a comment on the nature of all artistic representation as a deformation, a remodelling of the world by the artist. The question of the relation between art and "reality" is posed once again: is art a mirror of reality, or is it a construction of reality, and in this case a construction involving — it is suggested here — mutilation? The mirror above both *Lady at the Virginals* and Alba serves as a reminder that there is always another side to the scene the artist has chosen to represent, angles which cannot be included.

If the mutilation of Alba is taken as a comment on Van Meegeren's re-using of Vermeer's models, it would seem to suggest that the women of to-day have to be mutilated if they are to fit into this pattern of representation dating from a past era and that in any case they will not stay within the frame provided. They call to be freed for a new form of representation. Alba ends by throwing Van Meegeren out and telling him to take Vermeer with him.

The documentary film was proposed as one way of explaining the origins of life. It is one means of representing life, but it may be inaccurate. Science and the expression of its theories in documentary film form constitute a way of trying to pin down the mysteries of life and death, but science does not triumph at the end of the film, it is annihilated by the snails, by life itself. New attempts will have to be made.

After *The Studio* sequence, Oliver and Oswald contemplate jumping into the crocodile pen. The force of the crocodile is as inevitable as the coming of night, but after night comes day, as after death new life appears. As a symbol the crocodile is linked to the force of death but also to that of rebirth. That death leads to rebirth is the central mystery revealed to the twins. After the death of the swan, the advertising hoarding is a white space; death introduced the white space, the empty page. It must then be filled again. The disappearance of one form of representation leads to the return of representation in another form. Vermeer's paintings are an attempt at representing life. They are indeed beautiful but they are themselves reworkings and need to be constantly reworked (reworking bringing new creation) or transposed into new forms of representation, which however new, will inevitably have their roots in what came before.

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<sup>4</sup> Reproductions of the two paintings appear in: Tzvetan Todorov, *Eloge du quotidien: essai sur la peinture hollandaise du 17ème siècle*, Paris : Adam Biro, 1993.

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If we look further at the film, we discover that the documentary and Vermeer's paintings are not the only examples of parallel methods for the ordering, representing and explaining of the universe. It is Venus de Milo, the woman in black (with a little white) who helps Alba into her "Vermeer" dress. Her name takes us back once again to the Greek mythology, this being another way of ordering, explaining, representing the origins of life, Man's experience.

We remember that, earlier in the film, Oliver picks up an apple from a dish of vivid green apples beside Alba's bed. It is the first organism on which, after taking a bite out of it, he conducts his analysis of decomposition. It was Eve's apple that led to Man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden and to his condemnation to mortality. The Bible, the Christian myth, yet another explanation/representation of the origins of life, is no doubt as accurate, or inaccurate, as are science, documentary films or Vermeer paintings in the film. One attempt replaces or rather is laid next to, if not over, another.

Venus de Milo is a story-teller. Story-telling is also an attempt at ordering and representing experience. When she helps Alba into her Vermeer dress Alba says: "I know enough about you to know you favour black". She also knows that Milo tells "dirty stories" and suggests she could tell her one. Milo: "What would you like? I could tell you what Venus did to the Unicorn in Beardsley's *Under the Hill*."

Thus, Venus de Milo leads us to yet other forms of representation, those of Beardsley. Of course this artist favoured black and white. He drew but he also wrote, amongst other things, the erotic story: *Under the Hill*,<sup>5</sup> which would have been classed as "dirty", like de Milo's, by his contemporaries.

The advertising hoarding in the background of the accident takes on added significance. Beardsley is also known for having written an essay attacking "the popular idea of a picture" (a Pre-Raphaelite tenet) as "something told in oil or writ in water" and intended to be hung in a gallery. He made what was a revolutionary proposal at that time, that a poster might be a picture, that hoardings were not worse places than private galleries for the display of art, that the hoarding had the advantage of charging no admission fee. His essay was entitled *The Art of the Hoarding*.<sup>6</sup> Beardsley was first adopted and admired by the Pre-Raphaelites, but it soon became apparent that he did not fit into their theories. The discovery of his own originality, his personal forms of representation, implied a rupture from theirs, one form of representation being evinced and reappearing in a new guise, as has been suggested above.

Symbols, myth, the written word, paintings, drawings, engravings, scientific experiments, documentary film are all "parallel worlds" in *A Z.O.O.*, presenting theories on the origins

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<sup>5</sup> The book was never finished "because it was his personal erotic fantasy and to finish it would have been to relinquish life." Brigid Brody, *Beardsley and His World*, London : Thames and Hudson, 1976, 99.

<sup>6</sup> Brody, 51.

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of life, and all are attempts at representation of Man's experience, of which film is the most recent to have been used when it comes to filling the white empty space of the screen/advertising hoarding. The birth of one form implies the death of the previous form, but its death contains the perpetual re-birth of art. Alba escapes from the Van Meegeren fakes and decides on her own fate. Fecund, she gives birth to new life and then effaces herself. Her death and that of the twins can be read as literal deaths, or as an allegorical portrayal of the processes of representation through art: for creativity to perpetuate itself, the model must die to be freed from earlier forms of representation.

