Greenaway's suitcase cinema and new media archaeology

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Abstract

Although Peter Greenaway has long been celebrated as a godfather to new media cinema, his Tulse Luper Suitcases *project suggests that he brings more ambivalence to the library potentials of digital cinema than is commonly recognized. In his recent experiments with digital storytelling, we see Greenaway using new media to describe the boundaries, limits and choices that remain central to cinema in the new millennium.*

For more than a decade now, Peter Greenaway has been sounding the death knell of cinema. In 1997, he proclaimed:

> I think we've seen an incredibly moribund cinema in the last 30 years. In a sense Godard destroyed everything . . . he broke cinema all apart, fragmented it, made it very, very self-conscious. Like all the aesthetic movements, it's basically lasted . . . three generations: the grandfather who organized everything, the father who basically consolidated it and the young guy who chucks it all away.
>
> (Hawthorne 1997)

Of course, in 1997 such apocalyptic pronouncements were very much in fashion, and careers were made proclaiming the death of film at the hands of New Media – digital modes of production, distribution and exhibition; the personal computer as the new vertical monopoly. And so it was not surprising that when new media theorists began to seek out a genealogy for their visions of the future, Greenaway was identified as spiritual godfather to post-cinema.

For Lev Manovich and others, the 'end of cinema' promises liberation from the tyranny of narrative, the liberation of the database, which for a century now cinema has worked to obscure behind its narrative scaffolding. Finally audiences would have access to the non-hierarchical repository of images, sounds and text that is the raw materials over which cinema has imposed arbitrary sequence. The cost of narrative has thus been the denial of the agency of the spectator and the end of the possibilities of a truly 'interactive' cinema between filmmaker and end user. For many film scholars today, therefore, the emergence of digital filmmaking is ultimately less

about the development of a radically new (or post-) cinema than it is about the recovery of the lost potential of the earliest cinema, a 'pure cinema' which, as Anne Friedberg puts it, empowered the 'mobilized virtual gaze' of the spectator before it was forced 'underground' by the rise of narrative film after 1907 (Friedberg 1993: 89). By this typology cinema was a new media born too soon, awaiting the computer to unleash its true form.

By this account, Greenaway serves as a prophet for this long-overdue millennial project: '"wrap[ping]" a minimal narrative around a database' we are at last able to envision the database as the 'new symbolic form of the computer age' (Manovich 2001: 238, 219). As Holly Willis puts it, Greenaway makes narrative essentially either pointless, excessive or impossible, forcing the viewer to instead take recourse in the pleasures of 'database narrative', 'underscoring the processes of selection and combination' (Willis 2005: 41). His experiments with arbitrary systems of categorization (numbers, colours, alphabetization) have long highlighted the ways in which film is always already a database form costumed with the frippery of narrative. And Greenaway himself spent much of the 1990s seemingly encouraging those who would put him in the role of prophet to the digital messiah. Greenaway's public exhibitions in the 1990s – '100 Objects to Represent the World' and the 'The Stairs: Munich Projection' – explicitly explore what we now identify as a database aesthetic. And in countless interviews, Greenaway celebrated 'the whole digital revolution' for, 'after a hundred years of this prologue to cinema', paving the way for 'at last being able to make pure cinema' (Cody 1995). A 'pure cinema' in all these accounts is a cinema that affords all the freedoms and possibilities that (impure) narrative cinema has denied – providing the viewer with the raw materials and inviting her to serve as co-creator of the meanings of the film text; as Herbert Klein describes it in an account, of Greenaway's earliest digital experiments: 'The result of this ["(digital) Paint Box"] technique is thus not arbitrariness but the necessity of individual choice in the conferral of meaning' (Klein 1996).

And indeed these seem to be the principles governing Greenaway's major twenty-first century project as well, the ongoing *Tulse Luper Suitcases.* The conceit of the project is that Luper, a 'professional prisoner', has left 92 suitcases scattered across the globe, each containing collections designed to represent the world. *Tulse Luper* is multimedia project which at its most ambitious seeks to distribute itself across feature films, exhibitions, books, 92 cd-roms, websites, video games and more. Here Greenaway seems to foreground precisely the ways in which filmmaking is a database form in disguise, putting on display some of the larger data set from which the 'final' 'narrative' is drawn: casting sessions, multiple takes, scripts, archives, sketches (see Figure 1).

