



FRAMES OF MIND: THE FILMS OF PETER GREENAWAY

Haunted Generations: The Lingering Legacy of the Public Information Film

Introduced by author and Fortean Times columnist Bob Fischer

Lingering eerily in the imagination of those who grew-up haunted by the warnings of danger and death, public information films occupy a potentially sinister netherworld of what-ifs, combining authoritative voiceover with unnerving, lyrical imagery. A highly inventive director at the Central Office of Information, Greenaway applied his own distinct take to the language. We trace the influence of this filmmaking mode, while also presenting 1970s classics *Lonely Water* and *After Dark*.

bfi.org.uk

The COI – Central Office of Information – came into being during 1946 as a replacement for the wartime Ministry of Information (MOI). It remained in being until 2012 when it was closed under David Cameron’s government. The COI was tasked to provide a means of producing public information materials such as books, photographs, exhibitions, press releases and films for all departments of government. COI Films Division was to be the interface between a government department who wanted a film made and the film production companies who might make it. More precisely it was to take a message, find the most appropriate creative talent and explore solutions to make the best use of film as a means of communication.

That was the starting point for the COI and its use of film in the public service. Its fortunes waxed and waned in tune with the economic times and the many changes in client departments, together with major changes in the financial basis of COI. The 66-year life of the Films Division can be divided into three parts. The first is the period between 1946 and 1959, which included an uncertain start-up period complicated by the continuation of the Crown Film Unit under the control of COI until 1952.

The early 1950s were financially straitened times when government stopped almost all public service film production until the mid-1950s, when there was a very gradual recovery in the level of production together with early signs of what became the Overseas Television Services in the latter half of the 1950s.

The second part ran from 1960 to 1990, when the production of documentary films, television fillers and television commercials for the UK Departments not only recovered from the financial famine of the 1950s but considerably increased. The formation of the Overseas Television Services from small beginnings in the 1950s blossomed, as the Foreign Office and other overseas departments became the largest COI client in terms of volume of production and expenditure during the 1960s. This led to the setting up of a largely in-house production process to meet the needs of the new, television-oriented programmes. The eventual volume of production for use overseas was huge by comparison with that for use in the UK (Peter Greenaway’s *Insight: Zandra Rhodes* is representative of this body of work).

The period from the 1960s to the 1980s was, barring a few hiccups, a good time to be part of the COI Films Division. Production staff increasingly moved on from the restricted interface role of 1946. There were now staff producers, directors, writers and researchers, and film editors. The elements needed for Films Division to be its own production unit gradually came together.

At the same time Films Division continued to use production companies who had the writers and directors with proven records of excellence. For example Sarah Erulkar, (*Never Go with Strangers*), Hugh Hudson (*Design for Today*) who also made a very remarkable recruiting film for the RAF (*12 Squadron: Buccaneers*), John Mackenzie (*Apaches*), John Krish (*Drive Carefully, Darling*) who also made many other excellent documentaries, television fillers and commercials. These were just a few of the many very talented directors and writers, who made films for COI down the years.

The final years of COI, from 1990 to 2012, are defined by a period of drastic change, following a decision by Margaret Thatcher's government to change the financial basis of COI from Non Ministerial Department to Executive Agency and Trading Fund. The crucial element of the decision was that departments were no longer obliged, as they had been since 1946, to use COI services; they could choose to use COI or go their own way. Over several years many did. The first to opt out was the Foreign Office, which set up its own Film Unit. This was an immense loss to Films Division, accounting for about 40% of its work: several other departments followed.

