

Crime, Revenge and Horror: Peter Greenaway's  
*The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*  
as a Jacobean Revenge Tragedy

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On 29, May, 1985 millions of people saw live on TV a terrifying show of horror and violence from the Heysel Stadium in Brussels. What was supposed to be a spectacle to enjoy, a football match, became a scene of blood and death like the play-within-a-play of some Elizabethan revenge tragedies. This episode, which reminded viewers that barbarity is a timeless inherent feature of our human soul, inspired Michael Nyman's *Memorial*, which is the main musical theme of Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989). This connection is not accidental since precisely in this film Greenaway examines human horror as seen in the tragedy of the Heysel Stadium.

Some critics have mentioned the influence of John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* on *The Cook* and, in fact, Greenaway himself acknowledges it, but the film shows not the influence of a particular play but of the whole genre, the Elizabethan and Jacobean Revenge Tragedy, whose conventions Greenaway follows closely in order to impregnate his film with what Susan Bennett calls "a Jacobean sensibility" (104). Greenaway himself says that

You are being invited to watch the film as a play, a performance. You're not to take it seriously, but you are to engage in the ideas. Like Jacobean drama, it has a very savage content, bringing it front stage for examination." (quoted in Bergan 27-28).

In order to emphasise this link with revenge tragedies, in *The Cook* Greenaway stresses even more the usual theatricality of his films. Thus the beginning and the end of the film are marked by a curtain that rises and falls. We also find other elements with the same purpose such as the almost exaggerated frontality of the composition; the frequent lengthy long shots; the short number of sets; the absence of the fourth wall; the motionless camera, which offers a point of view hardly ever corresponding to that of any character; or the division of the film into days, like acts, which are in turn divided into a few scenes which change through sideways travellings to keep the continuity of the take.

Apart from these features that link the film to drama in general, there are other elements that connect it directly with Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedies. The first of them is obviously the revenge theme. These tragedies typically begin with the murder of a kinsman or a lover of one of the main characters (Grantley 59). In *The Cook* Albert kills his wife's lover after finding out about her infidelity. This murder unleashes her revenge, as in the Jacobean play *The Fatal Dowry* (1619?) where a wife takes her revenge on her husband for his killing of her lover. In other revenge tragedies there are frequent examples of adultery leading to tragic consequences, as, for instance, in *The White Devil* (1612) or the subplot of Livia and Leantio in *Women Beware Women* (1613).

The revenge we see in *The Cook*, takes up just the last section of the film, which was common in the later examples of the genre<sup>1</sup> in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when, as Fredson Bowers points out, “the interest of the audience is less concerned with the workings of the villain’s revenge as a revenge than with depiction of lust, villainy, and horror” (158). Greenaway embodies that villainy and horror in the character of Albert, who could be described, as Sean French points out, as “a theatrical Jacobean villain, with the gang as his depraved courtiers and the curtained dining-room as the stage where he finally receives his deserts” (277).

The representation of horror is probably one of the most specific features of revenge tragedies (Griswold 79). In them we find all kinds of violent acts, sexual aberrations and, in general, all those actions that transgress culturally defended boundaries, and which Greenaway seems to have carefully incorporated to *The Cook* in order to present a complete collection of abhorrent atrocities. One of these horrors is cannibalism, which was quite common in some revenge tragedies. But cannibalism is portrayed by Greenaway even more cruelly because, unlike Tamora in *Titus Andronicus* or Piero in *Antonio’s Revenge*, Albert in *The Cook* is fully aware that what he is eating is Michael’s body. Cannibalism provokes horror in most cultures because it breaks our boundaries between the edible and inedible. This transgression is also a key element in Albert’s methods of torture, which are always related to the ingestion of inedible elements. Let’s think, for instance, of the compelled coprophagy of Roy, the book pages Michael has to swallow or the buttons eaten by Pup, who following a macabre pun is also forced to eat his own belly button, bringing to the film another common element of revenge plays: mutilation, an element which plays an important role in the action of some of the best-known tragedies such as *Titus Andronicus*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Antonio’s Revenge* or *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*. Other typical horrors of revenge tragedies that Greenaway shows or suggests, sometimes in a symbolic way, are rapes (as in *Titus Andronicus* or *The Fatal Contract*), necrophilia (as we find in *The Duke of Milan*, *The Revenger’s Tragedy* or *The Atheist’s Tragedy*), incest<sup>2</sup> (as in *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, *The Tragedy of Hoffman* or *Women Beware Women*) and madness (let’s remember Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Titus Andronicus, Hamlet or Cornelia in *The White Devil*).

