

From Ham House to the Pineapples of Groombridge Place: Locating *The Draughtsman's Contract*

BLANK SLIDE

No other film deals as comprehensively with the history of landscape gardens as Peter Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract*, released in 1982. It features all the key figures from garden history: landowners, a draughtsman, a landscape designer and gardeners.

For those of you who don't know it, the film is set in 1694 on a country estate called Compton Anstey. It was shot almost entirely at Groombridge Place, a real country estate in Kent. While the owner, Mr Herbert is on holiday, his wife commissions a draughtsman to make 12 drawings of the estate, in return for money and sex. It gradually appears that evidence of crimes is being planted in the gardens, including evidence of the murder of Mr Herbert, and evidence of his wife's adultery. Mr Neville, the draughtsman, has unwittingly been recording this evidence in his drawings. Mr Herbert's corpse turns up in the garden. Neville finds out that he has been used by Mrs Herbert and her daughter to make them both pregnant. He is then killed by various acquaintances of the Herberts. During the film, we see a large number of landscape shots as well as Neville's drawings of the gardens.

The film deploys both period accuracy and well-chosen anachronisms. Given the density of Greenaway's engagement with garden history, an analysis of the film's aesthetics needs to draw on the discipline of garden historiography. This paper will consider the way the film's gardens were constructed from a combination of Groombridge Place as it was in 1694, and production design.

SLIDE

The Draughtsman's Contract points to a key moment in English garden history – the transition in the eighteenth century from formal gardens to the picturesque. However, like many other country house films, it does so not by giving an account of the incredibly complicated, long history of this process, but instead by abstracting the archetypal features of these styles and contrasting them. The archetypal formal garden typically consisted of geometric patterns.

Many landscape gardeners in the late 18th Century preferred a mode which seemed more natural: the picturesque, with its rugged shapes, winding rivers and roads rather than straight lines and – crucially – partial concealments provided by unclipped trees.

SLIDE

Neville often picks sites that revolve around formal elements for his drawings. As you see here, one site is a kind of Augustan garden, with obelisks and classical statuary. However – the picturesque lurks in every shot. In this case, behind the formal garden is a clump of trees which partially conceals the sides of the house.

SLIDE

When it was built in the 1670s Groombridge Place had formal gardens. In 1982, all that remained of the original layout was the Apostle Walk – a path with 12 shaped yew trees on either side. Most of the estate's other trees – such as those behind the Apostle Walk – had

been allowed to grow into picturesqueness. Greenaway and his production designer Bob Ringwood accentuated the contrast by adding formal Augustan elements such as obelisks and classical statues. It is worth considering why they chose this mixture of styles, rather than an estate with only formal elements. In general, the film offers an anti-realism that contrasts with the kind of period film that strives only for historical accuracy. There is more to it than that, however.

SLIDE

The picturesque's lack of obvious order threatens Neville. He refers to Mrs Herbert's schemes as having a 'long and diverse path'. When he tries to draw, he is constantly interrupted by picturesque messiness, such as the intrusion of sheep. The relationship between different landscape forms and different regimes is made apparent at the end of the film, when Mrs Herbert says she intends to 'soften the geometry' of her dead husband's estate. In fact, it seems that her husband's taste for geometry has already been removed, since we only see picturesque parkland in this scene. She suggests that her decision has been influenced by Neville's drawings.

SLIDE

Indeed, not long before her husband's corpse is discovered, Neville draws a scene which is entirely picturesque. His desire for regularity – his use of a viewfinder grid to frame a view and divide it into squares – is already being undone by the alluring irregularity of the picturesque.

In fact, both regularity and picturesqueness point towards Neville's blinkered view of things. The devious aristocrats are using the partial concealments of the picturesque to hide their crimes, but the formal garden also hints at the fact that Neville might be missing something.

SLIDE

In Neville's drawing of the formal garden, the obelisks are arranged to create a perspectival line that points to the concealing picturesqueness behind the garden.

My arrow here points to a herm. The herm was a type of statue used to mark boundaries in gardens. Here, the boundary it marks is not only the edge of the garden, but the edge of the picture. Neville's instructions to the family state at what times he will be at each site. While he is at that site, they can continue their conspiracies elsewhere, without Neville seeing them. In this case, then, the herm also marks the boundary of Neville's knowledge.

