



Peter Greenaway - Cineasta y Pintor. Foto de Marcelo Báez Meza  
Bogotá, 2008

## **Interview with Peter Greenaway<sup>1</sup>, the Filmmaker and Multimedia-Artist**

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Received: August 26  
Approved: September 30

<sup>1</sup> Cinema director with formation in plastic arts, specifically in painting, reason for which the sensibility and aesthetics of his works; let's remember for example, "Nightwatching" (2007) based on the brilliant picture of the Dutch painter Rembrandt (17th century). He is an inheritor of the cinema and the European classic art and of forefront, thanks to which he receives his first influences, since it is possible to state in "Train" (1966), abstract film with concrete music. He has penetrated in: short films like "Death of Sentiment" (1962); in experimental movies, being probably "The Falls" (1980), the most ambitious, where he gives life to an amazing encyclopedic being; in serious and structured offers as "Vertical Features Remake" (1978), dedicated to the arithmetic; in works that reach major recognition as "Drowning by Numbers" (1988). In his last productions like the documentary Rembrandt's J'Accuse (2008) he includes advances and technological innovations that they lead to the interaction between the cinema and the public. Of this form, the creative Englishman approaches the reality of his dream: to reinvent the seventh art.

\* Article: Interview. Original version is from the interviewer.

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## Abstract

Provocative and inconsiderate, the British artist and cinema director Peter Greenaway speaks plainly with the author of this interview about his thinking related to the Cinema, Literature and Painting. His works in general are full of pictorial references; they are based on the Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer. In the same way he has been influenced by Wilson, Constable, Gainsborough, Turner and Palmer. He attributes his academic training to the world of the Fine Arts. Without regard he says that all filmmakers are ignorant, that the film should no longer be a slave of the literature, but the reality is different and it must be accepted and it is necessary to update the language of the cinema using the new technology. Regarding his paintings, he defines himself as a selfish person, since he tries not to sell any. His movies are based on his paintings, and these last ones with his world view.

### Key words

Art, cinema, Greenaway, interview, painting.

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**P**eter Greenaway (Wales, 1942). Painter, editing director, novelist, poet, script writer of operas, producer, cameraman, director of his own films, essay writer, narrator, illustrator of his own books and VJ (video jockey). In his passport his profession is something he is proud about: "TV technician". He considers himself a hybrid artist, like a compulsive creator of images. He owes his academic formation to the world of Fine Arts, to which he was drawn from early age.

It was *The seventh seal* (1957) of the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman, which motivated him to come into the cinema, a means and a form of artistic expression. After all, according to his unshakeable beliefs, "it is about a dead art. The cinema expired in September 31 1983 when the remote control entered into homes. Thanks to it, the TV became interactive, something that the cinema will never be able to be. What we are seeing, is how the tail of the dead dinosaur continues moving on Wednesday, after having been murdered on the weekend".

I interviewed him in the first days of October 2008 in the framework of the XXV Festival of Cinema of Bogota in 1995, where he was the director invited to close the festival with *Nightwatching* (Night of round), a film based on a famous picture of Rembrandt.

Next to Greenaway, I saw *Fernando Botero's* permanent exhibition in the National Museum opposite to the *Luis Ángel Arango* Library. He expressed: "I believe that he is repeated too much. Once you have seen a Botero, you have seen everything – referring to the artist of *Medellín* -; however, as a

painter and a film director I am always trying to move away from what I have done in the past”.

The author of *The Belly of an Architect* studies each wall, each room. He is a man who is always analyzing the space: “Architects and dancers love my films because of the form that I interpret in the aspect of space. But those who like it more, are the painters, I annotate”.

### **His pictorial vision of the world**

Greenaway began as a painter in the Sixties. He was enlisted in the Walthamstow School of Art and began to experiment with the brushes. He references artists like Kitaj, Paolozzi and Peter Blake. He assures that he is very selfish about his own production, since he tries not to sell any of his paintings. “It is very difficult to me coming off them; I prefer to accumulate them only for me”. He says it while he requests a *capuccino*.

