

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



## Early Modern Anatomical Discourses in Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books*

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Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1991) features 24 books (plus *The Tempest*), including the fictitious *Anatomy of Birth* attributed to the sixteenth-century anatomist, Andreas Vesalius. The piece is embedded into Prospero's narrative, in which he explains how he and Miranda fled Milan. It serves as an interpretative addition to *The Tempest*; the spoken narrative follows the Shakespearean lines while the images imply that Miranda's mother died in childbirth. The movie is a display of overlapping visual, textual, and audible narratives and a running commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. It addresses the interrelated notions of corporeality and textuality: both the pages of Prospero's books and the actors' bodies are used as visual signs and vehicles for narrative.<sup>1</sup> The moving bodies fulfil an almost linguistic purpose on screen,<sup>2</sup> as they are agents of cinematic language and thus function as modes of cultural and artistic expression. Similarly, images of the books visualise the textual narrative (by presenting texts as images) and reflect on the meta-cinematic nature of the movie.

Over the course of the past three decades, scholars and critics have done considerable research on Greenaway's provocative proposition that we have never seen films, only literature or theatre put on screen. Greenaway's movies exploit Renaissance/Baroque literature, theatre, and art extensively;<sup>3</sup> he famously admires these periods, in which intermediality (i.e. the use of diverse cultural codes, texts, narratives, images, and

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<sup>1</sup> Greenaway frequently touches on the subject of text and image in his movies; e.g. *The Pillow Book* (1996), the story of a Japanese woman who uses her lover's body as a surface on which to record calligraphic marks, also addresses the issue of the interrelation between image and text by displaying the calligraphic characters as sets of visual design.

<sup>2</sup> See Yuri Lotman, *Semiotics of Cinema* (University of Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> See *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), *The Belly of an Architect* (1987), *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* (1989), *The Baby of Mâcon* (1993), *Nightwatching* (2007).

performances) was common. Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights familiarised themselves with popular ideas circulating in England at the time, and this gave rise to incredibly complex visual and textual narratives. Contemporary theatre displayed a vast array of corporeal and physical means of expression, including visual, auditory, olfactory, and even gustatory elements, and it demonstrated a keen interest in the workings of the human body. Corporeality is a key notion in the discussion of the Vesalius reference in *Prospero's Books* for at least two reasons: Vesalius's studies and the spread of sixteenth-century anatomy theatres and public autopsies challenged medieval ideas of the human body, thus establishing early modern anatomical discourses, which are also echoed in Greenaway's movie; furthermore, corporeality is central to the semantic aspects of cinema and theatre, as they are both agents of 'the human being, as body and soul, flesh and spirit, as either union of or gap between signifier and signified'.<sup>4</sup>

This essay sets out to explore the rich matrix of corporeal meaning in *Prospero's Books* with reference to sixteenth-century anatomy books, particularly Andreas Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*. The main focus falls on the examination of the interrelation between body and text and the culturally coded understanding of the transcendent via an understanding of the human body. First, I outline certain aspects of Greenaway's film narratology. I then offer a brief discussion of Renaissance anatomy conventions and Vesalius's *De Fabrica*; in the last section, I explain how knowledge of these conventions and Vesalius's work contribute to an interpretation of the movie. I use a multidisciplinary approach involving the interpretive strategies of film narratology, semiotics, and iconography in order to reveal the function of corporeality in *Prospero's Books*.

## I.

Greenaway, a trained painter himself, rejects mainstream trends in plot-driven film narrative and characterises his composition of film-narratives as image-centred. In his movies, image and text seem to be in a competitive relationship, and they generate compositional conflicts resulting in intermediality and artistic fusion. Although

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<sup>4</sup> Attila Kiss, 'The Body Semiotic in the Theatre', in *Sederi XI*, ed. by Pilar C. Domínguez et al., (Huelva: Universidad de Huelva, 2002), pp.13-24 ( p. 13). For more on text and image in Greenaway's films see László Kovács, 'Írás, kép, test. Shakespeare és Greenaway találkozása a boncasztonon' ('Text, Image, Body. Shakespeare and Greenaway Meet on the Autopsy Table') in *Apertúra*, 2007 <http://uj.apertura.hu/2007/nyar/kovacs-iras-kep-test-shakespeare-es-greenaway-talalkozasa-a-boncasztonon/> last accessed 9/12/2019

Greenaway emphasises the importance of image over plot, his movies are not completely free of storytelling; many of his movies are sequential reinterpretations of narratives deeply ingrained in European culture.<sup>5</sup> Randy Laist refers to the notion of hyperreality in *Prospero's Books* (a concept first described by Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard) and argues that the books are the sources of Prospero's (and *The Tempest's*) reality. The abundant references to various aspects of Western culture, Laist adds, are 'embedded in an elaborate, hyperreal fantasy that has always been marooned on Prospero's island'.<sup>6</sup> Greenaway's films offer competing cultural narratives and constructs consisting of subtle sets of signs which intersect, overlap, and reflect on one another. He argues that human knowledge and experience are structured into a variety of narratives. These narratives are neither exclusive nor universal. They offer fragmented interpretations of the world and are culturally, socially, and historically determined. He explained this as follows:

I would just argue that all our systems are very much constructs, even systems that are held very dear (like religious beliefs), and that they are only useful in small pockets, either for individuals and communities, historically and geographically, they fit time and place, they are conveniences.<sup>7</sup>

When observed from a critical distance, as Greenaway argues, powerful constructs like religion become opportunities for creativity, playful de/reconstruction of seemingly stable systems of ideas, meta-cinema, and reflection. James Park points out that 'behind all Greenaway's work is a postmodernist sense that narrative structures of chronological succession and logical cause and effect are false to the essentially chaotic and problematic nature of subjective experience, and that the patterns we discern in experience are wholly illusory'.<sup>8</sup> Greenaway's films reflect on the relativity of such systems, foregrounding the notion that they can be reconstructed and modified at any time:

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of such underlying narratives in Greenaway's *A Zed & Two Noughts* include the birth of a miraculous child in *The Baby of Mâcon*, the conflicting creation myths, the reversed version of Darwin's theory of evolution, and the myth of Leda and the Swan.

<sup>6</sup> Randy Laist, 'Prospero's Books: Hyperreality and the Western Imagination', in *Shakespeare on Screen: The Tempest and Late Romances*, ed. by Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 185-98 (p. 185).

<sup>7</sup> Qtd. in Trevor G. Elkington, 'Between Order and Chaos: On Peter Greenaway's Postmodern/Poststructuralist Cinema', *Film-Philosophy*, 8.2 (2003), <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol8-2004/n2elkington>>

<sup>8</sup> James Park, *Learning to Dream: The New British Cinema* (London: Faber, 1984), p. 88.

We are on our own, which I think is fantastically liberating, and which would also prove that all the other checks, all the other codes, all the other organizations of our lives are human constructs, which we have attempted to invent in order to attack the notion of purposelessness.<sup>9</sup>

Here ‘purposelessness’ does not necessarily connote nihilism; rather, it is closely linked with cultural detachment and the lack of emotional involvement, which lead to artistic freedom and promote reflection. Bruce Kawin highlights two formulas of film-reflexivity: on the one hand, authorial self-consciousness allows the film-maker to articulate the process of creating a discourse within other discourses, sometimes violating the audience’s suspension of disbelief and taking the stage in the process; on the other, in systemic self-consciousness the film itself appears to be aware of its own discursive nature, and this imitative awareness seems to fall outside the authority of the director.<sup>10</sup> This is also true of *Prospero’s Books*, in which the systems almost appear to narrate themselves. Mostly due to their self-reflective nature, as Alan Woods argues, metacinema and metatheatre in Greenaway’s movies are metaphors which prevent emotional identification with the characters or action, which otherwise would stand in the way of understanding both art and life. As Woods put it, unless ‘art first holds up a mirror to art, it cannot begin to include nature within its frame’.<sup>11</sup>

The subtle narrative systems in Greenaway’s movies serve this very purpose: the frequent collage-like shots in his films generate frames within the frame and spectacles within the spectacle. In *Prospero’s Books*, the spectacle within the spectacle is manifested in sets of multi-layered images, providing a fitting vehicle of framing and re-framing and also feeding the process of ‘words making text, text making pages, pages making books from which knowledge is fabricated in pictorial form’.<sup>12</sup> This is closely related to corporeality in the movie: the images reveal the various layers and interconnectedness of the organs of the human body, a complex system, the significance of which I discuss later in this essay. *Prospero’s Books* displays several narratives at once, and this requires highly flexible spatial arrangements.

The spaces of Greenaway’s movies are hard to identify: they are in constant transformation, periodically altering, thus creating a highly metaphorical background to

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<sup>9</sup> Eklington, ‘Between Order and Chaos’.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Kawin, ‘An Outline of Film Voices’, *Film Quarterly* 38.2 (1984-1985) 38-46 (pp. 41-2).

<sup>11</sup> Alan Woods, *Being Naked Playing Dead: The Art of Peter Greenaway* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p.17.

<sup>12</sup> Vernon Gras and Marguerite Gras (eds.), *Peter Greenaway: Interviews* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), p. 130.

the ongoing performance. *Prospero's Books* incorporates books and paintings into a reconfigured cinematic space, situating the viewer, as James Tweedie observes, in a liminal position 'somewhere at the crossroads of arts [...] The whole film unfolds in this disorienting environment, a space of instability and heterogeneity, the apotheosis of Deleuzian «any-space-whatever»'.<sup>13</sup> This imaginary space transformations and the frame of the film is transgressed as sets of ideas unfold. Greenaway's films, as Tweedie notes, operate 'within mathematical ordinances modelled on what Deleuze calls Leibniz's «Baroque mathematics,» in which the «straight line always has to be intermingled with curved lines»'.<sup>14</sup> This results in overflowing and spaceless narratives which constantly transgress generic and cinematic boundaries, hence blurring the line between life and art, presentation and representation; this is a state of permanent liminality which creates new perspectives and new opportunities for self-reflection.<sup>15</sup>

Greenaway's films challenge culturally established narratives like those of creation or ideas about the workings of the human body by placing them into highly ambiguous cinematic spaces and questioning their authority. *Prospero's Books* also exhibits copious visual, textual, performative, and audible elements. One example of such complexity is the thematic enumeration of Prospero's books, each of which contains a convoluted crucible of ideas with reference to other sets of ideas in other books. *Book 8, The Vesalius Anatomy of Birth*, thematises sixteenth-century anatomy books, especially Andreas Vesalius's *De Humanis Corporis Fabrica*.

