

Cinema of ideas

An interview with Peter Greenaway

2001

Texts versus images?

Oosterling:

Since this interview is part of a series of debates on visual culture and your specific art of – if you permit me to use a term coined by Kodwo Eshun – ‘imagineering’ entails the fragmentation and layering of sequential narrative, I would like to start with an exploration of the transition from narrative to sequences of images that is so characteristic for your films.

Greenaway:

A narrative has to have sequence, but sequence does not necessarily have to have narrative. Since I was originally trained as a painter, there’s a way I believe in the power, not only of the single image, but of a sequence of images of portraying. Let us go back to the notion of a field of ideas. So, I believe sincerely that it is possible in the cinema to be able to express ideas in sequences without being a slave to narrative.

Oosterling:

Looking at an image presupposes a different receptive system than working through texts. Do images always have to be translated in order for them to trigger ideas?

Greenaway:

No, I disagree with that. That is because of our western text-based education. Look at my cinema and you can see how I’m trying to explore that particular area. I can’t give you closings, I can’t give you definitive endings, but I make the cinema that is searching all the time to find a way out of this particular dilemma.

Oosterling:

Is that the reason why you are layering images?

Greenaway:

It’s an attempt I suppose, like all wounds that need to be scratched. I would certainly use texts. On the examples I will show you later, there’s a lot of text on the screen. But consider the attitude - and I think this is the whole purpose behind *The Pillowbook* (1995) - that here in the West we have very much separated text and image. They are parts of two different sorts of culture, certainly if you’re English. And also there’s a value judgement there too - and I sense it also in your questioning - that somehow the text is superior to the image because of our education, because of our receptivity, because of the preciseness that is possible in text versus the ambiguity of the image. We are far more prepared to rely upon a text than on an image. It’s fascinating isn’t it, that the history, even associating very much with Erasmus for example, has basically been a question of examining the texts.

There's no actual attempt to use images as the basis of historical understanding until you get to **Abe Warburg** for example. That is remarkably late, because Warburg gets pushed out of Germany in the nineteen-thirties. In a sense now he is only beginning to be understood as a real useful potential tool for the examination of history. And if you do live in an English situation, we just had a famous account of the American-English artist **Arby Kitay**. An incredibly articulated man, who could speak as well about his paintings as he could actually paint. It is rather like the example of **Sir Joshua Reynolds**, way back in the seventeen-nineties. He wrote probably ten discourses about the attitude of painting and nobody could possibly believe that he had ever written them so cogently, because he was a painter and painters aren't supposed to be able to write. This I think, is a particularly endemic situation in England. But I suspect it is also very much a Western notion of our cultural approach. We are so confident at handling text. After all we spend our entire lives learning how to manipulate it. But remarkably few people ever go to design school or are ever taught how to see. Very few people actually have that education. You all, I am sure you will readily agree with me, you have to learn and you have to study very, very hard indeed, to be able to reach the sense of sophistication, even across all the language barriers, that you and I have now reached, to explain ourselves in text. There is no equivalent or very little sophisticated equivalent in the business of images.

Oosterling:

And being a painter, you have this equivalent?

Greenaway:

Yes, but these are a minority of people. We can all speak languages.

Oosterling:

What about designers nowadays?

Greenaway:

Remarkably small in terms of all the amount of time and effort we spend on learning how to speak. As a small child you learn the alphabet. You spend all your teenage and early years putting the vocabulary together. Even throughout the rest of our lives we read and read and read, the whole process increasing and becoming more and more sophisticated. I would argue - this is an important dictum to me - just because you've got eyes doesn't mean to say you can see. The eye has to be trained to perceive and make images just as your mind had to be trained in order to negotiate text.

Oosterling:

As most people's minds have to be trained to more or less experience philosophy, which of course is more than just reading and writing texts.

Greenaway:

Indeed.

Oosterling:

But as you will certainly know, with Nietzsche philosophy has discovered the fact that metaphorical images are layered in every text. There are always images embedded in texts. That complicates their relation. Obviously it is not that simple.

Greenaway:

No, indeed, it is not. Let me get to your initial question about notions of narrative as I see them. Because I have a low opinion of narrative in the cinema. Cinema is successful for other reasons: ambience atmosphere, attitudes and ideas, which are put over in a particular audiovisual way and are not common to narrative. I challenge you, can anybody in the room give me the story of *Titanic*, and can anybody tell me the story of *Casablanca*. You'll be able to give me a sort of gloss in maybe two or three sentences. But it's not what's important for the film and it's not what's important for you when you leave the cinema. Other things are at work. So, if I believe that to be the case, I necessarily will have to use some structure to hang my clothing on. I need a clothes line on which to paint all the ideas I want to. Because I would also believe with John Cage that, if you introduce more than twenty percent of novelty into any artwork, you're immediately going to lose eighty percent of your audience.