His cinematographic race began really late. *Windows* (1975) is the beginning of a scintillating race, whereas *The Draughtsman’s Contract* dates from 1982. There is a constant trans-encryption between the painting conception and the creation of cinematographic texts. His pictures are a bridge that takes us towards his movies, and the pictorial composition of the cinematographic screen is an integral part of his world view. “Paintings, collages, sketches and photographs that constitute my aesthetic worry are not any more than a small portion of a speculative investigation, which is developed within an ampler context when I write film, operas and novels”.

Greenaway’s cinematographic works are saturated with pictorial references. He has indicated in an endless number of occasions that the Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer is his constant inspiration in his way of studying light and in his ability to catch the extreme intensity of a fleeting moment. The work of the painter and photographer Eadweard Muybridge is also significant, in that it investigates the movement, achieving the early cinematic use of the frozen photogram.

“My fascination for the landscape began when I was fourteen or fifteen years old. Landscape is synonymous with painting for me. The classical English painters of landscapes (Wilson, Constable, Gainsborough, Turner, Palmer) were my main interest. Many of my beginning works are a pale imitation of them”.

His obsession for painting is such, that it grants to Robert Rauschenberg his taste for the wistfulness that underlies all perspective. This painter taught him a series of strategies to determine his total attention to the surface of the painting that is the same thing that a film maker does exactly in a horizontal field of vision.

### **An iconoclastic artist**

His declarations are usually true dynamite. “All producers are ignorant”, he said in a press conference in Bogota. The impressive thing was that he spat it in front of the co producer of *Night of round*, who had to swallow those declarations with a smile. In order to insinuate that his darts did not only aim at his colleagues, he asked the present ones who had studied Art History. As nobody raised a hand, he struck the table and shouted: “All of you are illiterate. You do not know how to read images”. He asked in addition to the young people present, which was the last novel or film they enjoyed. After listening to unsatisfactory titles, he said: “Everything a person must read in Literature or see in cinema, they have done before being twenty one years old. After that, it is the same as trying to teach new tricks to an old horse”.

The four tyrannies is another one of his most famous declarations: the one of the text (the cinema does not have to continue being a slave of Literature); the tyranny of the actor (the cinema is a vehicle for the virtuoso interpreters and their mimetic activities); the third tyranny is the one of the setting; and finally, the tyranny of the camera.

“This quartet of tyrannies could remain back with the new technologies that will allow us to go where painting has been in the last two thousand years. Now we can recreate the world again, not by means of the mediation of the camera, but first hand. It is really very encouraging; the cinema would have to go towards it”.

He says it while he savors his *capuccino*, which is just delicious for him.

He came to Bogota as a special guest of the XXV International Cinema Festival, an event in which he presented *Nightwatching*, a film about Rembrandt and his famous picture *Night of round*. He received many compliments but one in particular powerfully drew his attention: an adolescent called him “The Architect of The Matrix”, in reference to the popular movie with Keanu Reeves.

It was the first time that he visited Colombia and he asked why his films have penetrated to this part of the world. When I answer that it is because he is a cult film director, he does not delay in answering: "It must be an accident of some distributor or an error of piracy".

"Most of the films are stories to put adults to sleep", he says while he prepares his pipe. Darkness for him is associated with dreams and nothing done in 113 years of cinema, compares with 8,000 years of painting. "All means must be developed. Otherwise, we would continue watching cave paintings. The new electronic means mean the extension of the potential expansion of what we called cinema". He cloys himself with his words and gives himself time to be apocalyptic: "If humanity perishes, the last image that we will see will not be a digital image; it will be something similar to the bison of Altamira".

