

GOING FOR BAROQUE



La Sapienza

The Films of Eugène Green

BY BLAKE WILLIAMS

To get it out of the way at the outset: Eugène Green, now 67 years of age, began making films when he was 53, all of them built around and deeply concerned with a set of traditions belonging to the arts of the Baroque period, particularly its theatre. His body of work (to date, five features and three shorts) is one that is not merely “inspired” by the late 16th century style’s tastes, concepts, and modes of thinking; it is entirely saturated in the Baroque itself—in its manners of thought, being, loving—and it accordingly exhibits many of the exuberant, contradictory, proto-Rococo tendencies suggested by this affiliation. The films unabashedly announce themselves as such, and any discussion or discourse surrounding them, or any of the research, writing, or theatre direction that Green has produced up to this point in his career, tends to (perhaps necessarily) approach these works through the lens of Baroque sensibilities above

and before all else. Because of this, opening his films up can be quite a challenging task, as they seem to do all the work for us while still managing to remain philosophically dense and complex. Counterintuitively, opening up *to* them is fairly easy to do. Lacing his mannered formal precision and rigidly loquacious personae with fairy-tale tropes (e.g., werewolves, lion knights, and ogres) and cheese ball one-liners, Green’s work is often at odds with itself in refreshingly playful and zany ways, evoking wholly original and sublime sensations.

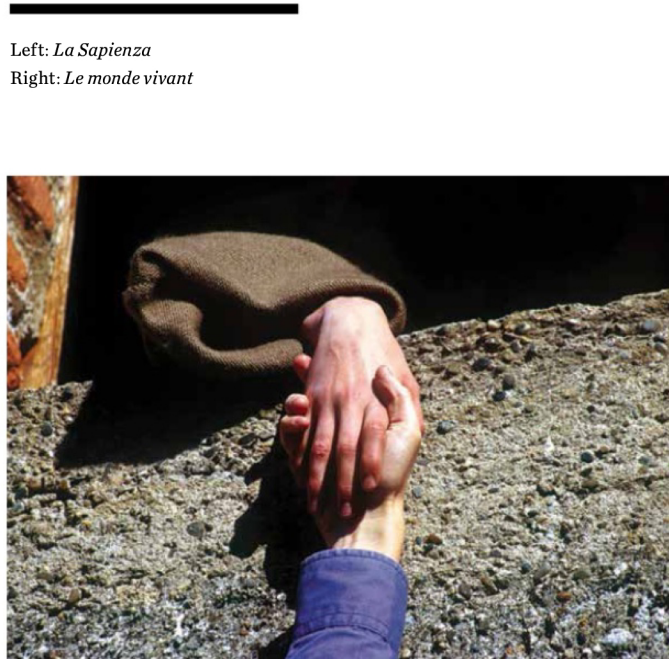
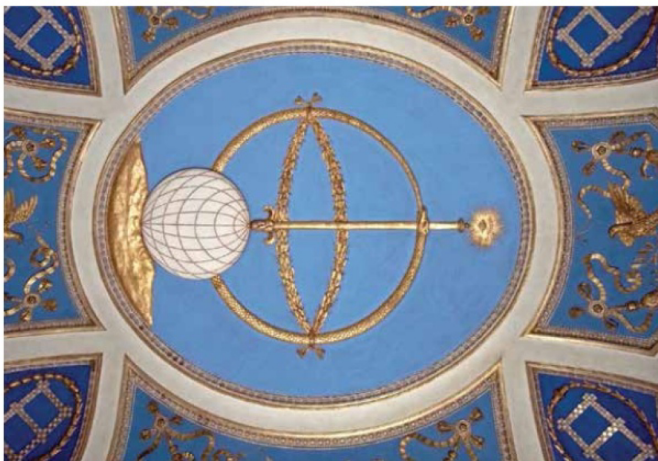
Thus, it can be difficult to place where Green might fall with respect to other contemporary filmmaking traditions and circles. He got some help early in his cinema career from the Dardennes when they offered to co-produce his second feature, *Le monde vivant* (2003)—an association that no doubt helped grab the attention of the Quinzaine, where the film pre-