Cinema is a very difficult business to organise, distribute and fund. I'm not going to commit financial suicide by throwing narrative right out of the window. I'm going to try and take it as far as I dare. But if I'm going to throw major narrative, complex, convoluted nineteenth century **Hadiou**, Tolstoyan, Proustian narrative out of the window, I've got to find some other way to do it. So, my narratives are extremely simple. They are basically fables and myths which everybody understands and they are basically sex versus death. And I try and minimise the narrative as much as I can, but that doesn't mean to say that there's no narrative there for reasons that I've already suggested, because on the flipside of the coin, I'm a very, very good storyteller. I can invent narratives very, very easily.

Oosterling:

Like *Tulsa Luper*, the project you are already occupied with for years, but now has become an integral project, including Internet?

Greenaway:

If you take *Tulsa Luper*, if you take the *Falls* (1980), for example, ninety-two narratives, all compressed, very rich narratives, within three and a half-hours.

Oosterling:

But why do you use narrative in that kind of films?

Greenaway:

Again, it is this question: if you have a scar, you need to scratch it. I'm anxious, always anxious about cinema's presentation of text versus image. It is an experimental attitude to find how we can address or readdress those problems, that wants me continually to go back to narrative concerns. So, again, as a summing up of maybe what I think you've been asking me: I will use narrative, but as it were, at my peril. I don't want to use narrative, but it has become part and parcel of the way we understand how cinema works

for the last a hundred and five years. If I had my way, if I could find a way to make it work, I would askew that possibility of narrative altogether and find other ways to make a construct.

Oosterling:

By what means do you counter narrative?

Greenaway:

A lot of the structures of my films are based - as far as I can - on all sorts of abstract phenomenon. *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover* (1989) for instance is based on colour theory, on the seven colours of the spectrum. The notion I suppose of *Drowning by Numbers* (1988) is very much predicated, very obviously like the title, on the counting of one to a hundred. Some of the other movies, I suppose, are based upon equations, even if they are self-reflective equations like Godard suggesting that cinema is truth twenty-four frames the second. So suddenly 'twenty-four' becomes very important. Also some other things which I've learned from contemporary science and certainly from painters like Jasper Jones for example, who would use number and letter as image.

This brings us to *The Pillowbook*. This was my attempt to make a demonstration that certainly in the East Oriental art - along with a lot of other attitudes towards presentation of material which is so different from the West, although we tend to forget that - does not need a frame. All plastic arts in the West are predicated by a frame. But the other idea is that the history of calligraphy, the history of literature has also been exactly synchronous with the history of image making. So - and Eisenstein was pointing this out in 1910 - the hieroglyph, in a sense, is a text which you can see in the way that it obviates itself almost as a perfect marriage between the notion of image and text.

Sexuality as textuality

Oosterling:

You mentioned already the relation between sex and death, one of your favorite topics. In case of the calligraphy in *The Pillowbook*, there is also a tension between the flesh and the text, between sexuality and textuality. Why isn't there any reference to *irizumi*, the Japanese art of tattooing? Why did you choose, in a western way, to use the skin as paper?

Greenaway:

The main character finally makes all the ephemerality of the writing permanent as an memorial. And why do you think it's a western way? It's very much an eastern way. There are many traditions in Japan about writing on monks. There's a very famous tale in the fourteenth century, where a young monk was written over his entire body apart from his ears and that was a terrible mistake, because the devil could grab him by his ears.

Oosterling:

Is that the reason why one of the messengers is painted behind his ears?

Greenaway:

That's supposed to be part of the phenomenon too. It's a bit like the Achilles heel. If you don't cover the body sufficiently in text, watch out, the devil will get you. But I wanted to talk about the calligraph as a model for the possibility of reinventing cinema. Necessarily I had to posit my tale in an oriental country. Otherwise I think the stretchmarks between the two cultures wouldn't work. But there is a long tradition of writing on the body in the oriental.

Oosterling:

Isn't there a more profound reason?

Greenaway:

It's only in the sense to make it permanent at the end. I wanted to make sure that all the texts were removable as a notion of transitoriness, of writing on water. The flesh after all is not permanent: it changes every seven days, but after seventy years it decays and disappears entirely. I didn't want to get into any areas which would suggest the Nazi occupational situation of collecting tattoos of holocaust Jews to make lampshades and gloves. I didn't want to get anything that was in any way scarifying or penetrative or abusive or dangerous. The actual attitude of writing on the human body had to be immensely pleasurable. And I think if that became in any sense permanent - which would mean it couldn't be eradicated if you wanted to - then that would be too negative for the particular story that I wanted to tell.

Oosterling:

In your oeuvre water is a very important ingredient. You start with a documentary on water and the last thing I saw was *Writing to Vermeer* (1999). This piece was tremendously skillfully done: all this water on the stage. In Japan, water has a purifying power. In *The Pillowbook* it played no role of any importance.

Greenaway:

There's a sequence, where she goes out into the rain and the rain purifies her body by wiping off the text. I also think there is a way in which you should regard all the various films as being in some senses parts of one long, continuous film. And if water indeed continually comes back in different guises, the notion of purification is very important in some of the other films and doesn't necessarily have to always occupy the notion of purification in the foreground.

