

Winners Conference: Outstanding Contribution to British Cinema

16 February 2014

Winner: Peter Greenaway

Q. Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the recipient of this year's BAFTA for Outstanding Contribution to British Cinema, the great Peter Greenaway. Congratulations.

PETER GREENAWAY: Thank you.

Q. So, Peter, in your acceptance speech you said you were surprised to receive this BAFTA. Why?

A. While I think probably I have relished the idea of being an outsider, but of course it has its downside: it means you get ignored. So it is really rather surprising, I think, that, shall we say, a fairly conformist institution like BAFTA and all it stands for and represents should welcome me into their midst, of which, of course, I am both pleased and honoured.

Q. Excellent. You also mentioned in your speech about the continual reinvention of cinema. Is that a mandated view you chose for yourself 30 years ago when you started out, or...?

A. Yes. It was said, I suppose, in the prologue to my going on that stage that cinema, curiously, was not the first profession that I wanted. But a journalist once asked me: why is it, Mr Greenaway, you moved from painting to cinema, and I suppose I offered the rather glib answer: unfortunately paintings don't have soundtracks.

So in a curious way, I suppose, I pursued my interest in the primacy of the image, but in association, of course, with a huge number of other disciplines that make up cinema. But I still think I am happiest when I can consider, examine, investigate the relationship, I suppose, from, what, 8,000 years of painting to only 120 years of cinema.

Q. Yes. Still in its infancy, very much so.

A. Exactly.

Q. Indeed.

Any questions for Peter? Yes, please.

NEW SPEAKER: You have had a very long career, but if you had to choose one of the projects that you have worked on over the years, which would you say was your favourite, or the one that means the most to you, and why?

A. Erm ... I would imagine it was a film, a documentary I made about Darwin. I rather suspect that very, very few people have seen it, but that might be a signature of most of my career anyway. I think we – we probably made about 80 films and perhaps only about, maybe, what, ten of them have appeared above sea level, so to speak. But it is an ongoing examination and investigation. And in a curious way, no film is ever seen on its way; it is always related to all the others. But I remember, we only had ten days to make this very elaborate film, supported by French television, and it was a huge demand on everybody. I think we had about 300 people involved in it, plus a couple of giraffes and one or two camels and a number of porn stars, and we managed, I think, within ten days to have the most exciting experience, probably, of my whole cinematic career.

NEW SPEAKER: Sounds wonderful.

Q. Yes, please? Thank you.

NEW SPEAKER: Peter, Vincent Dowd, BBC World Service.

Kind of roughly 30 years after you, Steve McQueen is sort of taking the same progress from visual art to arthouse cinema, if you accept that term, but he has gone further into the mainstream.

Do you ever think: maybe 25 years ago, I should have tried to make that big blockbuster?

A. Well, you know, there was a French journalist who once suggested that only a single film – was only allowed to make three good films. It is a sort of lottery game. Whether you make them all together, one at the beginning of your career, one at the end of your career, you are still only allowed three. And he asked me what are the three films that I would think would represent my career. And of course I returned immediately with a glib answer: I haven't made them yet.

Q. Yes, please?

NEW SPEAKER: Peter, could I ask, you know, you have mentioned your outsider status, but you are here absolutely on the inside tonight. From your perspective, what do you think of the state of British film?

A. I am a really lousy person to ask about cinema. I thoroughly enjoy making cinema, but I hardly ever go to it. I am an extremely bad cinema spectator. I would rather go to an exhibition of video art or I would rather go to a painting exhibition than I would be dragged to those strange dark places that are called cinemas.

Having said that, of course, by trying to be as professional as I can, I do, as it were, by accident see a huge number of parts of films, if not actually paying the money, going in and sitting there quietly for 120 minutes.

So I think probably the – I suppose the answers I am trying to give to maybe some of the previous questions still stand with me. When I was 13 I wanted to be a painter, so in a curious way my ambition has failed. I have ended up as a film maker instead. It has been enjoyable and a very pleasant way to pass a life and a career, but somehow or other, I am still waiting for – or asking for, I suppose, a cinema that really does represent the very, very best painting that we are all – it's all part of our heritage of the last 8,000 years.

I always think that probably cinema was not invented by Lumiere and Melies, but was invented in the early 17th century by four painters: Velasquez, Caravaggio, Rubens and Rembrandt, and I would have loved to have been in their company.

Q. On a wonderful note, join me in saying congratulations to Peter Greenaway. Thank you.

A. Thank you.