THAT FILM, THIS PAPER — ITS BODY

THE SOAP:
We’re a capital couple are Bloom and I;
He brightens the earth, I polish the sky
(Ulysses)

Oedipa stood in the living room, stared at by the living
eye of the TV tube, spoke the name of God, tried to feel
as drunk as possible.
(The Crying of Lot 49)

Despite the appearance of their differences, what if postmodernism and
humanism were found to rest on a similar axiomatics of consciousness?
What if postmodernism hasn’t happened yet?

This is indeed a very general and challenging question, which we pose
on the basis of our suspicion that the postmodern text-commentary relation
might be the inverse of the humanist priority of conscious agent of produc-
tion to and over inert textual product. For humanism, texts have agents; for
postmodernism, texts have agency. If this is so, then postmodernism cannot
be understood to have deconstructed consciousness but simply to have
displaced it — from people onto things. It may be as if consciousness were
a property of the world, whose quantum is able to be dispersed and
redistributed but never diminished or exhausted. Such a property or
condition would seem to us to be of the order of the mystical, like divine
grace, which is precisely the order on which postmodernism challenged the
humanist version of the text-commentary relation in the first place. If it
could now be shown that, despite the death of the author, that relation
remains more or less the same, then it is left to ask what in fact it is that
postmodernism has challenged. Our suspicion is that nothing fundamental
has been put at risk, in the form of a deconstruction of the axiomatics of
consciousness, and that a crucial question has never been answered, let
alone been taken up (despite any instances which see themselves as being
to the contrary). That question, attributable to Heidegger, is what — if
anything can — constitutes the difference between people and things, self
and world, or even more radically: is there any necessity to think of a self-
world relation at all?

Self and world belong together in the single entity, Dasein. Self and
world are not two entities, like subject and object [...] but self and
world are the basic determination of Dasein itself in the unity of the
structure of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, Phenomenology 297).

In the absence of an analytics based on such a radical questioning of
consciousness, we have to ask — again — has postmodernism happened
yet?

This should not come as a relief to the opponents of postmodernism
(though it may lead to a rethinking on the part of its advocates), however,
insofar as the "postmodern" critique of the humanist text-commentary relation is not unjustified but simply, we suspect, unfinished. (Later, we will argue that postmodernism is necessarily unfinished, and unfinished, as a project, which is also the case with humanism. We do not wish to be accused of imputing the possibility of realisation or plenitude to either, or to any imaginable alternative form of the relation in question.) By this we mean that, for postmodernism to happen, for a deconstruction of the axiomatics of consciousness underlying the text-commentary relation to occur, there needs to be a further critical movement succeeding the inversion of (human) agent to and over (textual) agency. While we can (and later will) speculate on what such a movement might entail, we confess to not knowing what texts of the text-commentary relation would then look like in its wake. How could we?

As for our suspicion that postmodernism remains a non-event, or an event remaining to eventuate, it arises from our attempt to account for the text-commentary relation of a film by Peter Greenaway, *A Walk Through H*. We take this film for a classic instance of early-postmodernism insofar as the text provides its own commentary on itself, thus posing the critical question of how to produce a commentary on "it" without reproducing the text-as-commentary; in short, without repeating the film (see McHoul and Wills, "Zoologies"). But instead of deciding in advance that this presents a problem to be overcome, we prefer to see if an appropriate mode of repetition cannot be found that would satisfy the critical imperative to generate commentary while also remaining true to the text. One such form of that truth might be that the *H* of the film’s title is not in fact a letter but a pictogram, making it unpronounceable and therefore able to be repeated only in a form of demonstration that was (despite being steeped in words) nonlinguistic and which might approximate the purely filmic. Taking our cues from the text, we wonder if the *H* is not a pictogram of the pattern that is produced by shifting through the gears of a car:

Here we shift to a description of the film in the form of a "treatment" whose materiality is confined to black marks on white paper — a treatment in (other) words but which is also a form of the film's own treatment of itself. We want to see if in this space we can't make the film able to be "seen" by those who haven't seen it, as well as those who have. Here, then, we want to try to "screen" the film although we can't quite bring ourselves to assert this without the aid of a grammatical special-effect, viz. the scare quotes, knowing that we are also going to be doing something else (more, or less). So in the form of this (our) (its) so-called "screening," which will shift across our (this) (its) paper and has in fact already begun, the film can now be shown as follows:

- In white lettering over a black screen the words *A Walk Through H* appear.  
- In white lettering over a black screen the words *The Reincarnation of an Ornithologist* appear.  
- Fade to reveal the interior of what could be a
small art gallery in which a woman (a secretary?) sits alone at a desk in the bottom right of screen. She appears to be working on some papers as the camera tracks past through two central door frames into another room, then pans a line of artworks. Narrator (who does all the talking) recites his first words: "Tulse Luper arranged all these drawings in order for me one Monday afternoon when he heard that I was ill." Cut to a drawing that once belonged to a man who looked after the owls at the Amsterdam zoo. Cut to another drawing that Tulse Luper has told the narrator he will probably need first. For what, he doesn’t say. From now on, drawings more often referred to as “maps.” Of what, we aren’t told. Music, mainly in the form of syncopated piano lines, begins here and remains throughout, only occasionally interrupted by silences. Close-up of artwork, followed by the appearance of "entering" its surface to establish a set of camera movements that will predominate (up-down-across-through-up-down). Here also the drawings are established as the principal object-text, making the film into a “literal” instance of the motion picture. Several cities are mentioned — Austerlitz, Antilope, and one that “reminded me of a seaport, though it was far from the sea.” [...] Another map acquired by the narrator came with a letter accusing him of stealing eggs. But he “never understood the relationship of the map and the accusation.” [...] Narrator once had chicken pox. [...] It’s by now apparent that the narrator is actually on some kind of a journey. Another map. “Tulse Luper suggested my journey through H needed 92 maps. Anticipating my question, he suggested the time to decide what H stood for was at the end of my journey — and by that time it scarcely mattered.” [...] Narrator had an aunt who died of food-poisoning after eating an omelette. Map 13. “The map began to fade before I had crossed two-thirds of the territory it represented. All that remained on the paper was a mark that could have been a signpost, or the skeleton of a windmill. All those 13 maps whose territory I had passed through had faded and in their place on each sheet was the same mark, or one very much like it.” [...] Cut to footage of wild bird in flight. Narrator: “Never trust a philosopher whose name begins with H.” Another map. “Tulse Luper said, if in need I should play this map like a blank in a card game — it might get me out of trouble.” [...] Another map. Others have been here before him and there may be others still to come, who “might take less time than I deciding what the initial H was to stand for. It didn’t stand for ‘heron.’” [...] Map 28. Entering by the Owl Gate, narrator proceeds to cross “the most significant map — the Amsterdam map,” which “I had known in advance [...] would be significant. Up until my possession of it, any accumulation of maps was unplanned, fortuitous. It was only after I had been persuaded to steal this map did I look for a map in everything I possessed, and in most things I didn’t possess as well.” Earlier, his mistakes had been few; “after it was mine, my mistakes were legion.” Pan across map to reveal by now typical pattern of black and white and red pathways, or perhaps just randomly intersecting lines. The map has been stolen by the narrator from Van Hoyten (“another H”), the keeper of the owls at the Amsterdam Zoo who is also a passionate bird counter. But there are no compass directions and “I could not depend on the top of the map being North.” Nothing has
to be what it seems: "against the disc of the full moon, even white birds are
black.” ■ Cut to more footage of birds. Music increases in volume and
urgency. ■ Cut to maps. "Perhaps it was not impossible that other travellers
had different maps of this territory, simpler and more straightforward
maps. Perhaps the country only existed in its maps, in which case a traveller
created the territory as he walked through it. If he should stand still,
so would the landscape. [Pause.] I kept moving." ■ More bird footage.
■ Narrator learns from Tulse Luper that Van Hoyten is “compiling a
catalogue of the migrating birds of the northern hemisphere.” For
what purpose, it isn’t made clear. ■ But Tulse Luper thinks it’s important that Van
Hoyten should never finish the catalogue. It should be completed by "some
disinterested person, an ornithologist with no ulterior motive.” ■ More bird
footage. ■ Another map. "By the time I had passed one point on this map
nine times, it occurred to me I might in fact be marking time by arrangement,
awaiting the convenience of future maps. Perhaps the time allowance for
each map stretched forwards as well as backwards. Perhaps I had now been
walking through H too fast.” ■ [...] ■ Another map has red squares with
"RED" printed inside them. This stood for "redevelopment." ■ [...] Maps 46
 [...] 60 [...] ■ More footage of birds. ■ [...] Maps 65, 66 [...] ■ "The lack of a clear
route was not causing me any especial disappointment." ■ All the while, the
music. ■ The piano. ■ Urgent music. "A map that tried to pin down a sheep
trail was just credible, but it was an optimistic map that tried to fix a path
made by the wind — or a path made across the grass by the shadow of flying
birds. The usual intentions of cartography were now collapsing. Either that
or the route itself was becoming so insecure that mapping it was a foolhardy
It was Tuesday morning, early, at about a quarter to two. I had used 92 maps
and had travelled 1,418 miles.” ■ Track back through room and out to
woman, who gets up to leave centre screen but realises she’s forgotten her
bag, which she returns for, then exits through wooden side door. ■ Cut to
shot of book left behind on desk, whose title is Some Migratory Birds of the
Northern Hemisphere by Tulse Luper. It contains 92 maps and colour
photographs of 1,418 birds. ■ The words A Walk Through H appear superim-
posed over the book and right of centre, in the same lettering as before and
identical to the title of the book. ■ Music fade. Cut to credits. Written,
produced & directed by Peter Greenaway. Maps by Peter Greenaway.
Narration by Colin Cantile. Music by Michael Nyman. A BFI Production,
1978.

Typically postmodern, this film’s text-commentary relation appears to
form a closed circuit. To ask the question — what is this film about? — is to
be met with the answer — its aboutness (which may be no more than a proxy
for the question of consciousness again: what does the film want?). So
literally does it seem to take itself as an instantiation of the motion picture
that, if there were no such thing as motion pictures in the world but only a
desire for them to be, this film would be a perfect realisation of that desire:
the very thing in itself. At least it would be so insofar as the film’s object-text
is considered to be the maps or drawings, the pictures set in motion by the
camera. This, of course, is an illusion, since the pictures themselves always
remain still. Or else it is not an illusion, on the grounds of asking: on what grounds could the pictures ever attain the status of “themselves” within a text where “they” are always and necessarily in relation to commentaries on and about “them”? There can be no pure form of these pictures as themselves, then, unless by inference — prior to being filmed they were themselves, as pictures. Perhaps they were turned back into themselves again after filming. But for as long as they remain on the surface of the film’s paper, they can never be themselves as such — any more than the word “question” can be a pure form of itself inside its relations to the other words of the line “To be or not to be, that is the question.”

Even when it is not inside Shakespeare, though, the word “question” still has to be somewhere, in relation to something. And this is also true of Greemaway’s drawings: they can never exist outside a context, in relation to that context, where they could simply, ideally, be themselves-as-such. So whatever they “are” here, in this film, is also what they are made to be by the film, as film, by being filmed. Equally and at the same time, the film is itself never locatable outside a context, in which any form of its “internal” relations themselves must be in relation to an outside that necessarily re-forms them. There is no question, then, of there being an ‘inside the film’ to or against which commentary can be positioned on or from the outside. There is no available meta-level of criticism in relation to the film.

But neither is there any space “inside” the film for that relation to occur. On the contrary, the film is about the impossibility of separating what it “is” from what it is “about” — just as what the drawings are cannot be separated from what they are said to be (maps, for instance). This does not mean — on the contrary — that the film provides an analysis of the drawings that gets deep inside them to reveal a hidden truth. In principle, the film can’t do that: because it is a film. But also — and crucially — because it is a “postmodern” film (therefore having no conviction in respect of an interior to explore). No matter how much it might try to go “into” the drawings, it can only track over and across them. And it can do so only in the form of an H-pattern, restricted to configurations of the movements up, down, and across. The only variation on this pattern is proxemic, provided by the movements in and out or forward and back, allowing the film to approach closer to the drawings, even to zoom in on selected details, and to pull back when it decides — but never to actually go into or through the drawings’ surfaces, which always remains impossible. Therefore the Walk Through of the title is an expression both of what might be called the film’s content and its form: on the one hand, H can be an initial that stands in for — perhaps — a place name that is never given, and so the film’s content is the narrator’s journey through or toward that place; while H can also be, on the other hand, a pictogram of the motions that form that journey in and as a film. In other words, H is both what and how the film films. Moreover, the what is an effect of the how — because what is filmed becomes film, just as a word becomes poetry when it is used “poetically.”