Yet, even as Greenaway's work intersects in many ways with that of new media theorists and filmmakers who have embraced him, Greenaway's *Tulse Luper*, like his earlier work, highlights choices, selection and limits. Far from a cinema of freedom and infinite plentitude, Greenaway's is a

Figure 1: From Tulse Luper Suitcases, Episode I: Moab Story *(2003).*

cinema about choices, but also about limits – about what contains possibilities as much as about what unleashes them.

Especially telling here is Greenaway's contribution to *Lumière et compagnie/Lumiere and Company* (1995), a project in which 40 directors were asked to use the Lumière brothers' original equipment in celebration of the 100th anniversary of their cinematographe. Greenaway's contribution was one of the only ones which was edited from multiple shots, instead of from one continuous take as the brothers themselves had filmed their subjects. As the short film progresses, we see the years of cinema's century passing by, compressed into the constraints of the 52 seconds that the rules of the project allowed, as the film offers us three different shots of a nude male figure seated against a dark backdrop. Framing the short film is a shot of the apparatus itself, equipment that could fit into a suitcase, allowing a mobility that the studio system would soon make unimaginable (Figure 2). As Erik Barnouw reminds us, the *cinématographe* was revolutionary most prominently for its compactness and 'could be carried as easily as a small suitcase . . . It was an ideal instrument for catching life on the run—"sur le vif"', as Lumière put it' (Barnouw 1993: 6).

But Greenaway does not take the Lumière suitcase cinema – which could be adapted with a few minor adjustments to serve as both camera, lab, and projector – to celebrate mobility or to perform the 'parallax historiography' of the productive relations between the lost possibilities of cinema's origins and the brave new world of digital media's future (Russell 2002). Instead, the suitcase apparatus sits there as inert as does the nude man (and the film history) it would describe in 52 seconds. And as if to underscore the point, Greenaway closes the frame on his own version of 'parallax historiography' not with a celebration of the limitless possibilities still to be uncovered but with another declaration of the living-death of cinema: 'there's a lot of evidence already that it is dying on its feet', he intones. The subject of his contribution to *Lumière et compagnie*, far from
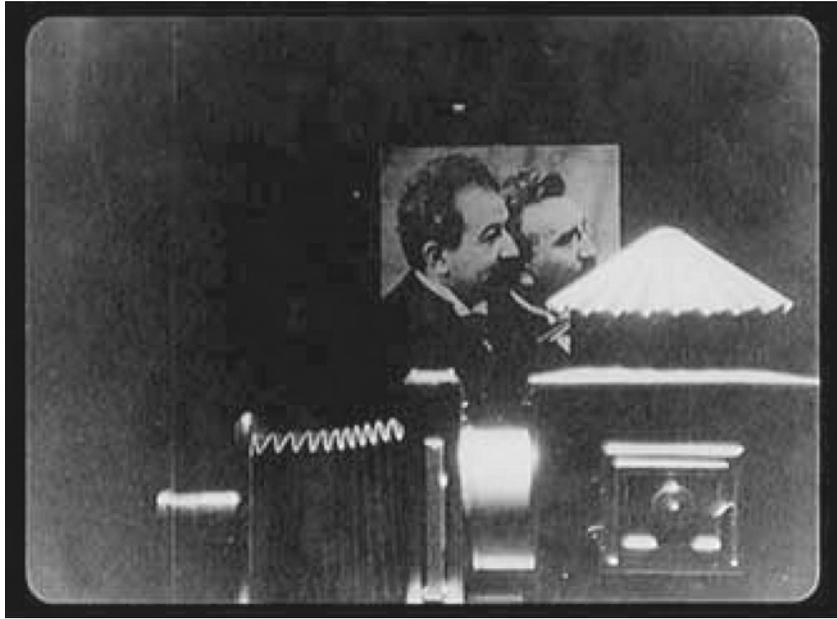
Figure 2: From Lumière et compaigne *(1995).*

representing an alternative to this mortal exhaustion, is himself unable to even stand. There is no new life, new energy to be found in the Lumière brothers' suitcase apparatus: what there is instead is the mortal body – human and cinema itself – and an apparatus that can as easily serve for coffin as for a cradle.

