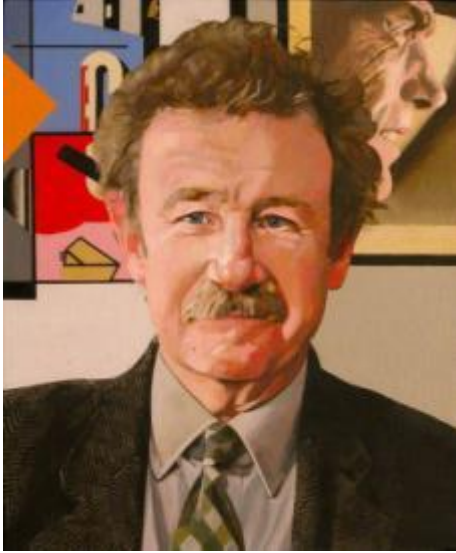


# Christopher Frayling

Born 1946. Professor of cultural history.  
Available online at [www.livesretold.co.uk](http://www.livesretold.co.uk)



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# 1. Introduction



*The following introduction was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Wikipedia website at [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org).*

Sir Christopher Frayling was born in Hampton, a suburb of London, in affluent circumstances. After attending Repton School, Frayling read history at Churchill College, Cambridge and gained a PhD in the study of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He was appointed a Fellow of the college in 2009. He taught history at the University of Bath and was awarded an Honorary Degree (Doctor of Arts) from that University in 2003. In 1979 Frayling was appointed Professor of Cultural History at London's post-graduate art and design school, the Royal College of Art. Frayling was Rector of the Royal College of Art from 1996 to 2009.

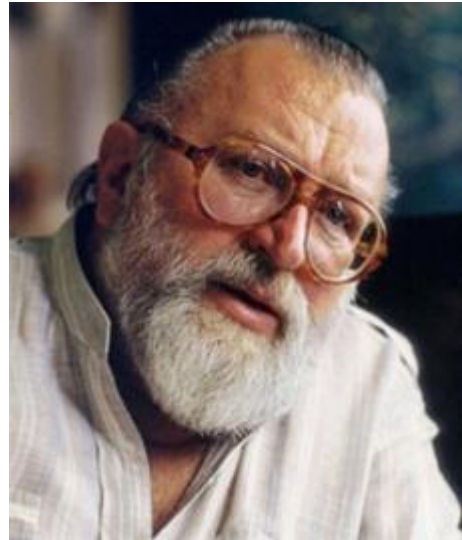
In 2003 he was awarded the Sir Misha Black Award and was added to the College of Medallists.

He was the Chairman of Arts Council England from 2005 until January 2009. He also served as Chairman of the Design Council, Chairman of the Royal Mint Advisory Committee, and a Trustee of the Victoria and Albert Museum. He was a governor of the British Film Institute in the 1980s. In April 2014 he was appointed Chancellor of the Arts University Bournemouth.

He has had a wide output as a writer and critic on subjects ranging from vampires to westerns. He has written and presented television series such as *The Art of Persuasion* on advertising and *Strange Landscape* on the Middle Ages. He has conducted a series of radio and television interviews

with figures from the world of film, including Woody Allen, Deborah Kerr, Ken Adam, Francis Ford Coppola and Clint Eastwood. He has written and presented several television series, including *The Face of Tutankhamun* and *Nightmare: Birth of Horror*.

He studied Spaghetti Westerns and specifically director Sergio Leone (right). He has written a very popular biography of Leone, *Something To Do With Death* (2000); helped run the Los Angeles-based Gene Autry Museum's exhibit on Leone in 2005; and appeared in numerous documentaries about Leone and his films, particularly the DVD documentaries of *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). He also provided audio commentaries for the special edition DVD releases of *A Fistful of Dollars*, *For a Few Dollars More*, *Once Upon a Time in the West* and *The Colossus of Rhodes*.



In January 2018, he gave a lecture at the British Library in the Hogwarts Curriculum Lecture series on "Defence against the Dark Arts". This specialised in the treatment of vampires.

Christopher Frayling's father, Major Arthur Frayling, was a furrier. His mother, Betty Frayling, won the RAC Rally in 1952. His brother, Nicholas, was Dean of Chichester Cathedral from 2002-2014.

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## 2. Andrew Davidson Interview

*This chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Management Today website at [www. managementtoday.co.uk](http://www.managementtoday.co.uk). The interview was conducted by Andrew Davidson, and was published in February 2002.*

**Design Council chairman and Rector of the Royal College of Art, inveterate committee-sitter, writer, TV presenter and pundit on popular culture - he's full of zestful geniality. What's he running from?**

Sir Christopher Frayling has to be dragged out of the party to see me. Music is pumping, brawny men swig beer, skinny women pull unwilling partners onto the disco floor. I'm stepping through all this just to get to his office. What is going on? Only the Royal College of Art's Christmas lunch. These guys clearly know how to party.

'Phew,' puffs Frayling, 'thank God you're here, people were threatening to make me dance!' He laughs as he strides towards me, tall, slightly dishevelled, wearing a rumpled suit and limp tie, his unkempt curly hair and bushy moustache making him vaguely-out-of-date-man. He looks like Lord Winston's scruffy younger brother.

Before we have even shaken hands, he's already chatting away, a big smile creasing his squishy face. He'd scheduled this interview, it turns out, as a bit of disco-avoidance. What a wag. Frayling, 55, seems to approach everything in his busy life - college-running, book-writing, committee-sitting, programme-presenting - with the same boyish bonhomie, great gusts of zestful intellectual enthusiasm blowing through a multi-talented, churning mind. Most love him for it, though some say it is a bit of an act, camouflaging a very ambitious drive. As one of the most influential people in the arts today, he would have found it hard not to make some enemies, I suppose.

But he works at his niceness. He unpeels a sticker from his lapel - it says BOSS - and gestures grinning to a seat round the circular meeting table in his book-strewn office. Large windows on two sides frame the December traffic rumbling past Hyde Park on London's Kensington Gore. Nice view out, good view in. Occupants of the number 9 bus - hello! - get a pretty good close-up as they trundle along. Frayling, a natural performer who made his name with his analyses of popular culture, is clearly more at ease in the public glare than most. He even uses the window to display a few of his own books. He apologises for this with the hint of a wink.

He has been rector of the Royal College of Art for six years, a job that most acknowledge he has done pretty well, forging closer links with business than ever before. The college, set up well before the Great Exhibition a

century and a half ago and now pitching itself as the Oxbridge of art schools, is unusual in mixing fine art and design disciplines, and numbering artists like David Hockney and industrialists like James Dyson among its alumni. It is also a large, complex organisation to run: 800 postgraduate students, 100 contracted academic staff, 800 visiting academics, 250 support staff, pounds 20 million turnover and a plum site opposite the Royal Albert Hall.

Enough, you might think, to keep most people busy, but Frayling, an avaricious job-taker, likes to put himself about. He has, while working at the RCA, been on the Arts Council, Crafts Council, Design Council and the Dome board, and contributed to a clutch of other organisations as well. On top of which he churns out books and radio and television programmes as a full-time hobby. Where does he get the time? 'Oh, I've always liked being busy,' he chuckles. 'I wouldn't know how to spell the word relaxed.'