Revenge tragedies typically present this hair-raising collection of horrors but, as Wendy Griswold points out, probably “the most striking revenge tragedy horror is the repeated equation of sex and death . . . . In revenge tragedy, death is a part of love, is embodied in it from the beginning” (80). This is exactly what we have in *The Cook* where the link between sex and death is repeatedly suggested, not just in the obvious fact that Michael dies because of his love affair or in the necrophilia of Georgina with his corpse, but also in other subtle details. For example, there are some hints that Georgina is a former prostitute who is married to a murderer, exactly as in *Women Beware Women*. At times the link between love and death is established in powerful visual images. For instance, when Albert rushes into the room where the lovers have just been making love, he sees, instead of them, a kitchen boy with his arms soaked in blood. In *The Cook*, Greenaway not only links death and love but also connects them with a key element in the film: food. Food was important in revenge tragedies not only in plots (cannibalism, banquets) but also in imagery to suggest the wild predatory character of human beings. As Marguerite Alexander points out, in these tragedies “natural imagery is almost unknown; more usual are the images derived from death, corruption and gluttonous feeding” (337). The association of love, food and death is repeated in the film. This is exactly what we have, for instance, in the image of rotten food covered with worms that go out through the sockets of a skull in the lorry where the lovers hide. In this image we have the three elements together.

<sup>1</sup> There is no agreement among the critics to refer to this late phase. While some authors such as Fredson Bowers, Grantley or Wendy Griswold speak of *Revenge Tragedy* in general without naming the different periods of the genre, J. A. Symonds calls this last period *Tragedy of Blood*, Marguerite Alexander uses the phrase *Jacobean Tragedy* (337) and Greenaway himself calls it “satirical English Jacobean theatre” (7).

<sup>2</sup> The references to incest in the film are very subtle. At the beginning of the film we can see the word *luna* in a neon light as an allusion to the film *La Luna* (1979) by Bernardo Bertolucci, that is about the incestuous relation between a mother and her son. Greenaway also suggests that the relation between Albert and Georgina can be considered, in a certain way, as a symbolic incest in the sense that she is a mother figure for him and he is “a big psychopathic child” (French 277) dominated by his oral and anal fixations, who confesses that she has taught him everything.

Similarly love and food are linked, for example, in the lover's sexual encounters, which take place in the kitchen; in the symbolic cross-cutting of sex and cookery scenes; and more explicitly in the words of Albert, who states that "the pleasures are related. Because the naughty bits and the dirty bits are so close together, it just goes to show you how sex and eating are related". Greenaway also suggests the connection between death and food by presenting the corpse of Michael cooked, the frequent references to poison, the use of a fork as a weapon, or the fact that the two characters who are murdered in the film, Michael and Albert, die eating.

This association between sex, food and death is, to a certain extent, ironic since, as happens in revenge tragedies, those elements that make our life possible and give us pleasure (sex and food) are the source of pain and death. Irony is one of the most typical conventions of revenge tragedies, in which things seldom are what they seem, revealing in this way a world where "perceptions are unreliable" (Grantley 201), just as we see in *The Cook*, where Albert's elegant costumes and refined manners at the table contrast with his despicable cruelty. Verbal irony is very important in revenge tragedies, in which there are frequent examples of sentences that once said take a quite different meaning. In the film this is the case of the moment when Albert discovers his wife's affair with Michael and shouts in rage "I'll kill him and I'll eat him"; this is what actually is going to happen.

Humour is a typical component of revenge tragedies closely related to irony. Humour, apart from contributing to please the "wide range of tastes" of the audience of the period (Griswold 69), was also an effective device to relieve the emotional strain of spectators after the horrifying spectacle they were witnessing. But often this humour is impregnated with the horrors of the play and, consequently, it becomes the typical black humour that we find, for instance, in the jokes about Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*. Similarly, Greenaway also introduces in his film this kind of humour<sup>3</sup>, as we see, for example, in Albert's threat to Roy, after which we do not know if we have to laugh, to feel horrified or probably both: "Pay when I ask you - otherwise next time we'll make you eat your own shit - after first squeezing it out of you through your prick - like toothpaste". On other occasions this humour, albeit equally macabre, is much more subtle. After the brutal murder of Michael, who has been forced to eat the pages of his books, we are shown Paolo Veronese's *Marriage at Cana*, whose image has been used to advertise some famous digestive pills.