The celebration of life: intermedia and baroque quality

Greenaway:

If I was actually asked to say what my cinema was about, I could posit all sorts of ideas which might be more relative to one film rather than another, but in general I suppose, my films really are about simply a celebration of life. So even in apparently a morally degraded situation which exists in *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover*, that film is still - I would like to think - an enormous celebration of the phenomenology of life. It is full of food and richness and stuffs and colours abundance. It has a richness about it, like a Caravaggio or a Veronese painting, even though it is used as a showcase in order to

make a moral tale of various descriptions. So, if I want to make a celebration of life, in a sense, the films have got to be as complex, as complicated, as rich as what is happening outside there. And I believe that most films do not do that. Now I know a lot of film directors will say: "Well, that's not my intention." And they will bring up ideas like "Small is beautiful" or notions of to be modest in fact is to be in some sense capable of forms of communication which you can not necessarily encompass by being excessive.

Oosterling:

Is there any affinity with David Lynch's films?

Greenaway:

I would imagine that his surrealism, which in a sense is a form of Baroque use of the imagination, would be more in sympathy with me than against. But if you were to put up people like Bresson, it's difficult, isn't it? Fellini for me is, in a sense - I don't want to be arrogant here, because he's an extraordinary filmmaker - a soulmate. I find his extraordinary delight and celebration of the world something that I would feel very, very sympathetic with. Though again, you know, he would point out all negativism, certainly of all the ideas that he's associated with.

If you look at some of the Fellini films in terms of the richness of choreography and movement and characterization, there's a stretch and breadth of character there which you would hardly call minimalist or modernist. If you look at the cinematography of *La Notte* for example, which is an extraordinary abundant celebration of contemporary architecture, again I think you would say in some senses he certainly did have a very baroque side to him.

If I want to make a celebration of life, I want to use the largest vocabulary I can find. Cinema in itself is a baroque medium. Cinema in a sense is a great intermedia medium, because it has brought together so many different disciplines. I mean first of all sight and sound - and the sound of course is already split into three areas: dialogue, music and sound effects. So already you begin to build up layers of lots of different disciplines, all coming to work in one place. When you manufacture a cinema image you're employing colorists, costume makers, make-up people, theatrical designers, lighting people and - when talking about the temporal nature of film - you're employing people who are interested in time, people who are interested in notions of pace, structure through temporality and so on. So, you have many, many disciplines, already interacting, even to make the simplest film.

Oosterling:

Initially you were a painter. But painting with its imagery and images was not enough and you switched to text, sound, cinema, theater and even dance. In spite of all these changes it is the image you are still after.

Greenaway:

No, you make it sequential and yet you're a believer in pluralism. It is not that suddenly I wanted to make cinema. If I say I have chosen film in a peculiar way that sounds again somewhat arrogant, because the medium chooses you rather than that you choose the medium. I started life as a painter and very rapidly I became interested just as much in

dialogue and just as much in text and just as much in music. Apart from one or two paintings by Rauschenberg, not many paintings deal in music or text. I could see in the potentiality of cinema an expanding of all those things: the notion of the still image, the notion of the twentieth century painted image. So, there is no sudden magic moment when I make decisions in that particular way. I suppose, that in a tradition in twentieth century painting - Picasso for example - text is used within a painting. I just mentioned Rauschenberg using associations with notions of music and sound effects.

Oosterling:

But all the surrealists of course did it.

Greenaway:

Indeed. So, that was already part of the processing. I suppose Michelangelo is another supreme example of the introduction of the potential of expanding what painting could offer you by association with the other media. The way we are looking at this problem is to suggest that there are different separated art forms. Remember that Michelangelo made wedding cakes. He was a poet. He was a sculptor, he was a painter. He happens to be extremely good at practically all these things, but he's not a single media artist. And I think the notion of separating off the arts into "I am a writer who only writes novels" and "I am a composer who only writes chamber music" is a very, very late and aberrant idea in western culture.

Hollywood and intermediality

Greenaway:

We talked about cinema being itself a multimedia phenomenon, and of course opera precedes that, because opera itself traditionally is even more regarded as a being a multimedia operation. We made an opera on the stage in Amsterdam called *Rosa* (1994). The one we just finished is *Writing to Vermeer*. A Dutch Television Company said that we could film *Rosa*. I wasn't interested in filming it, because I thought opera is unfilmable. But I told them that we would tackle that problem if I am allowed to remake it for a screen. I brought in all my old concerns about multi-imaging and about the use of text, which is also particularly useful, because as you know 60 percent of the text becomes incomprehensible in an opera. In a sense we are developing the notion of the surtitles for the screenversion of *Rosa* by making a great virtue of the text in making it a compensate part of the screen.

Oosterling:

Talking about opera, does the notion 'Gesamtkunstwerk' still has any meaning to you?

Greenaway:

I think there's no need to use that. Wagner of course never meant what he meant or he intended to mean by that. He just basically wanted all the other art forms to support opera. Bernini was the last maybe supreme multimedia artist in the old fashioned sense of the word.