Which is what he usually says to the media, but I'm not so sure. Frayling is so good-humoured, so attentive, so garrulously charming that you tend not to question what the underlying agenda is. He's constantly going off on a conversational tangent like a frisky horse that has to be reined in, so you're continually preoccupied, just holding on. He does, it has to be said, notice my growing exasperation at this. It doesn't stop him; he simply prefaces each lunge away from the subject with: 'Sorry, this is another digression ...'

If all that makes me sound unduly suspicious, it's only because I'd been warned that his chatty cheeriness can occasionally be an exercise in evasion. There are 101 subjects you can quiz him on - his life is so multifaceted - not least academic management, at which he is adept, the Arts Council, on which he sat for 13 years, and the doomed Dome, to which he contributed guidance, of a sort.

But I feel all Domed-out, and more intrigued by his chairmanship of the Design Council. It's the one element of his lengthy CV that puzzles some as, despite being in charge of Britain's most prestigious educational institution for art and design, he doesn't seem a very design-fixated person. His obsession is popular films and television - his most recent book was a biography of spaghetti western maker Sergio Leone - and his expertise is administration; anyone expecting to find him surrounded by iconic design pieces would, looking at his office, be sorely disappointed. By his own admission, he's a scruffy academic.

Yet he took over the role of Design Council chairman in a flurry of publicity two years ago, promising to boost design's profile, after which ... silence. Hmm. A few in the design world suggest that Frayling's appointment had more to do with ambition than logic, and the council has payed the price. I have to admit that, before I read the cuttings, I wasn't really sure if the Design Council still existed.

Frayling, who seems impossible to offend, barely breaks his smile when I tell him. 'No, no, no,' he laughs. 'It has completely changed, though. When I came into this business it was the ministry of taste - it gave its seal of approval to products, it told us what to like ... That's patronising to the consumer now, so it has flipped itself into a lobbying, opinion-forming, context-creating organisation. Instead of directing itself towards the design community, it directs itself towards government, education and business ...'

He then launches into a long lecture on the growing popularity of design in schools, how the Design Council is directly involved in the curriculum, how the challenge is now to get higher education to take it seriously, how business schools are so fusty about design - all good points - GCSEs, truancy, surrealism, British adverts, cigarettes, bus queues, William Morris, pots with thumbprints, JCB, Scandinavian chairs, jamjars you can open, crime in Wales ...

Stop!

Like so many of Frayling's speeches, it's not the rapidity of delivery that throws you off-course - in fact, he speaks slowly and lucidly - just the way the pertinent points spin out mesmerically in so many different directions. Eventually, you quite forget whether he's answered the question.


His main argument, and I precis here, is that the Design Council is very good at trying to 'create the context in business' in which design can be important and successful - so don't mess with it. It's not like the Arts Council, trying to engineer policy by giving money to people. It's different. Nor is it about plugging big-name designers. 'Design with a big D. That concept is out. Why should they have a trade association paid for by the government (pounds 6 million last year) which hooks for them? It's more about trying to understand the concept of design.'

Then he's off again on another anecdote, about Hovercraft and how the French named theirs after its design engineer and we called ours Princess Margaret and that says it all really and ... When I report all this later to Andrew Summers, the Design Council's chief executive, he laughs and says: that's Christopher. The point about him, he adds, is that he is very good at interfacing with government and business. Cogent arguments and contacts are the name of the game, not designer clothing.

I have to admit there are probably cogent arguments against all this too, but I am not sure I can get a word in anyway. What's in it for Frayling? Boosting the RCA's grip on the design world, for one. He has spent much of his time as rector of the RCA plugging the profile of its design courses and their links with industry. Business brings in money and provides jobs for his students. Hence his tight links with Dyson - a big RCA graduate

employer - and others. 'We are judged on the destination of our students,' he smiles.

Frayling has always been good at turning circumstances to his advantage. Born in south London, the second son of an affluent furrier - Major Arthur Frayling, OBE, chairman of the Hudson's Bay fur auction house in the City - he says he gets his interest in business from his dad and his love of the arts from his mother's family. His mum, however, was fascinated by cars: she and her brother won the RAC Rally in 1952. She was born into a German immigrant family that ran a music shop in New Oxford Street, terribly exotic, early gramophones, music boxes, Bauhaus-design bags. All of that gave Frayling an insight into the allure of arts and crafts at a young age.



**are you too a keen \* discollector?**

say of folk songs from Spain  
or maybe a chanson from a French cabaret  
or a Russian hymn-chant?  
perhaps it's a tune played on a draalorgel  
or could it be a serenata from Italy  
or the same thing in Arabic  
or is it Greek to you?

**\* he buys his records at**

**IMHOFS**

ALFRED IMHOF LIMITED 112-116 NEW OXFORD STREET LONDON WC1 MUSEUM 7878

*An advert for Frayling's mother's family firm: Imhofs in New Oxford Street.*

His father was also an inveterate music hall fan, dragging Frayling and his elder brother to the Kingston Empire to see terrible old acts shortly to be driven out of work by television. His dad was a loud extrovert too, loving piano singalongs and military music. That, says Frayling, is probably where he got his ease with popular culture from, and his desire to perform.

And the fur trade? He never really encountered the sensitivity of his father's fur trade links till the issue became political in the late '60s. His father, after retirement, became spokesman for the whole industry and eventually had to be given police protection.

'I have to say it in hushed tones now, of course,' says Frayling, who hastily makes plain he has no truck with the fur trade. 'At home, dad was



incredibly affectionate to our pets and then would go into work with all these corpses with fur on them. He just didn't make the connection.'



*Christopher Frayling's mother and uncle won the 1952 RAC Rally in an Allard J2 (above).*

Frayling and his brother, three years older, were sent away to boarding school at a very young age, probably to facilitate their mother's rally driving. She also suffered from terrible back pain, brought on by all those suspensionless cars, and wanted a break from the kids. Frayling was just six. 'I went with my brother because they thought we worked well together, but when we got there, of course, we were barely allowed to speak to each other.'

His brother later entered the church, and is now rector of Liverpool. Two rectors in one family? 'He says he's the real rector,' laughs Frayling, 'not me.' But their early school experience has not made him a fan of the boarding system. His worst moment came when he started calling the school matron 'Mum'. 'That,' says Frayling, laughing nervously, 'is a bit scary, isn't it?'

Did it all affect his character?

He frowns in concentration. 'I think one develops a double life early on. There was the social me, the one that operated in the rather compressed society of boarding school, and the different me, in holidays. You do become rather duplicitous ... I am still very rigid about public and private.'



In fact, I've never really done an interview where I have talked about myself like this.'

Really? Some who have worked with him say he never hides anything, yet Frayling seems to imply the opposite. Summers says: 'What you see is what you get.' Lord Palumbo, Frayling's chairman at the Arts Council for many years, describes him as a fan-tastic communicator, 'palatable, logical, doesn't shout or scream'.

A few who have crossed him suggest there is another side. Stephen Bayley, former design director of the Dome, was interviewed against him for the RCA rector's job in 1992 (both failed) and later worked with him on the Greenwich project (Frayling ended up 'godfather' of the Faith zone after Bayley left). They are not friends. 'Christopher always reminds me of a koala,' says Bayley. 'He looks cuddly, but can be vicious if you're not careful.' He adds that, during their time at the Dome, Frayling seemed keener to get preferment from the Government than provide any cogent view of what should be in the tent.

Ouch. Certainly Frayling has proved adaptable throughout his career. After getting good A-levels at Repton, he went to Cambridge to read law, and switched to history after three days. 'Law was so dull.' He went on to do a PhD in the history of ideas, ducking and diving to avoid his father's ambitions for him to enter advertising. 'That was commerce-meets-art in a slightly panic-stricken way,' he laughs. 'Dad was terrified I would go arty on him.'