## II.

Greenaway's movies display various aspects of corporeality; the bodies fulfil an almost linguistic purpose on screen as they are agents of cinematic language and function as modes of cultural and artistic expression. The Vesalius reference in *Prospero's Books* invites corporeal interpretations and alludes to one of Greenaway's recurring themes: the depiction of the human body as a sign and its comparison to books. Several of Greenaway's movies present narratives through corporeality and through books (see e.g. *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, The Pillow Book, The Baby of Mâcon*):

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<sup>13</sup> James Tweedie, 'Caliban's Books: The Hybrid Text in Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books*', *Cinema Journal* 40.1 (2000), 104-26 (p. 105).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 115.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the use of space in Greenaway's films see Zita Turi, 'Metamorphosis and Identity – "Cinetheatrical" Spaces in Peter Greenaway's *The Baby of Mâcon*', *Forum: Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts*, 10 (2010), <http://www.forumjournal.org/article/view/647/931> last accessed 9/12/2019

the various layers of the body correspond to the pages. His films, as Bridget Elliott and Anthony Purdy point out, blur the boundaries of representation as they ‘mingle mind and matter, high and low, to dissolve the distinctions between the body and its representations, between nature and culture’,<sup>16</sup> as well as between various vehicles of signs (books and bodies alike). I return to this context later and move on to a discussion of Renaissance anatomical discourses, particularly the ones that were highly inspiring for Greenaway.

Andreas Vesalius was the figurehead of sixteenth-century medical studies in Europe, and his *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543) was the first authoritative anatomy book to summarise both contemporary and ancient findings in the field. He studied and worked at the University of Padua, one of the few European universities at the time where autopsies were allowed. The university attracted international scholars, for instance the English physician William Harvey, whose *Exercitatio Anatomica de Motu Cordis et Sanguinis in Animalibus* (*An Anatomical Exercise on the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Living Beings*, 1628) challenged Galen’s ideas and gave a novel account of the circulation of the blood. Vesalius’s findings, like those of most contemporary anatomists, were based on ancient principles and had considerable influence on medical science in continental Europe and England.

Renaissance medical science, like most contemporary disciplines, questioned medieval principles and sought inspiration in the works of ancient authors. The works of Aristotle and Galen were already well-established in Western medical conventions when Vesalius became an influential anatomist; although he did not introduce ancient authors to early modern anatomical discourses, he challenged their medieval interpretations and established an anatomical narrative which complied with contemporary humanism. The medieval idea of the relationship between body and soul is largely based on Plato’s *Phaedo*, in which the soul seeks to become free of the constraints of the body. Jonathan Sawday notes that this dualistic struggle is deeply embedded in medieval Western theology and was very commonly associated with one’s relationship with God. Sawday quotes Augustine, who regarded the ‘corruptible body’ as ‘a burden to the Soul’.<sup>17</sup> Although the medieval narrative was occasionally challenged, only with the emergence of science in the sixteenth-century did ‘mastery over the body, and control of its internal processes’<sup>18</sup> become a real political stake.

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<sup>16</sup> Bridget Elliott and Anthony Purdy, *Literature and the Body* (Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 1992) p. 180.

<sup>17</sup> Qtd. in Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996; repr.), p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

The sixteenth-century history of anatomy confirms the reinvention of the field through the revival of ancient knowledge. Nancy G. Siraisi notes that Renaissance anatomy, contrary to the medieval conventions, was ‘a great enhancement of both practice and textual foundation, the latter both ancient and modern’.<sup>19</sup> This trend contributed to the improvement of various dissection techniques, helped establish anatomy as an autonomous discipline, and bred a generation of scholarly practitioners. Siraisi adds that ‘the new anatomy demanded that anyone who could dissect a cadaver should also be capable of dissecting an ancient Greek anatomical text (preferably in the original language), and that anyone who wished to discuss an anatomical text should also be capable of dissecting a cadaver’.<sup>20</sup> Vesalius was one of the finest such mainstream scholarly anatomists.<sup>21</sup>

Vesalius’s understanding of the human body was also considerably shaped by Galen’s anatomy, according to which the human body must have been designed by an intelligent Creator. He developed an elaborate teleological concept of the human body and, drawing on Plato, considered it a ‘conscious, purposeful design’ of a ‘divine Craftsman’.<sup>22</sup> Galen explained his views concerning a link between human anatomy and the human soul, and he highlighted various patterns indicative of how the soul is ‘arranged by regions of the body’.<sup>23</sup> Galen’s teleology was compatible with medieval natural philosophy, which was largely based on his works, the works of Aristotle, and the ancient theory of the four humours. Richard Sugg discusses Renaissance medical scholarship and the hierarchy of human existence and refers to the sermon by John Donne in which Donne tells his audience that

