

A Zed and Two Noughts delightful for those interested in decoding art

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position shorts become more and more elaborate, various and unnamed characters set up a cottage industry supplying the two with subjects and pseudo-philosophy.

Greenaway surrounds the twins with even more unlikely characters; a legless man in a white suit, a lecherous doctor and his lover, and a femme fatale type named Venus de Milo who sells animal stories with greater skill than she does her sexual favours. Images of decay and decomposition are given greater depth with the complementary images supplied by a film series called "The Origins of Life," whose interspersed monologue becomes as strangely relevant to the twins' predicament as the activities of a young girl, who appears from time to time to recite animal names in sequence with the letters of the alphabet.

As the "Origins of Life" film series moves towards the eighth and final episode, the "evolutionary leap" to mankind, it becomes obvious that the twins' films are running a parallel course. On a subtextual level (keeping in mind that, in this case, the subtext is just barely distinguishable from the text) Greenaway himself is involved in both activities, constructing and subverting his narrative while moving towards an ending which is as arbitrary as it is predictable. Indeed, if there is a point to all of this—one could make a strong argument to the effect that the decoding of the film contains its own point—it is in this observation: If life is indeed chaotic, or arbitrary, why does the human mind seek to impose an order upon it? Furthermore, what is it about that ordering which is traceable and which implies some sort of progression or causality?



FEMME FATALE: Venus de Milo (Frances Barber) is a zoo prostitute/writer who sells her animal stories with greater skill than she does her sexual favours.

The film itself becomes the strongest symbol for the process of decomposition, the single dominant force which seems to negate all notions of movement or evolution. In the film, characters regress—the twins (originally Siamese, we are later told) become more and more alike, to the point where they wear the same clothes, go jogging three-legged

style, and even have Venus design them a suit which they can both wear. Alba has her second leg amputated, rendering her totally immobile, though preserving for her the symmetry she senses in the natural order. Even the "Zoo" sign reverses itself—reading "OOZ" in the background in one of the film's final scenes.

There are times (like this one) where Greenaway's film becomes too clever for its own good. With every dramatic element deconstructed so quickly after its introduction into the film, virtually all hope of any emotional impact is lost. And while we appreciate the irony of the film's conclusion (it ends with the twins' film series, both taking poison and lying in front of an automatic camera), we have little reaction at this point to the implied tragedy. Self-conscious narratives like this one rely heavily on predicted response and manipulation—give someone a tragic structure, touch on

their narrative expectations, and no matter how overtly the device is undermined, a resonance of the original response will remain; or so the theory goes. The problem with *A Zed and Two Noughts* is that everything has been predicted, right down to the exact moment when the audience begins to get impatient with all of this intellect, the final result being a little too contrived, a little too much like foolproof filmmaking. Greenaway's script is so complex, so well put together that he stifles much of the automatic response he is depending on for emotional depth.

Still, the film remains an absolute delight to anyone interested in decoding a work of art, and while the possibilities are endless on the level of theme, many moments approach a level of profundity which is light years beyond most contemporary film. It seems likely that *A Zed and Two Noughts* will stand for quite some time as an excellent example of this genre of filmmaking.

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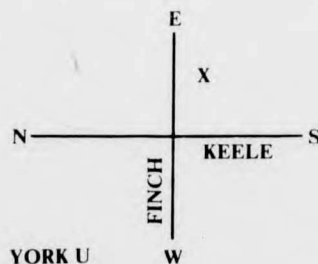


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