Thus, I would argue, there are reasons to question the close affinities between the new media utopianists and the work of Peter Greenaway. Greenaway's digital cinema is always about limits. If his work has strong affinities to the 'database aesthetic' celebrated by Manovich and others, it refuses to approach the database as a site of freedom and rebirth. Database cinema for Greenaway is different from narrative cinema only insofar as it foregrounds the losses and limits traditional cinema would obscure. In these terms the Suitcase – perhaps borrowed from the Lumière brothers' apparatus itself – and not the Database has become Greenaway's central figure for his own preoccupations with the non-narrative pleasures of data and collecting. For unlike the database metaphor, which suggests in our digital age an infinite elasticity and plentitude, the suitcase is always about *limits* – about what has to be left behind.

Instead of a prophet of new media liberation, therefore, we might reconceive Greenaway as closer to Jane Eyre, pleading to be released into a new servitude. For even as Greenaway has been railing against cinema's 'four tyrannies' – story, frame, actor and camera – he does not share with many of his followers the faith that new media will set us free. But he returns, again and again, to cinema *and* to narrative, never expressing any overwhelming desire to *be* free. Like his alter ego, Tulse Luper, Greenaway has spent a lifetime of making an art out of imprisonment. For all the

different jobs Luper holds, he has finally two true callings – prisoner and collector. And as we learn in *The Tulse Luper Suitcases, Part 1: The Moab Story* (2003), Luper discovered both of his callings simultaneously, during his first imprisonment at the hands of his father. Here, locked up in a coal shed, he begins his first collection: a suitcase of coal, miniaturized landscapes that he would visit in the course of his 20th century adventures. It is in this challenging but productive connection between imprisonment and collecting that the new media work of Greenaway's late career comes to light.

'I don't think that cinema is a very good narrative medium', Greenaway has declared, describing himself as 'basically a clerk, a cataloguer' (Hawthorne 1997). It is in almost identical terms that he describes Luper. But despite such declarations, Greenaway tells stories, almost compulsively, in his films. More recently, Greenaway has been explaining this seemingly irrational compulsion by comparing himself to Scheherazade, who presides over the Tulse Luper project as a kind of muse. Like Scheherazade, Greenaway must keep telling stories or die, even if the stories serve no end other than to forestall execution. But of course the *Arabian Nights* is *not* infinite: it is a fixed sentence – 1001 stories. A new media database, on the other hand, is by definition theoretically limitless: new data can be added, sorted and accessed in infinite ways. The fantasy of the database is ultimately the fantasy of infinite networking, mobility, growth, freedom. As Heidi Peeters usefully describes the multimedia nature of the Luper project, 'What is most striking is . . . not the sheer diversity of media involved in the project, but their compatibility in turning the Luper myth taking shape through the network into a coherent yet dispersed whole' (Peeters 2005). In these terms, Greenaway's own enumerated catalogues (100 objects, 92 suitcases, 19 million victims of the Violent Unexplained Event) share the new media principles of access and non-hierarchical arrangement. But the figure of the suitcase is always there to remind us that access will be limited, and recovery ultimately impossible.

It is useful to recall the origins of Tulse Luper, emerging in the 1970s, as Greenaway was leaving behind his early life as both painter and government bureaucrat. In *A Walk through H* (1978) an unnamed scholar struggles to find his way through an archive of impossible maps given to him by Tulse Luper. In *Vertical Features Remake* (1978), a team of researchers at the Institute of Research and Reclamation struggles to reconstruct a lost Luper film – even as they recognize that Luper might well be a figment of their collective imagination – an excuse to collect, systematize and remake unmade movies. Luper also plays an important role in Greenaway's first feature-length film, *The Falls* (1980), a 'mockumentary' produced by a commission seeking to record each of the 19 million lives effected by the 'Violent Unknown Event', or VUE. But of course, as the filmmakers acknowledge, such an endeavour would by necessity 'mock human effort' and so an arbitrary system is arrived at whereby a representative cross-section of 92 can be made to stand, synecdochally, for the millions. Alphabetization proves as good a solution as any, not because of its ability

to order, but because of its arbitrariness – juxtaposing unlike stories through the accident of 92 individuals whose names all begin with 'FALL'. Despite such arbitrariness, one recurring note does emerge across these 92 collected stories: the name of the mysterious 'Tulse Luper'.