*The Millennium Dome.*

Eventually, he got a post lecturing at Exeter university, then a job at the Imperial War Museum researching amateur film footage, and helping to contribute to the World at War television series. That fascination with the moving image was to become a constant theme in his working life. Posts at the university of Bath and the RCA followed. His first lecture at the RCA was 'History through Film'.

He became professor of cultural history at the RCA in 1979, pro-rector in 1992 and rector - effectively chief executive - in 1996. In between, he survived the turbulent regime of Jocelyn Stevens at the college, rector from 1984 to 1996. Stevens, a former newspaper executive more used to bashing the unions on Fleet Street, arrived at the college with a mission to impose firm management on its reluctant academics. Frayling was one of only two professors who survived.

'There was a lot of rough stuff, people coming and going, but I rather admired Jocelyn. He was a great ambassador for the place and he certainly made it more manageable. He gave it its confidence back.'

Why did Frayling survive? He chuckles and says: 'The Vicar of Bray springs to mind ...' But comparing himself to the time-serving cleric who survived multiple kings does not really do him justice. The truth is that Frayling liked Stevens, wrote some of his speeches and learned more about leading and managing than many might imagine (as the two men have rather different styles). He failed to get the top slot in 1992, but when Stevens' successor left four years later, Frayling was well placed to step into the breach.



*Jocelyn Stevens, Frayling's boss at the Royal College of Art, whom he later succeeded.*

He says he loves the job, but he is also passionate about his media work too. He has presented television series on advertising, Tutankhamun, the Middle Ages, horror - you name it, he can enthuse about it. He is, most agree, a terrific presenter. 'He has that wonderful ability to perform in public,' says Palumbo, who has seen him do the same on committees. 'He has a serious purpose but he cloaks it in geniality.'

Frayling is so good at it that, in 1993, he thought about leaving academia behind and taking up television as a full-time career. Any regrets that he didn't? 'No, because television has a short memory. What happens is they over-expose you, then drop you.'

But don't other academics think he is trivialising his talents? Frayling shrugs. He says he has spent his life being told his interests were 'too prole', right from his Cambridge days when he co-founded a magazine about cinema - not seen as a serious medium in mid-60s academia. But that's not going to stop him. 'I hate the argument about dumbing down,' he says. 'I can't believe whole genres are dumb, I really can't.' Frayling's next book, for the record, is about images of science in popular films - in short, why so many scientists are portrayed as bonkers in the movies. It's unlikely to appease his serious critics.

But it is accessible and, for Frayling, getting the audience is almost more important than winning the esteem of his peers. He seems, anyway, to be tiring of academic life. When I ask him if he will see out his five-year contract at the RCA - he's already done five and is in year one of the new deal - he makes a face, and says, probably not. He has things he still needs to do, like pushing through his plan for a new building, bolted on the front of the RCA, but maybe his energy is waning. 'I do think the point is reached when you're repeating yourself. I can't bear people who hang on too long. The academic world is full of them.'

So what would he do next? 'Oh,' he says, 'I just want to be incredibly busy.' He has his committees and his writing, and his beautiful house on Galway Bay in Ireland that he and his painter wife Helen built. He met Helen at the RCA - 'no, she was not my student' - and has three step-children through her. They live mainly in a beautiful house in Bath, but also in a flat, no doubt equally beautiful, overlooking the river at Chiswick in London. You presume Frayling has to be busy just paying upkeep on all that property.

'Actually,' he says, mulling over my last question, 'next I would like to be the David Attenborough of the arts.'

Isn't he called Melvyn Bragg?

Frayling creases up. 'No! No! No! Alright, I had better be careful. Ultimately I would like to broadcast more. I don't want a university job. I

want to write too - I have got about eight books I want to get out of my system.'

Goodness. He wouldn't fancy, then, returning to the Arts Council as chairman? He's an obvious choice. God no, he says, you can never win there, never enough money, just like the NHS. But there are a host of other things he can do.

Can't he slow down? What's he running from?

'Oh, my Lord,' he says, as if no-one has ever asked him before. 'I don't know. My idea of hell is lying on a beach getting sun oil on my books ...'

Does he think he is difficult to be around? He pauses. 'Yes, I am fairly driven. I like to have three lives at least. One of my philosophies is that road sign: Do not enter yellow box unless your exit is clear. And I think if you have other lives it enhances your performance.'

Then he tells me an anecdote about his mother, who died last year: how he took her to a dinner to celebrate 50 years of the RAC Rally, and how all the past winners walked in to See the Conquering Hero Comes, and she was the only woman, and they had film of her going across the finish line back in 1952 and he was so proud of her.

And while he's telling me I realise that Frayling perhaps has a lot to live up to. We part well, as he does with just about everyone. Outside, the disco's almost over, only a few blokes left rounding up the last unfinished bottles of beer. Frayling laughs and says he's going to stay skulking in his office, mission accomplished. He seems so totally at ease with his world. But behind the good humour, the desire to be liked, the urge to communicate, the huge capabilities for organising and teaching and contributing, I wonder if there's a kernel of insecurity inflaming his drive, part of him still the little boy urgently seeking his mum's attention. Look at me, Ma, top of the world! Boom! I may be wrong, but I bet Frayling loves the movie reference.



*The proud claim of Alfred Imhof, Christopher Frayling's maternal grandfather.*

### 3. Desert Island Discs

*The following chapter was transcribed and archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the BBC website at [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk). Christopher Frayling was interviewed for the Desert Island Discs programme by Sue Lawley; the programme was broadcast in November 2003..*

*Sue Lawley: My castaway this week is an art historian. He is as much at home with spaghetti westerns as with the old masters. He sees art everywhere, and he has spent his life encouraging his students to have the same vision.*

*His academic career has been centred around the Royal College of Art, of which he is now Rector. From that base he has written books, made television documentaries, served on innumerable committees, and generally gone about the business of trying to make people appreciate the beauty and the importance of the simplest things around them. He hates intellectual snobbery, but loves intellectual engagement. You can do a PhD on Mickey Mouse, he says. He says 'nearly all the books I have written are about taking seriously that which many people would consider beyond the pale. He is the RCA's Professor of Cultural History, Sir Christopher Frayling.*

*Give me a list then, Christopher, of these beyond the pale subjects you have written about.*

Well we start off with vampires. We move on to what are now known as Euro Westerns - in my day it was Spaghetti Westerns.

*You coined that phrase?*

Yes, I did. Actually there is a bit of a paternity suit going on about who was responsible. Certainly the Italians think I did, so I have a very rough time every time I go to Italy. Of course in the sixties everything was spaghetti - cheap and cheerful and Italian. Spaghetti Junction and Spaghetti House and all those things. Today it would be pizza. Anyway, Spaghetti Westerns, Clint Eastwood, popular Egyptian design in relation to Tutankhamun. I've always had this crusade really to broaden the notion of culture and to relate it to the reality of what happens in people's lives.

When I was at university I studied Charles Dickens or the Middle Ages, and it didn't seem to actually relate to what was going on in the high street. And of course there wasn't much contemporary art in the university. I've been trying to focus people on the broad front of culture.

