



The Pillow Book

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

The Pillow Book, it is clear, gathers up the two concerns that have driven so many of Peter Greenaway's films: the question of sex and power and the question of cinematic representation, of developing a kind of 'denser' film than the linear narrative of mainstream Hollywood cinema allows.

That these are his twin obsessions may be what marks him out as an inheritor of the 60s European art movie – for it was the concern with formal experimentation, and with a sexuality that couldn't be found in mainstream cinema, which gave 60s European art cinema its signature. Yet what is interesting about Greenaway is that he tends, when talking about his own work, to foreground the representation rather than the sex.

Perhaps this is because sex is always a dangerous bargain in his films.

The Draughtsman's Contract ties together sexual favours with social power – a similar situation to the one in which Nagiko's father is embroiled in *The Pillow Book*. Sex leads to multiple (off-screen) rape in *The Baby of Mâcon* and to cannibalism in *The Cook the Thief His Wife & Her Lover*, not to mention the death of Jerome in the present film.

But what is remarkable about *The Pillow Book*, in relation to his recent films, is that sex seems at times not only a liberating compact but a sensuous one. For instance, the effect of the elegant calligraphy on the bodies of the two main actors, Vivien Wu and Ewan McGregor, is often breath-taking (if troubling) and sometimes erotic.

But the importance of the sensuousness is greater than this implies – for one way of seeing the film is to see it as a riposte, whether consciously or not, to other recent art films about heterosexual sex and representation, such as Jacques Rivette's *La Belle Noiseuse*. Where in that film the scratching of Michel Piccoli's pen on paper seems an analogue to a penetrative assault on Emmanuelle Beart's body, in *The Pillow Book* the direct painting on the bodies seems rather to offer aesthetic enhancement and pleasure. But most importantly what really separates Greenaway's from Rivette's is that in *The Pillow Book* the heroine stops being the canvas on which the man writes and becomes the writer herself, taking control of her destiny, ready to begin a new life.

So it's clear that if Greenaway is indebted to the 60s, he is not slavishly so. What marks *The Pillow Book* out is not merely its partial setting at the millennium, but its millennial or utopian longings. Greenaway seems here to have found a form through which he can imagine past, present, and future on the screen simultaneously (via overlay); he can bring east and west together (through Vivian Wu and Ewan McGregor); and through the Japanese hieroglyph can bring together word and image – since the word is an image. *The Pillow Book* may have the characteristic 'violence' motifs of a Greenaway film: it also has a curious – and curiously moving – utopian quality.

Claire Tovey, *Sight and Sound*, November 1996

Peter Greenaway on 'The Pillow Book'

The visual language experiments of *Prospero's Books* are continued in *The Pillow Book*. Neither has a guilty conscience about putting the word 'book' in their titles, if only because this demonstrates the equivocations of a film tradition that always starts with text before it moves on to image, which seems to suggest filmmaking as an illustration of text. There are various symmetries. The first film was developed from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a 400-year-old classic English text, the second from a 1000-year-old classic Japanese text, Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*. But unlike *Prospero's Books*, the second is a contemporary story with opportunities to open up new strategies and structures which the first deliberately kept under a tight discipline.

The overall visual metaphor for *The Pillow Book* is the oriental hieroglyph as a template for a cinema practice. The history of Japanese calligraphy is also the history of Japanese painting. Image and text are one. The text is read though the image, and the image is seen in the text – very possibly an ideal model for cinema, considering the uneasy marriage of text and image that it tries to cement. With the Japanese hieroglyph predominantly in mind as a model – more sinuous, more painterly perhaps than any other in the Orient – the subject of such a film would most naturally be Japanese.

To develop a contemporary story on an ancient calligraphic tradition, the language used must necessarily be very old and very new: 2000 years of calligraphic marks and ten years of computer visual invention, and a century of cinematic vocabulary. There are three particular areas of comparatively new concern: multiple screens, deconstructed chronology and a persistent changing of screen ratio.

