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Author	Zita Turi
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Metamorphosis and Identity – “Cinetheatrical” Spaces in Peter Greenaway’s *The Baby of Mâcon*

Zita Turi

Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

Introduction

In his interviews, Peter Greenaway infamously claims that we have never seen films, only literature or theatre put on screen. He, being a painter himself, mostly characterises his construction of film-narrative as image-centred, a position in opposition to that of traditional plot-centred movies based on verbal narration. He wanted to make a cinema of ideas and not of plots, trying to use the same aesthetics as painting, which always paid great attention to formal devices of structure and the composition of framing (Woods 18). Not only is there a competitive relationship between the plot and the visual narration, but in his films the mediums used also vary. This contributes to the multi-layered structures of his movies, which are not limited by artificially imposed boundaries, but are centred on notions such as the place and space of performance and the self-reflective nature of art. The framework of intermediality, consequently, gains crucial significance within the discourse on Greenaway’s movies. On the one hand, it includes various mediums, allowing the interweaving of late-twentieth century visual arts (cinema and television) with theatre; on the other hand, it presupposes flexibility and a need for artistic fusion, creating a profusion of texts, images, and sounds within the given artistic constellation. This variability of expression requires variable spaces and this paper seeks to substantiate the interrelation between the metamorphosis of locations and identity in Peter Greenaway’s *The Baby of Mâcon*.

Framing the Stage

Michel Foucault suggests that the contemporary state of space is the space of juxtaposition, of near and far, of the side-by-side, and of the dispersed. He also emphasises that this space is unlike the hierarchic ensemble of spaces of the Middle Ages: the opposition of open and enclosed spaces, urban and rural spaces, celestial and supercelestial ones. Foucault calls these medieval locations the space of emplacement, alluding to the complete hierarchy and opposition. Such emplacements dissolved in Galileo’s discovery that the earth

revolved around the sun, therefore, a thing's place "was no longer anything but a point in movement" (Foucault 237-238). The spaces of the sixteenth and seventeenth century opened up, the boundaries gradually seemed increasingly blurry and verities that had appeared to be eternal were questioned. In his movies Greenaway adopts the heterogeneous spaces of the Renaissance and the Baroque to his films by clashing various locales, which unexpectedly open up or enclose.ⁱ

Greenaway's films are the results of a constant combat among modes of expression. In his words: "I wanted to make films that were not illustrations of already existing texts, or vehicles for actors, or slaves to a plot, or an excuse to provide any emotional catharsis" (Woods 18). He acknowledges in this sentence the genre of film, yet he also emphasises that his films are supposed to be different. They embark on creating artefacts that incorporate mediums into a reconfigured cinematic space, situating the viewer in a liminal position somewhere at the crossroads of the arts. Greenaway's films unfold in disorienting environments, in instable and heterogeneous spaces, in the Deleuzian "any-space-whatever" (Tweedie 105). Gilles Deleuze in his *Cinema 1* describes this "any-space-whatever" as space freed from conventional location within a totality to which all spaces can be related. It is "not an abstract universal, in all times, in all places. It is a perfectly singular space, which has merely lost its homogeneity, that is, the principle of its metric relations or the connection of its own parts, so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways" (Tweedie 109).

Intermediality requires constant transgression of generic boundaries within the cinematic framework and not only is the spectator cast into liminality, as Tweedie suggests, but so is the film itself. The boundaries of this framework are problematic to define. Deleuze suggests that the frame of an image is a relatively close system that incorporates everything that is present in the image - including sets, characters and props. The frame, thus, forms a set which has a great number of parts, elements that themselves form sub-sets (Deleuze 12). The frames, therefore, constitute further frames within the system; moreover, the out-of-frame conjures up everything that is inaudible, invisible, and still perceivable on screen. For the definition of out-of-frame, Deleuze refers to André Bazin, who describes this notion as a mobile mask, through which every set continues in a wider and more homogeneous one; that is, space and action always overflow the framework (15-16).

