

Film

Good Fictions: Remembering Peter Wollen

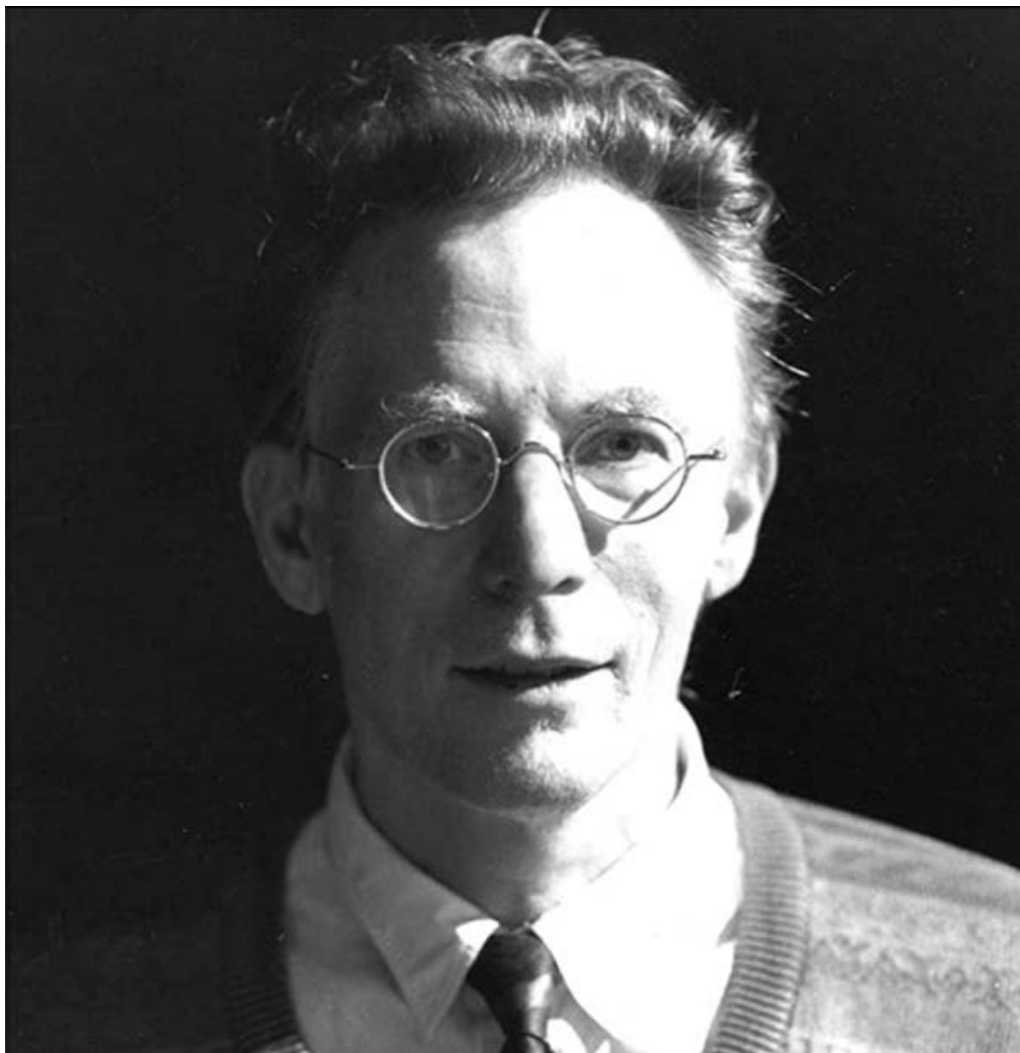
In the years leading up to Peter's death, I would find myself on occasion writing down our dialogues, both past and present.



by Chon Noriega
December 17, 2020



Support Hyperallergic's independent arts journalism. Become a member today »



Peter Wollen (image courtesy UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television)

Peter Wollen died one year ago from Alzheimer's disease. He had been in institutional care since around 2005. Peter was my colleague at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in the Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media, and, when his illness forced him to retire, I was with him on his last night in Los Angeles before he flew back to London the next morning. Kathleen McHugh and I wanted to make sure he had dinner; we went to a nearby restaurant and then spent the rest of the evening at his house. Peter talked in great detail about his career, the memorabilia on his walls, and Charles Grey, 2nd Earl Grey, after whom the tea is named. Peter's investment in the 2nd Earl Grey had more to do with his political reforms, but he paid all due appreciation to the tea, as well. Peter then pulled out his wallet and from it retrieved an Edinburgh newspaper clipping, carefully unfolded the browned newsprint, and read aloud an interview with Sam Fuller in which he praised Peter as the screenwriter for Michelangelo Antonioni's *Passenger* (1975). I had discerned over dinner that Peter's earlier memories remained intact, and, by process of elimination, narrowed that down to events prior to the release of *Russian Ark* (2002). It was a film we both loved and discussed, and yet now he had no memory of its existence, let alone our spirited discussion. From that moment on we spoke only about the past.

