

## The Buffalo Film Seminars



# The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover

**PETER GREENAWAY** (5 April 1942, Newport, Gwent, Wales) studied to be a painter, worked briefly as a film editor for the British Office of Information in 1965, and then began making his own films the following year. Some of his other films are *Death of a Composer* 1999, *8½ Women* 1999, *The Pillow Book* 1996, *Prospero's Books* 1991, *Drowning by Numbers* 1988, *The Belly of an Architect* 1987, *A Zed & Two Noughts* 1985 and *The Draughtsman's Contract* 1982. He has continued to paint, has written several books, and has curated museum exhibitions. Several of his film scripts, including *CTWL*, have been published. Amy Lawrence's *The Films of Peter Greenaway* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) is an excellent examination of his major film work through *CTWL*. Several of his more interesting interviews have been gathered by Vernon Gras and Marguerite Gras in *Peter Greenaway Interviews* (University Press of Mississippi, 2000). Greenaway has long been fascinated by the human body—not the freakish bodies so beloved of Hollywood producers but the kinds of bodies real people wear, as you know if you've seen *Prospero's Books*. His most eloquent nonfilmic exploration of the subject is his dazzling *100 Allegories to Represent the World* (1998). You can find more on his films, curating, writing and art at [www.tem-nanterre.com/vbleue/som/stat/es02a.html](http://www.tem-nanterre.com/vbleue/som/stat/es02a.html) and [www.worlds4.de/greenaway](http://www.worlds4.de/greenaway).

**THE COOK, THE THIEF, HIS WIFE & HER LOVER**, 1989, NC-17 123 minutes [there's also a 97-minute R-rated version out there]

**HELEN MIRREN** (Ilyena Lydia Mironoff, 26 July 1945, Chiswick, London), the daughter of Russian aristocrats who migrated to England in 1917, is perhaps best known to American audiences as Superintendent Jane Tennison in the five "Prime Suspect" miniseries broadcast on PBS. She has appeared in 66 theatrical and television films, among them the title role in *The Passion of Ayn Rand* 1999, Queen Charlotte in *The Madness of King George* 1994, Morgana in *Excalibur* 1981, Victoria in *The Long Good Friday* 1980, and (oh well) Caesonia in *Caligula* 1980. For more about her, visit [www.helenmirren.com](http://www.helenmirren.com).



**MICHAEL GAMBON** (19 October 1940, Dublin) has been a highly-regarded stage actor in Britain's Royal National Theatre for many years. He came to major public attention when he starred in John Dexter's 1980 production of *Galileo*. He was made a CBE in 1992 and shortly thereafter was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II. He has appeared in nearly 60 theatrical and made-for-tv films, playing Dostoyevsky in *The Gambler* 1997, Lionel Croy in *The Wings of the Dove* 1997, the magistrate in *A Dry White Season* 1989, and, perhaps most notably, Philip E. Marlow in "The Singing Detective" miniseries 1986.

**TIM ROTH** (14 May 1961, London) appears in two films scheduled for release next year (*D'Artagnan* and *Planet of the Apes*) and three this year (*Invincible*, *Lucky Numbers*, and *Vatel*). Some of his other films are *Everyone Says I Love You* 1996, *Four Rooms* 1995, *Little Odessa* 1994, *Reservoir Dogs* 1992, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* 1990, *Vincent & Theo* 1990, and (as

**Director** Peter Greenaway

**Script** Peter Greenaway

**Producer** Kees Kasander

**Original music** Michael Nyman

**Cinematographer** Sacha Vierny

**Film Editor** John Wilson

**Production Designer** Ben van Os Jan Roelfs

**Costume Designer** Jean-Paul Gaultier

**Production Companies** Allarts Cook / Elsevira / Erato Films / Er bograph Co./ Films In c. /Vendex

**Richard Bohringer**.... Richard

**Michael Gambon** .... Albert Spica

**Helen Mirren** .... Georgina Spica

**Alan Howard** .... Michael

**Tim Roth** .... Mitchel

**Ciarán Hinds** .... Cory

**Gary Olsen** .... Spangler

**Ewan Stewart** .... Harris

**Roger Ashton-Griffiths** .... Turpin

**Ron Cook** .... Mews

**Liz Smith** .... Grace

**Emer Gillespie** .... Patricia

**Janet Henfrey** .... Alice

**Arnie Breeveld** .... Eden

**Tony Alleff** .... Troy

**Paul Russell** .... Pup

Gregor Samsa, the most famous bug in Western literature) *Metamorphosis* 1987. **RICHARD BOHRINGER** has appeared in more than 70 films, just about all of them in French. **ALAN HOWARD** (5 August 1937, London) has done most of his acting on British television. A few of those programs made it over here, among them "A Perfect Spy" 1987 and "The Race for the Double Helix" (1987).