It is certainly possible to walk through a place and arrive at its interior. It is possible insofar as it is sayable. On another model of the possible, however, it would be better to say that one goes over a place and arrives at
its centre. The different valences of these possible forms of troping a journey could be of the order of a difference between history and geography, the modern and the postmodern. If so, then the text-commentary relation of *A Walk Through H* is clearly on the side of the latter term of each of these pairs: however much the film might want to get *through* to an interior of its object, it knows this to be the failed project of a humanist desire for mastery over hidden truths that lie beneath historical, textual, and psychic surfaces. It knows that whatever its object is is also what it objectifies, and this denies it any critical distance from which to penetrate that object’s interiority which is also its own. All it can do is repeat or try to invent configurations of motion constrained by the H-pattern, variable only insofar as it is possible to move in and out, but then only in the space of filming, prior to becoming film, when everything on paper is trapped on the surface and there is only ever up, down, and across.

In describing the film’s (perhaps) “postmodern” aesthetics and — also and identically, since it too involves judgements of value (see Wittgenstein, “Ethics”) — its “postmodern” ethics, we in some way repeat it, become complicit with it. Even to criticise a position, it has first to be installed, put in place; that is, given a place. What is that ethics — and how can we even begin to find another place, a place outside it? Is it perhaps in this way that we can begin to see how to theorise a film which is self-theorising and self-critiquing — a film which seems, by virtue of this (perhaps essential) “postmodern” trope of self-reflexivity, to be even more hermetically sealed and less open to outside intervention than classically modern texts?

The ethico-theoretical model of the film itself (what, to repeat our complicity with it, the film *wants*) appears to involve a kind of relève or Aufhebung. That is, no sooner is a proposition stated (say in the voice-track) than another proposition (which may be a camera movement, a next line of monologue or else a cut to what is apparently a “nature” film) overwrites it, cancels it, leaves it in place but (at the same time) takes it to another “level,” shifts it to another gear. The film operates, that is, by a continual series of over-trumpings. The frames of the Greenaway drawings (acting perhaps as “characters” for the drawings bought and stolen by the narrator) act also like cards in a complicated card game. Each can be, and is, “played” in a quite particular way. For example, the camera zooms in so that a drawing fills the whole frame of the film; then it tracks along the coloured lines of the drawing as though following a route map; then the camera pulls out and moves across the short spaces of wall between the frames, zooming back out to another drawing which then appears as one of the places or towns located in the previous “route map”; and so on. At the same time, the voice-track also tracks the drawings, telling several tales of journeys, arrivals, departures, searches, finds and frustrated investigations. But each “play” of each “card” (and sometimes these occur simultaneously within the diegetic space of the film) cancels the previous one or even the next one (or else the
ones that go simultaneously with it). In this way, the film (again we have to say) wants to defeat the logic of a linear narrative. It predicts, in this respect, a main technique of Greenaway’s better-known films, and especially The Draughtsman’s Contract, about which a colleague told one of us, “it defeats the documentary method of interpretation.”

This colleague was speaking of an operation which Harold Garfinkel (and other ethnomethodologists), borrowing from Mannheim, have found to be utterly crucial to commonsense thinking and practical operations (Garfinkel 77–78). According to this operation—the documentary method of interpretation (DMI)—people in everyday life apparently make interpretations by taking in a number of features of an object (say the first few lines of a story) and deriving from them a proto-overall pattern of meaning. The next few items, or evidences, are then either fitted into this proto-pattern, or else they contribute to fundamental changes in it. Eventually, a more complete pattern is arrived at, so that the whole complex object (or story) is deemed to have been “understood.”

The method consists of treating an actual appearance as “the document of,” as “pointing to,” as “standing on behalf of” a pre-supposed underlying pattern. Not only is the underlying pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences, but the individual documentary evidences, in their turn, are interpreted on the basis of “what is known” about the underlying pattern. Each is used to elaborate the other. The method is recognizable for the everyday necessities of recognizing what a person is “talking about” given that he does not say exactly what he means, or in recognizing such common occurrences and objects as mailmen, friendly gestures, and promises (Garfinkel 78).

On this model, meaning arises from understanding which, in turn, is the telos of a process of evidential interpretation; and such that each singular interpretation is founded (where we began) upon a meaning-so-far. Evidence changes pattern and pattern changes evidence, until each is brought into relatively perfect and harmonious alignment with the other. This is a version of the hermeneutic circle—and yet also of the induction-deduction procedure associated with Baconian versions of scientific method. If, during the first few minutes of a viewing of The Draughtsman’s Contract, it were true that this film (along with A Walk Through H) defeats the documentary method, then, for ethnomethodology at least, it is inaccessible to commonsense, scientific or professional hermeneutic reasoning. Every evidence (shot, camera movement, voice-track element and so on) in the film opens up the possibility of a new and completely fresh “underlying pattern of meaning,” to use Garfinkel’s term. That pattern is then scrapped and a new (singular) evidence-pattern takes its place—within seconds, within frames. Evidence and pattern never settle into a final totality. Instead of a single and overall meaning arrived at in the course of a linear narrative, meanings shoot off in every direction, to be collected nowhere, in no pattern, to be continually effaced—yet also left in place as candidate stand-alone meanings—by their adjacent or simultaneous meanings; and indeed by the meanings previous to them. The DMI uses “bricks” of evidence to construct
a patterned evidence; *A Walk Through H* is a pile of bricks, each with something it seems to want to say.

This, then, is not merely the defeat of what some would call a "Western," "linear" or "modernist," narrative model. It is much more than that — and yet it shares a crucial feature with it at the same time. It is both more and the same. Let us see why exactly.

