

# THE PILLOW BOOK [1997]

by

H. Arthur Taussig, Ph.D.

Copyright © – 1999, 2020

Every year, a master calligrapher (Ken Ogata) paints birthday blessings on his young daughter's face while her aunt reads to her from "The Pillow Book," Sei Shonagon's 10th century book of amorous memoirs. Nagiko (Hong Kong actress Vivian Wu) dotes on her father almost to the point of worship. Only later does she learn, to her horror, that, to get his work published, he has to submit to homosexual relations with his publisher (Yoshi Oida). The same publisher arranges a marriage for the 18-year-old Nagiko to a cruel, callous man who views her as an object, not a person. After leaving him, she heads for Hong Kong, a woman looking for the perfect lover: a talented calligrapher who will write on her skin and perform sexually (by the time they have acquired the necessary skill, most are too old). She falls in love with a bisexual Englishman, Jerome (Ewan McGregor), who happens to be the lover of the now-hated publisher. With this discovery, Nagiko begins plotting her revenge. She starts her own pillow book using the skins of her lovers as writing tablets. She sends her first effort on Jerome's body. The conflicted publisher falls in love with the body and the writing. Jerome accidentally commits suicide, and the obsessive editor removes the skin with the calligraphy on it and makes it into a book. Nagiko arranges for his humiliation by sending him a series of books, each on a different man, each exploring another aspect of sensuality. The final book, of course, is death. (Not Rated).

Peter Greenaway has always shunned traditional film techniques. He sees the filmic image less as a story telling device than a canvas on which to construct visual experiments. In *The Pillow Book* he comes the closest to combining his unconventional visuals with linear, narrative story telling. As a result, this is probably his most satisfying film. To date, his most popular film has been *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* [1989], in which an anti-intellectual hoodlum gets his just deserts (and becomes them) – an attractive story but with few of his visual pyrotechnics beyond magnificent set dressing and lighting. His next film, *Prospero's Books* [1991], a bizarre re-invention of Shakespeare's "The Tempest," is all visuals and little story. In *The Pillow Book*, he seems to have come closer to striking a balance (perhaps even more successfully than Oliver Stone did with the same combination of approaches in *Natural Born Killers* [1994]).

That balance, however, is not fully achieved here. Indeed, the film is so visually arresting that it is rather easy to float through its two hours on the strength of its images alone (and that would be a mistake, as I will show). Indeed, the film's greatest weakness is the director's concern for technique over character development. The only character of any substance, the only truly human element, is Nagiko, a Japanese-born fashion model with obsessions for calligraphy, physical pleasure, and revenge. The other characters (and surely the plot itself), often shallow and unrealized, seem to be no more than platforms on which the director performs his stylistic magic act, and not really necessary to the film.

To make up for this, the visuals *are* stunning. Spoken in Japanese, Mandarin, and English, the subtitles themselves are often elegantly calligraphic. Sometimes the subtitles are at the bottom of the frame, occasionally at the top, and once even wrapped around the subject. As soon as we become accustomed to this, the lyrics to a French song begin rolling across the bottom of the screen . . . not translated, but in French! Color bleeds into black-and-white and back again, often depending on the mental state of the central character on screen at that moment (memory, according to Greenaway, seems more black-and-white than color). Add to this multiple aspect ratios, small images inserted within the larger ones, split screens, visual windows, makeup, costumes, stunning set design, and you have a kaleidoscopic whirlwind, a visual fantasy world as deep as Nagiko's obsession with sex and calligraphy.

Nagiko's obsessions are the obvious psychological element in this film, but as in all of Greenaway's films, nothing is resolved. Nagiko concludes the film a Japanese woman with an Electra complex and a fetish for body painting. This is supposedly caused by three childhood experiences: 1) being painted upon by her god-like father, 2) the discovery of her father's (apparently unwilling) homosexual encounters with his publisher, and 3) her being read a millennium-old pillow book when she was far too young to truly understand its nature. By (possibly) misinterpreting all three of these situations, Nagiko becomes fixated on her father, calligraphy, sexuality and revenge.