It may be objected that Vermeer, as was stated at the beginning of this paper, was concerned with the representation "of that corner of that room", with composition, with the play of light and colour, and not at all with the wider issue of the representation of the mystery of life itself and the enigma of death. Let us look for a last time at Vermeer's paintings. We noted his predilection for women models. A closer look at *Concert Trio* (the woman on the right), *Woman in Blue*, *Woman Weighing Pearls*, *Servant Handing a Letter to her Mistress*, shows that the models are all with child, fecund, i.e. sources of life. We note also that in many of the paintings the women are portrayed wearing or manipulating pearls, and wearing jackets bordered with ermine fur. Perhaps these women represent more than studies in light, colour and composition. Perhaps Greenaway is not the only one to be using a symbolic code. The pearl, a lunar symbol linked to women and water, is a sign of perfection. Its similarity to the moon associates it with the phases of the moon, to the cycle of birth, life, death, and rebirth. Vermeer's predominant preference for women wearing, or standing close to, pearls, now appears to be linked to the notion of a perpetual renewal of life through birth. It is Woman who contains the answer to the mystery of life, who transfers the mystery of life, who assures a life after death, just as Alba draws the twins back towards life, and teaches them that the "answer" to death is in birth and re-birth. Vermeer's paintings, for some critics, are studies in light and composition, for others, they are studies in realism, but they are for yet another group of critics considered as a complex of symbols representing the mystery of transcendence, the manifestation of God in the universe.<sup>7</sup> *Woman Weighing Pearls* in particular, with its painting within the painting of *The Last Judgement* on the wall behind the model, has been said to depict Man's condemnation to mortality, compensated by the hope to achieve life after death for his soul.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The extent to which Vermeer's paintings should be interpreted in terms of their realist or symbolic content has been the source of much animated debate. Tzvetan Todorov sums up the main aspects and protagonists of this debate and provides his own conciliatory conclusion in *Eloge du quotidien: essai sur la peinture hollandaise*, 48-52.

<sup>8</sup> Hans Koningsberger, *Vermeer et son temps : 1632-1675*, Nederland : Time-Life, 1973, 152.

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Finally Vermeer, like Greenaway, appears concerned with wider issues than the simple representation of that corner of that interior we see so many times. It is here that we see the entire appropriateness of using the example of Vermeer as the artist in *A Z.O.O.*. On a first appraisal, the universes created in *A Z.O.O.* and in Vermeer's paintings appear to be unrelated. Indeed, visually, the one does not in any way "illustrate" the other, although we did discover references through colour and form, references we termed as oblique, rather than direct. It is through an examination of the symbolic codes apparent in both Vermeer's paintings and *A Z.O.O.* that the relevance of the former to the latter is revealed. By using Vermeer, Greenaway opens the door to a reflexion on the possible ways of reading visual images, and on the possible uses of these images.

*A Z.O.O.* has portrayed the long line of forms of representation from myth to brush, to poster and to photography for us on the screen. It is film which has rendered possible the visualizing within a limited time and place of all these forms of representation. Film is thus shown as the privileged form which is able to incorporate all these previous forms. It is the most recent in this long line of representation. It is not the same, but not either entirely different: it also is "parallel".

Cinema has been divided into the documentary and the narrative feature film. *A Z.O.O.*, with its intertwining of the two, introduces the idea that the objectives of the two are, if "parallel", not so far apart. Both are attempts at a representation of reality, not necessarily the material details of daily life but the reality of the mystery of life and death which Man constantly tries to fathom. In *A Z.O.O.*, Greenaway poses the problem of the purpose and procedure of all forms of representation. He quotes in his film the varied forms of representation of the human experience of life and death through the ages: the orality of myth and story-telling, the written word, the brush, from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, the poster, the photograph and finally film. Film becomes a link in the long chain of different forms of representation of the spectacle of life.

Greenaway has been accused almost of not being a filmmaker at all.<sup>9</sup> In *A Z.O.O.* he places the moving image within the history of all images, fixed and moving, claiming a place for film which is without doubt different from that claimed for it by classical narrative film. His film epitomizes the notion of "parallel worlds" within representation, i.e. of worlds at once separate, different and related. These "parallel worlds" are also to be found in those of myth, painting and film, or those of film itself. Indeed, film may be seen, shall we say, from Hollywood, (as an abbreviation), and may also be considered from somewhere between Great Britain, Holland, France and Italy. *A Z.O.O.* does turn out to be a reflexion on cinema itself. Cinema as a mirror of life or not? If so, a mirror of which aspects of Life? Cinema as a prolongation of other visual arts? What can it be used to portray? How to, and why, use it? *A Z.O.O.* is indeed

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<sup>9</sup> Colette Mazabrad, "La Culture et le bouillon : *Le Cuisinier, le voleur, sa femme et son amant*," *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Nov. 1989, 64-65.

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in its way a "reflexive" film. We might repeat by way of conclusion, but with a slightly new slant, that Greenaway, with his particular, even peculiar approach, both calls for and resists inclusion into the world of cinema.

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