These visual language devices are becoming familiar on television: insert frames, overlay frames, colour-coded frames, overlaid text, multiple use of text and image. All these have been major characteristics of all forms of visual advertising for some time. But their extended use, to service and structure a narrative feature film, is not at all common. *The Pillow Book* tries to engage in this multiple language using a content that is sympathetic and relevant to such treatment. Here the form and the content in this case seem meant for each other; this is a film about 'you are what you read', 'your life is an open page', 'I can read you like a book'. And every effort has been made always to find a rationale to bind language to content, as image and text are bound together in the Oriental hieroglyph, and never to succumb to the seduction of a purely decorative use of such potential, nor to shy from the Pleasure Principle.

The narrative demands a mixture of tenses, and the insert-frames and multiple screens can embrace images of past, present and future, not sequentially as is traditional, but all at once, arranging them in significant patterns of scale, priority, importance and colour: not necessarily in clear demarcated blocks but overlaid or interlaced to make equivalents to how we perceive time and tense. And the frame priorities can be arranged to accommodate irony, humour and criticism – to use the typical Godardian facility to make the important visually small and the trivial overwhelmingly large, or to make sleight-of-hand travel slowly, revealing the cheat as its apparent effect is demonstrated in real time. This is all arranged on one viewing plane, for an audience to make appraisal and comparison – a reach-out towards the freedoms and language that Cubism and Joyce and Eliot gave to Modernism,

a movement and a philosophy and a way of construction that seems to have entirely bypassed cinema. Or maybe cinema has willingly bypassed Modernism.

Using other possibilities of the complex frame construction, referential visual quotes are made of East and West, of the old and the new; in particular the dominant Western tradition of the Renaissance viewing-frame and that of the largely unframed Oriental picture space: the scroll and the hanging vertical 'picture', or the 'un-edged' vistas of folding screens and 'endless' wraparound landscapes of Oriental ceramics, and the insert-vignettes of Japanese prints. The film borrows the device of the calligraphic chop-signatures [the personalised stamp-marks that identified a particular calligraphic artist], for making imprimaturs of other kinds. These it uses to negotiate conflicting Western left-to-right and Eastern right-to-left readings. The Western left-to-right reading indicates positive action, spelling confusion to any true reading of Japanese text and image combinations, while the Eastern right-to-left reading seems unbalanced to a Western sensibility, uncorrectable in a mirror and even morally confusing (especially if we believe that, in the West, evil enters stage-right).

One hopes the film to be full of such attempts to marry form and content, under the banner of the example of the hieroglyph that unites image and text. The images that are here are not necessarily the most imaginative in this area, but all contribute something to the idea of making the search.

