



EVENTS

Peter Greenaway in conversation

Peter Greenaway's career as an artist, writer and filmmaker has spanned six decades. Throughout, he has consistently challenged established forms of narrative filmmaking, never compromising, while also embracing new technologies. As we celebrate his 80th birthday and an extraordinary career with a two-month season at BFI Southbank, we are thrilled to welcome Peter to join us and talk about his work to date.

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Peter Greenaway was born in Newport, Wales in 1942. He studied at Forest Hills Public School, and then at Walthamstow College of Art. An artist who is a believer in the subversive power of the image, his critical relation to visualisation is expressed in paintings, films, television and multi-media formats, that have earned him international acclaim as well as charges of mannerism, elitism, obscurantism, intellectual exhibitionism, even misogyny. Greenaway has come to be recognised as a philosopher of cinema, since the style and substance of his work addresses the changing status of the image in the contemporary world. His films draw self-consciously on various arts – painting, literature, calligraphy, theatre, architecture, and music – however, they are not merely formal exercises in style. Though they are obsessed with the nature and importance of form, they address profound questions of the historical role of art in culture.

Greenaway's work is critical of Hollywood methods of filmmaking that he sees as mere illustration of 19th century novels. For him, cinema must resist appropriating existing novels and plays. His early films are 'not illustrations of already existing texts, or vehicles for actors, or slaves to a plot, or an excuse to provide emotional catharsis', as Alan Woods puts it. The non-feature films and videos that he made from the 1960s into the 1980s can be described rather as 'theoretical deliberations' (Vernon and Marguerite Gras). They are encyclopaedic in scope, visualising aspects of modern life, e.g., transportation, funeral architecture, telephone boxes, rural and ancient, domestic and public landscapes, dress designers, composers, lakes, water towers, roads, conspiracies, riots and demonstrations, etc. However, these films are not conventional documentaries but Greenaway's mode of subverting realism, of highlighting the theatricality and artifice of the visual image so as to enable an understanding of the 'vast amount of data that's pushed at us all the time' (Marcia Pally).

The Draughtsman's Contract (1982), Greenaway's first mainstream feature film, is set in the 17th century, a time of social and economic transformation. The film portrays the draughtsman's encounters with the moneyed upper classes as he seeks to fulfil his commission. Though the film involves intrigue, even murder, it is not a conventional crime narrative. It is a whodunit that is also a complex exploration of the production of the visual image and its relation to sound, particularly music (thanks to Greenaway's collaboration with Michael Nyman). It examines perspective through the visual and verbal references to painting – the focus on framing of the drawings and of the film

itself, on conversations that are as stylised as the images of architecture and formal gardens. In effect, the film uses all of these strategies to invite the spectator to consider different ways of visualising history, contemplating language, storytelling, and, above all, cinema.

A Zed and Two Noughts (1985) captures similar images of nature and artifice to those Greenaway created in his short 'documentaries'. The film involves twins, Oliver and Oswald, but the narrative is not a story; it is a compendium of animals as in the zoo of the title. But Greenaway's zoo is the world, and, more specifically, the world of cinema. The cinematic and philosophical focus is on the world as reflected, on issues of sameness (as in the case of identical twins), emerging from the dualities of cinema and reality, art and nature, forgery and authenticity. Greenaway also introduces a motif from his other films – mortality seen through the lens of the cinema that both captures death and is itself doomed to decay and death.

According to Greenaway, *The Belly of an Architect* (1987), his third feature film 'has tried to explore all the different means whereby art has produced the human form' (Vernon and Marguerite Gras). The film reprises Greenaway's ubiquitous and complex motif of doubling with two architects, one an 18th century historical personage, Étienne-Louis Boullée, the other a contemporary American, Stourley Kracklite, who has come to Rome to set up an exhibit of Boullée. Greenaway seeks further doubling in the film's conjunction of past and present, particularly in the linking of Boullée's buildings to Fascist architecture and by linking architects to filmmakers in relation to the dilemmas they face in being dependent on patrons while attempting to express their own personal and cultural vision.

Drowning by Numbers (1988), Greenaway's next film, is generally regarded as more accessible to spectators than his other narratives. The film involves three women dissatisfied with their husbands and determined to do something with their disaffection – through death by drowning. By this act, the women develop 'a deeper form of kinship' and 'a primordial affinity with water' (Amy Lawrence). As the film's title suggests, the film relies on the elemental nature of water. The numbers alluded to in the title involve the doubling and tripling of characters, the four elements, the visual presence of ciphers, and the frequent allusions to counting. In Greenaway's films numbers play a prominent role, having to do with complex modes of ordering the world and are tied to modes of representation – classification, taxonomy, and symbolisation – that are scientific and visionary.