Jacques Derrida approaches the notion of framing from a different angle - as a commentary on Kant's *Third Critique* - and considers the frame to be a *parergon*, which literally means "outside the work" (*ergon* meaning "work") and is applied to both the philosophical discourse and arts in general. In this sense, the frame functions as a supplement

of a kind that is neither inside nor outside the work since it exists “without being a part of it and yet without being absolutely extrinsic to it” (55). The frames separate the content and its exterior in order to reflect on the content; “[no] «theory,» no «practice, » no «theoretical practice» can intervene effectively in this field if it does not weigh up and bare on the frame, which is the decisive structure of what is at stake. [...] The *parergon* stands out both from the *ergon* (the work) and from the milieu” (60-61).

Apparently, the frame of an artefact occupies a liminal position, in which transgression seems to be inevitably a question of perspective. In cinema, the liminal position of the frame could be analogous with the intermediality that Greenaway considers crucial to the genre. That is, transgressing places the medium of film on the borderline of the arts balancing, for instance, between literature and the visual arts, or in the case of *The Baby of Mâcon* cinema and theatre. Here, while I distinguish between filmic and theatrical spaces, I also would like to point out that these two constitute an organic whole in as much as they constantly transform into one another. The central miracle play of the movie is carried out within the frame of the stage (the theatre itself), to which the Deleuzean out-of-frame, the cinematic space is extrinsic. The frames of the movie, however, are not unequivocally identifiable: the film ends with the bow of the audience of the liturgical performance, during which the applause of invisible spectators can be heard, reminding the spectator in the cinema of his or her own spectator-self. The boundaries between fiction and reality are blurred and notions outside the frames are involved hence highlighting, in Greenaway’s words, that “the most important formal-metaphorical characteristics of the film are the notions of what is real and what is false, what is performed and what is witnessed, what is acted and what is considered true; who in any drama indeed, are the actors and who is the audience?” (Greenaway Preface to *The Audience of Mâcon* 4).

Fragments of the plays within the film are related to spaces of different natures, overlapping seemingly totally at random. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer discusses the nature of the play in general and points out that the playing field of the game is “set by the nature of the game itself and is defined far more by the structure that determines the movement of the game from within than by what it comes up against – i.e. the boundaries of the open space – limiting movement from without” (107). In *The Baby of Mâcon*, as we shall see, the metamorphosis of space is closely related to the act of performance, the essence of which is displaying and shifting identities both on screen and on stage.

Cinematic space is visualised in two dimensions and theatricality is adapted to this construction. Provided cinema is considered as the primary medium in this movie, the

implemented frame, the frame within the frame, seems to be the medium of theatre.ⁱⁱ This aspect of *frame* is applied, on the one hand, in the sense of a framework within which the film narrative evolves; on the other hand, the frames contain a cornucopia of images by which the visual narration assembles and develops.

The frame within the frame structure in *The Baby of Mâcon* correlates with the notion of metacinema and also metatheatre, capturing the subtlety of cinema by centring it on the issue of spectacle within the spectacle. Theatricality constantly intervenes in the movie with the result that the two sorts of visuals keep overlapping during the film. This is a variant of Greenaway's preceding movie, *Prospero's Books*, in which the spectacle within the spectacle is manifested in multi-layered images. In this adaptation of *The Tempest*, the structure provides an appropriate vehicle of framing and re-framing as well as feeding the transition from "words making text, text making pages, pages making books from which knowledge is fabricated in pictorial form." Thus, the movie manages to reveal several narratives at once (Gras & Gras 130). In *The Baby of Mâcon* the multiplicity of narratives can be grasped, however, not in the multi-layered imagery but rather in the performances enacted within given frameworks.

The framework of cinematic space in *The Baby of Mâcon* is theatre-based: on the one hand, the film revolves around a theatrical performance, on the other hand, theatricality saturates the movie - even the cinematic spaces carry theatrical traits and the spectacle is determined by the systematic transformation of space. The very first scene establishes the movie's in-between spatial state: the prologue of *Hunger* is situated in front of a neutral, black background, in which the actor mutters the key theme of the film, namely, the question of procreation and in/fertility. Suddenly, *Hunger* hurtles down, out of his hat and the consecutive scene displays the stage with the woman in labour, hence switching to a theatrical context. Nonetheless, a hat remains above the stage, thus highlighting spacial ambiguity. The neutral space of the prologue seems to be the film-space, which turns into theatrical space in the next scene, in which *Hunger* is not present, yet the hat above the stage signifies him. In the prologue of *Henry V* Shakespeare gives the 'definition of theatre' and refers to the Globe as "this wooden O" (*Prologue*13), which suggests that in the Renaissance the round shape was commonly associated with theatre. In *The Baby of Mâcon* *Hunger*'s hat is round-shaped, therefore, in the prologue the hat could denote theatricality, yet, in the next scene it, hanging above the stage, also signifies *Hunger*. This hat seems to condense the interdependence of cinema and theatre in the movie, suggesting that both mediums are simultaneously present, even if with different proportions and from different angles. In this "cinetheatrical" space the

interior and the exterior flow together, irrespective of the restrictions of the narrative and their transformations seem to be utterly arbitrary; yet, as we shall see, there is method in it.