**SACHA VIERNY** (1919, Bois-le-Roi, France), one of the world's great cinematographers, has worked with Greenaway on a dozen films: *8½ Women*, *The Baby of Macon* 1993, *The Belly of an Architect* 1987, *Drowning by Numbers* 1988, *Fear of Drowning* 1988, *M Is for Man*, *Music*, *Mozart* 1991, *The Pillow Book* 1996, *Prospero's Books* 1991, *Rosa* 1992, *A Walk Through Prospero's Library* 1991, and *A Zed & Two Noughts* (1985). Some of his other films are *Belle de jour* 1967, *La Guerre est finie* (1966), *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), and *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959). His first film was *Nuit et brouillard* 1955 (*Night and Fog*).

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#### SOME THINGS PETER GREENAWAY SAID.....

I believe that British cinema has always looked toward America. In contrast, I have always preferred to look toward continental Europe: I like a cinema of ideas and my heroes were always the great French and Italian directors like Resnais, Godard, Antonioni, or Pasolini.

...for me the stories are only the hook on which to hang one's hat. After a very short time, one understands the plot of my films; it isn't important to me what happens, only how it happens. Most films insult the viewers whereas I believe the public is far smarter and receptive than many producers and directors give them credit for.

I take great pains with wordplay, with a certain kind of humour. Very important to me is a certain kind of irony, for which the Americans have a noticeable lack of appreciation.

Many people say that my films deal only with death. I think they are correct, But there are only two things which really count: one is sex and the other is death.

I will begin a new film with the title *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*. That is going to be a very dark story about restaurants, sex, revenge, and death. It will be a kind of Jacobin comedy, a revenge-tragedy really. It will have four main roles but also another 26 speaking roles, which comes to quite a big cast. And for the first time, I shall try to shoot the whole film in a studio—so from beginning to end it's going to be completely artificial. And its central point of departure is food coupled to the idea that everything is eatable. Absolutely everything! That, of course, has a long tradition: Think back on *La grande bouffe*. The structure this time will be having ten menus over ten days.

It's impossible for cinema to be a window to the world, a slice of life. Everything I do is self-reflexive in this sense, filled with signs which emphasize the artificiality of the action, like the curtains in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* which are drawn apart at the beginning of the film and closed again at the film's end. My working methods and my cultural background are more Apollonian, rational—and have little to do with conventional narrative cinema.

That all my films circle around the theme of death has over time become a cliché in film criticism. Basically, the entire European culture treats only two subjects, sexuality and death. Since the sixties, one can talk quite openly about sex, and it's being widely discussed, but death is still the true challenge, the deepest tabu, the worst obscenity. And there is a great need to talk about this tabued theme. Cannibalism, murder, rape, necrophilia, a need for provocation. One of my heroes is Pasolini, a provocateur par excellence. If we wish to have a living cinema, a cinema that deals with really important things rather than being some popcorn entertainment or ivory tower observation then we must have the courage to articulate and show these things. Unfortunately, that doesn't happen very often. The last film of this kind that I have seen was David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, and, before that, *Last Tango in Paris*. If one says a film is about death that's equivalent to saying that it's about life. The positive and negative go hand in hand.

Another area is this desire, almost as a technical exercise, to invent a character who is wholly evil. We can think of hundreds of characters who are manifestations of evil in some ways: Laurence Olivier playing Richard III, for example, or J.R. Ewing in *Dallas*. Richard III has a way with evil that makes it somehow attractive. Milton in *Paradise Lost* creates a Satan who is so fascinating that you can't take your eyes off him. What I wanted to do was to take it a step further and make evil so thorough that there was no way you could love to hate this man, Albert Spica, there was nothing amusing, nothing affectionate, nothing redemptive, no way you could forgive him. To do that I had to invent not a Machiavellian creature but a thoroughly mediocre man. Television, before Christmas when *CTWL* opened all over Europe was full of images of Noriega and Ceausescu. A lot of people, especially the Germans, very quickly made cross-references to my character, Spica....