It is *more* because it carries with it a possibility or threat of meaninglessness which it can never bring off — for the threat applies only to the "whole text" as meaningless, and this apparent threat is predicated on a *promise* that each element/evidence can act, in itself, as a meaning, a pattern, albeit unconjoined and arising out of its own self-evidence. On this view (the postmodern as apparently "more" than the modern), we arrive at a paradox: "postmodern" asemantics-of-the-totality is predicated on the semantic *fullness* of text-elements.

On the other hand, it is the *same* as modernism because it carries with it a similar — only slightly displaced — ethics. The invitation, as it were, to the viewer — or, on another theory, the interpellation of the viewer — remains on the same ethical grounds as that of the standard version of the DMI. Indeed, the defeat of commonsense (or perhaps "realist") semiotic practices which the film *wants* us to find in it, depends on the idea(l) that those practices are what viewers "normally" and "routinely" use in watching films. The apparent self-evidence (intra-evidentiality) of the elements in *A Walk Through H*, that is, depends on a contrast with its opposite, the inter-evidential possibility (the DMI) which it rejects. We can find the "whole film" to be without a single meaning only by addressing the possibility that each element has one. Semiotic totality of a kind (a different kind), that is, remains — but it is simply displaced to a different filmic "level" or space: the space of the shot, the sentence, the camera movement, and so on. (Full meaning is still in its element.)

If the DMI invites us to ask questions such as "what does the film want to say?" or "what does the narrator want to say?," or even, "What does the director want to say" — that is, if it invites us to make statements about the overall meaning of the text or one of its possible producers — then the antidocumentary method of *A Walk Through H* invites us to ask instead, "What does this particular object want to say?," where the particular object may be a painted (and then filmed) yellowish cross, or else a phrase of voice-over, or else a zoom-in or zoom-out. In the routine (modernist?) position, questions of meaning are asked about whole texts and / or authors. These are the things to which modernism attributes want, desire, agency, will, vouloir-dire, intrinsic meaning and so on — in a word "consciousness." The only difference between this and "postmodernism" (as represented by *A Walk Through H* or *The Draughtsman's Contract*) is that the same formations — want, desire, etc. — become attributable to things, represented things in a relatively more "objective" sense. In viewing *A Walk Through H*, that is, we cannot ask (we are prevented from asking) what *someone* means by it as a whole. But we are specifically invited to ask what a flight of birds or a secretary's desk means — if only because their narrative linkage to other objects "in" the film is not only not explicit, it is excluded, cut off. We are
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asked to think about what just-a-flight-of-birds-in-itself might be about. Consciousness comes to reside in the object — no longer in the producitional subject (for example, its author). But the type of thing that consciousness is remains the same. And this, too, is a way of asking “what does the film want to say?” We do not move out of the space of that question: we simply see the film itself as an object (or as a non-collection of represented objects) rather than as a proxy for (or expression of) some person’s wants or desires or intentions. The “object in the film” is merely synecdochal for the move (in so-called postmodernism) towards objects (for example, films-as-objects) being the bearers of consciousness, meaning and intention.

The apparent anti-ethics of A Walk Through H, then, is still an ethics of (in the space of) consciousness. What the film means and who we are (or become) as its viewers, the position we have to adopt with regard to ourselves (to use Foucault’s later conception of ethics — see Foucault, Use of Pleasure and McHoul and Grace, Foucault Primer) in order to see and understand it, remains predicated on a certain conception of consciousness. How can we not, then, repeat this ethics? How can we not accept the film’s own method of analysing texts (for example, drawings)? How can we not repeat that?

And we ask these questions in all seriousness: if only because there are no easy answers in this field. That is, we can see no easy way of asking for an analytic space which does not involve and require some version or other of consciousness: either the subject(ive)-consciousness of the linear narrative and its routine method of apprehension (the DM2) or the object(ive)-consciousness of the anti-narrative consisting of a lamination of elements and its equally routine method of apprehension (the anti-documentary method).

This paper — our s(h)ift through H — to be sure tries to set up another pattern — something different from Garfinkel’s “underlying pattern of meaning” and different again from “Greenaway’s” surface pattern of self-evidence (to use a shorthand). It sets up an H-pattern, marked by the positions on a car’s manual gear shift consisting of (1) a description of the film, (2) a description of what that description may be, (3) a theorisation of what it is to describe and (4) a theorisation of what it is to theorise what it is to describe. But every point in that pattern has to rely on — to posit, to inscribe, to find a place for — the idea of someone or something wanting to say. We have not simply transferred A Walk Through H on to paper. How could we?

Everything we know about the relations of text and commentary (see Hodge and McHoul) speaks against that possibility: against the possibility of a total adequation of text by commentary, of film by paper. Our paper, its body, cannot simply repeat, on paper, the motions of the camera and the voice. There is an inescapable difference between writing a paper and making a film. But there is still a repetition of some prior. And this “prior” is an imbrication in the field of consciousness (of understanding, of interpretation, of wanting to say what someone or something wants to say). We remain complicit with that; even as we try to ask the question of what it would be not to be so complicit.
The ethics we might want, in place of an ethics of consciousness, cannot be announced yet. It (which might be the postmodern) is a letter which has not yet arrived. Our positioning in a history of commentary and analysis does not yet allow a space for that operation. Even to return to the materiality of the paper, this paper, our paper, paper-in-general, does not rule out the possibility of consciousness arising. If ours is yet — and, to repeat, we doubt it — a postmodern world because it is a world where we ask the meaning of a flight of birds in *A Walk Through H*, where the soap in *Ulysses* speaks, where the TV in *The Crying of Lot 49* watches its audience (and so on, down a long list of so-called pomo tropes), that does not mean that consciousness has disappeared as a baseline axiomatics of interpretation. On the contrary, it has simply been displaced from persons to things, from subjects to objects. Our paper, our analyses, theorisations and descriptions, our bodies of thought, remain caught in that field.

All this for the sake of a better understanding of a little-known film, albeit by a well-known director? While we might want to reply to this that our paper is aimed at a much larger body of concerns, and that if’s therefore only incidentally a contribution to Greenaway studies, there can be no escaping the fact that it is this and not some other film (by Peter Greenaway or someone else) that set us on our way, however radically directions may (or may not) have shifted since; and so *A Walk Through H* cannot be simply “incidental” to where we are presently at. But, being not incidental — is this the same as being indispensable? And wouldn’t we have to be able to decide this question before being able to theorise what a theory of description might entail, insofar as this pertains to what can be described? Isn’t this also an ethical question?