*Almost as a point of honour, it would seem?*

Yes, that's true. There's culcha with a cha, which is what connoisseurs do, and there's culture, which is the sort of art you lean against. I like this spread. I like taking cinema seriously, taking despised cinematic genres seriously - not too seriously.

*So it doesn't have to be Eisenstein, it doesn't have to be Bergman?*

No. If there was a terrible holocaust of some kind, and I had to choose between saving the sole copy of Wagner's Ring and the sole copy of Singing in the Rain, I wouldn't hesitate. It would be Singing in the Rain. It's a wonderful wonderful movie. I think there is a cultural snobbery; everyone erects hierarchies, particularly in this country. We are interested in literary rather than visual things, the great tradition of literature and history. So we don't look at film and technological culture; we don't take them as seriously as we should.

*In a sense, your lifetime has been that battle. And it is more of one now than it was when you were at university?*

To some extent. But superimposed on that is the dumbing down debate. As if certain forms of art are themselves dumb. My view is that there's good movies and bad movies, just like there's good poetry and bad poetry. And it's not to do with dumbing down.

*But there has to be a dividing line somewhere? There has to be a point at which you say that is art, and that isn't art. Otherwise the whole term is debased?*

Oh yes, there are categories. Important categories. But my point is that culture is a very very broad church, and nothing is to be gained by erecting artificial barriers.

*So you can do a PhD about Mickey Mouse. What can't you do a PhD about?*

I think you can do a PhD about anything. It's a matter of approach, seriousness, vocabulary, concepts. But not everything is art. Not every PhD is about art. There is nothing intrinsically trivial about any subject matter.

*So you could do a PhD about the art of washing up?*

Yes. You could do an interesting PhD about the social history, about the domestic agenda. It's a matter of how you approach it.

*Let's stop and have your first record. What is it?*

My first record is Reasons to be Cheerful, by Ian Dury. Ian was a student at the Royal College of Art in the mid sixties, and before that at Walthamstow, where he was a fellow student with my wife Helen. The words of this song remind me of wandering around the painting studios at



the college. All the students have their sort of pinboards of favourite postcards, Xeroxes, posters, things they like. If you listen to this, it is about the things Ian likes; the things that make him cheerful.

[Reasons to be Cheerful by Ian Dury]



*Ford Ka.*



*Bentley Continental.*

Ian Dury, one of the alumni of the Royal College of Art, along with Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, and David Hockney. But also of course James Dyson, he of the vacuum cleaner fame. And more recently Chris Svensson,



who designed the Ford Ka. Yes, I sit in my office watching the work of all these graduates whizz by - the Fords and the Bentley Continental.

People think because it's called the Royal College of Art, with a capital A, it's only to do with fine art. I spend a lot of my time as Rector trying to put over the fact that actually 70% of the students do design in one form or another, whether it is craft, or industrial design, design for manufacturing, or one-off things. It's all in the realm of design.

*But it's an art college, and it's purely postgraduate?*

Yes, it is only postgraduate. What we do is art in a design environment and design in an art environment. You put those two things together, with a lot of bright postgraduates in art and design and see what happens. It's a sort of greenhouse. You put this very concentrated community of people together. You stir the pot a little bit - put the artists next to the designers. So you are giving them an opportunity to be very very creative within that. But, at the same time, you're saying to them 'You are all talented. Some of you will learn how to use your talents and some of you won't'. And that's where the professional orientation comes in.

*Isn't there a danger, if you do that, and you start teaching them also how to book keep and things, to be professional, you might just kill that kind of free spirit - the one who might design the one-off beautiful prototype. Because they are concentrating on the bottom line?*

I don't see it like that, because design is part of everyday life. Every light switch, every bulb, everything you see was designed by someone as a conscious decision. It is the fact of making it that turns it into design really. So I don't see the distinction between the real world for designers and the greenhouse. Because it's a continuum. Unlike many university subjects, the application of it is part of the activity itself.

*So what are they designing at the moment? Whet our appetite.*

Well, the big big issue for designers at the college is humanising technology. They feel that a lot products on the market are pushed by the technology rather than being pulled by people. So mobile phones do far too many things, and are incredibly complicated to work. Or a car radio, and you can't work out how to switch it on.

Where fashion design is concerned, intelligent fabrics. Sewing information into clothes. You can turn information into soft fibre now. You could have clothes that actually react to the environment that people are in. You remember those old science fiction films, where people had on their cuffs an adding machine, and we thought that looks really really hokey? Actually you can do that now. You can sew into clothes all sorts of parts of living.

*So you can sew into your scarf a mobile phone?*

Yes, and in fact one of the students had a lovely idea a few years ago of sewing a mobile phone into a glove. And what was nice about that was that each of the numbers was on a joint of a finger. And the microphone to speak into was in the palm of the hand. So you put your hand over your mouth when you were making a phone call. It was like Jane Austen meets digital technology. A wonderful idea, because it is good citizenship as well as being rather elegant design. I don't know if it will go into production.

Humanising technology is a big big issue for our students. Don't let the technology push us around. Let's bring the users into it. And let's bring delight back into everyday products, because it seems to have gone.

*Record number two?*



*The Band and Drums of the Royal Scots Greys.*

Record number two is my grandfather, Frederick Frayling. He was the professional bandmaster of the regiment the Royal Scots Greys. This was recorded in 1912; a selection from an operetta by Franz Lehar called Gypsy Love. This brings back my childhood extraordinarily.

[Selection from Gypsy Love by Franz Lehar, played by the Band of the Royal Scots Greys under Frederick Frayling. Recorded in 1912].

That was my castaway's grandfather F.W.Frayling conducting the Band of the Royal Scots Greys. You weren't around in 1912. It was obviously played to you as a boy? And there was great uncle Charlie who played the trombone?

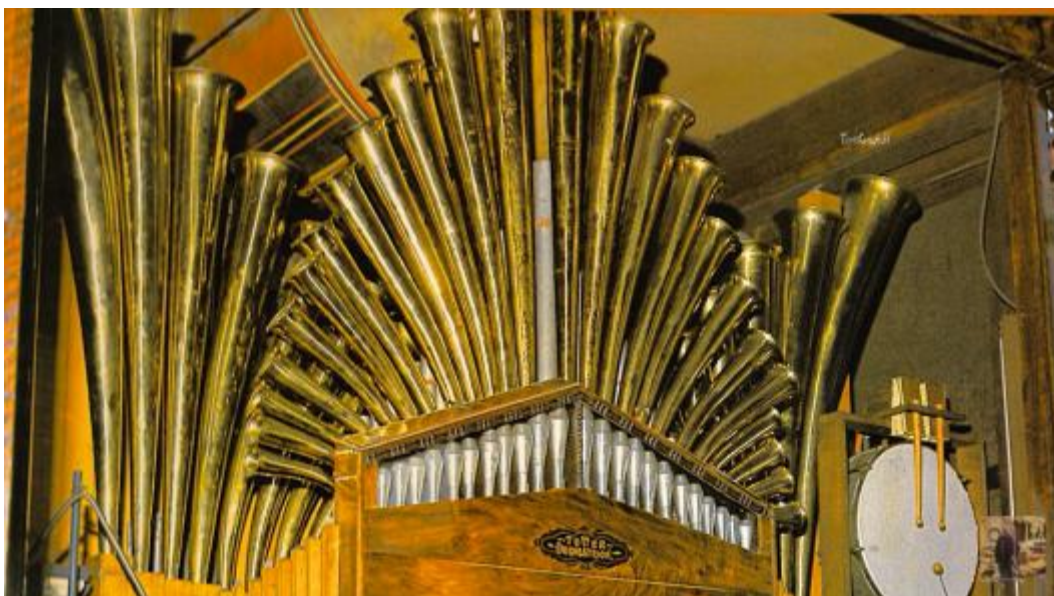
He played the trombone in the Scottish Orchestra, and also in the pit at the Glasgow Empire for Harry Lauder. In fact family folklore says that great uncle Charlie contributed to Harry Lauder's songs, but I'm not sure about that.