miered—and there is a conceivable kinship between the filmmakers, particularly with regards to their overlapping concerns for their subjects’ spiritual dimensions. Yet, because of certain hallmarks of Green’s style—such as his stark shot/countershot strategies, executed with direct-address monologues, or his belief in the power of words and gazes to reveal the inner energies of characters—he is most often placed into conversation with the more rarefied names of Ozu, Dreyer, and Bresson, especially the latter. From Bresson, Green developed a number of the aesthetic philosophies that have preoccupied his cinema practice as well as his writing, namely for his 2009 book, *Poétique du cinématographe*. He craves a cinema in which “the hidden knowledge beneath what is visible is revealed”; a cinema with no morals, “for the truth is always contradictory.”

For Green, the centre of his infatuation with the Baroque style and with cinema’s capabilities lies in what he calls “the Baroque oxymoron,” which concerns the people of the period’s devotion to the development of a more scientific understanding of the universe despite staying fully faithful to the notion that God is the supreme being. It’s this dialectical framework that has been the chief structural and methodological tool for all of Green’s films to date, down to the perversity of making “Baroque cinema” in such a mannered form. Baroque sensibilities have been in the film medium’s DNA since Early Cinema; its “cinema of attractions” demonstrate a heavily weighted favour to celluloid’s capacity and allowances for extravagance and visual excess, both spectacular and irrational (Eisenstein may well have been the first openly Baroque filmmaker, resisting cinema’s reliance on Renaissance perspectival realism but proffering the conviction that pathos was best achieved through a barrage of shock-inducing montage methods)—all apparently antithetical to what Green sets out to do in his work.

It is almost certainly not coincidental, then, that the first image of the first film of his career, *Toutes les nuits* (2001), should evoke the Early Cinema pioneer of excess, monsters, and reality-disrupting montage: Georges Méliès. A puff of fog drifts across a deep, nearly black-blue sky enveloping a bright, waxing moon—clearly some sort of manmade cut-out, its black box artifice as inviting and radiant as any prop from a children’s theatre production. “You are present in a sweet dream, in a sweet and gentle dream,” coos Baroque soprano Claire Lefilliâtre on the soundtrack, who plaintively continues, “but day after day you are absent.” Nearly everything in Green’s cinema appears here in this first film (“I continue to use the same elements of style...because they seem to me necessary and efficient in relation to what I am trying to achieve. I could not imagine doing otherwise”), with Lefilliâtre’s lyrics providing that lovelorn contradiction that he finds so essential. This theme of presence is key to his work, namely the way certain realities, be they emotional, spiritual, or temporal, become clearer via their absence. We experience this in his static blocking and the aforementioned shot/countershot strategy—the actors, straddling presentational and representational performance modes, stare into the camera and recite their lines as if speaking them to themselves, the words channelling whatever energy that’s alive in their bodies and transferring it into our own. Godard’s faith in language may have finally sailed, but Green here indicates a reliance on speech as if it were man’s last remaining mode of communicating and transferring love.

The narrative of *Toutes les nuits* also takes advantage of its remove from the present, restaging Flaubert’s 1869 novel *Sentimental Education* in the years bookending May ’68. The film traces the parabolic trajectory of a friendship between Henri and Jules (Alexis Loret and Adrien Michaux, both regu-



Left: *La Sapienza*
Right: *Le monde vivant*

lars in Green's films) as they fall in and out of love with Emilie (Christelle Prot, same), forming a bifurcated structure typical of Green's narratives, offering comparisons of adjacent figures (or, often, couplings) whose lives, desires, and beliefs inevitably reflect or challenge one another. These relationships and inter-relationships play along with—but never mimic—other elemental relationships in the film: the pastoral world's flirtations with civilization, the intellect's mockery of ignorance, the intercourse between light and nothingness. For Green, there are few worse fates that could befall a word than to be translated into another language; likewise, there is grammar in all of these relationships, however immaterial the involved elements may be, and they cannot be rendered into new forms; to do so would be to betray the precise and always purposeful being of the thing itself. Rather, these partnerships sit amongst one another in the collected space of the film, their conversation suggested but never silent.

