



NEW RELEASES

The Greenaway Alphabet

Anyone looking for a way into the works of Peter Greenaway would do well to begin with *The Greenaway Alphabet*. His films are visually appealing but can challenge the unsuspecting viewer not prepared for their density of ideas and references. This very personal documentary by multimedia artist Saskia Boddeke, also Greenaway's wife and collaborator, offers an insight into the man, his inspirations and the autobiographical and psychological background to his work.

We learn that his daughters from his first marriage appear as two of the characters in *The Falls* (1980), while a nostalgic visit to his childhood home in Newport, South Wales, is linked to scenes of wartime Britain in his Tulse Luper trilogy. It emerges that the character of Smut in *Drowning by Numbers* (1988) is based on Greenaway as a child, exhibiting the fascination with collecting and classifying that the director inherited from his father.

In contrast to the fairly rigorous order of Greenaway's films, the organisation of *The Greenaway Alphabet* feels more instinctive and free-flowing. And this is not just Peter Greenaway's alphabet, but that of his wife and, especially, their daughter Pip, his companion and foil throughout the film. Ideas and thoughts seem to surface naturally through their conversations rather than being predetermined or imposed.

As well as baring Greenaway's soul, Saskia literally undresses him, which seems only fair as he has demanded the same of most of his actors over the years. She films him naked on the beach and in other intimate situations, such as having his hair cut or trying on trousers at the tailor, mundane moments that possess an honesty and simplicity.

This is very much Boddeke's film and she deftly maintains the balance between the personal and the objective; affection for the subject is implicit but doesn't obscure truth. At times she emulates Greenaway's penchant for symmetrical framing, elsewhere using clips, multiple screens and projections to convey the effect she wants. Most appealing are the scenarios in which Peter and Pip engage in intellectual or artistic exercises in carefully chosen locations. Though staged, these vignettes never feel artificial and reveal an endearing side to Greenaway that rarely surfaced in public during the 1980s and 1990s.

During these decades, he was declared both a genius and 'the most arrogant man in British cinema' and, while the genius is still apparent, the arrogance appears to have faded with age. Any residual pretension is quickly dispensed by Saskia's frank, no-nonsense interjections and Pip's tenacious inquisitiveness. He certainly isn't a 'regular dad' and, growing up in such a creative environment, it's no surprise that Pip herself has become an artist.

At one point, Pip asks her father about his legacy, something he surely need not worry about. Whatever your view of his films (or of the concept of cinematic authorship), he is undeniably one of the few true auteurs of British cinema and from *The Greenaway Alphabet* it's clear that his imagination and

delight in the act of creation show no signs of waning. He has several films, artworks and writing projects in train and we can only hope he sees them all through to completion. In the meantime, Boddeke's film eloquently reminds us of the humour and passion with which he purveys his unique view of art and human nature.

Dr Josephine Botting

A lesson in lexicography, *H Is for House* recounts the objects that begin with the letter H, as seen through the eye of a child – a tactic later to feature in the narrative for *The Draughtsman's Contract* when an aristocratic toddler produces his own rendition of the country house's gardens. But it is also a playful translation of sorts of the Canadian avant garde film *Zorns Lemma* (1970) by Hollis Frampton, in which the letters of the alphabet are serially moved through by way of images that represent or evoke each letter. The associations in Frampton's film move from the obvious to the abstract and actively engage the viewer in decoding its rationale. Smoke is at what pointed used to represent the letter 'S'. The connections are not always so obvious.

As Greenaway himself remarked for the benefit of cataloguers at the BFI National Archive: 'No scripting in this film – it again follows the credo – make a film of collected images filmed in a casual way of what turns up whilst enjoying – for example – a country walk, often with my young family of the time – walking at their pace, interested in what at that time they were interested in – let the images dictate.' Greenaway's sharp eye would break down these eerie landscapes into a series of interrelated puzzle-like frames, just enough for him to retrospectively wind tall tales around like a knot. Or perhaps that should be a slip knot.

