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Review of The Draughtsman's Contract

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The Draughtsman's Contract
(Zeitgeist Films, 2.12.2008)

The Draughtsman's Contract is Peter Greenaway's best film, the only one by this idiosyncratic filmmaker to warrant repeated viewings. After years of editing BBC documentaries and making experimental shorts, Greenaway made his first feature, the mock documentary *The Falls*, in 1980. *The Draughtsman's Contract*, released in 1982, is his first true narrative feature and remains the most accessible of his films.

On an English estate in 1694, Neville (Anthony Higgins) is hired to execute 12 drawings of the buildings and grounds of Herbert (Dave Hill). Neville accepts the assignment reluctantly, suggesting to Mrs. Herbert (Janet Suzman) that he will do it, while her husband is away, only if she agrees to have sex with him each day. Neville offers this proviso as a joke only to be surprised when she agrees to his terms. Mrs. Herbert, however, is hardly a randy housewife, finding Neville's touch repellent. More is afoot than our naïve artist realizes.

The Draughtsman's Contract alternates between Neville's work on the drawings and his interactions with the haughty aristocrats. These include the jealous Noyes (Neil Cunningham), the estate manager and a former suitor of Mrs. Herbert, Talman (Hugh Fraser), the Herberts' insufferably arrogant German son-in-law, and Mrs. Talman (Anne-Louise Lambert), who eventually entwines Neville in her manipulative clutches.

In his commentary Greenaway strives not to spell out his film's themes, but *The Draughtsman's Contract* is clearly about the role of the artist in society. While Neville is confident about his superiority to his boorish patrons, he is far from being as in control as he thinks. To this smug society (and by extension any fickle society upon which artists must rely for their livelihood), Neville is merely a servant.

Greenaway comments on the British class systems in which servants are little but faceless objects. Neville's own servant (Alastair Cummings) appears in several scenes, yet the director never clearly shows his face. A Herbert servant (Michael Feast) is made to pose as a nude statue about the estate yet finds means to signal his contempt for his masters.

Far from a dry intellectual exercise (with a little sex), *The Draughtsman's Contract* enthralls on several levels. As Greenaway points out, it has the trappings of an Agatha Christie country house mystery (there are two murders), with clues and red herrings scattered about in Neville's drawings.

Contributing greatly to the aesthetic fun is Michael Nyman's score, the first of many he has composed for Greenaway. Using saxophones, clarinet, trombone, violin, guitar, bass, euphonium, piano, and harpsichord, the latter two played by

the composer, Nyman blends the baroque sounds of Henry Purcell, the subject on his uncompleted dissertation, with the repetitive minimalism associated with Philip Glass. Though I once saw the score described, in a mail-order LP catalog (we're talking the olden days, kids) as guaranteed to drive you up the wall, I have found Nyman's driving rhythms hypnotic and endlessly fascinating. Although Greenaway does not deign to mention the music until 42 minutes into his commentary, he acknowledges its impact as it comments ironically on the proceedings, being serious while what's on the screen is frivolous and vice versa.

Greenaway's commentary gets off to a slow start as he dwells on the historical and social background, but when he concentrates on the film itself, he can be fascinating. With an arresting, sonorous voice (Philippe de Montebello meets Max von Sydow), Greenaway elaborates upon the significance of the black, white, and green color scheme and explains his visual style. He feels his previous films were overly edited, so he employs as little editing as possible here, using a static camera in most scenes, with slow tracking up and down the table during the dining scenes, as in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*. Greenaway, originally a painter, reveals that the hands seen when Neville is drawing are his own.

Greenaway says he cast Higgins because of his body language, implying that the actor has the cockiness essential for Neville. Although Curtis Clark's cinematography is striking, Greenaway offers a single reference to "my cameraman." The restoration extra demonstrates the improvements over previous incarnations, including the Fox Lorber 1999 DVD, and while the images are darker, they lack the crispness I swear I remember from the theatrical version. There are brief essays by Greenaway and Clark, with the DP explaining how the film was shot in Super 16mm and later enlarged to 35mm. Clark also discusses how he tried to light the daylight scenes in the style of Rembrandt and Vermeer, the night scenes in the manner of Caravaggio and de la Tour.

There are four deleted scenes, galleries of the 12 drawings and production photos, a 10-minute introduction by Greenaway, a bland excerpt from a Nyman interview, talks with Greenaway, Higgins, and Suzman on the set, and footage of Greenaway trying to ensure continuity in the pomegranate scene. Though Suzman claims she was attracted to the film because of Greenaway, she grows impatient at his painstaking approach, uttering "Hate these first-timers."

My only quibble with the excellent package is Greenaway's failure to acknowledge any antecedents for *The Draughtsman's Contract*. The influences of *Last Year at Marienbad*, *Blow-Up*, and *Barry Lyndon* are too obvious to ignore.
—Michael Adams