

# Introduction

## *Encyclopedia Britannica*

One of the most controversial and distinctive filmmakers of the 1980s British film renaissance, Peter Greenaway has established himself as a byword in contemporary film studies. With seven feature films in eleven years and a series of award-winning shorts, Greenaway has produced a strikingly beautiful and cohesive body of work during a critical period in British film history.

Greenaway's films are marked by an astonishing proliferation of detail and a remarkable breadth of reference. From theories of history to theories of art, from consumption to construction, his films are best reached through metaphor and paradox – literary concepts that demand we hold in mind more than one thing at a time, that each element illuminate the other, and that those elements be, at the very least, contradictory.

As with the work of any cinematic stylist and innovator, Greenaway's films are easy to recognize and difficult to describe. In writing about Greenaway, some critics feel compelled to adopt the filmmaker's poetic density, his trademark wordplay and puns, struggling to convey a fragment of the unforgettable images crowding each film. In the first twenty seconds of the titles of Greenaway's breakthrough film, *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), Elizabeth Butz finds clues

anticipating thematic strains of revolution and cyclicism: light to dark, constancy and alternation, seed to offspring, the long shot pulling away and the close-up closing in, closet to courtyard, awesome catholicity and glorified protestation, artisan to courtesan, orange and pineapple, plum to purge, England and her nether lands.<sup>1</sup>

Another suggests the array of references that come to mind watching a single film: “*Cook, Thief* has the splendor of De Mille and the perversity of de Sade,” what “*'Tis Pity She's a Whore* might look like directed by Monty

Python in the spirit of *The Birds*.”<sup>2</sup> Even those who do *not* like Greenaway still find it necessary to cite his “diversity (author, painter, art historian), his taxonomical brilliance (games with numbers, alphabets, painterly tableaux, filmic *hommages*, literary allusions), [and] his unconventional narratives.”<sup>3</sup>

In an attempt to unify this diversity, many critics look for a central overriding metaphor. Tracy Biga sees eating disorders as an essential structuring element in all of Greenaway’s films – from the eating scenes in *The Draughtsman’s Contract* through *The Belly of an Architect* (1986) to *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989). Others argue for abstract organizational systems – numbers in *Drowning by Numbers* (1988), the alphabet in *A Zed and Two Noughts* (1985), both in *The Falls* (1980) – or for the centrality of artist figures: a painter (*Draughtsman’s Contract*), an architect (*Belly of an Architect*), a writer (*Prospero’s Books*, 1991), or a chef (*Cook, Thief*).<sup>4</sup> We can also find a mordant appreciation of scientific rationalism in the ornithologists and cartographers of *A Walk Through H* (1978), the centralized rural development officials and the documentarians in *Vertical Features Remake* (1978), the zoologists (*A Zed and Two Noughts*), coroners (*Drowning by Numbers*), and scholars (*Belly, Prospero*). But in Greenaway obsessions often overlap. In any Greenaway film, several structuring metaphors are operating simultaneously, no one truer to the essential meaning of the film or more useful than another.

Greenaway’s films indulge a taste for the encyclopedic. “I want to make films that rationally represent all the world in one place. That mocks human effort because you cannot do that.”<sup>5</sup> Greenaway’s films embrace cascades of information. He asserts that

works of art refer to great masses of culture, they are encyclopedic by nature. . . . [T]he works of art that I admire, even contemporary ones like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or any three-page story by Borges, have that ability to put all the world together. My movies are sections of this world encyclopedia.<sup>6</sup>

For instance, Greenaway points out that in *Drowning by Numbers* “the coroner’s son is named Smut, which begins with the letter S. So there are one hundred things in the film that begin with S. . . .” “You don’t have to know that to see the film,” he adds, “but it somehow enriches the fabric of it, makes the film again encyclopedic by nature.”<sup>7</sup>

The encyclopedia in Greenaway’s work is an organizational strategy as well as a philosophical stance as well as an ideological practice. A monumental pastiche, *The Falls* in particular can be seen as a postmodern encyclopedia, an organization of facts and pieces put together in an eminently

logical way, laced with the very slightest regret that none of it is actually true. In *The Falls*, Greenaway parodies every technique by which traditional documentary seeks to substantiate its ties to reality. Of course, by the end every aspect of the film has been revealed to be a complete fiction. One critic described *The Falls* as “a paean to pseudo-science; Edward Lear wrapped up in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.”<sup>8</sup>