*Did your father love music?*

Yes, he loved music hall. He loved military music. Edinburgh Tattoo. Royal Tournament. The Guards' Chapel. And the pipes; he burst into tears when he heard the skirl of the pipes. Amazing Grace and all that. That was on one side of the family. The other side of the family was also musical. It was a German émigré family called Imhof. My great grandfather Daniel Imhof came over in 1848 to the German community of Bloomsbury and set up what became a record shop called Imhofs. People remember this shop from the 1950s. It was a very stylish record shop on New Oxford Street, just by the corner near the Dominion Theatre in London. It had wonderful Bauhaus graphics on its carrier bags. Chrome, and a very modernist interior. I remember this very well. It had a lot of imports you couldn't get anywhere else.

*So it was records?*

At that stage. They originally started off with musical boxes, automata, and orchestrions - mechanical musical instruments, early synthesisers. Then they moved into records.



*An Imhof and Mukle Orchestrion. The instrument was originally made in 1879 for the Blackpool aquarium at a cost of £3000. When the tower was erected in 1894 the orchestrion was installed in the tower buildings. The instrument is housed in a wooden case with glass panels and measures 13ft. high, 9ft. wide, and 6ft. deep. When the orchestrion fell into decline at Blackpool it was dismantled and taken to Birmingham Museum.*



*Crowds queuing for the Imhof sale in 1970.*

*So you would go there as a boy?*

Yes, I was allowed at Christmas time to make my selection of records. I think the serious artistic cultural side of my personality comes through the Imhofs.

*Your mother's side?*

Yes, whereas the kind of showman, communicator, comes from my father's side.

*But what happened to the shop? Because you might have been quite a rich businessman by now.*

Well, it didn't keep up with HMV down the street, and the chains. It was the old story. In fact Imhofs marketed the very first video machine in the mid sixties. Can you imagine that? They were hugely expensive. They were very good at avant garde marketing, and getting there first. They weren't awfully good at exploiting that situation and that's it. The old old story.

*You might also have had a different kind of business, because your father was in the fur trade; he had an auction house in the City?*



Yes, my father ended up as chairman of the Hudson's Bay Company in London. It was something I kept slightly quiet from the students in the 1970s, because animal rights and anti-fur. The 1970s was a time at the Royal College when the fashion show was actually flour-bombed because some of the students were wearing fur.



*Interior of Hudson's Bay House, the London headquarters of the Hudson's Bay Company. The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), chartered 2 May 1670, is the oldest incorporated joint-stock merchandising company in the English-speaking world. HBC was a fur trading business for most of its history, a past that is entwined with the colonization of British North America and the development of Canada.*

*The Independent described Arthur Frayling in its 1993 obituary by J.G.Links thus:*

*FOR MORE than 30 years the giant figure of Arthur Frayling dominated the European fur trade from the Hudson's Bay Company's warehouse and auction room in Garlick Hill, London. The London fur trade, a few warehouses clustered round St James's, Garlickhythe, had been there a very long time - well before its Livery Company, the Skinners, was chartered in 1327. In modern times it had become the international market for fur skins, Britain's second largest entrepot trade, although hardly any fur was produced here and relatively little consumed. This was a remarkable situation and one to which Frayling made a formidable contribution. He had joined the Hudson's Bay Company as a boy, returned to it after six years' war service, and became head of its London fur sales department in 1949.*

*The Hudson's Bay Company had by this time become one of the greatest in Canada but it was still British-owned and controlled from London. It was in order to find Canadian*

*fur (principally beaver, for gentlemen's hats) and sell the product in London, that the company had been chartered by Charles II in 1670. Selling fur was still its only activity outside North America but its auction sales had attracted buyers from many parts of the world.*

*It was Arthur Frayling's self-imposed mission to maintain and expand London's position as the international fur centre despite all the temptations the producers had to sell in their own countries. With no experience in the arts of negotiation, and with hardly any direction from above (the company had not a single full-time director), he had to persuade foreign governments and co-operative associations to consign their fur crops each year to London and then, by reliable sorting, cataloguing, and market forecasting, to induce buyers to venture far from home to bid for them. Often this involved 100,000 miles of travel in a year but somehow he gained and held the confidence of both seller and buyer.*

*Sue Lawley: Your father never suffered from the fur controversy?*

Oh he did. Latterly. Not in his career, really, because people didn't think like that in the 40s, 50s and 60s. It was the mark of everyone's ambition to own fur. This was the mark of affluence. Then in the 1970s as he came up to retirement he became the industry's spokesperson and was on a hiding to nothing. He appeared on TV and radio programmes defending fur against animal rights activists. And all you need is one slide of a seal, and you have lost. It got quite bad. He even had police protection for a time because he got threatening letters and phone calls. So he was in the eye of the storm towards the end.

*Record number three?*



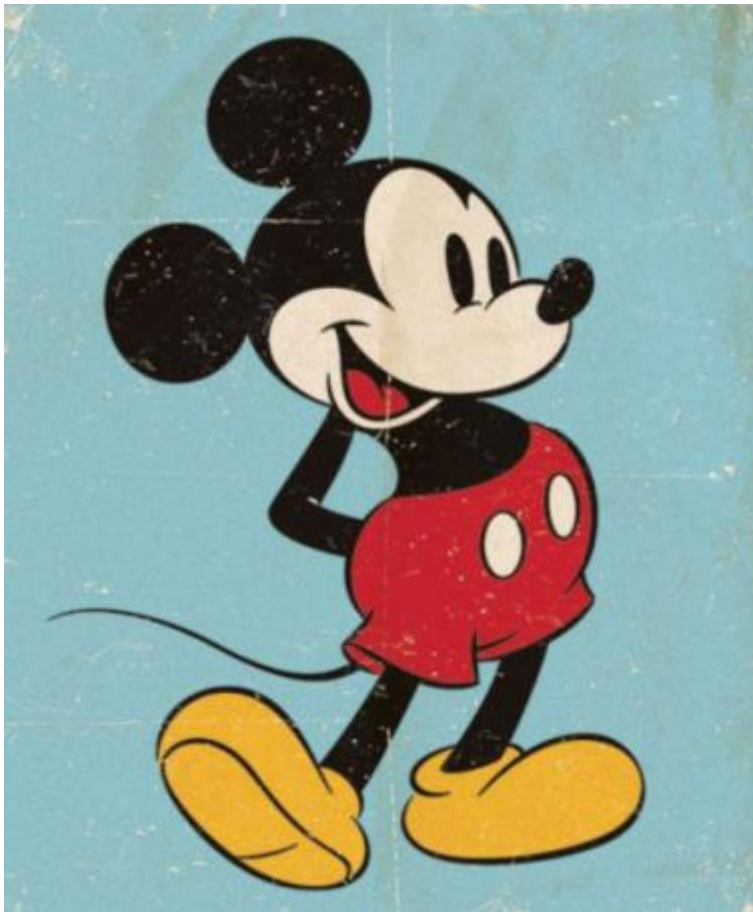
*Audrey Hepburn sings Moon River on the fire escape. From the 1961 film Breakfast at Tiffanys.*

Record number three is Moon River. But it has to be the version actually sung by Audrey Hepburn. She hasn't got the best voice in the world. But think of the scene in Breakfast at Tiffanys of 1961. A young writer is in an

apartment in New York on 71st Street. He looks out of his window and just below him, on the fire escape, is sitting this vision of Audrey Hepburn. Not in Givenchy for once, but just wearing jeans and a pullover, strumming on a guitar, singing Moon River. It stops his writer's block, it gets him going, and he writes this wonderful book. I'm with that!