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<sup>19</sup> Nancy G. Siraisi, ‘Vesalius and the Reading of Galen’s Teleology’, *Renaissance Quarterly* 50.1 (1997), 1-37. (p. 2).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> His *De Fabrica* was written in Latin and conforms to the principles of antique rhetoric, particularly to his literary model, Cicero, from whom Vesalius borrowed principles of ancient rhetoric. Andrea Carlino discusses the alternative meanings of the word ‘fabrica’ and argues that Vesalius chose this particular term as a reference to Cicero’s *De natura deorum*. In this piece the word occurs in anatomical passages, and it refers to providence and nature’s intelligence, ‘where the wonder generated by the enterprise of the Faber (the gods, Nature) is asserted’; see Andrea Carlino, ‘Medical Humanism, Rhetoric, and Anatomy at Padua, circa 1540’ in *Rhetoric and Medicine in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Stephen Pender and Nancy S. Struever (London: Routledge), pp. 111-28 (p. 117). For Vesalius, Ciceronian rhetoric and eloquent style were the access points to this intelligence (see Carlino, p. 117). For Renaissance humanists, the human body was seen as the source of all understanding and the cadaver’s function was very similar to that of a book, which reveals a vast array of knowledge when opened.

<sup>22</sup> Siraisi, 4.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

the body is not the man, nor the soul is not the man, but the union of these two makes up the man; the spirits in a man which are the thin and active part of the blood, and so are of a kind of middle nature, between soul and body, these spirits are able to do, and they do the office, to unite and apply the faculties of the soul to the organs of the body, and so there is a man.<sup>24</sup>

Medieval ideas regarding human integrity persisted well into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; one finds them in the illustrations of Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, although the focus of inquiry gradually shifted from the immortal soul to the human body. In the sixteenth-century, as Sugg notes, a rift opened between metaphysics and natural philosophy (mainly due to the Church's failure to explain the link between body and soul). The body increasingly became the subject of the investigation of the fusion of matter and soul,<sup>25</sup> and medical scholars began to view the human body as 'the wonder of the soul, and of its mysterious Creator'.<sup>26</sup>

The frontispiece of the *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* shows Vesalius performing an autopsy on a female cadaver; his focus of interest is the lower abdominal region and the female reproductive organs.<sup>27</sup> The top centre of the image displays Vesalius's heraldic symbols: three weasels, small, agile animals which are capable of entering hidden places; below, there is a skeleton, a reference to the memento mori tradition. Vesalius performs the autopsy in front of a diverse audience. A German student, Baldasar Heseler, gives an account of these kinds of public dissections: 'the anatomy lesson had been organized... quite well and conveniently... There was a table on which the subject lay, and around it four rows of seats constructed in a circle, so that almost two hundred people could see'.<sup>28</sup> The three figures wearing togas around Vesalius, Galen, Hippocrates, and Aristotle represent the art of medicine of classical antiquity. Vesalius is in the centre of the image, he is looking at the viewer while his right hand is pointing at the abdominal region of the corpse; his left index finger is pointing upwards, thus linking the female reproductive organs with the heavens. On the one hand, the upward finger points towards the skeleton, a representation of the memento mori tradition; on the other, this posture indicates that Renaissance autopsies aimed to unhide the secrets of the divine, a feature also echoed in *Prospero's Books* (see later). Although

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<sup>24</sup> Qtd. in Richard Sugg, *The Smoke of the Soul: Medicine, Physiology and Religion in Early Modern England* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 17–18.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>27</sup> See <https://exhibitions.lib.cam.ac.uk/vesalius/case/focus-on-the-frontispiece/> last accessed 9/12/2019

<sup>28</sup> Qt. in Giovanna Ferrari, 'Public Anatomy Lessons and the Carnival: The Anatomy Theatre of Bologna', *Past & Present* 117 (1987), 50-106 (p. 62).



dissections revealed the complex systems within the human body, what animates the body remained a mystery. In the Middle Ages, the gap between body and soul was bridged by the spirits that were responsible for bodily functions. The Catholic Church invented this narrative in order to explain the discrepancies between its doctrines and the mystery of the relationship between body and mind; this theory was widely accepted until the sixteenth-century, when it was challenged by the rapid development of anatomy.

Vesalius avoided religious transgression and did not want to refute medieval views about body and soul (which would have been fatal); he did, however, challenge about 200 of Galen's points, and he based his anatomical experiments not on ancient narratives, but on observation. It took almost another century for the New Science to establish itself fully and for anatomical investigations to become widely acknowledged as valid scientific and cultural modes of inquiry.<sup>29</sup> Sixteenth-century anatomists developed their own narrative, according to which the human body was a 'gateway' into the transcendent and, as a biological construction, full of secrets to be revealed. As Sugg notes, the 'soul was always potentially present during a dissection. It was the soul which lay at the root of all physiological processes, branching out into innumerable ramifications of nerves, veins and arteries in the form of those intermediate spirits of the blood'.<sup>30</sup> These images exhibit the human body and soul on a cosmic scale,<sup>31</sup> hence further developing the medieval discourse.