What counts as “evidence,” for methods of interpretation by accretion (the DMI) or by lamination (the anti-docu approach)? Doesn’t this have to be decided on the basis of what doesn’t count, what everyone already “knows” to be incidental? So, for example, the very question we have just put may turn out to become indispensable to our paper, but the typeface in which the question appears in (on) our paper is always going to be incidental. That kind of thing. The kind of thing you just know doesn’t matter, even though the thing itself is capable of being both incidental and indispensable but never at the same time.

Once again, the structure of this either/or indicates the kind of stranglehold that consciousness has on both sides of the text-commentary relation. For we would argue that the seeming incidentality of consciousness to (say) film theory is in fact indispensable to it, though it is not often the case that consciousness is explicated as the organising principle of texts. We want to make it clear, in other words, that for the axiomatics of consciousness to be as powerful as we suspect, consciousness as such does not have to be explicitly mentioned as a positive productional or effectual force. It does not
have to appear in its own right or synonymously (as desire, will, agency, etc.) for it to fulfill the role of organizing even the most mute and disparate group of signs into a form of the speaking subject, whose plenitude arises out of consciousness. But while subject(ive) consciousness can sometimes be lost (through coma, for example), we suspect that there may be no object(ive) equivalent — no form of the text, that is, which doesn’t always want to be effectual in general (either at the level of micro-elements or in terms of a macro-structure) or which doesn’t, more specifically, want to be a poem or a Western or a love letter or a self-theorising film.

Semiosis without consciousness: we wonder what this could mean, despite the project of a so-called science of the sign. For no matter how much the sign’s internal relation is held to be (strictly) arbitrary, it can never be purely so; otherwise, for semiotics, the sign could never be. It could never be, because it could always not-be; it could always be another sign, or not be a sign at all. Something other than a force of the purely arbitrary must hold the relation of signifier to signified in place, then — and what else could this be but the axiomatics of consciousness? I want to be a sign. I do not want to be anything else. I will myself (to) signify.

Isn’t this — the axiomatics of consciousness — the basis of the text-commentary relation of the Greenaway film? How else could the drawings mean, if they weren’t presumed to want to do so? If there were only inert materiality-in-general, pure forms of the signifier-in-particular, how could semiosis occur? How could any object (say, the signifier H) be supposed to bear meaning if it were understood to be just that — a pure object? So there must be something — some force — that supplements the object’s itselfness or its object-ivity. And this would mean that, for A Walk Through H, even the self-analysing film (in which the content, as it were, is its form, and vice versa — viz. the text-commentary relation) could never “hope” to arrive at or as pure self-presence, total plenitude, ultimate aboutness in the form of itself as self-analysis. No matter how convincing the film might look in terms of being about itself as film, there will always be a residue of it being about (say) bird-watching, or the nature of nature films, or a form of cluedo in which some of the clues remain to be deciphered (H stands for “heroin,” for instance, or “Heidegger”; or it’s the letter that comes between “G[reenaway]” and “T”). However much postmodern/ art film/discourse wants to achieve pure self-presence, it is always — in principle — structured not to. There will always be room for a supplementary movement within and between the structure of the incidental/ indispensable relation to play itself out and shift from one to the other, turning (say) the incidental evidence of the bird footage into the ultimate indispensable truth of and about the film.

By the same token, the inverse of this movement also applies, for even the film that is most apparently about its “content” is inescapably at the same time about itself as film. No matter how hard a film like Schindler’s List (say) or Philadelphia may “try” (or may not — we aren’t passing judgment here) to be about the issue of the Holocaust or the issue of AIDS-related death, each still bears a trace of what is supposedly incidental to itself in relation to those issues: namely, the fact not simply of being a film but of being about that fact.
This remainder of the film’s ideal purity contaminates and prevents any film from becoming “pure” issue, just as it can never succeed in becoming “pure” film. Similarly, *A Walk Through H*, perhaps despite itself, can never be a pure and simply “postmodern” film, inasmuch as all films are structured by the text-commentary relation to require representations and analyses of (commentaries on) other texts, and themselves. This one just happens to do that explicitly, perhaps in order to (put a) point on this “fact” about film. So there could be no pure form of a question that might pertain only to the self-preservation of *A Walk Through H*, such as whether or not it is indispensable to the film that the narrator’s aunt died of food-poisoning from eating an omelette. This is precisely the kind of question (addressed to a micro-element or narrated event) that is put to film in general, to the text in general, on the basis of having to decide what a film/text in particular is “about” (which does not mean that a totalising unity is necessarily built up from the various aboutnesses of individual micro-units). But the question does not belong to the text in the way that the narrated event that gives rise to it does, or in the sense that the narrator’s voice belongs to the text as much as the events he narrates and the script of his narration. However incidental Colin Cantile’s voice is supposed to be (like the typeface of this paper), in contrast to the indispensable words he narrates (our words), it remains true that it’s his voice (this typeface) and none other that we hear (see). And so on.

But even if an exhaustive list of every last detail of the film (the grain of the narrator’s voice, the very grain of the film’s paper, every single camera angle and shot sequence, the precise shade of every colour in the film, the precise performance tone of every note of the musical score) could be compiled, it would never be a list of everything that was indispensable to the film except in terms of describing its materiality. Yet, in fact, every detail (micro-unit) would be indispensable, at least in terms of some idea(l) of the film’s pure form. What to make of the further fact, though, that some details will be regarded as incidental? Does this fact — the question of judgement — also belong to the text, to the text-commentary relation, and should it be included in the list?