To Greenaway, the present generation that "has been born with the laptop in the cradle" (the laptop generation) wants major participation; it is against of Hollywood's elitism and wants to replace it by a cinema based on the image, instead of the text. "We continue illustrating novels of (the English Victorian novelist) Jane Austen, which is a loss of time", pronounces the provocative film maker. "What is made at present it's not literary work adaptations. *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* are not more than book shows (book-spectacles)". For this reason during the *Bogocine* he was not present at the introduction of any of the films in competition, and when he was called to present his, during the closing, he decided to rise and go away to the hotel after it had fifteen minutes begun. "The last one for which I remember to have paid a ticket is *Blue Velvet* of David Lynch".

In order to end the cerebral death of the seventh art, the British director advises to look for alternative forms of expression. Due to this, he is a video-jockey and he has future plans to make short films that will be transmitted by mobile telephones. "It is necessary to use the doors and windows that are open by the digital revolution".

The interviewer decides to break the teacher's monologue by igniting the tape recorder. It is only a question of opening fire while the teacher smokes his pipe.

**Do you think you are a painter, a poet, or a film maker?**

"I don't know. I am still trying to find out".

**Let's say that you are a writer who paints with the light within the rectangular linen cloth of a cinematographic screen.**

“The idea does not bother to me”.

**Why do you always profess the supremacy of painting over cinematography, aside from the obvious chronological difference between them?**

“Painting has always been on the front line in relating to the creation of images, and in relation to this, the cinema is very conservative; it does not experiment, it is not radical, it does not investigate sufficiently. If somebody wants to experiment with the cinematographic language, he must watch over the shoulder and gather what Literature and the Painting have obtained. I do not believe that we have seen true cinema, but I also believe that cinema is dying, since it does not satisfy the imagination. The people with great imagination have gone away to other arts”.

**Don't you sometimes become bored with yourself by repeating the same thing with every journalist: the death of the cinema, the four tyrannies and the superiority of painting”?**

“The truth is that journalists are parasites. It is necessary to give them what they want. What I do not know is why they always take me so seriously. I am a *provocateur*”.

**Phrases against Scorsese are the most from a provocative? You said that he was not doing anything that David Wark Griffith has not made at the beginning of the past century.**

“It is the truth. The North American video artist Bill Viola does ten times what Martin Scorsese does”.

**Do you dream of an Oscar?**

“No, I am not interested in the prizes; but if they are going to give me one, it has to be the *Palm d'Or* of Cannes. European festivals have a fascist origin though. It is enough to remember that Joseph Goebbels created the Festival of Berlin and Benito Mussolini, the one in Venice”.

**Louis Lumière was the president of the First Festival of Cannes. That prompts me to a question: Why did you decide to appear in the documentary Lumière & Company?**

“Well, I do not consider myself a director who owes anything to Lumière brothers. If I have to choose somebody, it must be Georges Méliès. The first ones see the cinema from a documentary point of view; the second one, like a magic act. I appeared in the documentary because it seemed important for me to collaborate in a collective tribute to the founders of the cinema”.

**Why is it important to visit or to reinterpret Rembrandt at these times? Maybe because we are in an era raised by the baroque style?**

“If Rembrandt lived, he would be a great director of cinema. He was one of the most successful artists in history, as much in artistic terms as economic. In addition, he lived in a republic like Holland, whose democratic political system was an alternative to all the existing imperialism in Europe”.

**You who are the postulator of the four tyrannies, are you not a tyrant in a set of film also?**

“Well, a film must never be democratic. There are many economic interests in the middle, that the hard hand is the unique form to leave *avanti*”.

**Have you not invented another tyranny, or is four sufficient?**

“Well, I believe that the tyranny of the director is healthful” (smiling).

**Have you been approached to direct in Hollywood?**

“I am not interested in Hollywood. That word, to my ear, is not more than a suburb of Los Angeles. I still believe that it is possible to make films with a small budget”.