The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover (1989), made during the last years of Thatcherism, was commercially his most successful film and revealed Greenaway's penchant for allegory and his ability to combine political with cultural critique. The film draws on popular images of crime and violence, food and fashion, and links them to Thatcher's England. The focus on consuming is not only a critique of contemporary capitalism as gangsterism, but of the violence of history as conveyed through the fictions by which it is consumed,

Prospero's Books (1991) carries Greenaway's investigation of representation to greater complexity. The film engages with Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, not as theatre transposed to film but rather – through the overarching figure of Prospero (Sir John Gielgud) – with issues of art and science, human intelligence, the powers of reason and unreason. The most striking aspect of the film has to do with role of 'books', the archive of human knowledge, covering the natural sciences, history, magic, painting, and calligraphy.

Prospero's Books is exemplary of Greenaway's encyclopaedic strivings. The 'books' are the artist's archive and are also indicative of the potential of cinema to capture the multiplicity of life and thought. Utilising allegory, the film draws on visual images, dialogue and music to invoke theatre, masque, opera, high and low comedy and create a complex vision of authorship, cinematic narration and the clash between words and images.

The Baby of Mâcon (1993) draws on a play performed in Italy in 1659 and focuses on the slippery relation between theatrical illusion and 'reality' within the performance of a play, exploring the complex role of ritual (and cinema), in Greenaway's terms, as both 'paradoxical and dangerous', an opportunity for critical reflection or an instrument of deceit and manipulation. In creating *The Pillow Book* (1995) Greenaway follows another trajectory, pursuing connections between writing and the body: the body of thought, the body of writing, and the body as writing. Working with a thousand year-old diary, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagan*, he reshapes the text to address his primary aesthetic and philosophical concerns. As both this allegory and *Prospero's Books* suggest, Greenaway is wrestling with relations between word and image: Japanese calligraphy provides him, as it did earlier for Sergei Eisenstein, with a rethinking of the separation of the body and the text. The film is a cornucopia of images and allusions: Greenaway explores within the film and in the form of the film the creation of new languages, generating different visual effects with framing, multiple screen images, letter-boxing, overlaid texts, writing superimposed on visual images as well as writings on the body of the actors.

Consistent with his exploration of media and language, Greenaway's later films – *8½ Women*, *Death of a Composer* (both 1999), *The Man in the Bath* (2001) and *Tulse Luper's Suitcase* (2003) – rely on new media, particularly CD-ROM. *Nightwatching* (2007), the first in his 'Dutch Masters' series (with the second project titled *Goltzius and the Pelican Company*), was accompanied by a special installation designed for the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, shown beside Rembrandt's painting *The Night Watch*. He continued his series of digital video installations revisiting classical paintings in 2008 when, after much negotiation, Greenaway staged a one-night performance 'remixing' da Vinci's *The Last Supper* in the refectory of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. In 2009 he exhibited his digital exploration of *The Wedding at Cana* by Paolo Veronese as part of the Venice Biennial.

He also contributed to *Visions of Europe*, a short film collection by different European Union directors; his British entry is *The European Showerbath*. *Nightwatching* and *Rembrandt's J'Accuse* are two films on Rembrandt, released respectively in 2007 and 2008.

On 17 June 2005, Greenaway appeared for his first VJ performance during an art club evening in Amsterdam, Netherlands, with music by DJ Serge Dodwell (aka Radar), as a backdrop, 'VJ' Greenaway used for his set a special system consisting of a large plasma screen with laser controlled touchscreen to project the 92 *Tulse Luper* stories on the 12 screens of 'Club 11', mixing the images live. This was later reprised at the Optronica festival, London.

On 12 October 2007, he created the multimedia installation *Peopling the Palaces at Venaria Reale* at the Royal Palace of Venaria near Turin, which animated the Palace with 100 videoprojectors.

Greenaway has honorary degrees amongst others from the Universities of Staffordshire, Edinburgh, Gdansk, Bucharest, Southampton and Utrecht, and was awarded a CBE in 1990 and a BAFTA in 2014 for services to cinema.

Greenaway continues to expand his exploration of the various arts, their interconnections, the historical changes that must be acknowledged and their implications for understanding the relationship between expression and power.