[Moon River, sung by Audrey Hepburn. From the 1961 film Breakfast and Tiffanys.]

I wrote to her just before she died and explained that I was an admirer. I think she was deeply unimpressed, but she did agree to do an interview. Unfortunately she died before it could happen. I developed something of an obsession with Audrey Hepburn. I think you also did one of the very early interviews with Woody Allen, who was notoriously difficult to interview and unco-operative.



He made it very difficult. The BBC had tried to get an interview with Woody Allen for ages. Eventually I wrote on Royal College of Art headed notepaper, with the royal arms. I think he thought he was getting the OBE. Anyway, he agreed to do the interview, and it was very very sticky. The thing that actually brought us together was when I started talking about Minnie Mouse and her shoes. You know Minnie Mouse has these huge shoes and tiny little feet inside them. I've always been intrigued by that. It looks wonderful. And he said he had always been intrigued by that. There



aren't many of us around. And that unlocked the interview. I got his confidence by sharing that thought.

*Let's go back to your childhood. I do want to hear about your mother. She was obviously quite a lady. She won the RAC Rally?*

Yes, she did. In 1952. In those days rally driving was a very different thing from what it is today. It was a semi-amateur sport, with souped up cars - in her case an Allard. It was a large car with a V8 Cadillac engine. I grew up with this large car. We used to go on family holidays, with racing gear changes on the way to the boat at Dieppe. She took part in all the major rallies. I do remember being proud at school that everyone else's mum seemed to be what they then called a housewife. And my Mum wore a Biggles hat and drove Allards across the finishing line. That did make me proud.

*You'd have been what age when she was doing that?*

I was six. I was sent off to boarding school. Partly because my mother had other things to do. But also because my father travelled a lot. The Hudson's Bay Company took him to Canada for several months each year. He would visit fur farms all over the world, while my Mum did motoring. I think they felt that, a bit like the diplomatic service, shunt the children off to boarding school.

*And you called the matron Mummy?*

Yes I did. I had this dreadful moment where I was wandering around and there was the matron, and I said 'Mummy'. God, it's so Freudian.

*So do you think this parental deprivation did you lasting damage?*

It certainly made me rather embattled about life, which has helped me. It stokes me up. Going on crusades. Being against the grain sometimes, and fighting for causes that are different. Yes, I think it did stoke me up. It gave me a 'me against the world' attitude, which I still have to some extent.

*Record number four?*

Record number four is the Suite from the Threepenny Opera by Kurt Weil, but it has to be the version of 1928 conducted by Otto Klemperer, who was there at the very first performance. This for me is twenties Germany, it's jazz meets opera, it's incredibly evocative.

[Ballad of Mack the Knife from The Threepenny Opera by Kurt Weil.  
Played in 1928 by the State Opera Orchestra of Berlin, conducted by Otto Klemperer.]

Your visual imagination was fed by your mother's shop and by the cinema. And by the time you got to your public school Repton you were acting. You played Juliet?

I did. My great triumph was playing Juliet. Unfortunately I fell down the fire escape about three weeks before the performance and broke my leg, so if you can imagine doing the balcony scene with your leg in plaster. It was very very strange. I performed with James Fenton, actually, who subsequently became a great poet.

*Was he your Romeo?*

No, no. A different production, but I think we were both in drag. It was very strange.

*But from what I've read about you, the acting seems to have informed this business of your seeing performance from the inside. Appreciating the performer. Moving away from the academic analysis.*

Yes, I was very lucky to have a marvellous English master, called Michael Charlesworth. He emphasised not just dead texts but live performances. It transformed my attitude to learning



*Michael Charlesworth (left).*

*So, an exhibition to Cambridge. An early switch from law to history. Lots of drama, lots of writing for Varsity, the student newspaper. But all the time you were apparently destined for a job in advertising, if your father had anything to do with it?*

That's right. In those days, in the school magazine they had an article in which they asked the parents what their children were going to do. And for me it was advertising.

*But you shuddered at the thought?*

I did. Noone from my background had been to higher education before. I was the very very first. I went before my brother. My father was very worried that it would make me, as he put it, unemployable.

*He thought you had gone arty on him?*

Exactly right. I remember when I published my first book, which was in the early 70s, he looked at me and said 'I suppose you think you are Charles Dickens'. He was very suspicious of that, but actually he came round later in life and began to be quite proud of what I was doing. Although he would never tell me; he wasn't that sort of person. But he told lots of friends, who then phoned me and said 'Do you know what your father was saying about you?'. I wish he had told me direct!

*He was somebody who didn't like flannel, who didn't like what he called bullshit?*

That's right. When people used long words or jargon, or were trying to baffle you with science, he would bristle and say 'Come on, what do you really mean?'.  
*Are you your father's son when you walk around sometimes talking to some of your students? As we know, with a work of art it is possible to come out with all sorts of pretentious guff. Can you spot it a mile off?*

Oh gosh yes. I can. And I love cutting through it. I think part of the education of being at art school is putting your ideas over in a clear way - particularly with the designers. There's much too much obscurantism in that world. And I love cutting through it.

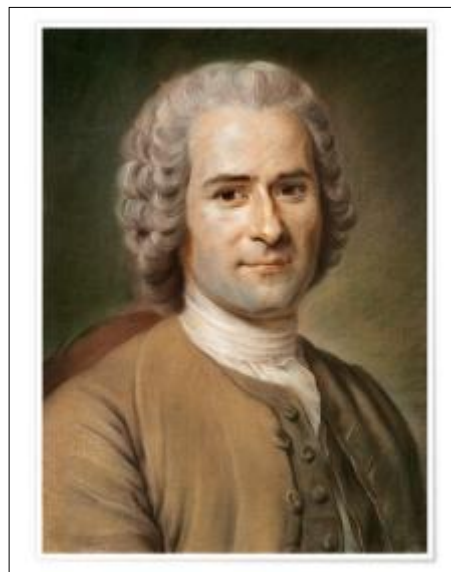
*Your father wouldn't have approved of that word obscurantism!*

Yes, it does slip out a bit! And of course one person's jargon is another person's technical language. But very often technical language isn't technical language; it's smokescreen covering woolly thinking.

*Simplicity is the most difficult thing of all?*

Yes it is. And it's partly because there were only three books in the house when I grew up, and one of them was Ruff's Guide to the Turf. In that sort of situation you deal with things directly.

*Record number five?*



This relates to when I was doing research just after I left being an undergraduate at Cambridge. I stayed in Cambridge for a few years being a research student, studying the Genevan Jean Jacques Rousseau (above). He was an interesting man. He was very direct. He wrote from the gut. He hated pretension. He was, so far as I know, the only political philosopher in history who actually wrote an opera. The very first song brings all that back to me.

[J'ai perdu tout mon Bonheur. From the opera Le Devin du Village by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.]