**An example can be a film like *Night of Round* because it cost 5 million Euros?**

“Yes, although I keep thinking that it is not so easy to get budgets to make cinema, with certain exceptions like the one that I received

from Russia. They said to me that they put at my disposal the Hermitage Museum to do films. Although I said no, an amount continues waiting for me in a muscovite bank”.

**Was not made a film already there *Russian Ark*?**

“Yes, a minor film that nobody remembers any details of its history. Everybody remembers that film for being a single wrap of hour and a half”.

**And does “The girl with a pearl earring” deserve a better opinion from you?**

“No, I consider it a boring film. It is a terrible distortion of the biography of the painter Johannes Vermeer about whom I consider myself an authority”.

**Are you not a nihilist?**

“No, I think I am an anarchist. It is more accurate”.

**What writers do you admire?**

“Borges, John Donate, Marcel Proust, Thornton Wilder, Italo Calvino and obviously Shakespeare”.

**Film makers?**

“Truffaut, Godard, Eisenstein”.

**Chaplin?**

“No, I prefer Keaton, to mark the difference with Chaplin”.

**You have said that everything that has been done in cinema during the last 115 years is nothing others than illustration...**

(Interrupting). “*Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings* are an example of it”.

**Why then did you decide to film *The Pillow Book* by the writer Sei Shonagon or your personal version of *The Tempest* by Shakespeare that you titled *Prospero’s Book*?**



“Well, they were only a pretext. I begin with certain literary budgets, but the rest, as you say, is something personal”.

**Is *The Pillow Book* an antecedent of the multimedia in your cinema that soon takes flight in *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*?**

“Yes, it is a project that we sent in the form of a DVD, book and website. It is simply a desire to accept the reality and to update the language of the cinema with what technology offers”.

**Is it the overcoming of the tyrannies against which you have been rebelling so much?**

“Clearly, and that takes me to make questions like: Why do we make films locked up in a rectangle? Why a single action, when we can see seven, eight... until a hundred screens at the same time?”

**Is your job of VJ (video jockey) an advantage in the multiplicity of screens?**

“Yes, what I want to do when I stuff a place with screens, it is that it has an experience beyond the cinematic thing; I want to appeal to all the senses. I desire, in addition, there exists a physical experience (to dance, to move from one side to another), something that the inertia and the passivity of the cinema is never going to obtain”.

**What do you think of the film *Dogma*?**

“They do not raise anything that the English movies of the sixties and fifties have not said. *Lars von Triers*, one of the directors of this movement, asked to me to make a *Dogma* film, but I refused. By the way, he is a very strange type. He has a phobia of flying and he almost never travels. When he does, they must soothe him and bandage his eyes. Sometimes he asked them to put him in a trunk of a car to be able to mobilize him from one city to another”.

**If your cinema is elite, how do you explain that you are in a festival that implies a direct relation with the audience?**

“A festival is the opportunity to have contact with your public. That is excellent because as director that finishes filming, and the film becomes the producer and the distributor”.

## **What films are you preparing for the mediate future?**

“I am finishing a series of short films about masterpieces of Art History. The topic is very simple: I take a picture and I begin to distort it, I make a deconstruction of it, defragment it. Obviously, it is also a sonorous experience, because I contract a musician for making the sound track. The interesting thing is that I make these short films in order to project them on the original work. I already did it with *Las Meninas* of Diego Velasquez in the Museum of the Prado and with *La Última Cena* of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Church of Santa Maria del Fiore. Apparently I have some admirer in the Vatican, because they have given me permission to play with *Judgment Day* of Michel Angelo. It is not bad for an atheist, isn't it?”

**You said that all art has its pioneers, its followers and a parricide. You named Griffith as the founder of the cinematographic narrative, Eisenstein as the theoretician of the cinematic syntax and Godard, killing off the previous two. Who is going to kill you?**

“Well, you should answer that question, since you have been observing me during the last hours... maybe the public”.

**Bogotá, October 2008.**