Oosterling:

In one of your earlier interviews you in a critical sense connected Bernini with the notion of intermediality. Although your projects can be evaluated as an emancipation from traditional cinema, in a sense your imagery submerges its audiences in a way Bernini's Gesamtkunstwerk did. Do you think your cinema is still critical and that people can choose to be manipulated or not?

Greenaway:

Well, I made the comment earlier about making films, shall we say, for an ideal audience. And that ideal audience, of course, has access to all the ideas, schedules, agenda's that I have. In an American context, of course, I am described as an elitist, as someone who makes sort of art gallery entertainment whereby you have to have huge amounts of knowledge about 15.000 different archaic subject matters. I make no apology for this whatsoever. The whole world and its information is there to be used and reused and refurbished in order to make intelligent, sophisticated art works. The opposite situation of that is we are all going to end up in the same boring, dirty little puddle, where there is only a certain amount of so-called valid currency to play with. And of course that's absolutely disastrous.

What you are saying here is maybe relative to something that I said in Rotterdam several years ago talking about intermediality. First of all, the notion that intermediality, of course, is not a twentieth century phenomenon. It's been going on for thousands of years.

Oosterling:

Coleridge already used the word at the beginning of the 19th century. The Fluxus artist Dick Higgins forged the notion in the sixties into a methodological category. But the experience, looking back, is much older of course.

Greenaway:

The cathedral makers for example. But the political information there, as we suggested, that Bernini was a hired hand by the Roman Catholic Church in order to buy art, encourage all the Protestant schism to be healed, to encourage people to come back into the Roman Catholic hearth, so to speak. So, he used absolutely everything that was possible in terms of emotional sensationalism. Look at the paintings of Caravaggio for example, huge melodramas. Look at all the miracles, look at all the Saint Peter in Rome, absolutely everything was thrown together in order to bamboozle, to manipulate the protestant breakaway to return. My argument under those situations about cinema in the twentieth century is trying to fulfill the same situation.

Oosterling:

Are you referring to Disney?

Greenaway:

No, I am thinking about American cinema in general, which offers often a very obscene moral attitude to the world, which basically says that money is good and if you are richer you are happier, that always believes in closures and happy endings and solutions to all our problems. You know, 'pie in the sky when you die' phenomenon. So, just as Roman

Catholicism would offer you paradise and heaven, there is an equivalent commercial paradise being offered very largely by the whole capitalistic effect, which is associated with the western cinema. So, that is my political analogy in terms of the use of multimedia as a political weapon. So, I would equate, in a sense, the great Baroque counter-Reformation, cultural activity, as being somehow associated with what cinema, American cinema predominantly, has been doing in the last seventy years.

Art as Manipulation?

Greenaway:

It has always surprised me that we live in democracies - and here of course in Holland, you have the most developed democracy of perhaps everybody in Europe - but in a way our artistic practices are still oligarchic or monarchial or Renaissance based. We still worship Strawinsky, we still bow down to Corbusier, we still admire Mondriaan. In a sense we still regard these as significant Renaissance figures, who have a sort of tyranny over our imagination. But what has happened in the public domain?

The Kodak Brownie camera was invented - in 1834, I think it was - very early in the history of photography. The Olivetti typewriter is even earlier. The notion, I suppose, of Cagstone's printing press or the Gutenberg revolution happened at least four centuries ago. This continual availability of the means of production has reached a point now that any of you can go out into the local chemist shop and buy a camera recorder to enfranchise you for the manufacture of artifact. But that has had almost no impingement, in a strange way, about the notion of our cultural activity in the West.

Let us go back to Eisenstein's *October* again. But it has been an incredible long time coming. Gutenberg: 1492, Olivetti: 1801, Kodak Brownie: 1834, Camera recorder: 1983. Where are all this massive democratization of cultural activity in the West? It has been an awful long time coming.

Oosterling:

The Internet 1992? Have the way we are interacting with and via exponentially accelerating technologies changed our political-economic system in the sense that we are all part of this dynamical system? Or do we still believe that eventually someone can pull out the plug?

Greenaway:

Well, we will just have to, literally, as they always say, wait and see. But there is also this desire, isn't there?

Oosterling:

Are portals decisive once you are dependent upon the Internet? Warner Brothers has made a deal with America On Line. This is a vast, an immense industry, that has all possibilities to impose their imaginary.

Greenaway:

True, true. But there are other psychological reasons. I was at Karlsruhe last weekend, which is supposed to be Europe's state of the art for media. We got into a stupid

argument about manipulation. The general feeling was that audiences don't want to be manipulated, which of course is not true at all. It is in the nature of art to manipulate. And that is part of the equation. So, I think there is a deeply entrenched feeling that the notion of democratization of the media will somehow forego this notion of manipulation. Well, we know it's in the hands of Spielberg, in the hands of Scorsese, if you like. Take the best and the worst of mainstream American cinema. It is all about this notion of being manipulated. But why do we feel that anxiety about being manipulated? I ask the question rhetorically, but it is part of our cultural activity. It is endemic, it is almost obligatory of the artist to create the engine that makes that happen.