A longstanding prejudice regarding experimental films argues that if the pleasures offered are other than narrative (are found, for instance, in visual style, montage, *hommage*, tantalizing juxtapositions, and *ideas*), the films will be cold, distant, pretentious game-playing. “The same accusations (elitism, mannerism, formalism, [and] chilly intellectualism),” one critic points out, were also “levied against the films of Eisenstein, Alain Resnais, Straub-Huillet.”<sup>9</sup> Resnais, in fact, is one of the filmmakers Greenaway admires most.<sup>10</sup> “I’d like to think my cinema is somewhere between Resnais and Hollis Frampton, if that’s possible. Sort of to the left of field of Resnais but still slightly to the right of Frampton.”<sup>11</sup>

Far from chilly in discussing his films, Greenaway takes pleasure in the exuberant range of interpretations to which his work can be subjected. *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, he relates,

has been seen as an essay on fruit symbolism, the political history of Northern Ireland, pro-Thatcherism, anti-Thatcherism, pro-feminism, anti-feminism, and many other things. *Time Out* . . . argued that the film was an exposé of English League Football.<sup>12</sup>

Although he acknowledges that “I am often accused of being an intellectual exhibitionist” (and enjoys repeating Pauline Kael’s less than flattering description of him as a “cultural omnivore who eats with his mouth open”),<sup>13</sup> Greenaway emphatically rejects the charge of elitism. “There is much in [my films] to enjoy besides the use of conceit and allegory. It’s absurd for people to say, ‘Christ, I’m not clever enough to catch all these references.’”<sup>14</sup>

Given such myriad references, some critics feel Greenaway’s films fail to develop fully the complex “intellectual, philosophical and aesthetic” ideas they raise.<sup>15</sup> This dissatisfaction frequently centers on what Jonathan Hacker and David Price call the “significant problem of inadequate characterization. The characters are frequently awkward pawns within Greenaway’s intellectual game-playing” – leaving the audience with no access to emotional identification.<sup>16</sup>

Greenaway, on the other hand, argues vehemently that cinema should be allowed to serve as a forum for something other than psychological realism. “Most of the films originate essentially as ideas – not as events, not as pieces

of narrative, [and] not as a desire to express a character.”<sup>17</sup> Like Resnais (who also began as an editor of informational films), Greenaway privileges style, and an epigram associated with Resnais applies equally well to the Greenaway of *Draughtsman’s Contract*, *The Cook*, *The Thief*, and his other feature films of the 1980s – “Form is feeling in its most elegant and economic expression.”<sup>18</sup> Greenaway puts it another way:

I do have a genuine interest, I think, in language – cinema language, textual language, imagery. Content very rapidly atrophies and all you’re left with is language. It’s the manipulation of language which keeps us all excited.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, Greenaway concedes that his work might be too successful at what could be called a characteristic emotional restraint.

The English are very good at game-playing – they have probably invented most of them – and we are often criticised for hiding behind them. It is said to be a way of ritualizing emotion.<sup>20</sup>

Although his early short films carry a delicate but nonetheless powerful emotional undertow, in his features Greenaway has been especially dependent on actors to introduce and maintain each film’s emotional domain. Consequently his strongest films have the best acting: Anthony Higgins, Janet Suzman, and Anne Louise Lambert in *Draughtsman*; Brian Dennehy in *Belly*; Joan Plowright, Juliet Stevenson, and Bernard Hill in *Drowning by Numbers*; Helen Mirren and Michael Gambon in *Cook*. When the acting fails (the main characters in *Zed*) or when Greenaway depends on international stars whose accents detract from the rhythm and wit of the dialogue (Andrea Ferreol in *Zed* or Richard Bohringer in *Cook*), the films risk incoherence (literally, with Ferreol and Bohringer) and lose emotional resonance.

Greenaway’s films possess a fundamentally postmodern sensibility. Without underlying myths to endow them with meaning, everything we see is unmoored from history, reduced to the status of signs without referents. History becomes a playground of artifacts, fragments from all periods insouciantly scattered about, incongruous, enchanting, opaque. In *The Belly of an Architect*, an American architect (Brian Dennehy) reels through Rome, his office littered with models, reproductions, props and diagrams, domes and cycloramas, an eerie green-lit Xerox machine spewing forth copy after copy of the marble stomach of Caesar. Outside, gargantuan heads are left sitting in courtyards. A lightweight culture-thief hawks a tray of noses casually chiseled from antique statuary. In *The Draughtsman’s Contract*, the

dialogue imitates Sheridan and Congreve, the music, Purcell, the images, De La Tour and others. In *The Cook, The Thief*, the characters are dwarfed by the culture they mimic in miniature and to which their every move may be compared. In this grab-bag approach to history, complex relationships can be stated visually in a way that is both dense and widely accessible.