Two years later, Green would push his concerns even deeper into semantics and presentational abstraction with *Le monde vivant*. An overt fairy tale on its surface, its melodramatic narrative concerns a Lion Knight (Loret) (whose "lion" is portrayed by an adorable white golden retriever packing an MGM roar) as he attempts to rescue the local ogre's wife, Pénélope (Prot), from her own husband so that they may be happy together. His task is complicated by the fact that Pénélope, despite hating her life with her child-ingesting spouse, refuses to repudiate the ties—their marriage, her word—binding them together. Only the ogre's death can liberate her from this loveless hell, but the Lion Knight's attempt at killing him cuts his own life short when he loses a battle with the ogre after slipping on his slug slime. In his fantastical set-up, Green presents "the word" as a unifying stricture only in the scenario that it resides in the realm of other words. "It is strange to be alone even though we are two," the dying knight proclaims to Pénélope in his final moments of life, to which his love responds, "Grammar makes it so." The wordplay is only bittersweet, however, as the exasperated Lion Knight, eyes glazed over, interjects, "Where I am going, grammar will not let you follow." The narrative splits, and the late knight's new friend, Nicolas (Michaux), avenges his death by battling the ogre while wearing a pair of slime-proof shoes his mom gave him. In what has to be the most Dreyerian turn of events in Green's oeuvre, the Lion Knight returns to the picture, resurrected by Pénélope's words, which transferred the love from her living body into his, and what was dead is no longer so. "In the living world, the breath of the spirit is the breath of the body," he preaches. Embracing him, Pénélope bursts into tears, and cries out, "Your body is real!" The rational world says this cannot be, and yet in cinema, defined by Green as "the word made image," it is absolute.

If *Toutes les nuits* and *Le monde vivant* mythologized "the word," elevating it up to a transcendental revealer and giver of life and love, Green's third feature, *Le pont des Arts* (2004), worked to counteract this exaltation. Language in *Le pont des Arts* is predominantly repressive, a tool for violence toward whomever it's directed. It's also the second and currently final Green film that has a villain—a man so evil, so brilliant as to not even warrant a name. The Unnamable (Denis Podalydès), as

he's called, is the brutal conductor and curator of an exclusive Baroque ensemble. To miss a note, a beat, a pitch, or to apparently lack whatever innate and unlearnable *je ne sais quoi* he's looking for is to ignite a ferociously insulting diatribe (comparisons to strangled kangaroo included), which is precisely the fate incurred by Sarah (Natacha Régnier) upon her performance of Monteverdi's "Lamento della Ninfa." The song (which is actually sung, once again, by Lefilliâtre) is a masterpiece in and of itself—so much so that the five-minute track is played six times in the film, three times all the way through—and serves as an almost irrefutable case study against the argument that the word itself is the ontological bearer of beauty in language; rather, the voice is. Then again, *Le pont des Arts* is still Green's magnum opus precisely because of how profoundly dialectical an object it is—a sprawling and all-encompassing volley of polemical thesis statements as articulate as they are self-refuting. Though contradiction is patently Green's "thing," the film bears the marks of an artist wavering on the passions to which he's devoted his entire life, and it's his only film to come close to matching the excess of the Baroque style.

Five years later, Green returned with his most conspicuous take on Baroque Catholicism, *A Religiosa Portuguesa* (2009). An actress named Julie (Leonor Baldaque) is in Lisbon to shoot her scenes for an upcoming French art film. As she checks into her hotel, she tells the clerk that her character, a nun, will never be seen speaking in the film; in lieu of speech, a recording of a 17th century French text will occupy the soundtrack. "I never see French films, they're for intellectuals," he tells her. She counters that her films are popular in Portugal, to which he retorts, "Only in Lisbon, where there are many intellectuals. No city is perfect." It's a cheeky anti-intellectualist throwaway that may well have been inserted to call back to *Les pont des Arts'* own elitist air, but it's not incongruous to the attitude that meaning in art is beside matters of erudition. (For that matter, critics who call Green's cinema "pretentious," even those who aren't using the term pejoratively, just aren't in tune with his sense of humour.)

