

**SLIDE 1: Landscape and Dialectical Atavism in *The Ruling Class***

English country house films in the early 1970s developed new modes of deploying locations, whereby the architecture and histories of actual estates became intrinsic to narrative. This moment needs to be considered as a turning point in a distinctly English genre. Significantly, however, the two key country house films of the decade were by non-British directors: *The Go-Between*, by American Joseph Losey and *The Ruling Class*, by Hungarian Peter Medak. These films were chosen to represent Britain in the Cannes Festival competition in 1971 and 1972 respectively, which indicates that they were perceived to be similarly representative of British filmmaking at this point.

Circumstantial evidence also suggests that Medak's agenda was similar to Losey's. When Medak left the production of the film *Figures in a Landscape*, Losey took over, only to become as disillusioned as Medak. Losey then went on to make a more satisfying landscape narrative with *The Go-Between*, just as Medak came to direct *The Ruling Class*. Both of these films refine *Figures in a Landscape*'s theme of a power struggle between individuals and a dominant ideology: a struggle significantly enacted through, and articulated in, a landscape. Like *The Go-Between*, *The Ruling Class* situates the confrontation in a more concrete generic setting: the English country house.

When it was released, *The Go-Between* represented a new form of landscape fiction film. It was shot almost entirely at one country house location, Melton Constable Hall. The interiors and exteriors of the film's fictional estate correspond to those of the location.

**SLIDE 2 – *The Go-Between***

Shots from inside the house, looking through the windows link interior to exterior. The *découpage* traces the aesthetic and socio-economic reach of the location, from the house to an outlying farm. Losey emphasises that the visible manifestation of the aristocracy's power is the aesthetic system which accompanies it, namely the landscape. The film deconstructs the power relations underpinning a single estate. *The Go-Between*'s Marxist portrayal of a country house anticipated Raymond Williams'

1973 *The Country and the City* and John Barrell's 1976 *The Dark Side of the Landscape*.

### **SLIDE 3 - BLANK**

Medak's approach was somewhat different, though with similar political concerns. *The Ruling Class* sutures together country estate locations 90 miles apart: Harlaxton Manor in Lincolnshire and Cliveden in Buckinghamshire. However, although the film successfully synthesises disparate locations into an organic fictional whole, the emphasis of *The Ruling Class* remains one of atomism; the individual contribution of each section of the gardens is of more consequence to the film's discourse than the character of any single estate.

*The Ruling Class* was adapted from Peter Barnes's 1968 play. An Earl dies, bequeathing his estate to his son. The son, Jack is a paranoid schizophrenic, who believes he is J.C., the God of love and that he is betrothed to the 'Lady of the Camelias'. The family is desperate for J.C. to produce an heir, so that they can gain control of the estate. They employ an actress, Grace Shelley, to play the 'Lady of the Camelias'. J.C. marries her, but after psychiatric treatment, assumes a new identity: he becomes Jack the Ripper and murders her. The play is divided into two halves. In the first, Jack is J.C., the God of love, and in the second, he is Jack the Ripper.

The play attacks many traits of the upper class: its repressive sexual mores, its ecclesiastical influence, its artistic tastes and its landed power. This multivalence corresponds to its range of cultural references. The play's frequent landscape scenes, however, are not referential. The only visible prop is a minimalist device: a metal sun is lowered from the flies.

The minimalist scenery is central to the play's theme of landscape as power. The impetus of the whole play is a struggle for possession of a country estate. The insubstantiality of the landscape as presented on stage points to the fragility of the ruling class's landed power. The very materiality of the land as a possession is denied by the play.

So, how does the film diverge from the play? Reviews of the film argued that its landscape locations introduce an incongruous naturalism to the discourse, which detracts from the play's narrative.

**SLIDE 4**

A representative article asserted that 'use of this Lincolnshire setting with well-drilled flower beds, grass and trees...add up to a realism which conflicts seriously with the work of a witty playwright whose declared intention was to cock a snook at naturalism.'

**SLIDE 5 [BLANK]**

However, the reviewer erroneously presumes that naturalism in film is the same as naturalism in theatre and that landscape gardens themselves are necessarily naturalistic. 'Naturalism' is a problematic term because of its historical contingency and its cross-disciplinary usage. At any one time 'naturalism' has had different applications to various forms: garden design and landscapes in painting, novels, plays or film sets and locations. In film production, the term 'naturalistic landscape' has frequently been used to mean location footage, but this has never precluded use of locations for fantasy or alienation effects. Likewise, gardens in situ or on screen do not always mimetically represent 'nature'. Formal gardens consist of abstract design and artifice. The picturesque landscape, which in English garden history succeeded the formal garden, tends towards a naturalistic arrangement, with artifice all but concealed in the composition. However, picturesque landscapes often contain gothic props, such as dilapidated buildings, which tip the composition towards self-conscious myth and fantasy.

The film version of *The Ruling Class* depicts both formal gardens and picturesque landscapes. It pursues Jack's transformation from J.C. to Jack the Ripper through a landscaped trajectory, from formal garden settings for J.C.'s escapades to a picturesque backdrop for Jack the Ripper's hunting exploits. The bipartite structure of the narrative is self-consciously mirrored in the way landscape changes in the film.

I will now screen two clips to show how Jack's metamorphosis is reflected in the film's deployment of landscape.

The first clip, from the first half of the film, shows J.C. with Grace as the ‘Lady of the Camelias’ in a formal garden. The second clip, from the latter half of the film, features Jack the Ripper in a picturesque landscape. The clips also contrast in pathetic fallacy. J.C.’s happiness is rendered in sunshine, while Jack the Ripper is pictured in gloom.

### **CLIP**

These grounds feature nothing as pointedly artificial as the play’s metal sun, but they are hardly ‘naturalistic’ as narrativised on screen.