In the years leading up to Peter's death, I would find myself on occasion writing down our dialogues, both past and present. His unique way of thinking and writing continues to have an impact on me. Peter was a traveler, thinking through place and networks, while also writing among other itinerants, as he once called Michel de Certeau. Peter died shortly before hospitals in Wuhan, China, started encountering patients with an unknown type of pneumonia, later identified as COVID-19. The world changed, largely by becoming unmoored from time and "remote" from those places where we were supposed to be. The last year feels like one long day taking place in a room. It is a room that Blaise Pascal and Franz Kafka have written about, a room that requires one to sit quietly alone. Failure to do so becomes the source of "all of humanity's problems" (Pascal), while if one is attentive and patient "the world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked" (Kafka). The following thoughts about Peter are my own attempt at an unmasking, not of Peter, but of the world we shared.

In the early 1990s, Peter and I would regularly head over to the campus café, where, over coffee, we talked about the academic enterprise. In a way we were both new to the profession. I had recently earned my PhD and started as an assistant professor, first at the University of New Mexico, then a year later at UCLA. Peter was a writer, filmmaker, and curator, and he had reluctantly accepted a position as full professor at UCLA. In those early years at UCLA, Peter described himself as an itinerant and a journalist, even though his book *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* (1969) and such articles such as “The Two Avant-Gardes” (1975) were key works in the development of academic cinema studies. When I pressed him about why he came to UCLA given his ambivalence about becoming a professor, he explained, “I was living in London and sitting at the table doing my bills when the telephone rang, and it was Nick Browne offering me a job.” Frustrated by his answer, I asked, “But *why* did you accept the job?” “As I said, I was doing my bills...”

As an intellectual, Peter neither argued nor explained. Instead, he orchestrated a description of the world that elucidated the intricate connections that made a figure, subject, medium, or issue something worth appreciating in detail. In his research, Peter followed the Socratic method. He would spend his mornings in the Arts Library, searching the catalogue and browsing the stacks. As he encountered a text, he found that it both answered a question and raised another, leading him to the next text, and so on. If his research was iterative, his writing did not explicate that process, nor did it elevate it to a method or theory that overlaid the subject. What he did was tell a story wherein the theoretical and political investments were in the story itself. From our discussions, I gathered this was due in part to the fact that Peter had either participated in or had come to know the participants of the 20th-century modern art and cinema that he wrote about. He made no pretense of standing outside the object of study, nor did he reduce it to the empirical “authenticity” of having been there. He was an artist and intellectual, and not a would-be scientist.

In those days, I struggled with how to advance my own research and curatorial work on Chicano cinema, while I was also starting to engage the visual arts. With respect to cinema, Peter was incisive: “Write about Chicano cinema as if it were the center of the field. Make it something everyone has to engage and take into account.” Later, in a free-wheeling discussion we had about the late 1950s and 1960s countercultures in the United States, Peter summed up the underlying ethos in a way that would inform my book, *Shot in America: Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema* (2000). That ethos was, he said, “What’s America if not me?” This statement seemed in line with his advice about speaking from the center rather than the margin, and provided the technique for doing so. Rather than reframe or recenter the field, simply claim the center as your own. The arc of this line of thinking culminated for me with *Home—So Different, So Appealing* (2017), a major museum exhibition and catalogue that I curated with Mari Carmen Ramirez and Pilar Tompkins Rivas. In this exhibition, we examined a universal concept through contemporary art since the late 1950s, drawing on an array of both art forms and formal languages and strategies, while selecting works by Latino and Latin American artists. After all, what is America if not the hemisphere? Of course, not too long after our conversation, I realized that Peter had said something else. He was referencing *Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), among other similar films, and drawing a connection between Beats and Hippies based on a certain strand of countercultural disengagement. In the soft lilt of his British accent, Peter had said, “What’s America done for me?” Whereas he had codified the particular form of white privilege that allowed disengagement to be a political gesture, I had heard what was silenced in the process.

Later in the 1990s, when I felt as if I had fallen down the rabbit hole of film theory, I asked Peter point-blank and with a bit of exasperation, “What *is* theory?” I certainly knew X theory, and Y theory, and Z theory, and could apply each to a text, work, object. But *theory* itself had suddenly become an opaque belief system. Peter responded immediately in a cheerily incisive way. “Oh, that’s easy. Theory is the meta-language of descriptive discourses.” Bam! And there it was ... And yet, as I learned through my own work, to know something is not the same as embodying that knowledge. While the former can guide us in our actions, and also define us through the consistency of our premises and conclusions, the latter may not occur until years or decades later. Theory, method, and thinking more generally are not entities, they are processes filled with contradictions, serendipity, omissions, and the inherent limitations of rationality. These processes take place in a body with a sense of self, and this body-self is always changing as it moves toward death. So, what can we do? You can research a subject until you find the answers you were looking for, or you can research a subject until you find the questions you were not expecting. These two approaches are neither mutually exclusive nor discrete, although the former inclines toward establishing a methodology while the latter inclines toward crossing a field dotted with rabbit holes. In either case, time is limited as one looks for something meaningful.