*You managed to duck advertising and you became a history man, an academic, in Exeter and in Bath. Then some years later you took on a post at the Royal College of Art - made to measure for you - as Professor of Cultural History. It was, in many ways still is, to cross that divide from academe into art education. What made you so sure it was the right thing for you?*

It was 1979. And at that stage it was very very rare for someone to go from mainstream university into art and design. An awful lot of people advised me not to. They said you're going into a jungle. They are mad, they are strange people. And there's also a snobbery again. One of my first meetings of the Vice Chancellor's committee, as it was then called, somebody came up to me and said 'Where do you work?'. I said the Royal College of Art. And he said 'Oh isn't that where they mend fuses?'. That was someone from Cambridge. It was one of those occasions where you think of a million things you could have said, just afterwards. There's a snobbery where there is an ivory tower where you study things, and a place where you make and do things. And the place where you make and do things is the tradesmen's entrance. I've spent a long long time trying to redress that.

*If art education is squeezed at one end, as you say, by a certain snobbery from the ivory tower, it is squeezed from the other, is it not, by industry who are often quite worried about employing students of art because they think they will be self indulgent or lacking focus?*

There's a terrible phrase in the educational jargon at the minute 'oven-ready students'. It's so dreadful. The idea being that if a student graduates from art school one day, the following morning turns up at an advertising agency, a graphics agency, a car company, and is absolutely ready. Of course in any culture nobody is going to arrive on the doorstep the first day and be 'oven-ready'.

*Are they going to think that someone who studied history or mathematics might be more focused, more disciplined?*

You've got to have people who push the story on. And they push it on in their own way. So the more creative they can become. They are never again

going to have this opportunity to free form. So this is the two years when they can really really fire on all cylinders, and then learn to adapt it and use it.

*What about those who don't go into industry. Those who do end up attempting to make a living by their art alone? I would have thought these days there's more possibility of that happening. I mean there's a great lifestyle demand?*

When I arrived at the Royal College there was an aggressive thing that artists should not be collectable. They produced things that were all about being an artist and being angry about collectors, and smash capitalism and all that. They were determined not to be bought by anybody. Now there's an active market. There are all sorts of patrons, like Saatchi, like the Tate Modern.

*But them apart, I would have thought it would be easier to set up?*

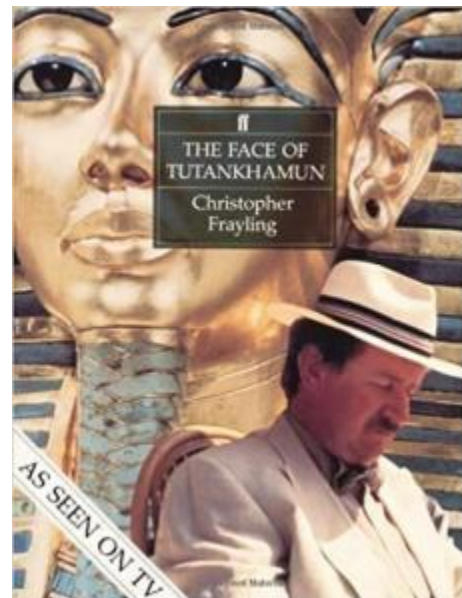
Yes it is. We did a survey of our fine art graduates a couple of years ago. 90% percent of them, on leaving, got work as artists in the subjects they had studied, and managed to sustain a living. Which is a remarkable statistic. And that's great, because that confidence comes over into the students. They feel wanted. They feel there is a world they can go into. It's a lottery with fine art. You can never be sure who is going to take you up. But it's an exciting lottery, and a very vibrant one at the moment.

*Next piece of music?*

My next piece of music is the title music from a TV series I did in 1992 called The Face of Tutankhamun. It still sends shivers up and down my spine. It was a great opening to the series, and it brings back all the fun of making that programme, indeed all the other programmes I have done.

[Title music from The Face of Tutankhamun, by Howard Davidson.]

*That's just one of many of your television programmes: antiquities, advertising, religion in the middle ages, horror films, mostly made in the 1990s. Some such programmes are made now, but not so many on mainstream television. What is put out are these lifestyle programmes, and of course these makeover are all about design. You must love them!*



Well I should, but I don't. They are about design, doing up your room, doing up your garden, doing up your kitchen. But it's all superficial makeovers. The Zen mediation area this weekend, then we'll change it into something else. I don't want to sound too solemn about it, but the trouble is that it has a rather superficial notion of design as style, as makeover. When I think it's actually a bit more important than that. It's about how things work, it's about manufacturing, it's about production. It's about everyday objects which function. Do you want a light switch designed by Lawrence Llewellyn-Bowen? I doubt it. Some of the programmes touch it, but it's mostly about encouraging people to buy things.

*But it's also for people who are interested in it. It's popular culture? It's what people like to do. To go to their do-it-yourself store and the to indulge in a little bit of artistic creation and design themselves at the weekend?*

I think that's fine. But I just think there is too much of it. It is clogging up the mid-evening. That and reality television, as it is called, are clogging up the mid-evening slots. When I did the Face of Tut it went out at 8pm on BBC2. When I did Nightmare: The Birth of Horror it went on BBC1 at a reasonable hour, before the witching hour. And the medieval series was 6pm on a Saturday.

*But would those appeal to the kind of audiences who like a makeover programme?*

I like to think they would. I think it's a question of variety. What I don't like is ghettoising the arts onto a channel that is labelled Arts. So let's shove it onto BBC4 when only three people watch it.

*How would you put across important design on mainstream television which by definition has nowadays to bring in those big audiences?*

Well I think one way of doing it would be solving everyday problems. You would say what object really really irritates you. Everyone has an object that irritates the hell out of them in their everyday life. The door doesn't open properly. Tiny things. I think that is a good way into design. Because it makes it everyday. But it is also a serious question because some of these things need re-designing and the re-designs have an important impact on our society.

*Record number seven?*

Record number seven is a piece of music by the Italian composer Ennio Morricone. It's the final sequence from The Good the Bad and the Ugly, the spaghetti western made in 1967. And if you can imagine, you are in the middle of the dusty Spanish desert. There are three men standing there staring at each other. In fact I called this sequence an opera in which the arias are not sung, they are stared. It's a three way duel. A triello, not a



duello. And this is the music on a triumphant Mariachi trumpet which accompanies that confrontation.

[Triello by Ennio Morricone, from the film *The Good the Bad and the Ugly* directed by Sergio Leone and starring Clint Eastwood.]



*Clint Eastwood in Sergio Leone's 1967 film *The Good the Bad and the Ugly*.*

*We are about to send you off to this desert island. I know you were godfather to the Faith Zone in the Millennium Dome, so do we infer from that you are a religious man?*

I am a seeker. The spiritual side of life is very important, and many people in an art environment feel the same thing. There is more to life than just the material.

*The spiritual Frayling would probably be fine on a desert island. The intellectual Frayling would go bonkers, wouldn't he?*

I think I would enjoy the solitude for a year or two, to reflect on what I have been up to in relative tranquillity. I think I would enjoy that for a year or two.