Transforming the Self

Greenaway's attraction to the Renaissance and Baroque is widely known: the late Renaissance and more notably the Baroque were periods in which the arts were united by intermediality. This included the fusion of visual, audible and written mediums, which competed with, yet also complemented one another and Greenaway considers opera to be the most outstanding example of this artistic synthesis (Woods 45). In his films, such as *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, music is fundamental to the film narrative and the tunes resemble, on the one hand, operas and, on the other hand, they imitate medieval liturgical songs and psalms.

The theatrical traditions of the seventeenth century originate in the Middle Ages and in *The Baby of Mâcon* theatrical spaces also display attributes of the medieval tradition. The most remarkable attribute of this is the structure of the stage(s). In the Middle Ages, two traditions of staging the cycle plays were widespread, the processional and the stationary stages. In the first case, pageant wagons would move in front of the assembled audiences carrying out the performance; stationary stages tended to have three levels symbolising the layers of existence, heaven, earth and hell thus displaying the topos of *theatrum mundi*. In *The Baby of Mâcon* both traditions manifest themselves, albeit slightly altered. The stationary stage of the miracle play has levels, yet only two of them, earth (the stage) and hell (the pit), can be unequivocally identified. Similarly, the representation of the processional stage is also fragmentary and varied: as opposed to the pageant wagons the audience changes locales and (literally) follows the dramaturgy.

These allegorical theatrical spaces give ground to the allegorical performance in which the characters are interchangeable - hence the Mary of the play turns out to be an "Every Mary" and the miraculous child is the ultimate "Every Child." Initially, the onstage labour is enacted by an old woman, yet later on Mary is impersonated by her daughter (Julia Ormond), turning out to be a pseudo-Mary. From the medieval times displaying multi-layered identities either by doubling theatrical roles or splitting them was a commonly applied method and it lingered on in the Renaissance as well as the Baroque theatre too. David M. Bevington differentiates between these two basic ways of depicting the subtlety of stage identity: doubling is the practice of one actor playing two or even more parts, whereas role-splitting is

the complete opposite of this where one role is enacted by two or more actors (Bevington 1962). The more widespread technique was doubling, yet Greenaway seems to apply the practice of role splitting in his miracle play. Throughout the film, characters are substituted: this includes the aforementioned Mary character whose multi-layered identity is captured most remarkably in the rape scene. This scene is a long shot without any cuts with very slow horizontal camera motion and in the second half of it a nativity scene is pulled in the middle of the screen. On the one hand, displaying the Biblical scene complicates further the metadrama/cinema, and also the nativity constitutes another frame within the already visible one; on the other hand, there are two women sitting next to the Mary figure dragged away, hence imitating the rape scene of the ongoing play. What occurred in the play on stage, which in our case is a confined bed, is represented with two doubles of the raped girl in a space extrinsic to the theatrical one.ⁱⁱⁱ By representing the representation Greenaway complicates even more the identity issue in the movie, complementing the frame within the frame structure, hence intensifying the notion of metadrama.

The Child's identity is even more subtle than that of the woman. His character is the most saturated with the practice of role-splitting, since even his words are uttered either by the Prompter or by Mary. In addition, his figure is represented at various stages of his life; therefore, impersonating him requires a whole range of infants of different ages and the camera reveals them in the backstage shots which are cramped with potential Child-impersonators. His identity is always dependant on the function the others attribute to him. In the stable scene, for instance, the Mary-impersonator calls him "only a child," who should be ignored during the seduction, yet, the Child's identity shifts in order to protect the girl's virginity and, at the same time, the dramaturgical authenticity of the miracle play. The woman could not remain in the position of the mother if she lost her innocence for the lack of virginity would exclude the concept of Immaculate Conception on which the Biblical story is based. In a movie that is pervaded by identity shifts the main roles, oddly enough, do not appear to be interchangeable.