Like Pasolini and Godard, Greenaway is a self-conscious auteur whose work poses the question: How to make art out of *ideas* about art? Despite his loss of faith in explanatory systems, Greenaway holds on to a few basics – the artist, landscape, structure, and the ruins of Western culture – while showing how each has been utterly compromised in the late twentieth century. Artists, for instance, are shown in *Draughtsman* to be inevitably corrupted by the political regimes within which they operate; in *Cook* their skill subjects them to unsolicited patronage. *The Belly of an Architect* and *Prospero's Books* situate the artist amid the rubble of a postmodern consciousness. In *Belly* the modern artist's fealty to the past implicates him in an unending chain of patriarchal authority (corrupt, tyrannical, megalomaniacal) that is ultimately inseparable from his idealistic vision of artistic purity. Prospero's use of books to dominate, subject, and (most stunningly) silence those around him is another indictment of not only the artist but the patriarch.<sup>21</sup>

In criticizing the artist, Greenaway is critical of his own position. After exhaustively listing the mediocrity of each of his major male characters, he concludes, "I suppose they're all self-portraits of a sort."<sup>22</sup> The most autobiographical figure in Greenaway's work, the architect-hero of *Belly*, is a middle-aged man overwhelmed by the endless reproduction of icons of the past as he compares himself to his artistic idols. In *Prospero's Books* and *A TV Dante* (1988), Greenaway does the same, measuring himself against Dante, Shakespeare, and the entire British theatrical tradition as exemplified by John Gielgud.

Like his artist figures, the women in Greenaway's films must make their own way. In films like *Draughtsman's Contract* and *Cook, Thief*, the women and the artists share a social powerlessness, and are valued only for what they can produce to the glory and amusement of the patriarchy. Each must learn to negotiate a hostile world in order to survive. Greenaway's women are frequently more successful at this than the men, and given the corruption of the worlds in which they succeed (*Draughtsman*), this has left Greenaway open to charges of misogyny as well as misanthropy. Although Greenaway occasionally falls into a mythic-romantic view linking women with nature, associating them with childbirth and life (*Drowning by Numbers*, *Belly*, *Zed*), the women in Greenaway's films are nevertheless some of

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-47919-6 - The Films of Peter Greenaway  
 Amy Lawrence  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

the most intriguing in contemporary cinema. Both *The Draughtsman's Contract* and *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* turn on the intelligence of the women characters. Greenaway's women are also often mature figures, which contributes to the adult eroticism of Greenaway's work: Mrs. Herbert in *Draughtsman* (Janet Suzman), Georgina in *Cook, Thief* (Helen Mirren).

Critical of human failings, Greenaway implicates cinema in the failure of art. In *A Zed and Two Noughts*, cinema's beginnings in Muybridge's studies of animal motion are inverted. Instead of creating the illusion of life, motion pictures create a parodic, grotesque, pseudomovement for the dead. In *The Belly of an Architect*, a camera, employed for surveillance and attempted blackmail, is ultimately revealed to be empty.

Despite this apparent pessimism, Greenaway argues that any tendency toward morbidity is balanced by his love for the English landscape.

Behind this death, evil, and mediocrity is the natural landscape. These landscapes are magnificent and optimistic. . . . [They] have an ebullient delight in the richness and variety of things and many [of the films] do end with a birth which persistently argues for another try, another chance, another opportunity.<sup>23</sup>

Compared to the urban obsessions of other British filmmakers (from Grierson in the thirties, through the "kitchen sink" realism of the sixties, to Stephen Frears, Mike Leigh, and Alan Clarke in the eighties), Greenaway's films emerge out of the rural British landscape, a setting inseparable from the history of British politics, culture, identity, and art. Evoking the work of landscape artists, Greenaway's short films weave idyllic, nostalgic images of Britain into a witty exposé of man's attempts to "read," interpret, and order nature with a series of grids, maps, and narratives imposed on the land. Films like *Vertical Features Remake*, *A Walk Through H*, and *H is for House* (1973) uncover a surprising depth of feeling as they reveal the comic futility of man's attempts to explain the richness of the world.