### **SLIDE 6**

The first clip presents a symmetrical, theatrical garden, with an arboreal backdrop, a hedge dado, and coulisses in the form of topiary. The exedra seat is typical of the garden theatres that were popular in the seventeenth century. The camera’s vantage point is raised as if seated in an amphitheatre.

These formal grounds are woven into the narrative. They constitute the site where J.C. is threatened by what he calls ‘paranoid plots’. However, they draw on the characteristics of the location. J.C. sutures the landscape into a fantasy of courtly and free love. His fantasies are in dialogue with the landscape’s design. J.C. and the ‘Lady of the Camelias’ court each other, behaving as if they are birds. In doing so, they mimic the bird-shaped topiary.

### **SLIDE 7**

J.C. alludes to Judas in the middle of a symmetrical hedge pattern. The shot suggests that J.C. is subjugated to the designs of the aristocracy with the same stringency as the formal garden is cultivated. The film’s association of the formal garden with imprisonment is reinforced by its scenes set in a lunatic asylum, where the inmates stroll through the formal grounds in which they have been incarcerated.

### **SLIDE 8**

The film’s representation of a lunatic asylum as a country house also implies that all country houses are lunatic asylums.

This subversiveness extends to the picturesque landscape. The revelation of Jack’s insanity in the second clip conveys the failure of his courtly dreams, equating that failure with landed power as represented by a picturesque landscape.

While design in the formal garden ultimately figures the ruthless circumscription of J.C.'s fantasies of courtly love, the picturesque's concealment empowers Jack and poses a threat to his family.

#### **SLIDE 9**

The second clip's landscape is naturalistic in that it largely represents 'nature'. However, farce is introduced into the space, thus undermining its naturalism.

#### **SLIDE 10**

The distinctive aesthetic feature of the picturesque is usually defined as its pleasing partial concealments. This characteristic is subverted here: A poacher, hidden by the trees is shot and forced to reveal himself. Jack's cousin is comically entwined in brambles. Jack uses the stereotype of the aristocrat hunting to conceal his madness from the others.

#### **SLIDE 11**

After Jack's family have left, his madness is revealed. There is a cut across the 180° line to an unexpectedly vertiginous high angle shot. The camera gradually zooms out, equating his maniacal monologue with the surrounding picturesque space. His lurching posture is paralleled by the tree. This oddly tilting, hollow tree reflects the decline of Jack into the gothic, like the autumnal leaves on the ground. While J.C.'s bird impression in the first clip mimics the topiary of the formal garden, here his bird-like flapping anticipates the following shot, which entirely undoes any of the picturesque naturalism. We see a clichéd shot of birds in a gothic silhouette, inexplicably abandoning a bare tree. The cut from a tree with falling leaves to a bare tree seems to accelerate autumn unnaturally. The historical relationship between the picturesque and the gothic is exaggerated.

#### **SLIDE 12 - BLANK**

While the formal garden frames and contains J.C.'s madness, cultivating his fantasies so that they can be exploited by his family, here Jack's madness is hidden. The film parodies both the holistic, open layout of the formal garden and the introversion of picturesque associationism. Neither scene is ultimately naturalistic. They both figure a correspondence between garden design and the protagonist's madness. His arc comically straddles the divide between the courtly allegories of the formal garden and the pleasing concealments of the picturesque.

A typological opposition of formal garden versus picturesque thus defines the film's innovative approach to landscape in narration. Its landscapes become components in a referential patchwork of surfaces. The grounds in the clips are represented by sections of Cliveden's estate. The first clip shows the Long Garden in Cliveden: the second clip was shot in Cliveden's Russian Valley. Neither of these gardens was strictly 'original' when first landscaped. Neither dates from the eras it references. They are both pastiches. The Long Garden combines topiary, box hedges, exedra and statuary which refers to the *Commedia dell'arte*. There is a wide range of allusions to garden styles, from Classical designs to Renaissance and Restoration masques, variously theatrical and all formal. This breadth is characteristic of Cliveden as a whole. The layout of its Russian Valley shown in the second clip is diametrically opposed in style to that of the Long Garden seen in the first. 'Improved' in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, with serpentine wooded banks, the Russian Valley encompasses the picturesque tradition, which had been widely popularised by the mid-1850s.

The locations were also chosen with meticulous regard to specific associations. The sense of aristocratic lineage is bolstered by the use of Cliveden, as the original estate was built by George Villiers, from whom James Villiers who plays the cousin caught in the brambles is directly descended. At the same time, Cliveden contributes to the film's aura of topicality. John Profumo's brief affair with Christine Keeler in 1961 began in Cliveden's grounds. The film's themes of seduction and unwitting self-destruction become all the more politically resonant when placed in the context of Cliveden. Like Keeler, Grace is an objectified woman: a lower class parvenu, who has been permitted access to the estate for her sexual charms. J.C.'s fear of what he calls Kremlin plots acquires a broader significance when we see Cliveden.

Following Losey's example, Medak's focus is therefore partly local. However, the role of *The Ruling Class*'s landscape in structuring plot is based on general typology. It represents the country estate as a place where aristocratic eccentrics play out their fantasies, with disastrous social consequences. In doing so, it juxtaposes two historical archetypes of garden design. The gardens, like the film's other cultural references, are pastiches detached from their provenance. It is apt that a film which attacks the aristocracy denies the aesthetic pedigree of the estates' landscapes. *The Ruling Class*'s dialectical atavism differentiates it from previous landscape films. By introducing a

structuralist diagnosis of the country estate, it predates the structural avant-garde landscape films which would appear later in the decade. Its approach distinguishes it as a turning point in landscape cinema, coeval with, and comparable to, that represented by *The Go-Between*, yet markedly distinct from it.