Oosterling:

Understanding art in those terms, manipulation is as old as mankind. The imagery of Lascaux, the stained glass in cathedrals. The world that is depicted, the architecture of the cathedral, the sculptures and the music created the *Gesamtkunstwerk* we were talking about. But the positive side still is a shared experience that made it possible for people to focus themselves in life. Where does it reach the point of manipulation in an ideological sense? Are you manipulating your audiences?

Greenaway:

Sure. But I would just say that the notion of minimalizing artistic activity into small compartments is an aberrant seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth century idea. So, in a sense we're now with our acknowledgement of intermediality coming back to the general motion and movement of western art. All those apologists like **Bazin** for example in the nineteen tens, the nineteen twenties and the nineteen thirties, propagated the fact that we've discovered this extraordinary medium called cinema, which would, in a sense, enfranchise our imagination. It would take us to places we'd never been before, give us currencies of communication which again had never been experienced before. I feel very sad about the unreachability, in a sense, of their ambition. We made it up with the cinema now, which is very formal, very boring, very much pneumatic, based upon values, which perhaps have nothing intrinsically to do with notions of cinema as cinema, but have to do with all sorts of political and social and financial organizations. So, we, in some senses, have debased the ambitions of the apologists of the nineteenth thirties to have created something, which I believe is unimaginative and very stereotyped. I would like, as I suppose any artist does, in some senses, to put up the potential for examination of new views, new attitudes. I'd like to offer you a cinema, which does say that cinema does not have to be like *Titanic*. It does not have to be like the formulae crap that we get from all over the world, because Hollywood films are made in Beijing and in Tokyo and wherever else. So, if you like, it is a social, it's a political position I want to take.

The nineteenth novel gave us great masterpieces of thinking material. It empowered our imagination. It took us to places to which we had not been before. Cinema can do that extraordinarily well. I don't think it has fulfilled its promise. Let's go right back to the beginning of our story, Picasso says 'I want to paint what I think, not what I see.' Finally, cinema, with all the new technologies, has got the languages now to be able to work through that Picasso quote. So, I think, in the next couple of generations, when people get really confident enough, when we begin to make the defining works, that actually make a

legitimate appraisal of all these new technologies and give them a legitimacy, then we will have the most extraordinary new cinema. We can't call it cinema, we'll have to find some other name for it. It will certainly be interactive, however we organize that. It will certainly be intermediary in terms of cinema just being sight and sound. We'll have all five our senses brought into play. It'll be a three-hundred-and-sixty degree experience and let's hope that maybe in a couple of decades we will find our Eisenstein. The first great work of cinema manifestation is Eisenstein's 1921 October. Cinema was invented in 1895. Count the years from 1895 to 1921. It took over twenty-six years to make the first masterpiece. If the notion of the new intermedia world starts on the 31st of August in 1983, we have still got some years to go before we reach the year twenty-six. Things, of course, move much faster now than they did then, so maybe we have reason to get impatient.

Cinema out of the cinemas

Oosterling:

So we finally enter this omni IMAX theatre in order to be immersed into the imagery?

Greenaway:

It won't necessarily. It's again part of what I would like to think as my agenda: to take cinema out of the cinemas.

Oosterling:

Is that why you are expanding into public space?

Greenaway:

Public spaces, like this huge event we had in the Piazza del Popolo several years ago. We're making a huge intermediary event in the Piazza Maggiore in Bologna now and there's a big event coming up in Rome in the of very shortly. There's a whole series of events including the Groningen museum next year, where the notions of using a cinema vocabulary by taking it out of the cinema house. Because I don't think necessarily now that cinema is the right place to see films.

In the seventies television began to move to the forefront. Video, television, we still haven't got our terminology quite organized about this: the television-video phenomena as the business of making moving images through tape rather than on celluloid. And I think from that moment on all the interesting filmmakers, all the interesting makers of the moving image moved away from cinema. They moved away to all the new technologies. We've seen the fruits of that. I mean Bill Viola for me is worth ten Scorseses. Scorsese is a very old-fashioned filmmaker, he's basically making the same films in the same situations in the same pieces of architecture as Griffith did in the 1910's.

You could really say that Bill Viola is essentially taking the medium of film - or maybe you shouldn't even say film, but the medium of the moving image - into all sorts of new areas. He's taking it out of the cinema. He's made it interactive in so far as the audience is not static, it moves around. He's putting it into a different context, a gallery context, which has a different history and background appreciation. He has, in a sense, used cinema vocabulary, but essentially taken out the cinema. So, he would be one of my first

heroes. I think there are lots of problems about the way we look at Bill Viola's images. We look at them in a gallery and the timeframe in a gallery is different from the timeframe in a cinema. You can look at the Mona Lisa for five seconds, five days, or whatever, according to how you wish. So, the recipient is in control of the timeframe. You put a film in a gallery and already you're in deep problems.

Oosterling:

Doesn't this count for public space as well?

Greenaway:

Indeed it does.

Oosterling:

So, you have to tackle this problem, once you enter public space with your cinema?

