

«I'll kill him and I'll eat him!»
Peter Greenaway
and the cinematic *Trauerspiel*

Mattia Petricola

The Cook, the Thief, his Wife, her Lover, and the tragic

The career of British director Peter Greenaway, now more than four decades long, has often been animated by a profound interest in what one may call the aesthetics of death. This is particularly true for his '80s and '90s films, which explore a wide array of strategies for the staging and ritualization of death. In *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985), twin zoologists Oswald and Oliver Deuce, obsessed by the study of putrefaction, commit suicide and film their own putrefaction on a specially made stage. The protagonist of *The Belly of an Architect* (1987), Stourley Kracklite, flings himself off a window of the *Vittoriano* in Rome while his wife is about to give birth to their first child. In *Drowning by Numbers* (1988), Smut, a child with a passion for inventing bizarre games, hangs himself after putting on a spectacular firework display. In 1989, Greenaway directs what is probably his best-known work: *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and Her Lover*. Here, for the first time, Greenaway's investigation of the aesthetics of death ventures into the territories of the tragic.

A history of love, infidelity, and revenge, with the four characters of the title as protagonists, the film is a triumph of the melodramatic imagination. Its main setting is the restaurant *Le Hollandais*, where the head chef Richard Boarst (the Cook) serves exquisitely elaborate French *haute cuisine*. A mobster, Albert Spica (the Thief), owns the

restaurant and dines there every evening, accompanied by a gang of henchmen and his wife Georgina.

One night, Georgina meets Michael (the Lover), a bookseller and habitué of the restaurant, and the two start a love affair. Day after day, helped by the complicity of the Cook, Georgina and Michael secretly meet in the restaurant's bathroom and pantries. When the Thief discovers their liaison, the two escape from the restaurant and take refuge in a book depository, where the Lover works as a cataloguer of French history books. But the Thief finds out the lovers' hideout and, while Georgina is away from the book depository, kills Michael by force-feeding him pages from his books. Georgina then takes revenge on her husband by asking Richard, the Cook, to cook her lover and serve him to Albert. After this cannibalistic dinner, Georgina shoots and kills the Thief.

In his introduction to *The Cook's* published screenplay, Greenaway cites as his primary source of inspiration for the film John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1633), a Jacobean revenge drama centred on the taboo issue of incest. At the same time, the film's final scene cannot but evoke the cannibal banquet served in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, which, in turn, looks back to Seneca's *Thyestes* and the tale of Procne and Philomela in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Despite this impressive cultural genealogy, a reading of *The Cook* as an allegory of the Thatcher government has often overshadowed the fundamental relevance of the tragic mode to the film's semiotics¹. Greenaway himself endorsed this reading in a number of interviews²,

¹ Walsh 1993 is one of the earliest examples of this position. For exceptions, see Lawrence 1997: 165-188, Siegel 2001, Stetco 2008, Aebischer 2013: 66-76, and Bennett 2013: 100-105.

² According to Greenaway, the film is «a passionate and angry dissertation [...] on the rich, vulgarian, Philistine, anti-intellectual stance of the present cultural situation in Great Britain, supported by that wretched woman [Thatcher] who is raping the country, destroying the welfare state, the health system, mucking up the educational system, and creating havoc everywhere» Siegel 2000: 81.

thus favoring its proliferation and creating a sort of vicious circle in which the critical interpretations of the film risk doing little more than confirming the director's view of the film itself.

In this political-allegorical view, the Thief embodies the Thatcher government, and *haute cuisine* represents «a displacement for a Thatcher-era bourgeois sensibility or a metaphor for class ascension and “tastes of luxury”» (Brinkema 2014: 154). This view also sees cannibalism as the ultimate development of the consumerist society that Thatcher favoured, which eventually cannot but devour itself (Bartolovich 1998).

This paper proposes to rethink the fundamental relationship that Greenaway's film entertains with the narrative and aesthetic forms of the tragic. I will try to offer a different, perhaps richer and less obvious perspective than the one deriving from the cultural genealogy illustrated above. More specifically, I will give a 'tragic' interpretation of *The Cook* by drawing on Walter Benjamin's reflections on the *Trauerspiel* (mourning-play) elaborated in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*].