The illustrations in the *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* display the enormous complexity of the physical body: the images were designed by Titian's workshop, and they capture the physical depth and numerous layers of the human body. The 1543 edition contains an appendix, the Epitome, with further illustrations in colour (and a frontispiece dedicated to Emperor Charles V) and pop-up images, i.e. pages displaying multi-layered manikins and the actual arrangement of the organs.<sup>32</sup> These kinds of pop-up illustrations served educational purposes for medical students, as they modelled the structure of the body and the levels of understanding of its make-up. Vesalius notes that the study of

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<sup>29</sup> See Christian Billing, 'Modelling the anatomy theatre and the indoor hall theatre: Dissection on the stages of early modern London', *Early Modern Literary Studies* Special Issue 13 (April, 2004): 3.1-17. <http://projects.chass.utoronto.ca/emls/si-13/billing/index.htm> last accessed 02/08/2017.

<sup>30</sup> Sugg, p. 73.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>32</sup> See <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/features/andreas-vesalius-1514-1564-and-the-books-that-made-the-father-of-anatomy> accessed 12/12/2019

anatomical layers ‘will bring you to the inward parts’,<sup>33</sup> and he proposes a divine plan on the basis of which the human body was engineered:

But, rather, the admirable industry of Nature here should come to be considered who engineered all those things thus divinely, nor constructed anything in the intestines unless for the highest usefulness... And considering these purposes indeed she most artfully crafted the intestines.<sup>34</sup>

These anatomy books exhibit the three dimensional human bodies on two dimensional pages; similarly, *Prospero's Books* displays autopsy sessions and bodies on the screen which fulfil an almost linguistic purpose, as they are agents of cinematic language and function as modes of cultural and artistic expression, a subject which I discuss in the last section of this paper.

Autopsies and their textual and visual representations were parts of the sixteenth-century idea that corporeality is the key to the mystery of the divine, and, at the same time, the iconography of the illustrations reveals the contemporary need for self-reflection and the understanding of human nature. Giovanna Ferrara argues that anatomy was regarded as a ‘precious instrument that could be used to investigate man, and with man nature’.<sup>35</sup> Interest in anatomy books increased in the sixteenth-century, mainly due to the extensive availability of printed books and the development of various illustration techniques. Ferrara adds that the anatomist and the artist collaborated closely and refers to Leonardo da Vinci’s description of this dynamic:

you, who wish with words to demonstrate the figure of man with all the aspects of his bodily parts, must renounce that opinion, because the more minutely you describe your object, the more you will confound the mind of the reader, and the more impossible will you render knowledge of the thing described. It is therefore necessary both to depict and to describe.<sup>36</sup>

Anatomy here is closely associated with art and the anatomist with artists. The bodies are aestheticized and may be regarded as visual signs which express cultural codes and reflect on early modern narratives about the interrelation between body and soul. In Galen’s teleology, the soul occupied the body based on hierarchical principles. According to these principles, the hands were highly important body parts, as they

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<sup>33</sup> Qtd. in Siraisi, 6.

<sup>34</sup> Qtd. in *ibid*, 16.

<sup>35</sup> Ferrara, 55.

<sup>36</sup> Qtd. in Ferrara, 55-6.

served as ‘an appropriate instrument for the intelligent animal’<sup>37</sup> and enabled humans to emerge from the animal world and use this instrument for artistic, scientific, and other creative purposes.<sup>38</sup> This is represented by the title page of the *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*, which displays Vesalius performing an autopsy on an arm, hand, and fingers.<sup>39</sup> As Siraisi observes, he is revealing the muscles which control the fingers beside a pen, an inkwell, and paper, references to the scholarly nature of the science and of anatomy.<sup>40</sup> Anatomy, however, was not simply science in the sixteenth-century; it was also regarded as an art form. The images of dissections were produced by outstanding contemporary artists, and the notions related to autopsies became parts of a variety of artistic expressions. The significance of the hand will be crucial in my discussion of *Prospero’s Books*, in which the images of the books similarly visualise the textual narrative (by presenting texts as images) and reflect on the meta-cinematic nature of the movie.

Public autopsies also influenced the performance spaces of early modern London. Christian Billing refers to Inigo Jones, who in addition to designing an anatomy theatre, converted Christopher Beeston’s Phoenix playhouse into a cockfighting pit. Billing adds that the architecture of the Phoenix closely resembled contemporary English and Dutch anatomy halls, to which early modern playwrights tailored their dramas. John Ford, for instance, created many of his tragedies to fit the space of this particular theatre and display the ‘act of murder from the social and political domain in order to create a new phenomenality of violence in which aggression is enacted almost uniquely as a function of anatomical imperatives’.<sup>41</sup> The main concepts of anatomy seeped into early modern literature and art, and themes related to dissections and corporeality became parts of the stock imagery for early modern dramatists. The New Science of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries is echoed in the imagery used by Elizabethan/Jacobean playwrights, and the ancient (and also Vesalian) idea of the creative hand appears in

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<sup>37</sup> Siraisi, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 5.

One of the finest examples of the hands of human beings as instruments of art and the striving for metaphysical truth is Michelangelo’s fresco of Adam and God in the Sistine Chapel. As Kathryn L. Lynch points out, the ‘touch of fingers, by which God transfers creative power to Adam in Michelangelo’s famous painting, could be mentioned as part of this tradition of the generative hand’. (‘What Hands Are Here?’ The Hand as Generative Symbol in Macbeth’, *The Review of English Studies* 39.153 [1988], 29-38 [p. 34].)