Greenaway:

Yes, indeed, but there's a way of course that a lot of video works do have a narrative concern. So, in a sense you have to stop your perambulation and you have to, as it were, put off your cinema hat in order to look at a moving image work. It is difficult, I think, and still doesn't fit into this notion, I suppose, of utility of the time-frame. And a lot of the works that I am engaged in now, are trying to approach this dilemma in order to find some way - I suppose in an intermedia way - which gives you, the audience, much more control of the phenomenon which you are witnessing.

Oosterling:

Can you give an example?

Greenaway:

I have a project in Spain, which is taking the film of Bunuel's *Belle de Jour*, turning it into a steady state painting. It's a ninety minute film, and I'm breaking it up into five second sections. So, it's a hell of a lot of sections. It's going to be contained on video monitors. There's over a thousand of them, so that you can visit the whole film at the same time. You can wander, as it were, from every five second, and you can go back and you can look at it for five second little gobbets. So, in a sense, the whole film is happening at the same time, which empowers the audience to use a gallery perception in a temple medium. These attempts are again experimental. We'll see how they work, how audiences feel about them, in order to address this problem of the time-frame, and to find a manifestation, which is fascinating and interesting. It is surrounded, of course, with all the confabulations of the gallery world, Catherine Deneuve is going to open the exhibition. It's all part of that presentation, which is necessary. But there are whole series of works, which I am going to become engaged in in the next three or four years.

Oosterling:

Big screens in public spaces is one of your options?

Greenaway:

It's one of the investigations. This is experimental. It's pushing and pulling. Some of the things aren't going to work. Some of the things are going to be boring and tedious. Some of the things are going to be like Andy Warhol's *Eight hours the Empire State Building*. It had to be done, but nobody ever looked at it. You know, they make statements about the media, which are very valid, and let's thank God they were made, but it's a bit like John Cage music. John Cage is a supreme catalyst, a supreme thinker, but often his music is extraordinarily boring.

Oosterling:

But he opened up a sensibility we can use.

Greenaway:

That's more important. Even Duchamp is maybe much better as a thinker, as an idea's man, than as an artifact maker. That's of course of the big criticisms about conceptualism anyway.

Interactivity: a matter of choice

Oosterling:

Is there a turning point in this presentation of all those interfaces where it becomes purely decorative?

Greenaway:

Well, I hope not. I'm quite conscious that maybe interactivity is related to the phenomenon of quantity becoming quality and to the notion of choice. If I make a film which has twenty-five endings, what does your interactivity mean: I made all the endings. But if I make a film, which has 7521 endings, there is interactivity when the quality overtakes the quantity. It's a bit like the analogy I always make. One car on one European road is not going to effect any cows, or old ladies or dogs, but 20.000 million cars on 20.000 million roads is going to change society completely. So, it's a question, I think, of how great we create the attitudes of choice to develop the notions of interactivity.

Oosterling:

People who have - and I think that's the right word - experienced *Prospero's Books* (1991) found this experience at least destabilizing. The interaction between different media for some is a very violent experience. Is there for you yet a methodical category or a methodical operation by which all those fragments are held together? Does your intermedial approach still have a synthesizing mechanism apart from the narrative?

Greenaway:

If I can try and answer your question about my mechanism let me just simply describe this new product: the *Tulsa Luper suitcase*. *Tulsa Luper* was a sort of alter ego figure, which I invented for myself many, many years ago. I was far too shy in any public space to ever say 'Peter Greenaway'.

(index website Tulsa)

Oosterling:

You surely solved that problem!

Greenaway:

Well, it took some time, but I am telling you, it's learnt rather than intrinsic. So, I created this sort of polyglot, polymath figure, who for me essentially would have to be something like Borges crossed with Duchamp crossed with Cage. But also Father Christmas is in there and also a bit of my father and certainly now **Sacha Vili** the cameraman that I persistently work with. So, he's become a conglomerate, in a sense, of all sorts of traditions, which I like and admire and wish to be associated with. We did, I suppose, make him as you suggested. The final apogee of his career was this film called *The Falls*, which was based again on a John Cage idea of demonstration of narrative through time. Cage made a record in the 1940's simply called *Indeterminacy*, where he told a series of his anecdotes and stories, but he predicated them, based upon a time schedule. So, every single story, whether it was a few sentences or several pages, had to be related, narrated, within sixty seconds. So, that meant, the cat sat on the mat. Imagine stretching that to one minute, it becomes ridiculous, and somehow it becomes, in a sense, anti-narrative. And likewise, if you read too quickly, comprehension becomes impossible. We tried to utilize this process initially in making a film. John Cage himself was vastly amused by this, because he's interested in chance and randomness. I had actually counted the number of stories on *Indeterminacy* as being ninety-two, when in fact they were only ninety. But when I took this film to a symposium in Canada, somebody said "Don't worry Mr. Greenaway. Since your film is about many ways the world will end, which was in fact true, you should not forget that ninety-two is the atomic number of uranium". So, by a secret route I had hit exactly on the perfect metaphor.

Oosterling:

And chance became necessity and random inescapable determination.