After discussing two essential concepts of Benjamin's philosophy of the *Trauerspiel* as described by Benjamin, I will argue that *The Cook* mirrors the *Trauerspiel's* opposition between Tyrant and Martyr in the characters of the Thief and the Lover. I will then analyse the Christian motifs thematised by the film in the light of Benjamin's description of the relationship between immanence and transcendence in Baroque culture. In particular, I will focus on the Thief/tyrant and interpret him as the Antichrist who subverts the ritual of the Eucharist. The conflict between this threefold character and the Lover will be read as an opposition between two systems for the construction of knowledge and experience. With the help of Benjamin's reflection, I will trace this conflict back to the baroque opposition between books and food. I will finally show how the polarity 'books vs. food' interacts with the Christian imagination in the film's most gruesome scenes, which I will interpret as rites for the making and unmaking of social bonds through the dysphoric use of food.

Watching Greenaway through Benjamin

Several convergences between the subject of Benjamin's essay and Greenaway's film seem to make a reading of the latter through the former not only possible but potentially productive.

The Origin of German Tragic Drama deals with theatre rather than cinema, and *The Cook* asks its viewers to experience the film precisely as a play. It does so by emphatically thematising its own theatricality: the presence of scaffolds and curtains, for example, shatters the naturalistic illusion of cinema from the very beginning of the film.

From a historical perspective, the *Trauerspiel* is quintessentially linked to baroque culture, and *The Cook* engages in a superb dialogue, both thematic and visual, with this same culture. We almost instinctively associate the film's sumptuousness, violence, and excesses to baroque aesthetics, and a monumental reproduction of Frans Hals' *Banquet of the Officers of the St George Militia Company in 1616* occupies the back wall of the restaurant's dining room³. Furthermore, the art direction ceaselessly evokes the golden age of Dutch painting by filling almost every scene with food arranged in the form of still lives.

However, what allows us to read *The Cook* as a cinematic *Trauerspiel*, so as to apply Benjamin's reflections to the film, are two much more specific convergences. In order to pinpoint them, I will first give a short account of the first macro-section of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. It centres around two inextricably intertwined notions that Benjamin regards as the philosophical foundations of the *Trauerspiel* as a dramatic form opposed to tragedy: the figure of the tyrant-martyr and the spiritual tension between the loss of eschatology and the yearning for transcendence. I will then show how *The Cook* mirrors these two notions and their fundamental interdependence.

Even if the title of Benjamin's essay makes explicit reference to German drama, it is important to note that Benjamin himself understands the *Trauerspiel* as an aesthetic form encompassing authors

³ An analysis of the use of Dutch painting and still lives in *The Cook* can be found in Pascoe 1997: 172-178.

from Shakespeare and the Elizabethan playwrights to Gryphius and Calderòn. The *Trauerspiel* «presents itself as a ‘play for melancholics’ (*Spiel für Traurige*), in its meaning of *Trauer* (‘mourning, grief, sorrow’) and *Spiel* (‘game or play’)» (Schiavoni 1999: xxix, the translation is mine). It is «a sort of ‘mystery’ in which the disintegration of the post-ancient man is staged» (*ibid.*).

Benjamin defines the *Trauerspiel* as opposed to tragedy. He describes the latter as a dramatic form whose function was to mediate the relationships of a culture with the Olympian world. As such, Benjamin argues, tragedy cannot exist after the end of ancient Greek culture:

Tragödie and Trauerspiel are radically distinct, in metaphysical foundation and executive genre. Tragedy is grounded in myth. It acts out a rite of heroic sacrifice. In its fulfilment of this sacrificial-transcendent design, tragedy endows the hero with the realization that he is ethically in advance of the gods, that his sufferance of good and evil [...] has projected him into a category beyond the comprehension of the essentially ‘innocent’ though materially omnipotent deities. [...] The Trauerspiel, on the contrary, is not rooted in myth but in history. [...] The Trauerspiel is counter-transcendental; it celebrates the immanence of existence even where this existence is passed in torment. (Steiner 1998: 16)

There is then a causal link between the excesses and violence that the *Trauerspiel* features and a human condition that has lost its eschatology and has precipitated into immanence:

The religious man of the baroque era clings so tightly to the world because of the feeling that he is being driven along to a cataract with it. The baroque knows no eschatology; and for that very reason it possesses no mechanism by which all earthly things are gathered in together and exalted before being consigned to their end. The hereafter is emptied of everything which contains the slightest breath of this world, and from it the baroque extracts a profusion of things which customarily escaped the grasp of

artistic formulation and, at its high point, brings them violently into the light of day, in order to clear an ultimate heaven, enabling it, as a vacuum, one day to destroy the world with catastrophic violence. (Benjamin 1998: 66)

Benjamin's notion of the baroque as a post-eschatological culture seems to shift to a significantly less recent time in European history the transition to a post-sacred era that Peter Brook will pinpoint as the cause of the emergence of melodrama in the late XVIII century:

The origins of melodrama can be accurately located within the context of the French Revolution and its aftermath. [...] Melodrama does not simply represent a "fall" from tragedy, but a response to the loss of the tragic vision. It comes into being in a world where the traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question, yet where the promulgation of truth and ethics, their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political concern. [...] We may legitimately claim that melodrama becomes the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era. (Brooks 1995: 14-15)

When the possibility of accessing transcendence vanishes, the tragic hero of the classical world loses his cultural role. In its place, a new tragic figure arises: the sovereign, «the representative of history» who «holds the course of history in his hands like a sceptre» (Benjamin 1998: 65):

[In the *Trauerspiel*] [i]t is not the tragic hero who occupies the centre of the stage, but the Janus-faced composite of tyrant and martyr, of the Sovereign who incarnates the mystery of absolute will and of his victim (so often himself).

[...] Behind this fusion stands the *exemplum* of Christ's kingship and crucifixion. Baroque drama is inherently emblematic-allegoric, as a Greek tragedy never is, precisely because it postulates the dual presence, the twofold organizing pivot of

Christ's nature — part god, part man, and overwhelmingly of this world. (Steiner 1998: 17)

Even if «[i]n the *Trauerspiel* monarch and martyr do not shake off their immanence» (Benjamin 1998: 67) and «the perfect martyr is no more released from the sphere of immanence than is the ideal image of the monarch» (*ibid.*: 73), the interaction between the ineluctability of immanence and the yearning for transcendence posited by Benjamin as the cultural core of the baroque may result in the pagan deification of the monarch, exemplified by the famous image of the Sun King.

In the light of this synthetic account of Benjamin's theory of the *Trauerspiel*, I would argue that Greenaway's film mirrors the logic 'tyrant vs. martyr' highlighted by Benjamin. Albert Spica, the Thief, rules over *Le Hollandais* as an absolute sovereign; his tyranny only ends when he is forced to eat the body of Michael, the Lover, whom he had tortured and killed. I would thus propose to read *The Cook* as the story of the dethronement of a tyrant, the Thief, by means of the sacrificial martyrism of the Lover.

The parallel between the film's characters and the characters described by Benjamin could be further extended to include another figure, the intriguer, whom Benjamin defines in relation to the spatial structure of the *Trauerspiel*:

In contrast to the spasmodic chronological progression of tragedy, the *Trauerspiel* takes place in a spatial continuum, which one might describe as choreographic. The organizer of its plot, the precursor of the choreographer, is the intriguer. He stands as a third type alongside the despot and the martyr. (Benjamin 1998: 95)

From this perspective, the intriguer may find a double, complementary embodiment in both the Cook, who hides the lovers and cooks Michael's body, and Georgina, who plots revenge on the Thief. One may also be seduced by the possibility of interpreting the «spatial continuum» of the *Trauerspiel* as analogous to the space of *Le*

Hollandais, whose four rooms — the car park, the kitchen, the dining room, and the bathroom — are «coextensive in a strong horizontal linearity» (Brinkema 2014: 158).

I will further motivate and analyse the analogies Thief-tyrant and Lover-martyr in the next section. First, however, I will provide a more complex framework for their study by describing another essential convergence between the philosophy of the *Trauerspiel* and the film's semiotics, a convergence that concerns the relation between immanence and transcendence.

Like the world of the religious man of the baroque, the world of *The Cook* appears to have irreparably fallen into immanence. The film explores the precariousness of the natural world through strategies that are more complex and articulated than those adopted, for example, in *A Zed and Two Noughts*. In particular, *The Cook* reshapes the obsessive interest for putrefaction which animates *A Zed* in a twofold way. On the one side, it is transformed into an interest in food as the edible form of the natural world; on the other side, it is transformed into an interest in cooking as an art form that transports the natural world to the realm of the aesthetic.

Nevertheless, exactly as it happens in the *Trauerspiel*, being trapped in the immanent does not imply renouncing the religious imagination. In fact, the transformation of the Lover's body into food cannot but evoke the Eucharistic rite — even though the ritual eating of a god, especially in the form of an animal, has obviously far more ancient anthropological origins.

This religious reading of *The Cook's* final scene is confirmed by the fact that the film explicitly refers to Christian themes through the character of Pup, the restaurant's kitchen lad. He presents a number of features that are culturally associated with purity: he is a child—the only one in the film; his skin and hair are perfectly white. More significantly, he sings Psalm 51 on many occasions in the form of Michael Nyman's *Miserere*, thus embodying a plea for purification and purgation constructed in indisputably religious terms: «Have mercy upon me/Blot out my transgressions/Purge me with hyssop/And I shall be clean/Wash me, wash me/And I shall be whiter than snow./Wash

me thoroughly from my iniquity/and cleanse me from my sin». The film's soundtrack alternates Pup's *Miserere* with Nyman's *Memorial*, which seems to connote the whole film as a mourning function.