All of Greenaway's films have an unparalleled surface beauty. Consider the southern warmth of *Belly of an Architect*, its underpopulated urban scenes evoking such sixties masters as Resnais (Greenaway was working with Resnais's cinematographer, Sacha Vierny) and the stringent cleanness of Antonioni; the cool, light-filled hospital rooms of *Zed*; an Infanta solemnly jumping rope under a shower of stars in *Drowning by Numbers*; the golden memories of a book depository in *The Cook* and its visual companion in *Prospero's Books* where pages fall like leaves – but upward and in slow motion. The consistent beauty of these films is all the more stunning

when one takes into account the speed with which they were made and the limited funding available for experimental film production in England in the eighties. Much of the credit for the “look” of a Greenaway film is due to his production team, which has remained remarkably stable over time: cinematographer Sacha Vierny, composer Michael Nyman, editor John Wilson, and production designers Ben Van Os and Jan Roelfs. This is not to suggest, however, that Greenaway’s style is merely the sum of the talents of the people he works with: even when working with others (cinematographer Curtis Clark and designer Bob Ringwood on *Draughtsman’s Contract*, for instance, or production designer Luciana Vedovelli and composers Wim Mertens and Glen Branca on *Belly of an Architect*), Greenaway’s films are instantly, identifiably, his.

### An English Filmmaker

Born in 1942 in Newport, Wales, during “the darkest days of World War II,” Greenaway was raised by his mother, aunts, and maternal grandmother in a “working class house in the industrial areas of this South Wales industrial town.”<sup>24</sup> When his father returned from the war four years later, the family relocated to London’s East End, nearer Greenaway’s father’s family in Essex. The long-delayed introduction of father and son was the beginning of a difficult relationship.

Greenaway’s father’s parents were “gardeners, horticultural people, who looked after estates.” “Not a million miles away,” Greenaway notes, “from the circumstances of *Draughtsman’s Contract*.” It was Greenaway’s maternal grandmother who introduced him to the cinema.

There was a concession just after the war that bereaved widows (ostensibly war widows which wasn’t my grandmother’s case) were allowed in cinemas half-price Tuesday afternoon. For some reasons occasionally I was dragged along.

My first cinema experience was of a Western. [I remember] sitting beside my grandmother in her purple hat, eating sweets and watching this movie . . . and not in any way understanding what I was watching. This was all going over my head until suddenly somebody in the film brought in a child – it must have been my age – a girl, long blond hair, I remember this very clearly – and what I thought was black currant juice on her head. Somebody mentioned the idea of scalping which I didn’t fully understand but suddenly it dawned on me that that black currant juice was supposed to be blood and the girl was



Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-47919-6 - The Films of Peter Greenaway  
 Amy Lawrence  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

dead – and I panicked because I suddenly understood the conventions. I screamed and was taken out. I remember the backs of my legs being slapped on Corporation Road. I must have been about five years old.

Subsequent ventures proved equally unpromising. Taken to a cartoon theatre in the Haymarket in London, Greenaway at eight was so “enthralled and excited,” he did not want to leave. When his parents forced him out of the cinema

there was a commotion and I ended up on the streets with one shoe. My petit bourgeois parents (who were embarrassed generally in public) were aghast that they had a child walking the London streets with only one shoe on. And ever after there seemed to be an association of cinemas and lost clothing which hung around my head.

As Greenaway grew to adolescence, cinema continued to fail to create a strong impression. “It seemed to be a much more social phenomenon, somewhere you went with your friends.”

Like many of his generation, Greenaway’s concept of what film could be was formed in the late fifties and early sixties by European auteurs. What he refers to as his “road to Damascus experience” occurred in “a small fleapit cinema called The State. The cinema manager, it would seem, thought that all Swedish films would naturally be sexy so he put on *The Seventh Seal*.” Greenaway and a schoolmate “ended up, probably rain-soaked, in the cinema hoping to have a risqué experience and saw this extraordinary movie.”

That was an amazing revelation. All the movies I’d seen before were not like this. This was something completely different. This really engaged in some questions I was interested in – superstition, religion . . . But it had the hallmarks of something which was highly watchable, [with] a story you wanted to know what happened next. It was about medieval history which was my passion. It had a strange musical language, beautiful Swedish, you had to read the subtitles which gave it a certain distancing (both characteristics of my cinema again). So I think that it was the big turning point.