Sight and Sound, November 1996

THE PILLOW BOOK

Director: Peter Greenaway; *Production Companies:* Kasander & Wigman Productions, Alpha Films, Woodline Films, *Association:* Channel 4 Films, Studio Canal+, DeLux Productions; *Support:* Eurimages Conseil de l'Europe, Stichting Nederlands Fonds vo; *Executive Producers:* Terry Glinwood, Jean-Louis Piel, Denis Wigman; *Producer:* Kees Kasander; *Line Producers:* Noll Associates, Jessinta Liu, Riverdrive Productions, DeLux Productions; *Production Co-ordinator:* Debby de Jong; *Production Co-ordinators (Japan):* Yuriko Mameshiro, Kay Kimura, Megumi Igei; *Production Manager (Luxembourg):* Fiona Nottingham; *Japan Unit Production Manager:* Misako Furukawa; *Hong Kong Unit Manager:* Cheung Chi Ho; *Japan Location Manager:* Kei Sugiura; *Location Managers (Luxembourg):* Marc Wouters, Bob Feltgen; *Location Manager (Hong Kong):* Maggie To; *Japan Location Co-ordinator:* Yumiko Miwa; *2nd Assistant Director:* Aimi O; *2nd Japan Assistant Director:* Kenji Nakanishi; *3rd Japan Assistant Director:* Koji Kabayashi; *1st Luxembourg Assistant director:* Vincent Rivier; *1st Hong Kong Assistant Director:* Paul Cheung; *2nd Hong Kong Assistant Director:* Kwan Shun-Fai; *Continuity:* Agathe Grau; *Casting (UK):* Liora Reich, Abi Cohen; *Casting (Japan):* Aimi O, Hitomi Ishihara; *Casting (Luxembourg):* Carrie O'Brien; *Screenplay:* Peter Greenaway; *Director of Photography:* Sacha Vierny; *Camera Operator:* Benito Strangio; *Special Lighting Effects:* Reinier van Brummelen; *Calligraphy:* Brody Neuenschwander, Yukki Yaura; *Japan Calligrapher:* Minoru Hibino; *Japan Calligraphy for Fashion Show Costumes:* Hajime Izutsu; *Editors:* Chris Wyatt, Peter Greenaway; *Production Designers:* Wilbert van Dorp, Andrée Putman; *Japan Production Designer:* Emi Wada; *Japan Art Director:* Koichi Hamamura; *Luxembourg Art director:* Vincent de Pater; *'Future' Items Designer:* Noriyuki Tanaka; *Costume Designers:* Dien van Straalen, Koji Tatsuno, Martin Margiela; *Japan Costume Designer:* Emi Wada; *Make-up Artist:* Sara Meerman; *Tattoo Artist:* Ryoji Kasumi; *Japan Heian Wig/Make-up:* Seji Arai; *Japan Contemporary Hair/Make-up:* Kyoko Toyokawa, Shoko Ishigaki; *Optical:* Image Creations; *Production Sound:* Garth Marshall; *Re-recording Mixer:* Cliff Jones; *Sound Editor/Post-production Sound:* Nigel Heath; *Dialogue Editor:* Mathew Knights; *Sound Effects Editor:* Julian Slater; *Foley Editor:* Rod Howick; *Heian Period Supervisor (Japan):* Isao Nomura, Nagahiro Ebara

Cast

Vivian Wu (Nagiko); Yoshi Oida (the publisher); Ken Ogata (the father); Hideko Yoshida (the aunt/the maid); Ewan McGregor (Jerome); Judy Ongg (the mother); Ken Mitsuishi (the husband); Yutaka Honda (Hoki);

Barbara Lott (Jerome's mother); Miwako Kawai, Chizuru Ohnishi, Shiho Takamatsu, Aki Ishimaru, (young Nagiko); Hidashi Hidaka, Dehong Chen, Luong Ham Chau, Akihiko Nishida, Kentaro Matsuo, Nguyen Duc Nhan, Augusto Aristotle, Roger To Thanh Hien, Chris Bearne (calligraphers); Wichert Dromkert (The Book of the Innocent); Martin Tukker (The Book of the Idiot); Wu Wei (The Book of Old Age); Tom Kane (The Book of the Exhibitionist); Kheim Lam (The Book of the Seducer); Daishi Hori (The Book of Youth); Kinya Tsuruyama (The Book of Secrets); Eiichi Tanaka (The Book of the Betrayer); Rick Waney (The Book of Silence); Masaru Matsuda (The Book of Birth & Beginnings); Wataru Murofushi (The Book of the Dead); Ronald Guttman (lecturer); Ryuko Azuma (grandmother); Seitaro Koyama, Tatsuya Kimura (nephews); Yoshihiko Nagata, Atsushi Miura (husband's friends); Kazushi Ishimaru (Baby Nagiko); Hikari Abe (Nagiko's baby); Junko Matsumori (pregnant Nagiko double); Kazuko Abe (breast feeding Nagiko double); Ai Kanafuji, Yoshino Yoshioka, Yuki Nou, Masami Nishio, Satomi Kimura, Michiko Matsuo, Kintaro Murayama (Nagiko's friends); Ann, Kaoru Ueda, Ohko, Junko Shinohara, Yuko Nozawa, Kiyomi Nomura, Midori Hatsuda, Miwa Hayashi (models); Seizo H. Inoue, Yoshihiro Kawai, Munenari Takeshima, Toshio Kimura, Masakazu Takemura, Hiroshi Nakajima, Kageyoshi Shirakata, Takashi Miyake (10th Century men); Hiroko Uno, Yuko Shimomura, Kana Haraguchi, Yuri Inoue, Makiko Shoji, Miwako Namie, Atsuko Nakamura, Tokiko Horiike, Akiko Yokotani, Yasuko Ogawa, Atsuko Yoshikawa, Mariko Ajimoto, Hiromi Tani, Fukue Kitaoka (10th Century women); Arnita Swanson (Edele); Jim Adhi Limas (man in lift); Miho Tanaka, Fabienne de Marco, Tania de Jaeger (model friend in Café Typos); Lu Jinhua (wife of calligrapher); Tien Sing Wang, Chau, See Wah Leung, Kha (intruders); Kumi Komino (elderly secretary); Yuki Hayashi (young female secretary); Maskai Taketani (young male secretary); Mr & Mrs Lo (old servant and wife); See Yan Leung (bookshop manager); François van den Bergen (Book of Seducer); Valerie Buchanon; Yorks Tong; Lynne Frances Wachendorfer; C.S. Wong; Michell Leigh Nicholson; Anna Chu; Farini Chang; Tom Tom; Doris Lui Lai Fong; Anita Leung Pui Shan; Shuen Ngar Lei; Cham Ben; Bobsy Jureidini; Vanessa Lanza; Chau Kwok Kwong; Sammuel Leung; Jo Jo Hui; Louis Fu Yiu Shi; Paul Wan; Adrian Kwan Shun Fai; Woo Leung; Hui Pak Kin; Tony Wong Man Kit; Poon Wing Hong; Li Chun Man; Stephen C. Lam; Edelme Christanse; Jimmy Lee Wai Chung; Terence Tsin Chung Tung; Sam; Andrew Chan