The thematisation of Christian motifs adds a further element of complexity to the relationship between immanence and transcendence in the world of *Le Hollandais*. This world not only appears to have precipitated into immanence; it also seems to have made transcendence itself precipitate into immanence.

Now that I have highlighted the second fundamental convergence between Benjamin's reflections and Greenaway's film, I will try to show how the tragic dimension of the film resides right at the intersection of the opposition 'tyrant vs. martyr' and the immanent re-elaboration of transcendence that I have just described. More precisely, I will focus on the character of the Thief/tyrant and his subversion of the Eucharistic rite.

Unholy communions, part one: the tyrant

Albert Spica, the Thief, is the tyrant of *Le Hollandais*. But how does this tyranny take concrete shape in the film's narrative?

Albert's character lacks any subtlety or nuance: he is utterly monolithic in his obnoxiousness. He is «sadistic, bullying, nagging, crude, loud, callous, self-important, sanctimonious, anti-Semitic, racist, misogynist, homophobic, drunken, unlettered, and possessed of a poor French accent» (Walsh 1993: 272).

Many interpretations of the *The Cook* see the Thief's physical and verbal violence as a reaction to his sexual impotence and repressed homosexuality⁴. However, the analysis that follow will explore the pragmatics of the Thief's violence rather than its etiology. What is particularly relevant to my argument is the fact that Albert's tyranny can be defined as a tyranny of orality. The Thief constructs a semiotic system in which everything, to make sense, must pass through the

⁴ On this subject see, among others, Siegel 2001: 247 and Keesey 2006: 86.

mouth. More precisely, this tyranny takes two forms: the absolute power over the act of speaking and the absolute power over the act of eating.

Every time that Albert is on stage, he talks almost unceasingly: «Indeed, at times, the soundtrack is virtually a monologue of his [Albert's] ravings» (Keller 2006: 16). He hates to be interrupted or contradicted and arrogates the administration of the verbal exchanges during dinner for himself: he decides who speaks when⁵. Contrariwise, Georgina and her lover never talk to each other at the beginning of their affair. They will begin to do so only through the mediation of the Thief, who, unaware of his wife's infidelity, one evening invites the Lover to his table and introduces him to Georgina.

But more importantly, Albert presides over the act of eating: in a world whose boundaries correspond with the walls of a restaurant, the tyrant decides who eats what; that is, he decides the most important thing in the world. The very first scene in the film makes the effects of this form of tyranny gruesomely evident. In this scene, the Thief and his thugs punish Roy, a local businessman, for not paying protection money. They strip him bare, Albert shoves dog excrement into his mouth, smears it over his body, and finally urinates on him.

The relationships between the Thief and his subjects are thus articulated through food and eating. The members of Albert's inner circle eat French gourmet food every evening; those who oppose his tyranny are forced to eat what the culture excludes from the definition of food: excrements and bodily fluids.

We could interpret this act of humiliating force-feeding in the light of what Benjamin writes about the cultural genealogy of the mad tyrant. In an analysis of the figure of Herod, he identifies the character's religious origins as follows:

[T]he figure of Herod, as he was presented throughout the European theatre at this time, [...] is characteristic of the idea of

⁵ For an analysis of other aspects of the Thief's 'verbal tyranny' see Siegel 2001: 238.

the tyrant. It was his story which lent the depiction of the *hubris* of kings its most powerful features. Even before this period a terrifying mystery had been woven around this king. Before being seen as a mad autocrat and a symbol of disordered creation, he had appeared in an even crueller guise to early Christianity, as the Antichrist. (Benjamin 1998: 70)

If we draw on the parallel between the mad autocrat and the Antichrist, we can see the Thief as a tyrant who gives his enemies a sort of reversed holy communion, an anti-Eucharist that replaces flesh and blood with body wastes. Significantly, while urinating on Roy, Albert tells him: «Now I've given you a good dinner and you can have a nice drink». The tyrant literally becomes the Antichrist by reversing the very pragmatics of the Eucharist: he turns a rite of *elevation* and *communion*, meant to reinforce the relationships among the members of a social group, into a ritual for the *humiliation* and *expulsion* of an individual from the community⁶.