We know that judgements are passed on people according to whether they are seen to be responsible for their actions, so that there can be no such thing as an accidental crime. Now we are proposing that this is the model on which judgements are made of texts. At the level of their responsibility, texts are held accountable for what they mean; but they might not always be responsible at some other, perhaps more atomic, level for what they literally are. And so it is regarded, not as a crime, but certainly as an accident that a text might “include” a typographical mistake, which is merely incidental to what it can be held to account for — that is, what it wants to mean (see McHoul and Wills, *Writing Pynchon* and Lucy, “Gilligan’s Wake”). There seems to be no other ground than the axiomatics of consciousness for deciding that some parts of the text’s “person” are incidental (like what colour tie it’s wearing) and some are known to be indispensable, intended (like the fact that it’s wearing a suit). (Nor does this mean that the incidental is always totally unintended, but rather that its intentionality at such times is of a “weak” form compared with the “strong” intentionality of indispen-
sable elements.) Only if the text were thought to be out of its head could there no longer be any basis for deciding what was meant and what was just an accident. Then, of course, the text would become persona non grata and not be a "text" at all.

In what can be called (for the sake of a certain pragmatics) a literal sense of the text, what it precludes any judgement of what it is about. And what(ever) it is, of course, is structured by the double and divided movement of the supplement (see Derrida, *Grammatology*); so that there is no hope of self-presence. In this (still literal) sense of what the text is, the only form of relation to it must be of an — ethical — order of the form of a repetition, which is never able to be pure. The ethical question is therefore to decide what is able to be repeated, before deciding what to repeat. For example, what does the film repeat when it repeats (films) the drawings?

A certain version of film theory might answer that, since the drawings are no longer separable from the film, the relation of what they are to what they were is purely textual and prevents their real meaning from collapsing into their real meaning prior to the film. But this would be no less true of the camera shots used to write them on the film's paper; even if these shots had never been used before in any other film, their use in *A Walk Through H* would still have the status of a repetition of some prior — perhaps as an imagined use, or simply in the realm of a language of camera shots. And so it would seem that theories of description must believe in the prior reality of what they describe, even if they also believe that their descriptions are so much text. Even if film theory believed its descriptions to be "reel" forms of the real, and that the real itself could be text ("reel" upon "reel"?), it would still be wedded to some idea(1) of succession that remained historical and rooted in a notion of the prior. Every movement across the geographic space of the screen that is both made possible and constrained by the H-formation (in this film, or that one), is also a movement within a temporal field. There is no outside the space of the text, whose coordinates are geographical and historical. Every movement is a shift, across some surface, in history. So there is always movement through as well as over — always a space of the in for moving up, down, across.

Literally, then, repetition is impossible, because (of) time shifts. So instead of being repeatable, objects are able only to be iterated — insofar as this notion of a (quasi-)prior concerns the always already sense in which a division occurs between opposing terms (real/reel, literal/metaphoric, indispensable/incidental, text/commentary). There is no term of positive value (real-literall-indispensable-text) incapable of being "parasited" (Derrida, "Signature Event Context") by its other and turned into its opposite; so that any slash that separates them is never rigorously pure and decidable. The slash or margin is therefore part of the term it also demarcates, limits, defines. There is always the possibility of a previously designated "incidental" feature of a text (perhaps even a "mistake") becoming "indispensable," such as the fact that the narrator's aunt died of food-poisoning from an omelette (see Lucy and McHoul). But it is only on the basis of being able to be incidental that this or any micro-unit would be able to become indispensable — its positivity is a structural effect of a quasi-prior
negativity. Similarly, any notion of the text's "materiality" must be compromised by this structure or "philosophy" of the limit (see Cornell), because the very idea(l) of materiality inters a not-material outside (to) itself that also defines materiality's limit and is to that extent inside the material. That is why, if for no other reason, this paper, its body, is and was always going to be already doubled and divided.

But we can't quite bring ourselves to say that postmodernism "knows" this. Instead, we suspect that the axiomatics of consciousness allows for meanings to be detected, described, analysed on the basis of a desire that is just as easily locatable in things as in persons; and, among things, just as easily in terms of micro-meanings as macro ones. In the end, the difference between an overall structure and an overall "lack" of structure does not seem to us to be much of a conceptual-ethical shift at all — not if the macroscopic lack is seen to be made up of microscopic units each with an overall structure. In any case, if the postmodern doxa is that the postmodern text (intentionally?) lacks a totalising meaning, because it doesn't "want" to be totalising, we can't quite see how this isn't a totalising statement. Consciousness can never be put under erasure simply through a kind of affirmative action by postmodernism on behalf of terms considered by humanism to be negatives. It is not enough just to go from work to text, if the latter term becomes the agent rather than the repository of consciousness.

Totalising truths based on "knowing" the will of the people can just as easily lead to the formation of repressive as to democratic structures, turning such "knowledge" into an effect of some prior relation between knowledge of bodies and bodies of knowledge. Whether the bodies in question are people or texts, the relation still holds — even when it leads to the totalising truth that there are no totalising truths. Postmodernism, then, hasn't replaced metaphysics with an analytics devoid of consciousness; its methodologies, its strategies of analysis and description, its whole axiomatics of critical/writing practices remain in a relation to choices that have been made concerning metaphysics — choices made still on the basis of knowing what the other wants. And these choices are made possible by metaphysical oppositions thought to be rigorous and permanent, so that an analysis might proceed by accretion or by lamination, for example, on the assumption that a text wants to be organic or mosaic. Until such oppositions have been deconstructed, until oppositionality in general is understood as a structure that requires and contains an other to oppose, consciousness will continue as the baseline to which all truth-statements must defer (including the film-theoretic or film-philosophic truth of what a film wants to be or mean). For as long as philosophy remains a system for seeking out the truth, in other words, we suspect that consciousness will remain the grounds of deciding the question "What is ...?" and continue to blind philosophy to the search for justice (see Cornell and Caputo). But what if there have never been any classical-philosophical questions, only pragmatic ones? What if the self-world relation does not pose a question worth asking (pace Husserl, who tried to make consciousness the means of connection — see Dreyfus), either in Heidegger's sense of Dasein as a single self-world entity or inasmuch as
there can be no general, universal structure of that relation outside specific reinsertions of it in the forms of Poet-Nature, I-Thou, Mind-Body, Individual-Society, and so on down a long list of capital essences that never seek to inquire — which poet(s) and whose nature? Can it be, perhaps, that postmodernism is not in fact "post-" anything, but rather continuous with the romantic moment of (pathetically) imputing consciousness to nature and therefore "postmodernism" is a misnomer? Should it now be known as "neo-romanticism," consciousness having but shifted, again, pathetically, into the domain of cultural objects (texts)?