Multi-layered identities, meta-referential performance and involving the audience all belong to the notion of metadrama, which Richard Hornby defines simply as "drama about drama," which occurs when the subject of a play turns out to be drama itself. The audience is always relating what it sees to the play as a whole on the one hand, and on the other hand, to other plays it has already seen, so a dramatic work is always experienced (at least secondarily) as metadramatic. Metadrama includes the play within the play, ceremony within the play, role playing with the role, literary and real-life reference and self reference (Hornby 31-32). If in

metatheatrical the notion of the play within the play gains self-referential significance, in metacinema the same goes for the frame within the frame structures. By accentuating the “image-self” within the visual narration, the movie draws attention to the act of image perception, and thus, highlights the fictional status of the spectacle. In *The Baby of Mâcon*, metadrama overlaps the framework of theatre constantly switching to metacinema in the movie, which can be best grasped as the transformations of theatrical spaces into cinematic ones.

In *The Baby of Mâcon* Greenaway establishes an analogy between theatre and Church; furthermore, the whole movie was shot in an enormous cathedral, thus laying emphasis on the religious origins of theatre. After the secularisation of drama, the Church found itself being deprived of the opportunity to exercise its own domain, namely, that of miracles, which later on become integrated into the theatrical discourse. In the history of drama, due to this desecularization, dramatic pieces were gradually excluded from the domain of the Church and confined within the framework of theatricality. In Greenaway’s movie, this, however, works vice versa. In this “any-space-whatever” the theatre seems to be implemented within the body of the church, which represents the wider spacial context of the film.

First of all, the stage constitutes a visual framework on screen, and when the theatrical space expands, the scope of the movie (the out-of-frame) encloses the theatrical vision. This is best represented at the end of the film, when the camera is moving backwards and the perspective is dilating; here, the opening field displays an ostensibly endless row of frames. In the stable scene succeeding the death of the Priest, a door opens in the background through which the audience (or in the context of the Church, the congregation) can witness the bloody deed. The open door shapes a frame, in which the crowd is the image, hence highlighting, again, the notion of metadrama. In this scene, the stable is an enclosed space and so is the stage; opening the door allows the non-theatrical, cinematic space to penetrate and transform the movie’s scope.

The visual shifts are closely related to the identity shifts: it seems the identity shifts are accompanied by spacial transformations. Numerous instances in the movie substantiate this: for example, when the Mary impersonator takes over the role of the Virgin and appoints herself as the mother of the Child, the space opens up and the consecutive cuts display the woman and the child mingling with the audience in the church-like environment. Similarly, at the end when the Child is laying on the altar the audience allegorises not only his clothes but his body as well. This scene is in a neutral dark space lit only by some candles, which resembles the initial monologue of Hunger. Here, the Baby transforms into a storehouse of

relics to which various magical characteristics are ascribed. He turns out to be an allegorical denotation, a visual symbolic representation of the miraculous Child that transcends the “function” of a mere infant.

Conclusion

The notion of metadrama emphasises the gap between the real and the illusory, it both connects to and disconnects from the performance, as a result of which the audience becomes involved and alienated at the same time. The spectator is constantly mirrored in the play and vice versa: the play is also reflected in and altered by the reactions and understanding of the audience seemingly extrinsic to it. The expanded scopic hurly-burly, Galileo’s space that is opened up to the world enables the movie to display both the confusion of identities and the heterogeneity of spaces. *The Baby of Mâcon* aligns allegorical characters and spaces that transform in relation to the audience and according to the identity shifts of the characters, which results in a matrix of visual notions that not only allude to one another within the framework but even beyond.

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Notes

ⁱ This goes alongside with the fact that the question of identity formation became increasingly problematic in the Renaissance, probably the best represented in Shakespeare's multiple identities.

ⁱⁱ Of course, this film contains many more mediums such as literature or visual arts, yet, for the sake of simplicity I would like to highlight only the ones of theatre and film.

ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly, at the beginning of the film when the father is selecting the applicants for breastfeeding, the women are clad in the identical shaped and coloured dresses, which also suggest that the impersonators enact a character with the same function.