



**FRAMES OF MIND: THE FILMS OF PETER GREENAWAY**

# **The Unreliable Narrator: Adventures in Storytelling, Documentary and Misinformation**

Veracity and doubt play off each other to uncanny, witty ends in imaginative films by Greenaway, John Smith, Patrick Keiller, Steven Ball and Philip Sanderson. The voice illuminates and obscures in equal measure, dryly satirising the authority of the documentary narrator, and interrogating film language and the relationships between sound and image. Weird tales and odd instructions seep up through the gaps.

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## **Windows**

Composed of shots of windows taken from inside the director's house, Peter Greenaway's *jeu d'esprit* offers a miniature groundplan for what was to grow, immensely, into one of his abiding concerns: the poetic possibilities and humorous plausibility of precisely marshalled statistics. The narrator, as always the acme of authority, gives some of the facts attached to 37 people who met their ends in the parish of W. in 1973 as a result of falling out of windows. One was a harpsichordist whose spirited playing can be heard on the soundtrack. The chief pleasure of this snippet derives from the density of Greenaway's writing, his skill in investing a well-turned sentence with unspoken possibilities. 'At sunset on 14th April 1973, the seamstress and the student of aeronautics who played the harpsichord jumped into a plum-tree from a window in this house'. In the last moment of the film, 'this house' – Greenaway's house, his imagination, that which we have been observing from the inside – is suddenly introduced, connected with these thirty-seven people in the mythical parish of W. An ornithologist makes an appearance; there are several violent unexplained deaths; one man under the influence of an unknown drug thought he could fly... Though only four minutes long, *Windows* sheds considerable light on Greenaway's interior landscape: it is also a conjuring trick, an example of making something out of nothing.

**John Pym, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1972**

## **Girl Chewing Gum**

Experimental film which draws attention to the cinematic codes and illusions it incorporates by denying their existence, treating representation as absolute reality. A random street scene in Dalston. The 'director's' voice instructs peremptorily making it appear that the accidental arrival and movements of people in the frame are actually carried out to comply with his demands.

## **Dear Phone**

Static shots of manuscripts retailing various fantasies all revolving round protagonists with the initials H.C. and their use of the telephone are juxtaposed with shots of red telephone boxes. Over the former, a narrator smoothly reads the manuscript's largely illegible text; over the latter, various telephone sounds-ringing, engaged and dialling tones, the speaking clock and conversations on crossed lines-are heard.

*Dear Phone*, together with *Water Wockets*, bridges the gap between Greenaway's earlier 'home movies' (*Intervals*, *H Is for House* and *Windows*) and the later, more 'public' works such as *A Walk through H* and *The Falls*. Partly cunning pastiche, largely impromptu invention, this light-hearted expose of structuralist conventions yields itself easily to the film-maker's more directly personal concerns. Greenaway's attraction to lost and forgotten corners of domestic landscape avoids the charge of whimsy because it is formulated as part and parcel of the conventional filmmaking process. Images of the original manuscript are juxtaposed with its supposedly transparent yet necessarily opaque realisation on celluloid. Assembly of the film is then completed by the addition of a 'final mix' sound track. This is composed solely of post-synch sound effects and commentary that supposedly reinforce yet necessarily contradict the edited pictures: telephone tones are heard only over shots of empty call-boxes, and the narrator's unhesitating voice only over images of the illegible manuscript. Thus, the conventional relationship between script, image and sound is shown to be as essentially contingent as that between subject and object in lived experience.

Every Greenaway film, but *Dear Phone* in particular, is marked by an existentialist intuition that its own reality as an act (the presence of the author) contradicts its reality as an event (the absence of the same author) – that cinema's 'esse', to reverse the Berkeleian dictum, '*non est percipi*'. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes states, 'The Photographer's "second sight" does not consist in "seeing" but in being there... Every Photograph is a certificate of presence'. The cinematic effect of Greenaway's absurdist fantasies is, paradoxically, to ground the 'being' of the Photographer /Filmmaker in reality, in an English world of 'noise' as frighteningly total, self-sufficient and real, in its own polyglot way, as Chantal Akerman's New York (*News from Home*), Marguerite Duras' suburbs (*Le Camion*) or Raul Ruiz's arrondissement (*De grands evenements et de gens ordinaires*). What all these films have in common is a static picture-track (authenticity / Death of the Photograph) in opposition to a moving sound track (fiction / Life of the Voice). The difference between them and Greenaway lies in his greater and more ruthless modernity, which eschews all the older and more humane traditions of an art uninflected by television. Both the documentary and fictional subjects and objects in his work seem 'fixed' in the grain of the image's finitude, mummified in such unnatural things as a telephone box, outside time (unlike, say, the characters who live through Duras' *India Song*). But, in the age of the Photograph – fast fading as Duras herself realised – the ability to conceive of Time as duration also seems to be disappearing. Communication, as on the telephone, now must be instantaneous to be effective.