...in England we have a gutter press. On the front page it castigates unusual sexual activity of public figures, but then on Page 3 you have a photograph of a four-breasted 14-year-old-girl—a horrible double standard. This personifies for me the character of



Spica—scatological, slurring over everything, prying in to people’s affairs, a fascistic, totalitarian bully.

Color-coding helps to achieve something that I want my cinema to do all the time—to tell people that they are only watching a film. This is an artifice, a construct. Let’s not get completely taken away by manipulative involvement. Use your mind as well as your emotional reactions.

This is a metaphorical film. There’s no way that the American cinema ever deals in metaphor. The only decent metaphorical filmmaker you have here is David Lynch. Americans don’t understand what metaphor in cinema is about. They’re extremely good at making straightforward, linear narrative movies, which entertain superbly. But they very rarely do anything else. The whole purpose of my cinematic effort is to explore metaphor and symbol. . . . *The Cook, the Thief* opens with curtains opening and closes with curtains closing. It already suggests, in quotes, this is a performance movie, this is a movie about virtuoso performances. It refers very much towards the proscenium arch. When the camera moves, it moves in a very, very subjective, inorganic way. Which is very much against the premises of American moviemaking.

The French chef in *Cook Thief* is a deliberate cliché that critiques those small-C arts [couture, coiffure, cuisine], but he is also me. With each film I invite people to my table and I make the meal. I take the cultural systems I admire and try to set them out in one place. I demand, as we all do, some sense of coherence, of order in world. And we are always defeated. This is the human condition.

I know my work is accused of being cool and intellectually exhibitionistic. But I’m determined to get away from that manipulated, emotional response that you’re supposed to have to Hollywood cinema. Human relations are considerably harder and harsher, and much more to do with contracts than with any glossy ideas that are so much in the current media package. Most mainstream cinema tends to glamorize, deodorize, romanticize, and sentimentalize. I’m very keen not to do those things.



You have a fantastic cultural puritanism over here. For example, all the attention you pay to frontal male nudity in films. It’s too bad for me, really, since the nude-naked nexus is one that interests me. There are a great many issues about the body beside the sexual one—like vanity, for instance. From the European perspective, it seems quite pronounced in America—this coy concern with youth, all the jogging and harsh dietary regimens. It has to us an arch feel, as though you feel guilty about yourselves and are unable to accept what mortality is all about.

No one can do anything about this death of cinema. *Draughtsman’s Contract* was paid for by television money and I was bitterly disappointed when I saw it on a television screen. But there’s no use complaining. I thought cinema was a vocabulary that had all the letters of the alphabet. Television has only vowels—primary colors, simple soundtracks, large closeups, no wide shots. Keep the picture moving, don’t hold a still.

One of the reasons why the Baroque is so important in my work is that it is centered upon the suspension of disbelief in its most extreme form: it uses all the details, all the decoration, all the light to that end. Bernini’s fountain in Rome manifests, re-creates a desire for a miracle. And cinema portrays something of the same kind. Hollywood cinema tries to find the pie in the sky, it tries to find solutions. My films don’t offer solutions, they don’t offer intimacy, they don’t offer condolences. They are removed from the phenomenon, they watch it without judgment. They go against the grain of a deodorising, romanticising and sentimentalising attitude towards sex and death.

Many quite popular films are filled with violence. I think the difference between those and my films is that I show the cause and effect of violent activity. It’s not a Donald Duck situation where he get a brick in the back of the head and gets up and walks away in the next frame. Mine have violence which keeps Donald Duck in the hospital for six months and creates a trauma which he will remember for the rest of his life.

I don’t think we’ve seen any cinema yet. I think we’ve seen 100 years of illustrated text.

If you want to tell stories, be a writer, not a filmmaker.



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*In the email I sent announcing this week’s film, I wrote: "This is a superb film—but it’s not an easy film to watch. The acting, writing, cinematography, score, and editing are superb. It’s the film that the category NC-17 was invented for: infinitely too good to be trivialized by an X-rating, but far too much sex, nudity, violence, profanity, rotting fish and meat, and dogshit to be allowed to run loose in the world (the dogshit is really chocolate pudding, but when you’re watching it on the big screen what difference does reality make?)." Ranjit Sandhu, who has helped us in presenting this series of films, thought the issue warranted fuller*

explanation and send an email saying why. This is what Ranjit wrote:

The problem with slapping an X rating on "The Cook..." was not that it would trivialize the film, but that most major cinemas in this country are/were contractually forbidden to show X-rated movies. This is how I remember what happened:

With the crackdown of 1934, cinemas signed contracts not to present any films that did not have the MPPDA seal of approval prominently displayed in the opening credits. In the 1960s, when there was a backlash to the crackdown and when movies, even American movies, introduced previously taboo subjects, words, and images, the MPAA, successor to the MPPDA, invented the rating system, which consisted of three and only three ratings: G, M, and R. Just before the system was scheduled to take effect, howls of protest from the Right forced the MPAA to add a fourth rating, X. The first three ratings would carry the MPAA seal of approval; the X-rated films would not. The MPAA never copyrighted or trademarked the X rating, and thereby intentionally gave the right of way for producers to self-rate their films X.

