Organizing the ZOO: Peter Greenaway’s A Zed & Two Noughts

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Abstract

Peter Greenaway’s film, *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985), examines the process of death and decay and how the cinematographic process can document the human experience. The film centers on Oswald and Oliver Deuce, grieving twin-brother zoologists, and their affair with Alba Bewick, a beautiful woman whose body is decomposing as a result of a series of amputations. She is also the woman responsible for the death of the twins’ wives. In order to process their wives’ deaths, Oliver and Oswald undertake a series of pre-cinema-esque studies: photographing the decomposition of the zoo animals in their care. Like all Greenaway films, *Z&OO* subverts traditional narrative filmmaking. Greenaway’s films employ a visual organizing principle as cinematic structure rather than traditional movies motivated by story and plot. *A Zed and Two Noughts* derives its organization from Eadweard Muybridge’s nineteenth-century locomotion studies, *Animals in Motion*. Muybridge’s pre-cinema photographic studies of human and animal figures in the 1880’s were meticulously organized, meticulously edited and near pornographic. Greenaway has explained that his fascination with Muybridge’s work lie not only in the visual organization but more in the peculiarity and perversion of the human activities documented in the studies. It can be argued that Muybridge’s work bridges the gap between art and science. It can also be argued that Muybridge’s work existed solely for the amusement of its maker. Greenaway’s use of Muybridge suggests both – art and science and the amusement of the maker. This article examines Muybridge’s organizing principles for his motion studies and how those same peculiar principles serve as the process for Oliver and Oswald Deuce to grapple with death in Peter Greenaway’s *A Zed and Two Noughts*.

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References