**Robert Brown, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, April 1972**

### **Insight: Terence Conran**

A short film on the designer and entrepreneur of modern industrial design Terence Conran.

### **Green on the Horizon**

An enigmatic, haunting blend of fake public information film and occult jaunt. A woman tours the sparse marshlands of southern England, but what is she seeking? With a tape recorder as her guide, she travels by bike and by foot in pursuit of her secret mission. This playful Super 8 film was, said the filmmakers, 'influenced as much by Tarkovsky and *The Avengers* as it was by avant-garde formalism.'

### **The Clouds**

With its dense, poetic and philosophical text and its sequences of apparently unrelated images, *The Clouds* (d. Patrick Keiller, 1990) has many threads: the narrator makes parallels between his own conception and birth and the

geological formation of the earth. Descriptions of geological time are echoed by images of rocks and water. Mythical giants who lived early in the earth's history show their remains in electricity pylons that dominate the landscape; boats and bridges are the backdrop to Kathleen Ferrier's rendition of traditional Scottish song.

Keiller's characteristic use of shots in which the camera doesn't move, but instead switches from one scene to another, or between different perspectives on the same scene, is reminiscent of the early British documentary tradition, of Humphrey Jennings and even Free Cinema. But Keiller has moved away from using images to narrate, using them rather to obliquely illustrate a fractured and personal text.

*The Clouds* is a film poem: its meanings are not exhausted in a single viewing, and one can return to it and discover new things, new connections between separate images, and between words and images. It also crystallises many of the methods of composition and narration that Keiller would use in his next, feature-length films, *London* (1994) and *Robinson in Space* (1996).

**Danny Birchall, BFI Screenonline, [screenonline.org.uk](http://screenonline.org.uk)**

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#### **WINDOWS**

*Filmmaker:* Peter Greenaway  
*Production Company:* Peter Greenaway  
*Title Design:* Kenneth Breese  
UK 1975  
4 mins

#### **GIRL CHEWING GUM**

*Director:* John Smith  
*Production Company:* Royal College of Art  
UK 1976  
12 mins

#### **DEAR PHONE**

*Director:* Peter Greenaway  
UK 1976  
17 mins

#### **INSIGHT: TERENCE CONRAN**

*Director:* Peter Greenaway  
*Production Company:*  
London Television Service  
*Sponsor:* Foreign Office  
*Producer:* Annabel Oliver-Wright  
*Script:* Malcolm Brook  
*Camera:* Mike Coles, John Rosenberg  
*Editor:* John Wilson  
*Music:* Michael Nyman  
*Sound:* Malcolm Stewart, Terry Lucas,  
Chris Moore

#### **With**

Terence Conran  
UK 1981  
15 mins

#### **GREEN ON THE HORIZON**

*Directors:* Steven Ball, Philip Sanderson  
UK 1988  
18 mins

#### **THE CLOUDS**

*Director:* Patrick Keiller  
*Production Company:* BFI Production Board  
*In association with:* Channel Four Television  
*Camera:* Patrick Keiller, Julie Norris  
*Text:* Patrick Keiller  
*Technical Advisor:* Andy Powell  
*Voice Recording:* Brian Sweetman  
*Dubbing Mixer:* Peter Maxwell  
*Film Processing and Printing:*  
Filmatic Laboratories Ltd.  
*Narrator:* Iain Cuthbertson  
UK 1989  
19 mins

#### **FRAMES OF MIND: THE FILMS OF PETER GREENAWAY**

**The Unreliable Narrator: Adventures in Storytelling, Documentary and Misinformation** Sun 6 Nov 12:40; Fri 25 Nov 21:00

**The Falls** Sun 6 Nov 14:40

**Peter Greenaway Shorts Programme 1** Thu 10 Nov 20:40

**The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover** Sat 12 Nov 14:55; Mon 28 Nov 17:50

**A Zed & Two Noughts** Sat 12 Nov 17:40; Mon 21 Nov 20:40; Sun 27 Nov 12:15

**A TV Dante: Cantos 1-8** Tue 15 Nov 18:20

**The Baby of Mâcon** Wed 16 Nov 20:30; Fri 25 Nov 18:00; Mon 28 Nov 20:30

**Experimental Sound and Vision: Found Sounds, Lyrical Loops and Landscapes** Thu 17 Nov 18:15 (+ intro by author and musician David Toop)

**The Belly of an Architect** Fri 18 Nov 18:20; Tue 22 Nov 18:10; Sat 26 Nov 15:30

**The Pillow Book** Fri 18 Nov 20:30; Thu 24 Nov 20:30; Tue 29 Nov 17:40

**Drowning by Numbers** Sat 19 Nov 14:30; Sun 27 Nov 18:00

**8½ Women** Sun 20 Nov 12:50; Wed 30 Nov 20:35

**Prospero's Books** Sun 20 Nov 18:00

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

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