<sup>39</sup> See <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/features/andreas-vesalius-1514-1564-and-the-books-that-made-the-father-of-anatomy> accessed 12/12/2019

<sup>40</sup> Siraisi, 5.

<sup>41</sup> E.g. *The Broken Heart* (1629), *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* (1630), and *Love’s Sacrifice* (1631). See Billing, ‘Modelling the anatomy theatre’.

Shakespearean drama.<sup>42</sup> According to Galen, as Lynch notes, the hand is the executioner of the creativity of the intellect or reason. By the Renaissance, ‘the tradition of the divinely creative hand was well-established’,<sup>43</sup> and it had become a frequently used trope both in literature and iconography, as seen in Rembrandt’s 1632 painting, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*.

### III.

Dr. Nicolaes Tulp, a humanist and fellow of the Amsterdam Surgeons’ Guild, commissioned Rembrandt to paint a portrait of him similar to the image of Vesalius in the 1543 woodblock. In the painting, Tulp is performing an autopsy and is revealing the anatomic structure of the cadaver’s arm. In the lower right-hand corner there is an open book, which serves as a manual for the session, and while some of the characters are looking at the dissected arm or at the viewer, others are looking at the pages of the book.<sup>44</sup> The iconography of the painting reveals that Tulp shared the sixteenth-century idea that the human body is the result of Divine creation and anatomical investigations lead to deeper metaphysical understanding. Tulp’s main focus is the hand of the cadaver, and, like Vesalius and Galen, he regards the hand as the main instrument ‘to create civilization’.<sup>45</sup> According to William Schupbach, the painting and Tulp himself were greatly influenced by contemporary metaphysical poetry circulating in Amsterdam; Schupbach highlights that while Tulp’s peer is directing attention to the cadaver and ‘points out the obvious mortality of man, Dr Nicolaes Tulp reveals the more elusive element that does not die’.<sup>46</sup>

The Vesalian ideas which influenced Rembrandt are strongly emphasised in Greenaway’s interpretation of *The Tempest*: the narrative interpolation about how Prospero and Miranda fled Milan focuses on Prospero’s wife and offers an alternative

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<sup>42</sup> If the hand is an instrument that enabled humans to emerge from the animal world, the tragedy of Lavinia in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* lies not simply in her mutilation and rape, but also in her inability to deliver (tell) and record (write down) her narrative. As she cannot express what happened to her, she refers to the story of Philomela in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, who was turned into a nightingale, a songbird which is also the attribute of Lavinia, who can only produce non-human sounds incomprehensible to other characters.

<sup>43</sup> Lynch, 34.

<sup>44</sup> See <https://www.rembrandthuis.nl/meet-rembrandt/rembrandt-the-artist/most-important-work/the-anatomy-lesson-of-dr-nicolaes-tulp/?lang=en> last accessed 9/12/2019

<sup>45</sup> Dolores Mitchell, ‘Rembrandt’s *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*: A Sinner among the Righteous’, in *Artibus et Historiae* 15.30 (1994), 145-56 (p. 147).

<sup>46</sup> Qtd. in *ibid*.

background narrative explaining the absence of Miranda's mother in the drama. According to this explanation, she died in labour; the scene displays her corpse in a setting similar to the setting of Rembrandt's painting, surrounded by men wearing white collars.<sup>47</sup> Next, the camera shows a naked pregnant woman, probably Miranda's mother, who peels the skin off her belly and reveals her womb and her intestines. Such representations were common in sixteenth-century iconography. The image of the self-flaying (wo)man was used to represent the endeavour to uncover the secrets of the human body.<sup>48</sup> The next shot shows Miranda's mother at her funeral, thus reflecting on birth and death simultaneously. The film can be interpreted as a commentary on Prospero's books, and this scene is embedded in a fictitious book, Vesalius's lost *Anatomy of Birth*. The voice-over narration refers to the volume as follows:

Vesalius produced the first authoritative anatomy book; it is astonishing in its detail, macabre in its single mindedness. This *Anatomy of Birth*, a second volume now lost, is even more disturbing and heretical. It concentrates on the mysteries of birth. It is full of descriptive drawings of the workings of the human body which, when the pages open, move and throb and bleed. It is a banned book that queries the unnecessary processes of ageing, bemoans the wastages associated with progeneration, condemns the pains and anxieties of childbirth, and generally questions the efficiency of God.<sup>49</sup>

*The Book of Birth* shakes, throbs, and bleeds, and the scene directly links the text in the book and the human body, more particularly, to labour and childbirth.

Prospero's wife is mentioned once when Prospero tells Miranda how they fled Milan; this scene also serves as the frame narrative for the *Anatomy of Birth* in *Prospero's Books*: 'Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and / She said thou wast my daughter; and thy father / Was Duke of Milan' (1.2.56-8).<sup>50</sup> Shakespearean drama tends to display dramaturgical inconsistencies and thus offers ample opportunities for interpretation and artistic adjustments. Greenaway invented the character of Prospero's wife and created a

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<sup>47</sup> Peter Greenaway dir, *Prospero's Books*, Miramax, 1991. 0:20:30 – 0:21:35

<sup>48</sup> One example is Juan Valverde de Amusco's *Historia de la composicion del cuerpo humano* (Rome, 1560), which contains several images of the self-flaying man. Valverde's work was greatly influenced by Vesalius, and he was even accused of plagiarism, as the *Historia de la composicion* contains many illustrations from the *De Humani Corporis Fabrica*.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Greenaway, *Prospero's Books* (1991), USA: Miramax.