It is important to note that Georgina, the Wife-Intriguer, is completely subjected to the semiotic system created by the Thief: she constructs an object as good and meaningful only if she can eat it. After entering the book depository for the first time, she asks her lover: «What good are all these books to you? You can't eat them. How can they make you happy?». As a consequence, she also constructs sex in terms of food. If we draw on the parallel between the mad autocrat and the Antichrist, we can see the Thief as a tyrant who gives his enemies a sort of reversed holy communion, an anti-Eucharist that replaces flesh and blood with body wastes. Moreover, at the moment of leaving the book depository to visit Pup at the hospital, she asks her lover for a kiss by saying: «Leave me something to eat».

The study of the Thief's anti-Eucharistic rite has provided us with the first example of how the intersection of the Christian imagination

⁶ For a different interpretation of this and other episodes of «malign nutrition», see Armstrong 2004: 225. For a study of the uses of food in Greenaway's films, see Woods 1996: 92-98.

with the conflict 'tyrant vs. martyr' in *The Cook* mirrors the intersection described by Benjamin. The next section will contend that this conflict implies a more abstract contrast between two classes of objects embodying radically different sets of principles for the construction of meaning: food and books.

An antidote to decay: the martyr

The only character who seems able to counter the semiotic logic of food established by the Thief is Michael, the martyr and anti-tyrant. Michael owns a bookshop, always brings books with him to the restaurant, and *reads while eating*, thus modifying the functional character of the restaurant and the pragmatics depending on it. By performing at the same time two activities that the Thief considers incompatible, the Lover openly violates the Thief's order of rules and meanings, thus declaring his independence from it.

The art direction renders the Lover's violation of (or rather impermeability to) Albert's tyranny through the use of colour and clothes. The film world is divided into six spaces, each defined by a dominant colour: «the parking lot is arctic blue, the kitchen is jungle green, the dining hall is blood red, the toilet is heavenly white, the book depository is golden brown, and the hospital is egg-yolk yellow» (Armstrong 2004: 223). When passing from one restaurant space to another, both the Thief's and his wife's clothes change colour to match the dominant colour of the room. On the contrary, the Lover is immune to these chromatic changes: he always wears a brown suit and a white shirt, as to provide visual evidence of his immunity.

Even more importantly, by taking the act of reading into a restaurant and dining in the company of uneatable objects, the Lover becomes the herald of an alternative semiotic order, of a new system for the construction of experience and meaning that is not dependent on orality. Thus, by creating a contrast between the Thief/tyrant and the Lover/martyr, the film constructs an opposition between food and books as the cores of two opposite semiotic systems for making sense of the world.

Food belongs to the natural world, possesses a precarious existence haunted by decay, and, once consumed, is destroyed and then expelled. Its life culminates in a short moment of exquisite grace in a gourmet dish only to precipitate in the indistinctness of body wastes. This sense of precariousness generates a feeling of anguish that seems to emerge during the next-to-last dinner at *Le Hollandais*, after the death of the Lover. Having discussed the favourite foods of history's most famous tyrants, Albert is asked by one of the thugs what Michael's favourite food could have been. Irritated, he answers: «What do I care? It all comes out as shit in the end».

On the contrary, books are artificial objects that can exist for an incredibly long time, thus remaining firmly anchored to the world. Significantly, their use does not imply their destruction. The fact that the books are stored in a depository rather than sold in a bookshop emphasises their potential imperishability: for the most part, they are absolutely static objects. Their polar opposite is the food which is cooked and served in the restaurant, existing only in a continuous process of transformation, ingestion, and expulsion. Moreover, the books in the depository do not 'contain' fiction but history — more specifically, Michael is cataloguing French history. We can thus view the Lover's books as objects that do not only project their existence into the future; they also incorporate the past in the form of history. From this perspective, the Lover becomes the herald of a sort of 'complete' temporality representing the polar opposite of the temporality of organic decay.

In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin pinpoints an analogous opposition between nature and the book as a key feature of baroque culture:

The Renaissance explores the universe; the baroque explores libraries. Its meditations are devoted to books. [...] The 'Book of nature' and the 'Book of times' are objects of baroque meditation. In them it possesses something housed and roofed. [...] Not least the book served as a permanent monument in a natural scene rich in literature (Benjamin 1998: 141).

This new convergence between Benjamin and Greenaway seems to touch the very heart of the reflection on the baroque, proving how the world of *Le Hollandais* incorporates this culture not merely as a postmodern display of artistic luxury, but also as a site for the problematisation of deep cultural anxieties that are still active today. *The Cook* is a baroque film not simply in a visual and narrative sense, but in a much broader, cultural one.