SLIDE

For his original twelve drawings, he rejects the south side of the house, so he does not see Herbert's corpse being dumped in the moat there. When Neville returns in the autumn he chooses this site for what becomes his unlucky thirteenth drawing. Like Herbert, he is killed and his corpse becomes another garden feature.

Neville attempts to regulate the estate by containing it in his viewfinder and pictures. But the picturesqueness of the estate constantly exceeds this control and eventually, it Neville's body which is contained by the landscape. With typical humour, Greenaway points to the danger of landscape aesthetics – that is, their ideological basis.

BLANK SLIDE

The ideological basis of the picturesque was its ability to conceal and naturalise power relations: the country estate was given a natural appearance. The thick trees and bushes of this naturalistic style hid property from prying eyes and protected the landowners from unattractive sights outside the estate.

The film's editing appropriately emphasises gaps in the knowledge that we have of landscapes. I'm going to show a clip now. While you watch it, focus on the way editing is used to construct space.

CLIP

It's actually very difficult to construct a mental map of the location from watching the film, because the elliptical editing, the use of static shots and the picturesque concealments all work to leave gaps in our knowledge.

SLIDE

If you visit Groombridge Place, you can work out that the journey shown in the clip follows the geography of the location, from the west side of the house to the hilltop prospect in the north. The red dots here mark where the shots we see were filmed.

SLIDE

The editing suggests otherwise, however. If the film had followed mainstream continuity editing conventions, shot B would seem to show Neville walking in a south westerly direction from the west side of the house shown in shot A. Between shot B and C, it would seem that he has turned 180 degrees, as he is walking in opposite directions in the two shots. It would also seem that he turns right between shots C and D.

SLIDE

If you match the shots with a map of the location, you find all this is nonsense. The scene consists of discontinuity editing. Neville walks north in shot B, not south-west. He turns 90 degrees between B and C, not 180 degrees. He turns left, not right, between C and D.

SLIDE

When he gets to the hilltop prospect, he starts to undress, as if imitating the undressed landscape. Greenaway has added an obelisk to keep the formal style in view, but the picturesqueness here embodies the occlusion that has taken place. The thick trees obscure the space between the obelisk and the house.

SLIDE

Using a wider range of shots or a moving camera, Greenaway could have revealed that three sites that we see at other points in the film are situated in the location between the house and the obelisk. Instead, he creates an elliptical sequence and it becomes almost impossible for

the viewer to work out where these sites are situated. This is in direct contrast with country house films like *The Go-Between* where viewers can easily construct a mental map of the location from what is shown onscreen.

So Greenaway makes the experience of watching the film very different from visiting Groombridge Place, despite mapping the fictional estate precisely on the location. He does so to point to the way in which both Neville's static views and the picturesque landscape conceal as much as they reveal.

However, he also draws heavily on the location's connotations. In his original proposal to the British Film Institute, asking for funds to produce the film, he said that the location - which he had not selected at that point - would shape the narrative. And indeed it did.

SLIDE

By choosing Groombridge Place, Greenaway points to parallels between the film and Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes novel, *The Valley of Fear*. The first half of *The Valley of Fear* is set in a country house, which Doyle famously modelled on Groombridge Place. In both the novel and the film, the *paterfamilias* goes missing. In the film, the corpse gets dumped in the moat and his clothes are littered about the estate. In *The Valley of Fear*, a corpse's clothes are hidden in the moat. The foolish Watson also thinks he sees criminal activity behind the concealing hedges.

SLIDE

The turning point in *The Draughtsman's Contract* occurs when conspiracy becomes overt during a scene set between the yew trees. Until this point, Neville has exercised some control over the landscapes through his instructions. Now, however, he stupidly watches as Mrs Talmann plots his guilt by putting incriminating evidence among the yews. In the first draft of the script, this scene takes place inside a corridor in the house. Instead, Greenaway made use of the garden's resonances. The fact that this part of Groombridge Place is called the Apostle Walk, suggests that the game being played has religion at its centre. In doing so, it invokes an earlier scene

SLIDE

in which Neville, a catholic, argues with Talmann, a protestant about the gardens of Eden and Gethsemane. The argument about religion takes place against one of the film's many blank obelisks. Most 18th Century English gardens only had one or two obelisks, which occupied an important place in the garden. Such obelisks usually had an inscription or a frieze to indicate what important idea or historic event they represented. In contrast, the multiple obelisks in the film challenge this kind of monolithic emblem, and their blankness suggests that it is not yet set in stone who will control the power of the landscape.