Greenaway:

Indeed. And what I wanted to do is revisiting that site. I want to revisit that mythology. Over the years *Tulsa Luper* has developed critics, criticizing philosophers. It has developed antagonists and lovers, mistresses and all sorts of bed-partners and associates. One of them was a woman called Sissy Callpitts, who appeared three times in the film *Drowning by numbers*. So, always in the background, there is a continuing reprising of my personal mythology.

Tulsa Luper: the project**Greenaway:**

Now I want to come right out of the closet and tell you everything I know about *Tulsa Luper*. We're going to make a huge project, which deals with his life. The first time you come across him is in 1928, which is the year that the Americans first came up with the notion of uranium. As you know, uranium is not a metal that you take out of the ground. It has to be synthesized. But it was first associated with Colorado Desert, not far away

from Salt Lake City, in 1928. That represents the first episode of the film. Then, there is a continuation of this man's life from 1928, when he's ten years old, all the way up to 1989, which is the year the Berlin Wall came down. Some people say it is the end of the power of uranium, because it's the end of the Cold War. I think, historians already are being far too optimistic, because of course Pakistan and India for example, are still waving a nuclear fist at one another. But it gives me an opportunity to make a long life history, which covers most of the history of the twentieth century, which is predicated by the metaphor and the literal reality of uranium. From Nagasaki and Hiroshima to the whole *détente* situation, Kennedy versus Chroestjov right up to the collapse of communism. And I use that as the background to a fiction, which I put in the foreground, which is the history of *Tulsa Luper*. But it's such a big chunk of historical time, and also it covers most of the world: we start off shooting outside Salt Lake City, which is one desert, and we finish sixty years later, filming in Manchuria, another desert at the other side of the world. And contrary to the way that western civilization has always moved westward, I want to go and move in the opposite direction. So, we have a large chunk of the world and a large chunk of history.

You never know what happens to him. I can talk for ages and ages about this film. You probably all know about the figure of Raoul Wallenberg, who is a sort European, Swedish diplomat who behaves rather like Schindler. He saved an incredible amount of Jews from the Hungarian Nazis in Budapest. In a sense he's something like a saint-like figure, but there's always a flaw in the argument, as indeed there's a flaw in Christ, so that is also part of the phenomenon. But what interests me most about Raoul Wallenberg is on the last day of the war, he disappeared. There are many evidences that he was seized by the Russians and he disappeared into a series of prisons inside the Soviet block. Many exchanges of the checkpoints between East and West constantly talked about a benign Swedish figure, who had a great sort of, I suppose, charisma about him. The sensation of mythologizing him became greater and greater.

I'm interested in how history becomes mythology. I have, in some senses, identified *Tulsa Luper* with Raoul Wallenberg in so far it's about a man who is imprisoned. And in fact the content, the actual organization of the content material, is to visit *Tulsa Luper* in sixteen prisons around the world. But these prisons aren't necessarily to do with bricks and to do with iron bars. They are to do with, I suppose, metaphorical prisons. Prisons of lust, of love, of desire, of wishing to become a philosopher, of wishing to become a filmmaker. The prisons that we make for ourselves and maybe ever afterwards we feel very equivocal about. So, it's an examination, I suppose: a jailer needs his prison as much as a prison needs a jailer.

Maybe the big overarching notion of the whole film is: there no such thing as history, there are only historians. Because of the huge amounts of language that's now available to me, I can make many, many versions of each story. So, there are many versions as you travel along with this film, about different viewpoints of history, different viewpoints of minor incidents: how *Tulsa Luper* drank a glass of water, but also how the Russians marched into Hungary. So, its basic notion is about the malleability, about the shifting perception and subjectivity that we have in the world.

History: Narrative and Subjectivity

Oosterling:

Are you playing with the idea of an overarching narrative? Is a Grand Narrative covering your *Tulsa Luper* project?

Greenaway:

What is important for me about this and, I think, what's empowering, is that I need to find an overarching phenomenon: the whole thing has a unity and a purpose and wholeness. But each of its various parts will also act autonomously. So, there are many, many devices and this is what I find deeply fascinating: how can you enter into one medium, but at the same time become more enriched by making a reference to another medium.

Let me offer you two of these strategies. It's called *The Tulsa Luper Suitcase* because all the information is contained in ninety-two suitcases. These ninety-two suitcases are found within the film in all sorts of places all over the world. One appears on top of the Empire State Building, one appears at the bottom of a swimming pool in Rotterdam, etcetera, etcetera. Suitcase forty-six is full of Nazi gold bars, confiscated from the Jews in 1938 till 1945. Now of course there are ninety-two gold bars. There have to be ninety-two gold bars in this suitcase. And we want to make ninety-two films within the film to explain how these gold bars were manufactured. So, we, in a sense, melt them back to the jewelry, the trinkets, the gold teeth and gold rings that they were minted from. So each single gold bar represents in itself a feature film. There are ninety-two of these feature films contained in only one of the suitcases and there are another ninety-one suitcases containing other sorts of triggers to give you other sorts of narratives.