Once Julie begins her shoot, she decides to spend her free time wandering the streets of Lisbon, leading to a series of encounters with a young orphan boy too poor to attend school, and an infatuation with a nun whom she watches from a distance. The film's core themes reside in the Catholic Church's affiliation with the historical Baroque style, the threat of the 16th-century Protestant Reformation prompting the Church to exploit its aristocracy in an effort to impress potential new members. Their power in full display, this reaffirmed religion as a prime subject in art and eventually architecture throughout Europe, and permanently integrated spiritual opulence into the style's aesthetic. When Leonor finally confronts the nun, she explains her profession in terms of truth: "I try to show the truth through unreal things," to which the nun responds, "God did the same when he created the world." The 11-minute *tête-à-tête* covers God's relationship to Reason, nature's materiality, and the search for inner truth and meaning, and it feels less like a cathartic fusion of worldviews than a treatise—something Green's films are prone to slip into in the home stretch, as so many threads strive towards a discernible point of conver-



La Sapienza

gence. It's a strategy that, four films into his career, emerges as a schematic method of tidying, despite the evidence that his films work best when left intricately unresolved.

It's a relief, then, that the arrival of Green's latest film, *La Sapienza*, should carry with it a fresh take on his choice material, directed by a new-to-him formalist hurdle (digital filmmaking), and his first concentrated consideration of modern architecture. While it's his first digital feature, Green's first experience with the medium was with the short film, *Correspondences*, his contribution to the 2007 Jeonju Digital Project. That was a work specifically preoccupied with digital distancing, and portrayed a young man's series of email exchanges with a girl he met at a party. Its characters' words isolated to voiceover, the film is predominantly comprised of shots of one or the other of them silently typing, reading, or contemplating the other's written text. (A small, rustic wax candle beside the man's laptop is as close to materiality as the film gets.) Green's cinema as a project has been an attempt to invoke immaterial energies from within material beings, and his position has so far been that the materiality of the celluloid strip allows for a lossless transference of love and emotion that is not possible with the immaterial, i.e. the virtuality of the digital image.

La Sapienza expands his disparagement for the digital by refracting it into its mise en scène. Stresa vistas are cut with icy shots of glassy grey modernist architecture and set amongst steely blue, industrial cubicles. Within the urban malaise, award-winning architect Alexandre (Fabrizio Rongione) and his wife Aliénor (Prot) are slumped in a deep, stoic silence,

reduced by their surroundings to blasé urban dwellers. They walk, dine, and sleep as if running on sedatives, and their infrequent conversations are purely functional rather than personal. Alexandre's announcement that he's spontaneously decided to depart for a field study to work on some of his old Francesco Borromini research is met with Aliénor's terse interrogation, "Was it planned?" as if love would stand a chance of surviving a life composed in blueprints. They soon meet young siblings Goffredo (Ludovico Succio) and Lavinia (Arianna Nastro), and Goffredo's interest in architecture allows him to tag along with Alexandre on his voyage through Italy.

From this point, the film's basic art-as-therapy narrative becomes a side product to a bizarrely moving tour through Borromini's body of work. Whatever hindrances digital filmmaking creates for the inner soul of people, it doesn't apply to capturing buildings. Green creates in *La Sapienza's* middle hour one of the great documents of an architect's magisterial brilliance to appear in cinema, evoking the canted architectural studies of German experimental filmmaker Heinz Emigholz. Gliding up and across Borromini's intertwining arches and rings, Green's camera caresses the intricate ridges of his Roman churches and courtyards. Tilting up until our gaze surpasses the domes' peaks—often decorated with a cross—he stretches our eyes up into the sky, as if willing the spiritual euphoria that he believes his medium is so inadequate in delivering. And yet, as if by a miracle, it does arrive, falsifying whatever evidence compelled Green to assume he was using a medium built for solely secular pleasures. The Baroque thrives on such contradictions.