Greenaway saw it “nearly two performances a day for five days.”<sup>25</sup>

This led to “a crash course in European cinema,” focusing on “Antonioni, Pasolini, Godard, and Resnais. I saw their films eagerly as they arrived in England – with Godard that was regularly.”<sup>26</sup>



Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-47919-6 - The Films of Peter Greenaway  
 Amy Lawrence  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

That was what I wanted – to make films regularly. I bought my own camera, a clockwork 16mm Bolex, and I applied to the Royal College of Art film-school.<sup>27</sup>

When Greenaway failed to be accepted at film school, his education followed a different path, one that “irritated and antagonized” his parents: “I was supposed to go to university. I got myself placed at Cambridge and I decided that wasn’t what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a painter instead.”

After he graduated from Walthamstow Art School, Greenaway’s employment in film began inauspiciously. Unable to find a position as a film critic (“writing totally unreadable articles like ‘The Relationship between Chirico and Alain Resnais’”),<sup>28</sup> Greenaway “got a temporary job as a doorkeeper at the BFI.” Working in the British Film Institute’s distribution department for eight months, he quickly moved on to a position as “‘third-assistent-editor-on-trial’ in the broom-cupboard cutting-rooms of Soho” until he “got a proper job at the COI [Central Office of Information] – nine to five, paid at the end of the week, union-supervised film-editing.”<sup>29</sup> For the next ten years, Greenaway worked first as an editor and then as a director of informational films.

[Having been] trained, I suppose, in an elitist way in terms of literature and art theory and painting, I entered as a minion sweeping up trims off the floor, determined to learn a craft. . . . So this rather, as they saw it, highly overeducated young man with grand ambitions and no practicality was trying to get into this system. I spent a lot of time climbing up the hierarchy.

The Central Office of Information was a branch of the Foreign Office producing informational films about life in Britain for distribution abroad. “We all had to sign the Official Secrets Act.” Greenaway was one of “twelve editors employed in house.”

There must have been thirty people . . . pushing out these programs all over the world. You never knew what happened to them. There was no feedback. It was calculated that a third of the world’s population was seeing these films – I mean the biggest audience I could ever hope for.

I’m sure a lot of the stuff was terrible. I remember making programs supporting DDT for spreading on fields in South Africa. I remember making documentaries about dried milk for babies in India. All these horrendous – Another program which I at the time thought was very dubious: farmers were encouraged to grub out their hedges and make

bigger fields, put more and more fertilizers, take down the forests and fill in marshes. . . . I had a little hand in all that propaganda.

Despite reservations about content (“It’s not exactly Goebbels but it’s retrospectively not to be proud of”), Greenaway found employment at the COI conducive to his own work.

I should have left earlier but I was well paid, extremely well paid, and with that money I could buy cameras, I could buy stock, and in the evenings I could use all the facilities I was using professionally. . . . So it was a useful little sort of nest for me – decent salary, facilities at my beck and call, and, within the COI, a certain amount of freedom.

Throughout his stint at the COI, Greenaway was making his own “very modest 16mm films, [and] developing theories” about non-narrative cinema – “largely determined by my absurdly meagre means of production.”<sup>30</sup> For Greenaway, these films were also the last time he was able to create films dictated exclusively by the image.

Those films were very much created from the camera. I went out and found the shots according to compositions that amused, excited, or delighted me, then came back with all this amorphous material and structured it in the cutting room.

None of the shots last longer than fifteen seconds – the capacity of Greenaway’s wind-up 16mm Bolex.

Most of Greenaway’s short films were influenced by his taste for avant-garde film and the work of structuralists like Hollis Frampton.<sup>31</sup>

I was also studying for a BA in film theory at the BFI [and] spending a lot of time in the archives. . . . I had the key to the projection room and the archive, and could go and see films when I wanted to.

At the time, “there was great concern for anti-narration in cinema in general,” and Greenaway was particularly struck by the work of North American “underground filmmakers – Hollis Frampton, Brakhage, Snow and all those other people. . . . The sense of freedom, the liberation that all their work indicated was powerful stuff.” For Greenaway, their work provided

great encouragement. Not because I wanted to make films like they did, but because here was an alternative. You didn’t have to have a Hollywood budget to make a movie. You could make a private movie that had philosophical legitimacy, concerning ideas which were hap-