This biography is adapted from Marcia Landy, 'Peter Greenaway,' *Directors in British and Irish Cinema: A Reference Companion* (BFI Publishing 2006)

PETER GREENAWAY

Born in Newport, 1942

All as Director
All UK unless stated

Feature films

2015 **Eisenstein in Guanajuato** (Netherlands/Mexico/Finland/Belgium/Germany)
2012 **Goltzius and The Pelican Company** (Netherlands/UK/Croatia/France)
2008 **Rembrandt's J'accuse** (Netherlands/Germany/Finland)
2007 **Nightwatching** (Netherlands/Canada/UK/Poland)
2005 **Tulse Luper A Life in Suitcases** (Netherlands/Spain/Luxembourg)
200 **The Tulse Luper Suitcases a Life History in 16 Episodes: Part 3 From Sark to Finish** (Netherlands/UK/Italy)
The Tulse Luper Suitcases a Life History in 16 Episodes: Part 2 Vaux to the Sea (UK/Luxembourg/Spain)
2003 **The Tulse Luper Suitcases a Life History in 16 Episodes: Part 1 The Moab Story** (UK/Luxembourg/Spain)
1999 **8½ Women** (Netherlands/UK/Luxembourg/Germany)
1995 **The Pillow Book** (Netherlands/France/UK/Luxembourg)
Stairs 1 Geneva (Switzerland)
1993 **The Baby of Mâcon** (UK/France/Netherlands/Germany)
1991 **Prospero's Books** (Netherlands/France/UK)
1989 **The Cook the Thief His Wife & Her Lover** (UK/France)
1988 **Drowning by Numbers** (UK/Netherlands)
1987 **The Belly of an Architect** (UK/Italy)
1985 **A Zed & Two Noughts** (UK/Netherlands)
1982 **The Draughtsman's Contract**
1980 **The Falls**

Shorts

2016 **Shchukin, Matisse, Dance and Music** (France)
2013 **Just in time** (segment of *3x3D*, Portugal/France)
2011 **Castle Amerongen** (Netherlands)
2010 **92 Atomic Bomb Explosions on the Planet Earth** (UK/Netherlands)
2004 **The European Showerbath** (part of *Visions of Europe*, Denmark/Germany)
Writing on Water (UK/Netherlands)

2001 **The Man in the Bath**
1997 **The Bridge Celebration** (Netherlands)
1995 **Lumière et Compagnie** (segment, France/Spain/Sweden/Belgium/Norway)
1992 **Rosa, La Monnaie de munt** (Belgium)
1989 **Hubert Bals Handshake**
1985 **The Sea in Their Blood: Beside the Sea** (COI)
1981 **The Exile**
1979 **Leeds Castle** (COI, part of *This Week in Britain*)
Ink Jet Printing (COI, part of *This Week in Britain*)
1968 **Revolution**
1967 **5 Postcards from Capital Cities**
1966 **Tree**
Train
1961 **Death of Sentiment**

Documentaries

2017 **Luther and His Legacy** (Netherlands)
2009 **The Marriage** (Italy)
2008 **Cinema Is Dead, Long Live the Screen**
2001 **The Reitdiep Journeys** (Netherlands)
1992 **Peter Greenaway** (Germany)
1988 **Fear of Drowning**
1983 **The Coastline**
1980 **Country Diary**
1979 **Women Artists**

TV

1999 **The Death of a Composer: Rosa, a Horse Drama** (Netherlands)
1992 **Darwin** (part of *Genii*, UK/France)
A Walk through Prospero's Library (Germany)
1991 **M Is for Man, Music, Mozart** (part of *Not Mozart*)
1990 **A TV Dante: The Inferno Cantos I-VIII**
1989 **Les Morts de la Seine / Death in the Seine** (France/UK)
1986 **Inside Rooms: 26 Bathrooms**
1984 **Making a Splash**
4 American Composers
1981 **Terence Conran** (part of *Insight*)
Zandra Rhodes (part of *Insight*)
1980 **Act of God Some Lightning Experience**
1961-80 (part of *Take Six*)

FRAMES OF MIND: THE FILMS OF PETER GREENAWAY

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover

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

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

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

Peter Greenaway Documentary Programme Sun 11 Dec 12:00

Peter Greenaway Shorts Programme 2 Mon 12 Dec 20:50

Haunted Generations: The Lingering Legacy of the Public Black

Pond and Other Short Films Wed 14 Dec 20:35 (+ intro by filmmaker Jessica Sarah Rinland)

The Tulse Luper Suitcases: The Moab Story Sun 18 Dec 12:00

The Tulse Luper Suitcases, Part 2: Vaux to the Sea Sun 18 Dec 15:30

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

Sun 18 Dec 18:20

Nightwatching Mon 19 Dec 18:00

Rembrandt's J'Accuse Mon 19 Dec 20:50

Information Film Wed 21 Dec 20:30

Eisenstein in Guanajuato Thu 29 Dec 18:15

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

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