If this were true, it would help to explain postmodernism’s reification of art-objects even if, as postmodernism might wrongly "want" to put it, the purpose was to "deconstruct" them. We suspect that whenever postmodernism uses the term "deconstruction," it in fact means something closer to the Russian formalist term, "defamiliarisation," or just generally — "critique." There is now a UK dance label called "Deconstruction," which is not simply by virtue of this name "deconstructive." Nor does the Greenaway film deconstruct film, or art work, or visual texts just by opening up the text-commentary relation to the "self-critical" approach of an antidocumentary method. Certainly the film’s closure repeats but — crucially — alters (iterates) the routine ending of a "documentary" film, where and when the narrative routinely provides a way of collecting all its elements to form an organic unity. In A Walk Through H this is both "quoted" and parodied, since all the elements are there at the end (in the form of Tu- le Luper’s book, containing 92 maps and colour photographs of 1,418 birds) — but with nothing to connect them, no way of reading this "conclusion" back across the film in order to make a retrospective "sense" out of it all. Everything points to a conclusion, then (since how could it not?), but when the film gets to that space, it’s been hollowed out, made empty — it’s too literally a conclusion to offer any sense of an ending. So the film’s own theory of description seems to work — again, literally — by de-scribing several objects (cartography, film, narrative), unwriting them according to their principles of composition. But this (what might be called) hyper-literal method of analysis, the film’s postmodern chic, could be just another — perhaps even the highest — form of consciousness at work: namely, irony. For irony is always — on a standard reading of literary devices — what is literally never there "in" texts; it always has to be imputed to be in place, so that "ironic" texts have to be understood to want to be ironic. So perhaps the film, in literally seeking to de-scribe the objects inside it and itself in relation to them, wants to point to the irony that the documentary method of interpretation is able to guarantee common-sense and / or scientificity only on the basis of metaphoricity, while A Walk Through H’s anti-documentary method seems to promise, if it does not produce, metaphoricity on the basis of a hyper-literal. This would no doubt be an interesting proof, if that’s what it wanted to be, but it does not locate the film’s analytics — its ethics — outside the domain of consciousness. Something still "wants." What we want to know is whether something that might be called a post-analytics could — possibly — not.
By theorising what it is to describe a film (this film) — in Gear Three — we have been led to a number of conclusions, about (the) film, about our own writing, and about the position or place that is so often referred to as “the postmodern.” So at this stage (or in this gear), it would be very easy to conclude with a defining summary — something, perhaps, along the following lines (in which we imagine quoting ourselves):

/""/ The film is not only postmodern, it’s also about the postmodern; but since the postmodern is effectively no more than a game with (in) theory (at least according to Frow) — rather than a “real” historical locus or (still less) period — then the film is not only “theoretical,” it is also about theory. On this reading, theory would become the context and medium of the film and also its “inside,” its “contents.” And this would be what gives us, in our paper, as commentators, no space to move. The postmodern would be the source of our problem of (non-)commentary. According to its logic, anything we might say would already be a possibility for the film itself (even if it were not actually taken up there in so many words, frames, images, musical phrases, and so on). It would then seem to be impossible for us to “get outside” the film and to describe it (or to theorise it) as an object. Hence postmodernism’s much-vaunted “collapse” of theory into practice and practice into theory, commentary into text and text into commentary, criticism into art and art into criticism ... and so forth. A collapse which apparently deletes consciousness from the privileged human subject and leaves only objects. Hence, also, the justification of plurality — of multiple reading/positions — that postmodernism “allows,” providing a space “in” which differences can be located, “in” which difference is desire(d), so that even pre-postmodern texts can be read as wanting to be read differently — see, for example, Morris — perhaps as (mere) objects."

But it is precisely this question of objects that has arisen time and again in our various shifts of gear. Within that metaphor, it is almost as if ideas of object and commentary were the “clutch” of concepts that allowed us to shift at all — without stalling, without grinding our gears, without bringing our paper to a halt altogether. And so, isn’t this insistence on object-consciousness finally a way of finding a space outside the film, outside the postmodern, and outside theory?

Of course, we’ve been trained to think of the idea of “a space outside theory” as essentially impossible. Essentially? Well, yes and no. For it is a certain kind of theory, itself, that argues that there is no space outside. And we can see why any discourse (theoretical or otherwise) would have an interest in keeping us (and you) inside its fold. Perhaps, then, in asking for a space outside the film and outside postmodernism (such that both could be criticised or problematised outside their own grounds), we are, after all,
asking for a space outside theory itself — at least insofar as we can’t yet imagine a theory without a dependence on some version of consciousness. (Let us be quite open about this possibility of extra-theoreticity: even if we’re still unsure how to bring it off.)

Nevertheless the clue to the shift appears to be this: whichever way we have turned, we have always been brought back to statements about “what the film wants to do.” For example, even in the last few paragraphs, we have been very close to saying that the film wants to be postmodern (or theoretical) and/or that it wants to embody (or be about) postmodernism (or theory). But if this were true — and we’re far from sure — it would mean that, within the space of the postmodern, there would still be — despite itself — something that wanted. Then there would still be consciousness, but a strange form of it shifted on to the object: the object(s) “inside” the film or else (by the synecdochical shift we have already mentioned in Gear Two) as the film itself. And this would lead to something utterly intolerable, even allowing for the (almost essential) contradictory positioning that the film/postmodernism/theory adopts. It would mean precisely that a humanistic version of consciousness has not simply gone away. It would mean that it has simply shifted from productional activity (authorship) to the product or production itself; so that while “we” do not have consciousness, “it” does. And let us remember — again — our utter complicity in this problematic: we have tried to find (and continue to try to find) “what the film wants (to say).”

We can’t imagine a space outside that. And yet that space which would be completely non-dependent on any concept of consciousness (which would also be the postmodern — and perhaps more “purely” the postmodern — were it available to us) is precisely what we would want to imagine.