What was innocent and joyful for a child translates horrifically into adult compulsions. Much of the film documents Nagiko's fruitless quest for strong writing and weird sex – both apparently to replace her father. At the end of the film, her father's tormentor is dead, her one love is dead and there are no indications that she has in any way faced or resolved any of her debilitating conflicts.

Yet Nagiko's quest is an instructive one – to the audience if not to her. She learns to assume much of the power around her and either control, manipulate or reject both the men in her life and the power institutions they represent. Her obsessions turn into avenues of success (not a very attractive message): her love of calligraphy is a way to manipulate the publisher to his doom and her lust brings willing victims to become pages in her pillow book and fodder for the publisher's homosexual appetites. While on the surface she seems to control her life and to a great extent the people around her, she is herself controlled by the obsessions planted in her by a male-dominated and corrupt world (perhaps with the exception of "The Pillow Book" – the one pure object in the whole film).

All this exists within the scope of Greenaway's other films, each of which expresses some aspect of his intellectual or emotional concerns. Mundane human issues rarely interest him; his own obsessions seem more important. Sensations are important: whether it is the sense of taste (of flesh, food and feces in *The Cook, The Thief, The Wife and Her Lover*), or pain (as in the pancreatic cancer in *The Belly of the Architect* [1987]). His intellectual conceits vary considerably, from the eccentric (the sequential numbers that substitute for plot in *Drowning by Numbers* [1988]) to the just downright weird (the "incident" that causes the mutation of 19 million people in *The Falls* [1980]). Yet one

recurring theme is Greenaway's penchant for reinventing literature and its theories as avant-garde narratives in filmic form (as in *Prospero's Books*).

Laudably, all these streams come together in *The Pillow Book*. Greenaway has finally brought his fascination with Freud's ideas that sex and death are the human creature's primary driving force (seemingly the most important colors on his emotional palette) to the surface where they can be inspected, to stand or fall on their own merits. But even these primal ideas are harnessed for a modernist purpose.

Ultimately, *The Pillow Book* is about the act of filmmaking itself. Once we realize it is not human skin that Peter Greenaway is talking about, but celluloid skin, all becomes clear. (Though most critics haven't seen this simple point, writing things like, "*The Pillow Book* resists being thought of in anything other than visual terms. There simply aren't any coins under the pillow.") *The Pillow Book* becomes a manifesto of post-modern filmmaking. It is one of the few films to hover about the edges of mainstream filmmaking that actually questions the notions of authorship.

More than most academically nurtured filmmakers up on their post-Modern theories, Greenaway goes beyond merely questioning the notion of "authorship" in the context of film. He extends these ideas into the physical world and makes them manifest by literally showing us the ideas of authorship as applied to sexuality when one lover writes on another's nude body.

Thus, skin is not to be observed or used for its ordinary purposes, but it is to be written on in an extraordinary manner that embellishes both the skin and the story written upon it. And thus, literature and sexuality collide. To use the film's own words "two things in life that are dependable: the delights of the flesh and the delights of literature." Greenaway attempts to meld these together in film. His visual pyrotechnics are the equivalent of calligraphic embellishments – the use of gold and red inks, the large figures against the small. And as a calligrapher instructs Nagiko about writing Chinese calligraphic characters, so Greenaway instructs the audience about film: the word for wind must swirl like the wind, the word for water must drip with wetness. In addition, this film works at myriad layers: family relationships, sex, obsession, love, betrayal, jealousy, women's issues, semiotics, literature, capitalism, homosexuality, cross-culturalism, secrets, and a little humor thrown in for good measure. This is, clearly, what Greenaway has attempted. The level of his success, I believe, depends on the perspicacity of the viewer.

*The Pillow Book*. Written and Directed by Peter Greenaway, Cinematography by Sacha Vierny, Distributed in the US by Cinepix Film Properties, 1997.