SLIDE

Before settling on Groombridge Place, Greenaway considered both Ham House and Chiswick House as potential locations. Residual influences from his research on these sites can be found in the film's landscapes.

When Greenaway was preparing his script, the Ham House guidebook had this painting on its cover. It seems likely that he drew on this image. Apart from the costumes, which are more colourful than the film's – the figures in the painting seem very much like those in the film, down to the dog that Sarah Talmann takes for walks. The line of orange trees in Versailles cases in this shot from the film, echoes the line of orange trees and statues in the painting. However, in a typical act of displacement, Greenaway does away with 17th century symmetry and contrasts the serialism of the trees on the left with the monolithic obelisk on the right. Orange trees suggest William of Orange, who Talmann supports. Versailles cases suggest the famous gardens at Versailles. The obelisk suggests Augustan gardens: Greenaway brings these elements into powerful opposition.

SLIDE

He also reproduces a conversation piece set in Chiswick, reversing the placement of figures in foreground and background as if producing a negative of the Chiswick picture. Unlike the obelisk in Chiswick, the film's obelisk is blank – making it hard to work out what the topic of conversation is.

SLIDE

Such displacements are typical of allusions to oil paintings in the film. In this shot, the film alludes to a painting of a gardener presenting the status symbol of a pineapple to Charles II. The shot in the film again reverses the composition as if to make a negative of the painting. There is no king in view in the shot and the estate's gardener has assumed the posture of Charles II. The apparatus for drawing pictures – the viewfinder – which itself is an echo of Greenaway's camera, is now inside the image.

SLIDE

And the pineapple – the crucial prop in the painting, is no longer singularly important. It is multiplied like the obelisks – and reduced to a piece of background décor, courtesy of the stone pineapples on Groombridge Place's gate. Power and its symbolism have been displaced.

SLIDE

We can think, then, of the construction of the film's gardens in the form of layers. A kind of archaeological approach to the film reveals a setting built up from Greenaway's understanding of landscape forms and ideology; his inspirational visits to Ham House and Chiswick; his sense of Groombridge Place's history, including its association with *The Valley of Fear*; his sense of the disparity between how the gardens looked in the 1670s and how they looked in 1982; and his insertion of obelisks and statues into the landscape. Together, these layers produce a landscape of period references, anachronisms, oclusions and displacements.

What kind of filmic garden is this and how might we contextualise it? Well, one way is to think about how it relates to the Marxist landscape history that began to go public in the 1970s and early 1980s.

SLIDE

Consider the film's allusion to Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews*. Again, there is a displacement. Neville is not standing on the left, like Mr Andrews. Instead he is sitting to the right of Sarah. The use of the words 'sinister' and 'dexterity' in the conversation can be interpreted as a pun on the reversal of the positions of Mr and Mrs Andrews, since sinister in Latin means left and dexter means right. The displacement means that Neville is not in the dominant position assumed by Mr Andrews in the painting. Sarah says that she feels her significance is diminished further away from the house, but she is now on the left.

SLIDE

The shot lacks the Marxist directness of John Berger and Mike Dibb's version of *Mr and Mrs Andrews* in the 1972 BBC arts documentary series *Ways of Seeing*, which features a sign saying 'trespassers keep out' nailed to the Andrews' tree. However, Greenaway's pun on the positioning of the man in relation to the woman places an emphasis on gendered power relations, which Berger and Dibb do not touch on in their treatment of the painting. Like Berger and Dibb's sign, though, Greenaway's dialogue foregrounds the significance of property.

In November 1982, soon after Greenaway's film was released, the Tate Gallery held an exhibition on *Richard Wilson*. This was the first British exhibition to focus on how landscape paintings can be understood through their socioeconomic contexts. Unlike the exhibition, *The Draughtsman's Contract* does not contextualise the landscape styles it refers to with detailed information about the relevant socioeconomic history. However, through its displacements and its emphasis on occlusion, it points to the way power has been enacted through landscape aesthetics, and how power has been made to seem transparent by those landscape aesthetics.