Netherlands/France/UK/Luxembourg 1995©
126 mins

FRAMES OF MIND: THE FILMS OF PETER GREENAWAY

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

A Zed & Two Noughts

Mon 21 Nov 20:40; Sun 27 Nov 12:15; Sat 10 Dec 17:30 (+ intro by Peter Greenaway)

The Belly of an Architect

Tue 22 Nov 18:10; Sat 26 Nov 15:30

The Baby of Mâcon

Fri 25 Nov 18:00; Mon 28 Nov 20:30

The Unreliable Narrator: Adventures in Storytelling, Documentary and Misinformation

Fri 25 Nov 21:00

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover

Mon 28 Nov 17:50; Fri 9 Dec 20:30 (+ intro by Peter Greenaway)

Peter Greenaway Shorts Programme 2

Thu 1 Dec 17:50; Mon 12 Dec 20:50

Peter Greenaway Documentary Programme

Fri 2 Dec 20:35; Sun 11 Dec 12:00

Haunted Generations: The Lingering Legacy of the Public

Information Film

Fri 2 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by author Bob Fischer); Wed 21 Dec 20:30

Black Pond and Other Short Films

Sat 3 Dec 12:00; Wed 14 Dec 20:35 (+ intro by filmmaker Jessica Sarah Rinland)

Rembrandt's J'Accuse

Sat 3 Dec 15:20; Mon 19 Dec 20:50

Nightwatching

Sat 3 Dec 18:00; Mon 19 Dec 18:00

The Tulse Luper Suitcases

Sun 4 Dec 12:10; Sun 18 Dec 12:00

The Tulse Luper Suitcases, Part 2: Vaux to the Sea

Sun 4 Dec 15:15; Sun 18 Dec 15:30

The Tulse Luper Suitcases, Part 3: From Sark to Finish

Sun 4 Dec 18:10; Sun 18 Dec 18:20

Eisenstein in Guanajuato

Wed 7 Dec 20:55; Thu 29 Dec 18:15

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover

Fri 9 Dec 20:30 (+ intro by Peter Greenaway)

The Greenaway Alphabet + H Is for House + Q&A with Saskia

Boddeke

Sat 10 Dec 12:00

Goltzius and the Pelican Company

Sat 10 Dec 14:15 (+ Q&A with Peter Greenaway); Wed 28 Dec 18:00

A Zed & Two Noughts

Sat 10 Dec 17:30 (+ intro by Peter Greenaway)

The Tulse Luper Suitcases: Antwerp (unconfirmed)

Sat 10 Dec 20:50; Thu 29 Dec 20:50

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