But how can one escape from the system of meanings created by the Thief? The answer to this question will further investigate the film's semiotic construction of food by shifting the focus towards its dysphoric counterparts: decay and excrement.

A journey through indistinctness: the escape

In order to escape the tyrannical and unbearably precarious rule of the Thief and enter together in the Lover's new semiotic order, Georgina and Michael escape from the restaurant after the Thief discovers their affair. Naked, they travel from the restaurant to the book depository hidden in a van full of rotten meat, «their naked bodies the same putrid yellow as the decomposing carcasses around them» (Keeseey 2006: 88). Once they reach their destination, the van's driver, Eden, washes them clean using a water hose; the lovers then finally enter their new home.

This scene, probably one of the most shocking of Greenaway's cinema, bears a close structural resemblance with a scene taking place shortly after the anti-Eucharistic rite analysed above. After the Thief has entered the restaurant, we are shown Roy through a series of cross-cuts. Naked and humiliated, he crawls on all fours in the car park, surrounded by the same dogs whose excrements the Thief has forced him. For a few moments, before he finally manages to get up, his silhouette becomes almost indistinguishable from those of the dogs. He then slowly moves towards the restaurant's entrance, where the Cook and his assistants help him. One of them washes Roy clean using a water hose and the Cook pours him a glass of wine.

Both scenes stage a ritualised breaking of the social communion with the Thief in the first part, and the establishment of new social bonds in the second part. The film articulates this physical and symbolic journey into two phases: the first one involves sullyng and degradation; the second one requires cleansing and purification through water.

The function of the first phase resides in the passage through a moment of indistinctness. In the van, the bodies of Georgina and Michael become indistinguishable from the rotten meat; in the car park, Roy's body becomes indistinguishable from the bodies of the dogs, which are in turn associated with excrements (Roy has been force-fed dog excrement). By journeying through indistinctness, the three characters temporarily lose their individuality and precipitate into two structurally analogous conditions, both located at the end of the process that transforms the natural world into food: decay and excrement. In order to break their social bond with the Thief, these characters are forced to journey through the polar opposite of the exquisite grace and distinctness of a gourmet dish.

The cleansing shower through which the characters recover their individuality thematises once again a Christian motif, this time in the form of baptism. But whereas the Thief's anti-Eucharist rite and the journey through indistinctness have the function of breaking a social bond, this (un)holy baptism acts as a rite for the establishment of a new social community⁷. Georgina has abjured her role as Wife and can now form a unique bond with the Lover; Roy is delivered from the Thief's oppression, joins the community of the enemies of the Thief, and will participate in the final revenge scene.

The conflict between the tyrant and the martyr is about to reach its acme. I will now show how the polarity 'food vs. books' structures the final, most violent stages of this conflict and argue that the final scene represents a new anti-Eucharist rite.

⁷ Pascoe 1997: 181 and Elliott and Purdy 1997: 19 give a different interpretation of the lovers' escape in the light of the Christian imagination as a Fall from the Eden represented by the restaurant.

Unholy communions, part two: the revenge

Faced with an alien and incomprehensible adversary in the form of the Lover, the Thief cannot but reassert the only kind of power he is capable of exercising: the power over orality. His revenge on the Lover cannot but take the form of a feeding torture: he force-feeds Michael pages from his books until he suffocates.

However, the Thief cannot predict that the torture he inflicted on the Lover is not a punishment but a martyrdom, that will transform the Lover's body into the sacrificial instrument of Georgina's final revenge. She, in turn, for the reasons explored above, can conceive of a counter-revenge on the Thief only within the semiotic framework that the Thief himself constructed. Therefore, she plots to turn Albert's twofold power over the acts of speaking and eating against Albert himself.

After discovering Georgina's affair, the Thief goes frantically in search of the lovers, wreaking havoc in the restaurant's kitchen. Then, in a moment of furious anger, brandishing a fork in one hand and a knife in the other, he swears to kill and eat Michael: *«I'll kill him and I'll eat him!»*. Georgina turns Albert's hyperbolic rhetoric against him by literalising it:

In the act of eating Michael, Albert does not receive the Word of God; rather, he is made to eat his own words, which have become flesh so that Albert might see, for the first time, just what he is. Albert, the man of metaphors, is made to take himself literally. (Elliott-Purdy 1997: 63)

The film's final scene imbricates with extraordinary ability a funeral ceremony, a ritual meal of expulsion from the social group, and a carefully staged homicide. Michael's cooked and steamy body is covered with a white shroud; a solemn procession accompanies it from the kitchen to a table in the dining room set for just one person. Richard (the Cook) and Roy, both wearing dinner-jackets, open the procession. All the members of the restaurant's staff and Albert's

former thugs follow them. By menacing him with a gun, Georgina forces Albert to take a mouthful of Michael's flesh, transformed into meat. Albert immediately vomits it, and Georgina shoots him.