I am now five years older than Peter was when we first met as colleagues in 1992. Back then, Peter’s hair was thinning and, rather than gel and comb what remained into a shell of its former fullness, he let it grow wild, a diaphanous architecture of loss and seeming obliviousness, like a building designed by Frank Gehry yet constructed by Do Ho Suh. Peter’s memories were thinning, too. Yet it seemed as amusing as it was worrisome, just Peter being Peter. He never took up the identity of academic, yet to everyone’s surprise he served two separate one-year terms as department chair, proving to be very efficient at keeping paper of his desk, while still carving out time in the Arts Library.

But he also forgot things, and started keeping a small notebook to jot down work-related details and exchanges. Later he served as vice chair of the Cinema and Media Studies Program. During his office hours, a doctoral student visited and started discussing her dissertation. After a while, Peter suggested she take up the issues she was raising with the chair of her dissertation committee. “But Peter, you *are* my chair!” Unfazed, Peter responded, “Very well, then. Continue.”

With the insistent erasing of Peter’s memory, history itself seemed to disappear: the intricate and global network of his journeys, encounters, and experiences, and how he put that into dialogue with the modern artists before his time. He was playful in method, a combination of a beginner’s mind and an insistence on research and attentiveness as the path toward telling the best story. I miss our talks. Dialogue is central to the Socratic method, but that dialogue itself is distinct from the “work” that one produces as a result. Essays have a structure, dialogues are open-ended, until they end. For Peter, the Socratic method could also be undertaken like Freud’s self-analysis, engaging himself “as if I were another.” In the 1960s, Peter wrote a number of critical engagements of film directors and their bodies of work in *New Left Review* using the pseudonym Lee Russell. In 1997, Russell turned his attention to Wollen, interviewing him about *Signs and Meaning* on the occasion of its fifth edition. In this dialogue with himself, Russell/Wollen shows a mind at work, going back and forth, differing with himself across time, thereby giving an example of thinking as an active and open-ended process rather than thought as a conclusion.

We were different generations — your first memories were of being put to bed in a cage under the stairs in a house outside of London in order to shelter you from German bombs late in the war, mine were of a cold war experienced through the arrival of Cuban balseros as our new neighbors, and of the numerous hippies on the downtown streets and in the parks of Greater Miami. These were not except-

-ions; they were the norms for the world into which we were each born. What we shared was the fact of a liberal arts education, something my father, who never went to college, inculcated in me by having me read his copy of Cardinal Newman's *The Idea of a University*, first published in 1852. Here, the liberal arts were oriented toward the capacity to think, and not a cultural heritage or tradition per se, borrowing from the framework for university education in the Middle Ages: the seven liberal arts, themselves divided in two parts — basically, language (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and mathematics (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music). I had just begun high school, and my father so very much wanted me to be the first in both family lines to get a college degree, and from Harvard, no less. As I worked my way toward the BA degree at a state university over a six-and-a-half year period, I became painfully aware that I was part of the last generation to be educated within a liberal arts framework: develop the person through the intellect and as a member of civil society, and the rest will follow. Today, over 15 years since you left the academy, that has all but disappeared, and I fear we have lost something implied within liberal arts education: namely, that *education* needed to be autonomous much more so than the arts. It needed that good fiction of being disengaged from the world, and from the home, so that the child and adolescent could become an adult. This is not just about child psychology, or the individual-qua-individual; it's about adult sociality, what psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung, then art critic, poet, and anarchist Herbert Read, and later civil and immigrant rights movements called *integration*.

Peter would be amused that I reference Herbert Read, a byproduct of my research over the last decade on art and arts education in the post-WWII era, since for him Read was one of two pillars of a restrictively “small world of British taste” that remained dominant into the 1960s when Peter started his career. His assessment is not quite accurate, but it also not wrong. And so, I find myself continuing our talks, as if I were another. Dialogues are open-ended, until they end ...

Related

ArtRx LA

August 26, 2014

ArtRx LA

November 1, 2016

There Is Nothing United About the United States or the Art World

February 29, 2020

[Sign up for our email newsletters!](#)

Support Hyperallergic

As arts communities around the world experience a time of challenge and change, accessible, independent reporting on these developments is more important than ever.

Please consider supporting our journalism, and help keep our independent reporting free and accessible to all.

Chon Noriega

Chon Noriega is Distinguished Professor and Director of the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA. Earlier this year, he curated *Pyramids*, a large-scale opera set and action painting by the artist... [More by Chon Noriega](#)

Leave a comment

*You must be a Member to post a comment. **[Sign in](#) or [become a member now](#).***