Another typical convention of revenge tragedies is the final celebration, usually a banquet or a play-within-a play, where the action reaches its climax and revenge is finally achieved. In these scenes we usually find powerful visual images of some characters showing either a part of the victim as a memento of the outrage (Annabella's heart in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*) or the whole corpse, as in *The Spanish Tragedy* and also in *The Cook* when Georgina exposes Michael's body cooked in the final banquet. In this sequence Greenaway specially emphasises the theatricality of the celebration. In fact, he calls it "a private function" and, in a certain way, it could be considered a kind of play-within-a-play in the sense that, as in *Titus Andronicus*, the feast turns out to be a deadly ceremony in which the guest becomes the unexpected victim under the eyes of a silent audience composed by all the characters of the film.

All this theatricality together with other features such as the typified nature of the characters (Bennett 101) or the consciously unnatural, distant way of presenting events (Gorostiza 231), contribute to the artificiality that defines Greenaway's films and also revenge tragedies, which usually avoid the naturalistic representation of reality. Nevertheless, this artificiality and this seeming estrangement from reality contrast with the fact that, on a deeper level, revenge tragedies were intimately concerned with their historic moment and usually reflected the political and social affairs of the period. Similarly, Greenaway also uses in his film a far-fetched story to discuss contemporary issues. As some critics have remarked, *The Cook* is a strong attack against "the entirely sickening nature of Thatcherite consumer capitalism, selfishness and excess" (Denham 48) epitomised in

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, the film was billed by the distributor Miramax as a Black Comedy.

Albert, a greedy character who is obsessed with getting money and consuming; he significantly asks Michael “How can books make you happy? You cannot eat them!”<sup>4</sup>

Greenaway also reflects in his film another topic that was common in many revenge tragedies. As Laura Denham points out, our “post-modern capitalist era shares with the Jacobean era its Machiavellian materialism and fear of impending destruction of civilisation” (30). Thus, Greenaway shows us how heartless materialism brings the failure of the great ideals, represented by Michael and his interest in the French Revolution, a clear symbol of ideals beaten by unmerciful pragmatism. This concern with “the failure of ideas when they run up against the stubborn tyranny of the real world”, which is a constant feature in Greenaway’s films (French 277), is also quite common in revenge tragedies since, as Robert Watson points out, “Jacobean tragedies do reflect bitter disappointment with the results of earlier Renaissance idealism” (331-32). Accordingly, it is not strange to find in these plays idealist characters disappointed when discovering the corruption of the world. Man is a wolf for man, as the fierce dogs at the beginning of the film remind us, and there is no room for ideals, just for evil and corruption. As Vindice says in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* “. . . to be honest is not to be i’ th’ world” (I. i. 95). This vision of the world is similar to the one that Greenaway offers us. In fact, the following words used by Watson to describe revenge tragedies could have been used in a review of *The Cook* since they perfectly reflect what we see in the film, that is “the portrayal of a world in which people are nothing more than desperate little bodies consuming each other, indistinguishably in sex and murder” (333).

All these elements and conventions we have referred to in this brief study show the unquestionable conscious link between *The Cook* and the Elizabethan and Jacobean revenge tragedies. I do not mean to suggest, as I have said before, that Greenaway tries to adapt faithfully any particular play. What he does is to combine most of the typical conventions of the genre to give his film a certain “Jacobean flavour” (Denham 31). Revenge tragedies offer a reflection upon our “inhuman” human nature, which apparently has not developed much over the centuries, constituting thus a timeless topic. As Greenaway himself acknowledges, these plays provide him with a model for something that he consistently does in his movies, that is, a model for “an alternative examination . . . which basically looks at the centre of the human predicament by going to the edges, to the extremes” (quoted in Rodgers 12). This is what revenge tragedies usually do and this is what Peter Greenaway does in *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover*.

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<sup>4</sup> One of Albert’s victims is Georgina, whose name makes us think of Saint George, holy patron of England, who killed the man-eater dragon, exactly as she does in the film with Albert.

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