To go back a little: the axiomatics of consciousness, even in (perhaps especially in) the most “postmodern” readings, has not been deleted. The same quantum of consciousness remains, but has simply been transferred on to objects rather than persons. And this means that the post-humanist promise of postmodernism — its ethics — has not arrived and is therefore not available. Our argument is no more or less than this: that that ethics could (if it were possible, in our form of life, in our history) shift us into another gear (a fifth, or possibly a reverse) and would, in so doing, allow us to get outside the H-pattern — of A Walk Through H.

Is the H, after all, just a Humanism? Humanism — to go back to that again, now knowing that postmodernism may be part of it or, at least, complicit with it — attributed consciousness to us, to human beings, thus invoking a general, non-differentiated humanity. This was the problem with humanist ethics. It celebrated the individual, but always on the basis of the individual’s consciousness which happened (in its grounds, rather than its specific inflection) to be invariant from person to person. It could not radically distinguish the individual from the collective, the ethical from the moral. This, so the story goes, gave rise to the anti-humanism of postmodernism. But what we have found here is that this means nothing more than a simple reversal: in postmodernism, we’re just as happy to attribute that same thing — consciousness — to object-texts (and so to assume that a general “humanity” has disappeared). But this doesn’t (in fact on the contrary) inaugurate the post-human(ist). The general model of
consciousness remains — albeit elsewhere. We cannot yet celebrate the so-called “death of man” that grounds postmodernism. “Man” is simply elsewhere, in “his” objects. Which is precisely how humanism saw posthumousness: the survival of human objects beyond death, thereby providing for the survival of persons’ intellection and consciousness after the demise of the body. But this (present) body of evidence points to a different conclusion. It suggests that life goes on — but in the space of the text; that a truly postmodern postmodernism would give up even that possibility, that telos of the self in its objectifications. It would want to answer the question “why write?” or “why film?” in a different way. It would want to. And this shows, exactly, its complicity. The author is dead — long live the text. But we can’t pretend that there is no space in what we’re doing for a certain “McHoul” and a certain “Lucy” to live on, long after they’ve died. We write, too, for a certain (albeit limited) post-arity; to remain in our objects after we are dead — killed perhaps in a road accident, from a wrong gear shift, just like the twins’ wives in A Zeit und Two Noughts. We, we confess, no longer know the limits to the going-without-consciousness that an ideal version of postmodern theory would inaugurate.

How could one (how could we) ever get outside that space — outside some notion of consciousness or the problem of subjectivity? This is the problem which Heidegger saw as precisely the wrong turn in philosophy, a turn marked by the shift to Plato from the preSocratics (see Heidegger, “Nietzsche’s Overturning”). If they asked about the substance of the world, he asked about the problem of knowing that substance, its forms and the configuration of those forms. This marked the beginning of interiority as the question of philosophy, the shift from ontology to epistemology, the shift from “what is?” to “how can we know what is?” It began the idea of philosophy as an inquiry into human being. The end of that inquiry is supposed to be postmodernism — as if the idea of a self-theorising object would mark that end. But all it in fact marks is a shift of the question of consciousness/interiority/humanity on to humanly-produced objects. So perhaps, after all, this is all postmodernism is: a re-attribution of consciousness to different objects — taking it away from the human — rather than an opening of a possibility of a philosophy outside subjectivity. What would that possibility look like? (This may be Heidegger’s question.) And, somehow, the question seems to be most important with regard to a post-analytics of film. How do we write about films in a way that deletes ideas of the idea, of want, desire, agency, will, vouloir-dire — of, in short, intrinsic meanings?

To shift back, again: a standard realism in filmic practice and in theory means this: that the means of representation disappear in order for the seemingly pure object to appear in its own right. This is how popular art works; this is its functionalism: to (seem to) present pure objects. But, equally, a standard relativism takes on a similar position: it says that there are only means of representation, such that the object (as noumenon) never arrives. This is how high art works in the space of the postmodern; this is its dysfunctionalism. But there are two problems with this. One has to do with consciousness, the other with morality.
Problem One: the idea that films want to say, or want to achieve something in saying remains. Both realism and relativism involve exactly the same model of consciousness—one in the subject, the other in the object—as if the latter guaranteed or grounded a certain and definite "otherness." The problem for relativism is the problem of the sameness of the model in a discourse which continually promises its other. The problem of humanism continues, but in another guise—that is, with slightly modified premises. And these new premises are—by their own logic—false.

Problem Two: there is a more-or-less single morality involved in the continuing distinction between high and low forms of art. It follows from the differential versions of consciousness in high and low forms. The moral problem is this: that there are degrees of consciousness such that high art is held to aspire to some purpose (by questioning simplistic modes of representation, by making representation itself an object of representation), while popular art is supposed to lack that same purpose or aspiration by representing (or thinking it can represent) objects rather than the means of representation themselves. (High art, then, has its highest point in Brecht and Godard, according to this theory.) But the question of consciousness remains in each—one apparently "self-consciously," the other "naively" or "unconsciously." The difference between these modes of address is, we argue, less important than it seems at first sight. It seems to be a difference which is fundamental—to mark different "periods" or to suggest a revolution. But this "revolution" is no more or less than a revolution in (inside) consciousness—not a revolution, then, so much as a re-volution. And so the position of commentary (from, say, Leavis to Lyotard) remains the same. It returns—high or low, postmodern or modern—to what someone or something wants. What is the space outside this double morality that is, as it turns out, quite singular?

How could we go back to A Walk Through H and perform a commentary on it which is not allowed to say—this is what the film wants to say? or—what does it achieve in saying? Can this be done? Is there a space of commentary without the possibility of consciousness, agency and morality; without some version of the high/low distinction (even if it happens to be one which celebrates the "low")? If there is nothing to say on this score, then there's the continuing possibility that postmodernism (like existentialism) is a humanism; that, despite itself, it veils the denial of the knowability of being, in Heidegger's sense: "In the history of Western thinking [...] what is, is thought in reference to Being; yet the truth of Being remains unthought, and not only is that truth denied to thinking as a possible experience, but Western thinking itself, and indeed in the form of metaphysics, expressly, but nevertheless unknowingly, veils the happening of that denial" ("Word of Nietzsche" 56).

Did A Walk Through H show—or teach—us this? If it did, then it might, after all, have asked the question of the postmodern—such that that is always a question and nothing more than a question, and is therefore something which is far from being with us (in this paper, that film, or any body) — yet.

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