



Sheldon Film Theatre

Mr. Neville (Anthony Higgins) tries to keep things in the frame in the film *The Draughtsman's Contract* currently at the Sheldon Film Theatre.

Mystery film a puzzle of great wit

Review by Eric Peterson

A mannered puzzle of great wit and intelligence starts tonight at the Sheldon Film Theatre. *The Draughtsman's Contract*, written and directed by Peter Greenway, is a murder mystery without an exposed and discovered murderer; it is an elaborate parody of life among Restoration gentry. The puzzle itself is the meaning.

In the importance of its puzzle construction, *The Draughtsman's Contract* is something like Alain Resnais' magnificent film *Last Year at Marienbad*, in which a baroque setting and conflicting memories combine to oppress and cut off escape — perhaps most like Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire*, in which an intellectual puzzle becomes a metaphor for how life is to be lived, the construction of webs and connections which are always in danger of being ripped apart.

The rich visual style is one of the great delights of this film, and much of it seems a direct tribute to *Last Year at Marienbad*, especially in many opening shots where everything is rigorously balanced — a person in powdered wig and a candle on each side of a centered figure, a mother and daughter almost pulling at the luscious young draughtsman sitting between them, two white-faced marionettes who appear to have no place in the plot, leaning head against head and saying the same disturbing words with mirrored expressions. This is a very self-conscious and deliberately artificial kind of work, in

What the Draughtsman drew

The Draughtsman's Contract, directed by Peter Greenway; screenplay by Petr Greenway; produced by the British Film Institute; released through United Artists Screen Classics. At the Sheldon Film Theatre, 12th and R streets, today through Saturday. Shows are at 7 and 9 p.m., with a 3 p.m. matinee Saturday. Rated R.

Mr. Neville.....Anthony Higgins
Mrs. Neville.....Janet Suzman

which parallel lines and echoed phrases are as important as anything the characters happen to be saying.

Perhaps the most important recurring effect in *The Draughtsman's Contract* is visual framing. Over and over we see the house at Compston Anstey, or its gardens, through the draughtsman's grid — he is a strict representationalist, a sort of logical positivist of the eye, and everything he sees must be rendered "as it is," in scale. For less deliberately intrusive but equally lovely effects there is, for example, a scene on a hillside in which the draughtsman and the matron stand in the sun, continue talking as a cloud passes over them and their conversation, and after a breathless interval the shadow is silently gone.

Continued on Page 11

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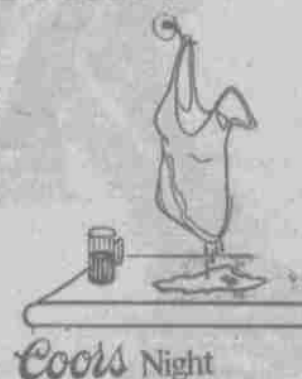
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