The system was "voluntary," and ostensibly instituted to prevent government censorship. Oooh boy. It didn't quite work that way. As for being voluntary, well, most cinema chains signed contracts with, I think, the National Organization of Theatre Owners (NATO), which precluded them from showing any films that did not carry the MPAA seal of approval. So by contract they could not show X-rated films, or unrated films (which included most foreign films, underground films, documentaries, and many films predating the Code of 1934). Further, beginning in the late 1950s it became rather popular to build cinemas in shopping malls, and contracts with the shopping-mall owners forbade the showing of "objectionable" materials. (As for giving freedom to producers, the effect was/is the opposite, as the Ratings Board also critiques scripts for objectionability - even before principal photography has begun. Want to talk about intimidation?)

Remember the early days of the rating system? When *Midnight Cowboy* got an X? Well, in my opinion, that X was deserved. But then why did *Easy Rider* get an X? When I saw the R-rated version in 35mm many years ago, all the sequences that even suggested nudity were removed or altered, not by being spliced out of the print, but by actual re-editing. *A Clockwork Orange*, in my opinion, deserved the X, but why did the re-release of *Witchcraft through the Ages*, a 1922 silent, get an X? Then, to hype their product, porn producers self-applied X's to every film that they churned out, and thus they brought into being the modern myth that X=100%walltowallhardcoresexandnothingelse, which, of course (as far as MPAA-applied ratings are concerned), was as far from the truth as could be.

Non-MPAA-approved films could generally be shown only in small independent cinemas, and for foreign films or underground or independent films, that market was, once upon a time, quite sufficient.

A similar stigma came to be associated with the G rating. Once a goodly number of children's films got G ratings, a G rating became the kiss of death for an adult-oriented film. So films that producers feared might get G ratings had some naughty words added to the scripts at the last moment.

Miramax apparently wanted *The Cook...* to get a general release, and did not want it confined to the small independent cinemas, which had by 1990 almost become extinct. So they argued for a reform of the rating system. The MPAA finally acquiesced, and invented the NC-17 rating, which was copyrighted or trademarked, and which carried the MPAA seal of approval. And the MPAA would no longer issue X ratings, though film producers were still free to self-rate their films X.

This created more confusion. The popular fuzzy idea (myth) that immediately arose was that the NC-17 was "classy" porn, as opposed to "regular" porn. And it did not help when a hardcore-porn producer tested the system by submitting *Candy in 3D* to the MPAA, which happily gave it an NC-17. There were then more howls of protest, and cinema chains instituted a policy never to show NC-17 movies. Ditto for video chains. Ditto for shopping-mall owners. And so now we're right back where we were 30 years ago, when an "all-ages" or an "adults-only" rating spells financial doom to any producer who hopes his nonkiddie or nonporn film will get shown in regular cinemas in this country. And that's why Tinto Brass's films can't be shown here. What distributor will buy a film that no major cinema chain is allowed to rent? Want to re-release the last four



features by Pasolini? Don't even think about it now. And that's why we'll never see the uncut version of *Once Upon a Time in America* (even the long "original" version is severely cut). Or the unmodified version of *Eyes Wide Shut*. And on and on it goes.

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Join us in two weeks Wednesday 29 November for Nikita Michalkov's Academy Award-winning *Burnt by the Sun...* for cast and

crew info on almost any film: [imdb.com/search.html](http://imdb.com/search.html) or [allmovie.com](http://allmovie.com)...for information on major American films, including detailed plot summaries: [www.filmsite.org](http://www.filmsite.org)... email Bruce Jackson: [bjackson@buffalo.edu](mailto:bjackson@buffalo.edu)...email Diane Christian: [engdc@acsu.buffalo.edu](mailto:engdc@acsu.buffalo.edu)...for the series schedule, links and updates: [www.buffalofilmseminars.com](http://www.buffalofilmseminars.com)... for the weekly email informational notes, send an email to either of us.

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