If we analyse the scene from the perspective of its literary and dramatic sources — Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Seneca's *Thyestes* and the tale of Procne and Philomela in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* — two fundamental differences appear in both the preparation of the cannibal meal and the way of consuming it. In Shakespeare and Seneca, for example, the human meat is baked into a pie. The *unaware* cannibals gladly feast on their sons' flesh, and the taboo nature of the banquet is revealed only in a second moment. On the contrary, the body of the Lover is perfectly intact and recognisable. Fully aware of the taboo act he is perpetrating, Albert feels revolted and only eats a small forkful of the meal.

We can understand the relevance of such differences by moving away from the classical construction of cannibalism on which the three sources rely in order to focus, once again, on Christian culture. I would suggest that the Lover's body is prepared and displayed so as to evoke an artistic practice devoted to the exploration of the relationships between permanence and decay: funereal sculpture. After having witnessed the subversion of the Eucharist, the viewer now confronts the sabotage of the pragmatics of Christian tomb sculpture in the form of the recumbent effigy or *gisant*.

While the function of the *gisant* should be to preserve the dead's physical appearance in an eternity made of stone, Michael's paradoxical *gisant* is made to be eaten and rot like every other food: his body is aesthetically sublimed for an instant before falling into decay. We can further investigate this parallel by taking into account the fact that Michael's body has been literally stuffed with books. The film's semiotics associate books with history and permanence through time. Therefore, Michael's *gisant* turns the Christian *gisant* inside out: in the latter, the perishable (the flesh) is hidden and protected by the imperishable (the stone); in the former, the flesh (Michael's body) hides and incorporates the imperishable (the history books). By subverting

the *gisant*, Michael transforms into a paradoxical monument to the precariousness of the natural world.

But the *gisant* is not the most crucial thematisation of Christian culture that is at work in this scene: Georgina's revenge mirrors the anti-Eucharistic rite of the first scene while incredibly emphasising its tragic nature. According to several interpretations of this scene⁸, by eating the Lover's body, the Thief would be able to absorb the Lover's qualities. I would contend, on the contrary, that expulsion rather than absorption forms the basis of this rite: it represents the immanent subversion of the Christian communion, a renewed and ultimate anti-Eucharist. The Lover acts as an Anti-Antichrist who offers his body as food in order to expel the Thief/Antichrist from the social body. The cinematography makes the sense of this expulsion even clearer. In the last scene, Georgina and all the characters who took part in the funeral procession are standing on one side of the table; Albert lies dead and, for the first time, alone on the opposite side.

Once the ritual expulsion is accomplished, Albert can finally be killed: his tyranny has ended, and the social order he had shattered can now be restored. Thus, the film's ending recovers one of the most essential features of the classical tragedy: its supremely *constructive* role, as opposed to the absolute destruction commonly represented in the *Trauerspiel*.

Conclusions

The analysis of the convergences between Benjamin's philosophy of the *Trauerspiel* and the semiotics of Greenaway's most famous film has resulted in the emergence of a number of interrelated isotopies. I have argued that the conflict between the Thief and the Lover mirrors that between the tyrant and the martyr described by Benjamin. This, in turn, reflects a more abstract opposition between food and books, that Benjamin defines as fundamental to baroque culture.

⁸ See, among others, Elliott-Purdy 1997: 63 and Armstrong 2004: 230.

The battle between tyrant and martyr takes the form of a succession of rites and counter-rites for the (un)making of social bonds. The film constructs these rites by clearly referring to the Christian imagination and its subversion, which consists in the substitution of what our culture constructs as food with its dysphoric counterparts: decay, excrement, and human flesh. From this perspective, the subversion of the Holy Communion represents the isotopy that could provide us with a unifying key for the interpretation of the film.

I hope to have shown how watching Greenaway through Benjamin may offer a 'stratigraphic' approach to the filmic text that favours focusing on the *interaction* between several isotopies and parallels, rather than on just one isotopy or literary source, in order to better account for the film's semiotic complexity.

Finally, the 'baroque' perspective I have tried to develop could help us see *The Cook* as a fundamental moment of transition in Greenaway's cinema. After portraying the conflict between food and books, he will work on two films – *Prospero's Books* (1991) and *The Pillow Book* (1996) – that unsurprisingly centre on the conceptual importance of the book as a tool for making sense of the world. *The Cook* marks for Greenaway the passage from the natural world to the world of books.

