

Rembrandt's J'Accuse

Netherlands/Germany/Finland | 2008 | 86 minutes

Credits

Director	Peter Greenaway
Screenplay	Peter Greenaway
Photography	Reinier van Brummelen
Music	Marco Robino, Giovanni Sollima

Cast

Rembrandt	Martin Freeman
Saskia	Eva Birthistle
Geertje	Jodhi May
Hendrickje	Emily Holmes

Peter Greenaway has never been a filmmaker in the usual sense of the term. He's always been an artist, in the usual sense of that term—an artist who uses film as one artistic medium among others, which include painting, performance, and design. As an artist who favors synthesis over analysis, he constantly blurs the boundaries between different forms, testing their limits and exploring the interstices where properties of one medium impinge on those of another. His most stimulating movies are those in which he places film into dialog with a different art form—drawing in *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), architecture in *The Belly of an Architect* (1987), literature in *Prospero's Books* (1991), theater in *The Baby of Mâcon* (1993), body art in *The Pillow Book* (1996), and so forth. His agenda isn't as schematic as this sounds, but his films are always hybrids of one sort or another. Paradoxically, the best of them are all the more cinematic as a result.

It follows that Greenaway's films are hard to pin down with genre labels. His latest feature, *Rembrandt's J'Accuse*, is a documentary in many respects, but it's also a biopic, a melodrama, a revisionist history lesson, a take-off on CSI crime shows, and a personal essay on a favorite painting. Equally important, it's a frontal attack on the visual illiteracy that Greenaway sees as a defining feature of the modern world. There's no question that traditional literacy—competence with grammar, clarity, spelling, and no extra apostrophe's—has been declining for years, but some media scholars claim this is offset by visual skills picked up on Websites, video-game consoles, and the like. Greenaway's scary message is that most people are as weak in visual skills as in verbal ones, which makes for bad communication, bad art appreciation, and bad resistance to the capitalist powers that use their expertise to manipulate the rest of us. Those most in need of this message aren't likely to see *Rembrandt's J'Accuse*, which isn't exactly "Rembrandt for Beginners," but it's an encouraging step in the right direction.

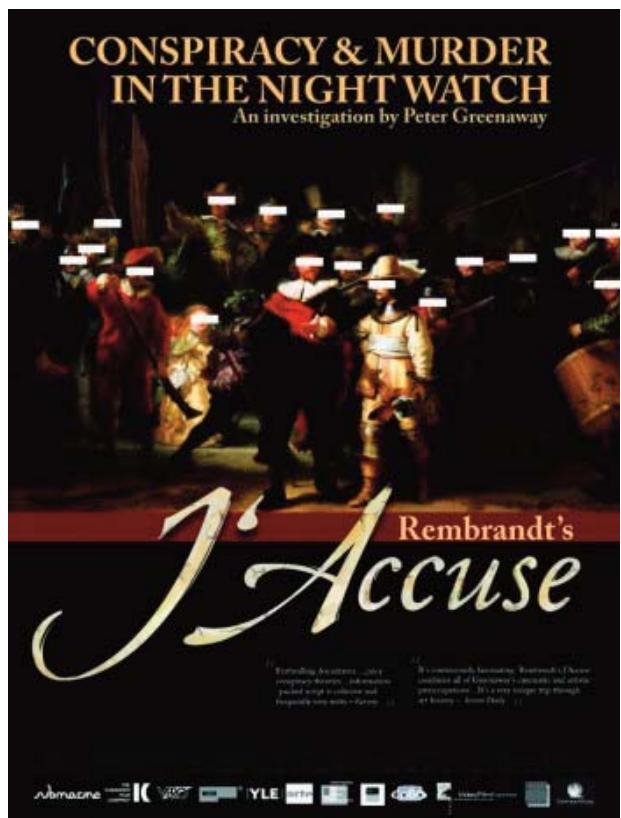
Greenaway started ruminating on Rembrandt as an art student, when he reacted against the painter's canonical status by deciding to dislike him. He changed his tune in later years, and in 2006 he initiated a series of video installations called *Nine Classical Paintings Revisited* with a digital study of *The Night Watch*, a.k.a., *The Company of Frans Banning Cocq and Lieutenant Willem van Ruytenhurch*,

In Brief

In this unusual documentary Peter Greenaway subjects Rembrandt's *The Night Watch* (which he had earlier made a fiction film about) to rigorous analysis and suggests that the 34 characters within it are conspirators in the crime of murder.



an enormous canvas painted by Rembrandt in 1642 on commission from a Dutch militia. The installation was cinematic in structure, using animated diagrams, digital stills, and a soundtrack to draw out the painting's details and advance Greenaway's own ideas about it. *Rembrandt's J'Accuse* grew directly from this project. Its thesis is that *The Night Watch* is at once a commissioned portrait of a military group, a coded protest against the oppressive power held by superrich families in seventeenth-century Amsterdam, and a cryptic communiqué providing sub-rosa clues to a murder in which the painting's subjects played a part. How literally does Greenaway, whose energetic narration runs throughout the film, want us to take his scholarly detective work? It's not entirely clear, but as an artist perpetually obsessed with games and puzzles, he regards the past as a wide-open field for speculation and



conjecture. He embraces the view that there's no such thing as history, there are only historians; and whether you're Ridley Scott or Walter Scott, he says, you're entitled to play with the evidence as you see fit.