So, imagine that you travel along the film called *The Tulsa Luper Suitcase*, but there are another ninety-one films running parallel with you at the same time. Sometimes, like through a window sideways, we glimpse these other films. Sometimes, we are embraced by them, because the other characters' lives become essential to *Tulsa Luper*. The idea is that I do not want to spend masses of time packing and unpacking these suitcases on the big screen, but you, the audience, can pack and unpack them to your heart's content in your time-frame on a DVD or a CD-rom. So, you can look at every single gold bar and spend weeks looking at all the information that's contained inside that case. And the choice of how you do that is entirely up to you.

In another suitcase there will be a collection of Vatican pornography. You can browse that as much as you wish. In another case, there will be a whole series of ashes, belonging to seventeen dogs. I'm not going to explain you why there are seventeen dogs. That's again part of a huge construction: Chinese boxes as in Chinese boxes. But you can actually examine each and every particle of the cinders of those seventeen dogs and work your way back again into a huge other matter situation of complex narrative.

Another one of the devices is that one of the characters wants to rewrite the thousand and one tales of Sheherazade for the twentieth century. We are not talking about tales of caliphs and yashmaks. We're talking about the statue of Liberty, taxis, Concorde, etcetera. These are a thousand and one tales, the Arabian nights, rewritten for the end of the twentieth century. I do not want to tell you all those stories on the big screen. It is going to take up a lot of valuable space, but every single story will come out, remember a thousand and one days is about three years, which takes me about as long as I am going to make the film, every night on the Internet. All those stories, of course, intermedially relate back to all the other stories that exist in this huge confabulation of narrative in all

the other media. I am never quite sure what an Internet night is, because it is never the same in ten years.

We will say there is one story predicated every twenty-four hours. That will start on the first day we start shooting the film, which is something like the second of October this year, and we will continue for three years. So, when the film finally reaches Addis Abbeba, you will have gone through all these modern Sheherazade stories. I've written about 630 of them, there is still some way to go and I have about six months to do it. So, I am going to have to get moving. You can see how what is set off in one particular medium is capitalized and extended in all the other media. Of course, because of ninety-two, there are ninety-two characters in this film, ninety-two major events and ninety-two suitcases.

In a lot of drama you first meet the characters when they are aged twenty-one and maybe you loose the characters out of the drama when they are sixty-three. I need to create what the Americans are now calling the 'back story' of all these people. So, you can trace what happened to character forty-seven from A to Z till the time he entered the film. You will not see it in the big film, but you can see it on all the accessory material. There will, after all this is imagined, be a censored version, running alongside an uncensored version and I want it possibly to be able to consider the problems of linguistics here. So, we have a version especially made for the Japanese, who have a different perception to the way that the Germans would see it. You see how this huge structure is almost inconceivable to imagine in terms of the cinema cinema.

Oosterling:

And you can only do it by using digital cameras?

Greenaway:

Certainly I don't want to predicate this in two hours of feature film. It is too little, too ephemeral, too badly distributed, too inaccessible in some ways, because cinema is the most difficult thing to see. If you wanted to see Kubrick's *2001* in the conditions in which it was made, it's virtually impossible. It's far easier for me to see an obscure picture by Caravaggio in a small town in Assisi, than it is for me to see Kubrick's *2001*. Isn't that a condemnation of the so-called great medium of the twentieth century? That's an essay. As for video, it's like seeing a postcard and the Mona Lisa. It is not the same thing at all.

Oosterling:

So, the experience is very scarce.

Greenaway:

But, it is ironic, isn't it? We pretend that, you know, cinema is the great twentieth century medium and it is basically inaccessible. That's an essay, but it's an interesting one. So, historically then and geographically I have a big scheme, not to be contained within one two-hour feature film. We are going to make a six-hour film. Nobody is, I think, going to sit and watch a six-hour film. So we have to be very practical: we are going to make two three-hour films. But not only that. We are going to make at least two back to back CD-

roms or its equivalent in two years time. We are going to make a television series. It's going to be on the Internet. Of course there will be a book. So, the ideal audience watches the film, buys the CD-rom, or the DVD, or its equivalent, plugs in the television series, buys the book and is certainly logged in to the Internet. Here we have a project, which is stretched over the old moving, visual imagery and over the new. It's a sincere attempt to legitimize a connection or a wedding or a marriage between the old and the new. And also it offers very, very instant practical distribution potential.

Oosterling:

In *The Falls* there is this idea of cataloguing and collecting, but there is also the violent, unknown event. Whatever it may be, once you have experienced it, one starts talking in a specific language. That's what the film is about. In a sense it deals with the sacrifice, so characteristic for your other films. Will there eventually be a violent sacrifice in *Tulsa Luper*?

Greenaway:

There will be. But there will also be sex and love and sentiment and pornography and everything you can imagine. It is a huge dustbin in which I can put everything I have ever learned, not only about life, but also about cinema. So, it's a grand, I hope, enabling work, which not only has an interesting new and important, almost philosophical distribution situation in practical terms, it is also a legitimization, I hope, of the old and the new. My credibility is going to go down and down and down, unless I finally create something, which is relative to my thesis.