<sup>50</sup> All references are made to The Arden Shakespeare critical edition, ed. by Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

narrative according to which she died during childbirth. In an interview Greenaway explains why he wanted to compensate for the lack of female presence in the play:

*The Tempest* is remarkably bereft of female initiative and I want to bring that in. We can't leave things like that out. I am fascinated by what is pushed to the margins of the text... But, just as I have the legitimacy for retrieving Miranda's mother from the margins of the text, I have the legitimacy for questioning the nature of Prospero's books. Gonzalo throws them in the boat, but you might as well ask yourself: Where are those books, what is the nature of those books, what makes Prospero so powerful on that island. I want to explain that.<sup>51</sup>

The books are linked with Prospero's wife's death in the shot which displays her dead body at the funeral. Her head is resting on a large book, which may be a visual reference to the fictitious nature of Greenaway's narrative or to Shakespeare's First Folio.<sup>52</sup> Either way, one striking addition in the scene is the interpolation of the *An Alphabetical Inventory of the Dead*:

This is a funereal volume.  
It contains all the names of the dead,  
who have lived on earth.  
The first name is Adam  
and the last is Susannah,  
Prospero's wife.

The name 'Susannah' may refer to Shakespeare's eldest child, who married the physician John Hall and had a daughter, Elizabeth, in 1608. The passage purposefully confuses Shakespeare's biography with a mythologised (even pseudo-Biblical) narrative about daughter and wife, thus blurring the boundaries between the drama, the supplementary amendments (that is, commentary) of the movie, and biographical facts.

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<sup>51</sup> Christel Stalpaert, 'The Artistic Creative Process, its Mythologising Effect and its Apparent Naturalness Called into Question: An Interview with Peter Greenaway', in *Peter Greenaway's Prospero's Books: Critical Essays*, ed. by Christel Stalpaert (Ghent University, Ghent: Academia Press, 2000), pp. 27-42 (p. 35).

<sup>52</sup> Various studies have tried to explain Miranda's mother's absence. Stephen Orgel, for instance, proposed a psychoanalytical approach to answer this question and proposes that, in a way, Prospero fulfils both the maternal and paternal functions in the drama. He also refers to a passage which, in his reading, describes the voyage to the island as 'a birth fantasy'; see Stephen Orgel, 'Prospero's Wife', *Representations* 8 (1984), 1-13 (p. 4).

The books are the sources of Prospero's knowledge; he is frequently depicted in the movie as a scholar in his study (a popular Renaissance theme) engrossed in reading and writing. The books may also represent Prospero's authority: he is in charge of the main narrative, for which he uses his books as sources. The diverse variety of knowledge presented in the books forms both a visual and a 'textual' collage. Greenaway questions artistic authority by presenting Prospero as a figure compatible with the cooperative creative processes of Elizabethan/Jacobean playwrights and with the postmodern notion of intertextuality.<sup>53</sup> Fragmentation, excessive self-reflection, and multimediality (visual and audible narrative, acting, images, frames, and mirrors) conceal the identity of one legitimate author in *Prospero's Books*. The visual signifier of creative authority is the writing hand, which represents the author's command of the text; on the other hand, artistic reflexivity and fragmentation generate distance both from the author and the piece, thus making it difficult to assign one creator to it. It almost seems as if the movie were creating itself.

Richard Burt arrived at a similar conclusion when he argued that the use of books in Greenaway's movie offers 'a solution to an authorship problem specific to film'.<sup>54</sup> Burt suggests that the opening credits of a book (publishing house logo or name, editors, etc.) can be compared to those of a movie (cast, scriptwriter, director); he quotes Georg Stanitzek's observation that 'a film cannot be attributed to one author [...] the opening credits (or *générique*) constitute a paratext that uses a number of paratextual forms found in books – as a kind of imprint for film – but does so in a specifically filmic way [...] A book can function as a filmic organizer of communication, as a kind of natural delineation of the entire work'.<sup>55</sup> This corresponds to Prospero's function in *The Tempest*: being a magician, he conjures up the spectacle for the audience, he directs the course of events, he performs his role(s), and he ends the drama abruptly by breaking his staff. His multifunctional figure can be seen as a theatrical metaphor for the creation of a performance (with the author, director, actors etc.). *Prospero's Books* reflects on the complexity of this artistic process by embedding the fictitious books into *The Tempest*, thus addressing the question of authorship of the narratives (visual and textual alike) within the movie. Authorship is partly represented via the display of the writing

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<sup>53</sup> For more on intertextuality in *Prospero's Books* see Amy Lawrence, *The Films of Peter Greenaway* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 161.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Burt, 'Writing the endings of cinema: saving film authorship in the cinematic paratexts of *Prospero's Books*, Taymor's *The Tempest* and *The Secret of Kells*' in *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship*, ed. by Judith Buchanan (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 178-192 (p. 178).