Rembrandt's *J'Accuse* combines Greenaway's intuitive montage with variable framing, expressive camera movement, superimposed images, and enough special effects to create a mid-budget Hollywood fantasy. These kinetic maneuvers might seem untrue to the film's seventeenth-century subject, but intriguingly, Greenaway regards Rembrandt as a sort of protofilmmaker who typically begins a canvas with a markedly dark background, analogous to the darkness of a movie theater, and then paints in the effects of light—freeze frames, in effect—much as a projector casts an image on the screen. Greenaway doesn't relate to Rembrandt's style as intimately as he bonds with Johannes Vermeer's in *A Zed & Two Noughts* (1985) or in the magnificent staging (and crafty libretto) he created in 2000 for Louis Andriessen's opera *Writing to Vermeer*. But his slight esthetic distance from *The Night Watch* is ultimately for the good, since it reduces the painterly quirks that occasionally weigh down his Vermeer projects. Rembrandt's *J'Accuse* is unadulterated cinema from first shot to last.

It's also a highly intertextual movie that relates as much to other films as to Rembrandt's painting. Its closest cousin is Greenaway's own *Nightwatching*, a 2007 docudrama that sketches an impressionistic account of Rembrandt's life and career during the period when he made *The Night Watch*. More sprawling and cluttered than Rembrandt's *J'Accuse*, it's one of Greenaway's less successful art-centered films, although its very excesses cast revealing light on the more obsessive aspects of his style. (*Nightwatching* is the first

installment in Greenaway's new Dutch Masters series; the second will be *Goltzius and the Pelican Company*, about a sixteenth-century Dutch engraver of erotic prints.) More broadly, Rembrandt's *J'Accuse* puts a new spin on ideas Greenaway has been refining for decades: taxonomy games (as in *Vertical Features Remake*, 1978), math games (think *Drowning by Numbers*, 1988), and conspiracy games (recalling *The Cook the Thief His Wife & Her Lover*, 1989), to mention the most conspicuous ones. Greenaway connoisseurs will also find echoes of his multimedia project *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*, which has produced four feature films and will eventually include books, plays, exhibitions, and Websites as well.

Looking beyond Greenaway's own filmography, Rembrandt's *J'Accuse* summons immediate thoughts of Jean-Luc Godard's masterpiece *Passion* (1982), which takes a similarly keen interest in *The Night Watch* at one point. *Passion* revolves around an expatriate filmmaker named Jerzy who cares vastly more about cinematic light, framing, and mise-en-scène than the storytelling his producers demand of him. Groping for inspiration, he stages a series of canonical paintings, including *The Night Watch*, as tableaux vivants on a studio soundstage. Looking at his re-creation of *The Night Watch*, he pronounces it "full of holes and badly filled spaces," by which he means it's all too faithful to Rembrandt's imperfect original. Jerzy thinks Rembrandt should have been more attentive to the faces, and I suspect Rembrandt's *J'Accuse* is meant as a reproach to Godard for taking a reductive view of so multifaceted a painting—Greenaway's two Rembrandt films combined only scratch the surface. That said, I won't take the side of either director, each of whom is a towering innovator of modern cinema.

As brilliant as it is, Rembrandt's *J'Accuse* has flaws that will outweigh its merits for many spectators. Like numerous Greenaway films, it has little emotional resonance, racing along its intellectual itinerary with hardly a glance at matters of the heart and spirit. The reenactment scenes are weakened by jokey, hokey performances. Most important, Greenaway doesn't address and clarify a central contradiction in the film—the esthetic tension that emerges from the effort to elucidate a painting (permanent, unchanging) in terms that are cinematic (fluid, mutable) through and through. Given his insatiable appetite for revisiting and reworking his favorite themes and methodologies, I hope Greenaway will someday make a self-critical film about his art-historical movies, exploring their successes and shortcomings as scrupulously as he explores those of great paintings from the past. Such a project—a *Watching Nightwatching*, perhaps, or a *J'Accuse J'Accuse*—could be the most illuminating Greenaway investigation of them all.

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