

Drowning by Numbers

Reviewed by

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If you can make it through the first five minutes and you know what to expect from a Peter Greenaway film, then *Drowning by Numbers* (1988) might be for you. Then again, it may not. I have mixed feelings about his work. I loved *The Pillow Book* (1996), with its stunning visuals and Ewan McGregor's masterly and frequently nude performance. I was also spellbound by the artistic obscenity of *The Cook the Thief, his Wife and her Lover* (1989). The even more misogynistic *8 1/2 Women* (1999), however, I found utterly sickening. *Drowning by Numbers* didn't make me feel sick, though it did make me squirm, sort of laugh, and shake my head a bit.

What's it about? Well, you'd have to watch it a few more times to pick up all the aren't-I-clever references, but to keep things simple: you take three women of different generations with the same name (Cissie Colpitt), give them three unsatisfactory husbands to drown, throw in a coroner-cum-sheep farmer called Madgett who's prepared to jeopardise his job to save the women he loves / lusts after, give said coroner a seriously death-obsessed pyromaniac of a young son, make said pyromaniac friends with a girl who counts and skips and names the stars every night dressed in a Meninas dress from the Velázquez painting (I did spot some of the clever bits), and, have all of these brilliantly bizarre characters take part in a series of equally bizarre, theatrically-staged games, the best of which is surely 'sheep and tides'. (That is quite possibly the longest sentence I have ever written. Keeping it simple is not what Greenaway's films are about and I'm afraid it's catching).

If much of the director's work is rife with misogyny, in *Drowning by Numbers* it is the women who are controlling, manipulative, amoral, and completely blasé about the crimes they commit. Played by Joan Plowright (Cissie 1), Juliet Stevenson (Cissie 2) and Joley Richardson (Cissie 3), the three Cissies have a jolly old time of things, caring about their friendship above anything else. They don't have 'normal' conversations or have 'normal' reactions to things, but this is not a 'normal' film. Rather, it is a riddle-filled sense experience, a sequence of frames drenched in rich, sumptuous colours that could be frozen and hung in a gallery.

Predictably, the film also has its fair share of nudity. The naked body is not a big thing in itself, as it was for example in *The Pillow Book*, but it fits in perfectly with the director's naturalistic style. When a character is naked there is no attempt to cover up or to beautify. On the contrary, in the first scene (the one that has to be endured), we observe two obscenely drunken characters flopping around naked in a couple of tin baths, vaguely trying to 'fornicate'. The bloke, Cissie number one's unfaithful hubby, is so repulsive that drowning him seems quite reasonable. Later, when the three Cissies push the drunken woman back to where she lives in a wheelbarrow (!), they make absolutely no attempt to cover her nakedness, treating her as if she were little more than a pile of dirt. Occasionally, the nudity is incidental and non-sexual, but mostly it is linked to slovenliness, sluttishness and shame – or lack of it.

Come back nudist camp fluff. All is forgiven.

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