Throughout the 1990s, output fell away. COI was reorganised as Films Division and became part of a Directorate of Content, later renamed as Moving Image and Audio Content (MIAC). In 1997, Tony Blair's government came to power with policies that gave rise to a period of increased expenditure for public communication. Requests from departments increased and the opportunities to reach new and diverse audiences with MIAC films included many that were delivered online. These were often projects that utilised a number of different outlets with short messages, much as the traditional television filler, with its origins going back to 1946, provided short public-service messages. Thus brief messages from Her Majesty's government would appear on boards or screens surrounding football pitches. They appeared on ATM screens or on advertising screens at the sides of escalators. They were adapted for use on departmental websites and as advertisements on social media platforms such as Facebook. They also included many projects delivered on DVD that would have been recognised 20 or more years earlier as documentary films.

The output reflected the diversity of departmental needs. They were fully in tune with the electronic capture and distribution of moving images. Moreover, the diversity of subjects included many of social significance. Subjects that the documentary filmmakers of the 1940s wanted to make and that John Grierson, the COI Controller of Films in 1948, called for in vain.

The final six or seven years saw MIAC at the height of its game with huge growth to an output of several hundred productions each year. At the same time it was exploring new ways of reaching audiences – an aspect of the work of COI rarely mentioned but crucial to its work of using film in the public service.

John Hall (Director of the COI's Film Division from 1982 to 1989). Booklet introduction to *The Best of COI: Five Decades of Public Information Films* (BFI Blu-ray, 2020)

THE SEA IN THEIR BLOOD

Director: Peter Greenaway
UK 1983
27 mins

ACT OF GOD: SOME LIGHTNING EXPERIENCES

Director: Peter Greenaway
UK 1981
27 mins

LONELY WATER

Director: Jeff Grant
UK 1973
2 mins

AFTER DARK

Director: Mike Dodds
UK 1979
13 mins

JAUNT

Director: Andrew Kötting
UK 1995
5 mins

DIVINER

Director: Frances Scott
UK 2017
23 mins

QUENTIN SMIRHES WORMHELMET QUEVID-20 PIF

Director: Sean Reynard
UK 2020
1 min

QUENTIN SMIRHES PICTUREBOX EXTENDED FOOTAGE

Director: Sean Reynard
UK 2015
2 mins

Total running time: 110 mins

FRAMES OF MIND: THE FILMS OF PETER GREENAWAY

Peter Greenaway Shorts Programme 2

Thu 1 Dec 17:50; Mon 12 Dec 20:50

Peter Greenaway Documentary Programme

Fri 2 Dec 20:35; Sun 11 Dec 12:00

Haunted Generations: The Lingering Legacy of the Public Information Film

Fri 2 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by author Bob Fischer); Wed 21 Dec 20:30

Black Pond and Other Short Films

Sat 3 Dec 12:00; Wed 14 Dec 20:35 (+ intro by filmmaker Jessica Sarah Rinland)

Rembrandt’s J’Accuse

Sat 3 Dec 15:20; Mon 19 Dec 20:50

Nightwatching

Sat 3 Dec 18:00; Mon 19 Dec 18:00

The Tulse Luper Suitcases: The Moab Story

Sun 4 Dec 12:10; Sun 18 Dec 12:00

The Tulse Luper Suitcases, Part 2: Vaux to the Sea

Sun 4 Dec 15:15; Sun 18 Dec 15:30

The Tulse Luper Suitcases, Part 3: From Sark to Finish

Sun 4 Dec 18:10; Sun 18 Dec 18:20

Eisenstein in Guanajuato

Wed 7 Dec 20:55; Thu 29 Dec 18:15

Peter Greenaway in Conversation

Fri 9 Dec 18:20

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover

Fri 9 Dec 20:30 (+ intro by Peter Greenaway)

The Greenaway Alphabet + H Is for House + Q&A with Saskia Boddeke

Sat 10 Dec 12:00

Goltzius and the Pelican Company

Sat 10 Dec 14:15 (+ Q&A with Peter Greenaway); Wed 28 Dec 18:00

A Zed & Two Noughts

Sat 10 Dec 17:30 (+ intro by Peter Greenaway)

The Tulse Luper Suitcases: Antwerp

Sat 10 Dec 20:50; Thu 29 Dec 20:50

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