Works cited

- Aebischer, Pascale, *Screening Early Modern Drama: Beyond Shakespeare*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Armstrong, Raymond, "All-Consuming Passions: Peter Greenaway's *the Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*", *Reel Food: Essays on Food and Film*, Ed. Anne L. Bower, London, Routledge, 2004: 219-34.
- Bartolovich, Crystal, "Consumerism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Cannibalism", *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, Eds. Francis Barker - Peter Hulme - Margaret Iversen, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998: 204-37.
- Benjamin, Walter, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928), eng. tr. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, London, Verso, 1998.
- Bennett, Susan, *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past*, London, Routledge, 2013.
- Brinkema, Eugenie, *The Forms of the Affects*, Durham-London, Duke University Press, 2014.
- Brooks, Peter, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1995.
- Elliott, Bridget and Purdy, Anthony, *Peter Greenaway: Architecture and Allegory*, London, Academy Editions, 1997.
- Greenaway, Peter, *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, Paris, Dis Voir, 1989.
- Keeseey, Douglas, *The Films of Peter Greenaway: Sex, Death and Provocation*, Jefferson, McFarland, 2006.
- Keller, James R., "The Allegory of Intemperance: Spenser and Greenaway's *the Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*", *Food, Film and Culture: A Genre Study*, Ed. James R. Keller, Jefferson NC, McFarland & Company, 2006: 13-23.
- Lawrence, Amy, *The Films of Peter Greenaway*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

- Pascoe, David, *Peter Greenaway: Museums and Moving Images*, Islington, Reaktion Books, 1997.
- Schiavoni, Giulio, "Fuori Dal Coro", Benjamin, Walter, *Il Dramma Barocco Tedesco*, Turin, Einaudi, 1999: vii-xxxv.
- Siegel, Joel, "Greenaway by the Numbers", *Peter Greenaway: Interviews*, Eds. Vernon W. Gras - Marguerite Gras, Jackson MS, University Press of Mississippi, 2000: 66-90.
- Siegel, Janice F., "Peter Greenaway's *the Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover: A Cockney Procne*", *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, Ed. Martin M. Winkler, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001: 233-257.
- Steiner, George, "Introduction", in W. Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, London, Verso, 1998: 7-24.
- Stetco, Dayana, "The Crisis of Commentary: Tilting at Windmills in Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*", *Peter Greenaway's Postmodern/Poststructuralist Cinema*, Eds. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi and Mary Alemany-Galway, Lanham MD, Scarecrow Press, 2008.
- Walsh, Michael, "Allegories of Thatcherism: The Films of Peter Greenaway", *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism*, Ed. Lester D. Friedman, Minneapolis MN, University of Minnesota Press, 1993: 255-77.
- Woods, Alan, *Being Naked Playing Dead: The Art of Peter Greenaway*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996.

Filmography

- The Belly of an Architect*, Dir. Peter Greenaway, United Kingdom-Italy, 1987.
- The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover*, Dir. Peter Greenaway, United Kingdom-France, 1989.
- Drowning by Numbers*, Dir. Peter Greenaway, United Kingdom-Netherlands, 1988.

Mattia Petricola, «I'll kill him and I'll eat him!»

The Pillow Book, Dir. Peter Greenaway, Netherlands-United Kingdom-France-Luxembourg, 1996.

Prospero's Books, Dir. Peter Greenaway, United Kingdom, 1991.

A Zed & Two Noughts, Dir. Peter Greenaway, United Kingdom-Netherlands, 1985.

The author

Mattia Petricola

Mattia Petricola is a Ph.D. student in comparative literature at the University of Bologna and the University of Paris-Sorbonne. His work focuses on intermediate states between life and death in literature, cinema, and comics from E.A. Poe to today. His research interests include speculative fiction, video art, death studies and cultural studies. He is currently publishing articles on Philip K. Dick, Peter Greenaway, queer hermeneutics, and the notion of spectrality in media studies.

Email: mattia.petricola@gmail.com

The paper

Date sent: 15/05/2017

Date accepted: 30/09/2017

Date published: 30/11/2017

How to quote this paper

Petricola, Mattia, “«I'll kill him and I'll eat him!»: Peter Greenaway and the cinematic Trauerspiel”, *Maschere del tragico*, Eds. C. Cao, A. Cinquegrani, E. Sbrojavacca, V. Tabaglio, *Between*, VII.14 (2017), <http://www.betweenjournal.it/>