*But if in the end it became obvious that you weren't ever going to escape how do you think you could accept that philosophically?*

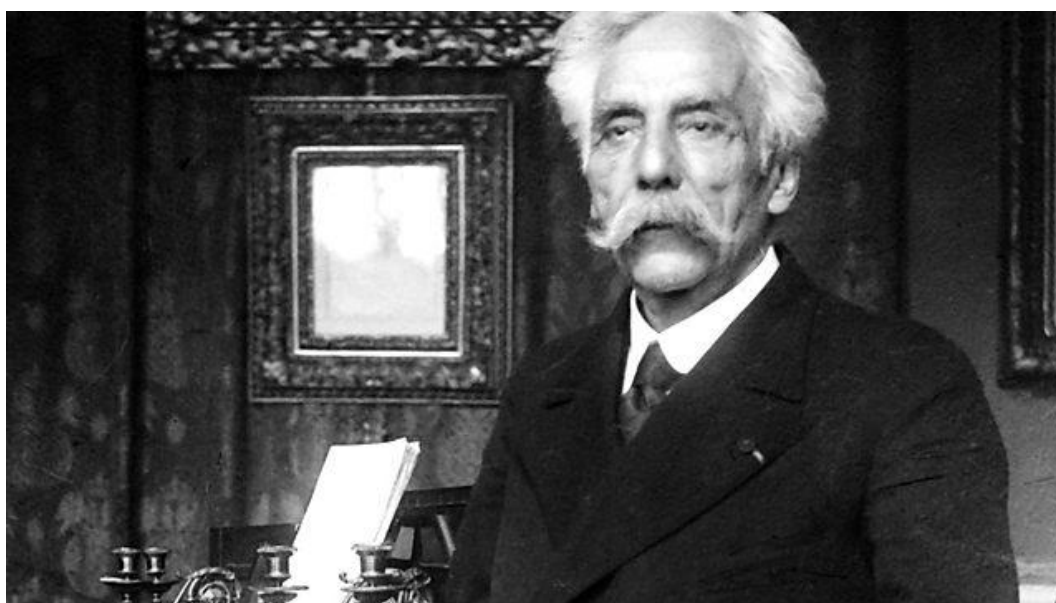
That would be moment at which you would start asking the really big questions. Questions that perhaps in the helter skelter of life you don't have time to ask. I would rather appreciate that. But I would build a boat. I rather fancy myself as a boat builder. I'm quite a good fisherman, and I think I would be able to make a boat. I don't think I could make a very good house, but I could make a boat. So a little time for reflection but they get the hell out and get myself back into culture as quickly as I can really!



*Your last record?*

My last record is a piece of Gabriel Fauré, *Cantique de Jean Racine*. I hear this at a memorial service for a friend of mine a couple of years ago, and it completely blew my head off. Music is so often to do with the frame of mind you are in when you first hear it. It just washed all over me, and it means a lot to me, this piece of music.

[*Cantique de Jean Racine*, by Gabriel Fauré.]



*Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924).*

*And if you could only take one of those records, which would it be?*

It would have to be the music from *The Good the Bad and the Ugly* by Ennio Morricone. If I was beginning to despair that mariachi trumpet would fire me up and I could get going again!

*And your book? As you know we give you the Bible and the complete works of Shakespeare.*

I would take *Don Quixote* by Cervantes. The relationship between Sancho Panza and Don Quixote is for me moving, amusing, and says a lot about me actually. Here's this popular culture man, Sancho Panza, who is rather coarse. He belches. He rides around on his donkey. He uses bad language sometimes. And the Don is the chivalric character. And the relationship between the two is just wonderful, and I would love to have the opportunity to re-read all of that.

*And your luxury?*

I wonder if I am going to be allowed this. I would like to take the Victoria and Albert Museum. It would stimulate me hugely. I could sort out the signage system. The thing about the V&A is that it is very difficult to find

your way around the building. I could sit on the desert island working out the signage. I would love to have the V&A if that is allowed. But I would promise not to use it as shelter.

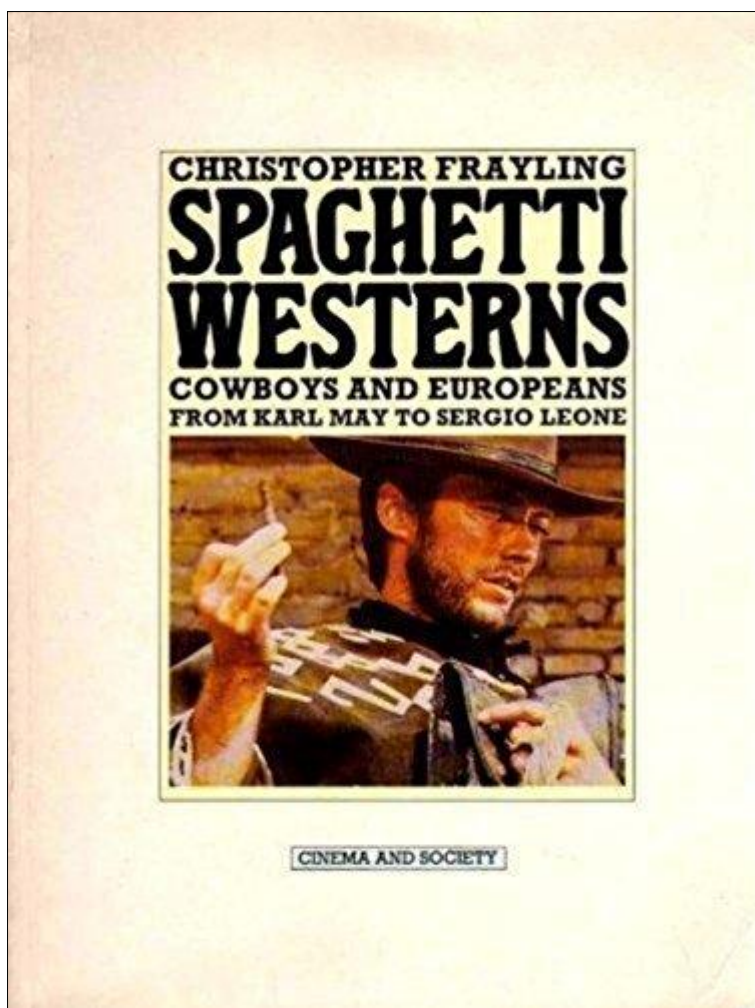
*It's a deal. So, Christopher Frayling, thank you very much indeed for letting us hear your desert island discs.*



*The Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, London.*

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## 4. Books



Books by Christopher Frayling:

### **Literature**

Napoleon Wrote Fiction (1972)

Vampyres: Lord Byron to Count Dracula (1978, revised 1992)

Nightmare: Birth of Horror (1996)

The Yellow Peril – Dr Fu Manchu and the Rise of Chinophobia (2014)

Inside the Bloody Chamber: on Angela Carter, the Gothic and other weird tales (2015)

### **History**

The Face of Tutankhamun (1992)

Strange Landscape: Journey Through the Middle Ages (1995)

### **Film**

Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone (1981)

American Westerners (1984)  
Clint Eastwood (1992)  
Things to Come (1995)  
Sergio Leone: Something To Do With Death (2000)  
Mad, Bad and Dangerous?: The Scientist and the Cinema (2005)  
Sergio Leone: Once Upon a Time in Italy (2005)  
Once Upon a Time in The West Shooting a Masterpiece (2019)

### **Design**

Ken Adam: The Art of Production Design (2005)  
On Craftsmanship: towards a new Bauhaus (2011)

### **Education**

The Royal College of Art: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Art and Design  
(1987)  
Design of the Times: One Hundred Years of the Royal College of Art  
(1996)  
The Art Pack (1998)

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