While the images in Greenaway's features would often be centred around symmetrical framing and distance, his early films were constructed differently. Walking green landscapes surrounding the Wiltshire villages of Wardour and Bridzor – 'They sound like Tolkien locations' he says – Greenaway reflected on their deeply inscribed histories, noting how their once substantial populations had been decimated by the Black Death in 1346. The timeless rural idyll of the English countryside gives birth to fantasy and whichever narrative it is we want, and whether we make reference to their histories or not; a quality Greenaway fully exploited. Not least by playing with the dialogues that can take place between image and text.

William Fowler

Notes extracted from *The Draughtsman's Contract* Blu-ray booklet (BFI, 2022)

H IS FOR HOUSE

Film-maker: Peter Greenaway
Production Company: Peter Greenaway
Title Design: Kenneth Breese
Featuring:
Colin Cantlie
UK 1976
9 mins

THE GREENAWAY ALPHABET

Director: Saskia Boddeke
Production Companies: Beeld, NTR
With the support of: Mediafonds, Fonds 21
Producer: Julia Emmering
Line Producer: Marita Ruyter
Production Co-ordinator: NTR Astrid Prickaerts
Commissioning Editor: Oscar Van Der Kroon
Camera: Ruzbeh Babol, Sander Snoep, Saskia Boddeke
High Speed Camera Operator: Jan Kees Dibbets
Editor: Gys Zevenbergen
Online Editing: Elmer Leupen
Grading: Joel Sahuleka
Music: Luca D'Algero, Borut Krzisnik
Sound: Mark Wessner, Gabby De Haan
Audio Post-production: Huibert Boon
Featuring:
Saskia Boddeke
Peter Greenaway
Pip Greenaway
Netherlands 2017
60 mins

A BFI release

FRAMES OF MIND: THE FILMS OF PETER GREENAWAY

A Zed & Two Noughts

Tue 18 Oct 18:10; Sat 5 Nov 17:40; Sat 12 Nov 17:40;
Mon 21 Nov 20:40; Sun 27 Nov 12:15

Peter Greenaway: Frames of Mind Season Introduction

Wed 19 Oct 18:10

The Belly of an Architect

Wed 19 Oct 20:30; Fri 18 Nov 18:20; Tue 22 Nov 18:10; Sat 26 Nov 15:30

The Falls

Sat 22 Oct 13:50; Sun 6 Nov 14:40

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover

Sun 23 Oct 15:30 (+ intro by Justin Johnson, Lead Programmer);
Sat 12 Nov 14:55; Mon 28 Nov 17:50

Drowning by Numbers

Sun 23 Oct 18:00; Sat 19 Nov 14:30; Sun 27 Nov 18:00

Peter Greenaway Shorts Programme 1

Mon 24 Oct 18:10; Thu 10 Nov 20:40

Experimental Sound and Vision: Found Sounds, Lyrical Loops and Landscapes

Thu 27 Oct 18:15; Thu 17 Nov 18:15 (+ intro by author and musician David Toop)

Prospero's Books

Tue 1 Nov 17:40; Sun 20 Nov 18:00

Peter Greenaway: Pioneer of Cinema

Sat 5 Nov 12:00-17:00

The Unreliable Narrator: Adventures in Storytelling, Documentary and Misinformation

Sun 6 Nov 12:40; Fri 25 Nov 21:00

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

The Pillow Book

Fri 18 Nov 20:30; Thu 24 Nov 20:30; Tue 29 Nov 17:40

8½ Women

Sun 20 Nov 12:50; Wed 30 Nov 20:35

NEW RELEASES

Decision to Leave (Heojil Kyolshim)

From Mon 17 Oct

Triangle of Sadness

From Fri 28 Oct

The Greenaway Alphabet

From Fri 11 Nov

Aftersun

From Fri 18 Nov

What Do We See When We Look at the Sky?

(Ras vkhedavt, rodesac cas vukurebt?)

From Fri 25 Nov

RE-RELEASES

The Others

From Mon 17 Oct

Poltergeist

From Fri 21 Oct

Nil by Mouth

From Fri 4 Nov (Preview on Thu 20 Oct 20:20; extended intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer at Large on Fri 4 Nov 17:50; intro by Kieron Webb, Head of Conservation, BFI Archive on Mon 7 Nov 18:00)

The Draughtsman's Contract

From Fri 11 Nov (+ intro by Kieron Webb, Head of Conservation, BFI National Archive on Fri 11 Nov 17:50)

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

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