<sup>55</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.*

Prospero and, particularly, via the images of the writing hand.<sup>56</sup> The image demonstrates how the act of writing, pictures, and performance overlap in the movie and create layers of visual meaning similar to the layers of the organs in the human body and to the pop-up pages of Vesalius' *Epitome*.

The hand seems to have a key function in the creative process depicted in *Prospero's Books*, linking the images of the dripping ink (which is also strongly connected with water in the movie), the quill, the paper, and the produced text, which, together with the spoken narration, contributes to the film's complex narrative. The act of writing and the writing hand in particular are metaphors with which Greenaway has long been fascinated. When commenting on *The Pillow Book*, Greenaway emphasises the link between body and text and argues that we should maintain

[...] this particular relationship where the body, through its brain, shoulder, arm, hand, pen, and paper makes the calligraphic gesture, and if we break that particular relationship, as indeed perhaps we have done ever since the invention of printing, and certainly now at the end of the twentieth century when most people develop their ideas on a keyboard, we have quite savagely broken the umbilicus between the notion of the body and text.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, many of his movies are concerned with the anatomical aspects of artistic creation and feature the creative hand as both the symbol and the agent of this creative process.<sup>58</sup> The interview reveals that for Greenaway, the introduction of the printing press meant the end of a strong relationship between creative ideas and their execution, an idea which persisted in Shakespeare's time. In their preface to the *First Folio*, the editors, Henry Condell and John Hemming, refer to the interrelation between creativity and its executioner, the creative hand:

His mind and hand went together: and what he thought, he vttered with that easinesse, that wee haue scarce receiued from him a blot in his papers.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> See [http://uj.apertura.hu/wp-content/uploads/uncategorized/7103/uj.apertura.hu\\_07.jpg](http://uj.apertura.hu/wp-content/uploads/uncategorized/7103/uj.apertura.hu_07.jpg) last accessed 9/12/2019.

<sup>57</sup> Qtd. in Douglas Keeseey, *The Films of Peter Greenaway: Sex, Death and Provocation* (Jefferson, New Carolina, and London: McFarland and Company Publishers, 2006), p. 149.

<sup>58</sup> See *The Pillow Book* (1996), *The Draughtman's Contract* (1982),

<sup>59</sup> William Shakespeare, *First Folio*, ed. by Henry Condell and John Hemming (London, 1623), A3, Early English Books Online.



Greenaway's movie reflects on this common Elizabethan/Jacobean view and relates it to contemporary anatomical discourses, thus re-establishing the lost connection between corporeality and creativity and, at the same time, demonstrating the narrative complexity of both the period and of *Prospero's Books*. The act of writing is central to the visual narrative of *Prospero's Books*: Prospero creates the text of the drama on screen while simultaneously reading the words aloud. Thus, Prospero's hand, as implied in Vesalius's *De Fabrica*, becomes 'an appropriate instrument for the intelligent animal',<sup>60</sup> an instrument which creates images and writes the drama.

Another example of creative authority relates back to the passage about Miranda's mother in *The Tempest* and its association with the *The Book of Birth*. Although very little is known about her, the hiatus she evokes is somewhat revealing: Prospero says that 'She said thou wast my daughter; and thy father / Was Duke of Milan' (1.2.57-8), as if he were questioning his paternity, that is, his contribution to Miranda's creation. The scene in the movie links authorial control and paternity and challenges both.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, the anatomical narrative of Vesalius and the idea of a purposeful divine maker (or author) are being challenged: in Prospero's books, creative authority is dubitable, and creation seemingly happens through almost random intersections of diverse cultural codes and narratives, which duplicate, reproduce, and reflect on one another.

## Conclusion

The relationship between the body as text and the word as flesh is strongly present in *Prospero's Books*, and it hearkens back to the widespread scholarly anatomy of the Renaissance. The image of the writing Prospero reflects the act of the creation of a narrative that is meant to explain the mystery of death. According to Greenaway, however, this narrative is fragmented: as the understanding of the operation of the whole body is limited, so are the narratives humans create to relate to the world. These systems are made up of sets of cultural codes which interact with one another and create a complex matrix of meanings.

*Prospero's Books* presents visual, textual, and audible narratives which can be regarded as running commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Greenaway's construction of

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<sup>60</sup> Siraisi, 5.

<sup>61</sup> For more on paternal authority in *The Tempest* see Magdalena Cieślak, *Screening Gender in Shakespeare's Comedies: Film and Television Adaptations in the Twenty-First Century* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), p. 109

film narrative fits the Renaissance use of diverse cultural codes and familiar patterns, a trend that resulted in highly complex and occasionally conflicting visual and textual representations, as expressed by the seemingly random inclusion of sections from Prospero's books. The sixteenth-century anatomists compared the human body to texts to be decoded, a notion which is compatible with the concept of *Prospero's Books*: the body can be regarded as the layers of meaning in the text. This rich display of cultural codes provides an opportunity to challenge established narratives and reflect on the artistic process. Greenaway questions sixteenth-century ideas about the relationship between body and soul, and he emphasises the relativity of any human narrative; by doing so, he creates space for diverse cultural codes, texts, narratives, images, and performances.