Interestingly, as Greenaway moved towards a more conventional narrative cinema in the 1980s, Luper seemed to disappear. But Luper's obsessions did not: collection, filing, gameplaying – non-narrative ways of knowing the world. Over and again, these films of the 1980s tell the story of the inevitable failures of all non-narrative systems to win out over the narratives of others. The objectivism of the Draughtsman's system for viewing the world in *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), the rationalism of the Deuce brother's scientific study of death and decomposition in *Zed and Two Naughts* (1985), even the decidedly ludic systems of the coroner and his son in *Drowning by Numbers* (1988) – in each case, the narratives of others (aristocrats, nature, the three Cissy Colpitts) triumph over all attempts to engage the world through system and collection.

But in Greenaway's twenty-first-century work, Tulse Luper has re-emerged at the centre of his most elaborate project – one that appears at first glance determined to redeem the 'failings' of his earlier system-makers, to re-package them within a larger structure so intricate and dispersed that conventional narrative cannot hope to win out. The project is centrally organized around the metaphor of the suitcase, a suitcase containing still more suitcases, an image used repeatedly on the related websites Greenaway and his collaborators have developed. The premise is that Luper has left behind suitcases which are now the study of researchers seeking to reconstruct his life – and with it the twentieth century he both inhabited and represented. And in returning to his own early career as the stuff of these suitcases, Greenaway is in a sense turning to new media not to leave film behind, but to repack it, redistribute it, make it newly *playable* for audiences. Clips and fragments from Greenaway/Luper's earlier films are redeployed throughout the project. For example, at one point Luper identifies explicitly with the snails who triumph at the end of *Z&OO*, with the ideal of carrying one's own suitcase, and one's own prison, at all times.

Understood in these terms, we might see Greenaway's Tulse Luper project as a new media version of Marcel Duchamp's suitcase, his 'Box in a Valise', a miniaturized and repacked version of his life's work. Like Greenaway, in his late career Duchamp had reason to be concerned as to the future reception of his work and sought to repackage it in a suitcase (see also Elliott and Purdy 2005). His growing despair about the future of his work had to do with both growing doubts about the art world and about the world in general, as Duchamp found himself a refugee from the war. As he said in 1954, 'all my work, literally and figuratively, fits into a valise' (quoted in Judovitz 2005). Like Duchamp more than a half-century earlier, Greenaway finds himself ever more alienated from the cinema and from his home country. Despite being routinely acknowledged as one of the great auteurs of the contemporary cinema, Greenaway certainly has

reason to wonder about the future reception of his work. In the digital age, only a small percentage of his major works are currently in print on DVD in the United States; the situation is only moderately better in the United Kingdom.

Like Duchamp's valise, then, *Tulse Luper*'s suitcase works to contain the career – not as a refined museum piece, but as an object for collection, circulation, tourism and rearrangement. In his most grand visions of the Luper project, Greenaway imagines it 'as an apparatus to make a review of all of my work: about 400 films . . . . There are references to practically everything I've ever made' (Badt 2004/2005: 55). His fantasy is that the ultimate presentation of the film would allow viewers to move through the films, to take them apart, put them back together. In these terms, as he describes it, the three *Tulse Luper* feature films are only 'the beginning of a [larger] DVD apparatus, in which can circulate all the other material' (Greenaway 2002).

As Greenaway will acknowledge, the experience of watching his films is often visually exhausting, and for this reason he imagines that 'the DVD [was] invented just for me. It is such an extraordinary medium that I can cope with all this encyclopedic material in a way that I can get the audiences to enter it and leave it.' The DVD opens up the possibility for 'ambulatory movies' (Greenaway 2001), 'a privatized, comparatively inexpensive means of distribution and access' (Greenaway 2002) – not a mass distribution, but self-selecting digital *salons*. The DVD could allow increasingly balkanized audiences to find their own cinema objects outside of mainstream distribution, which has been decidedly unkind to Greenaway in recent years. The fantasy is to have 92 DVD suitcases 'to pack and unpack', as the mood strikes – finished films that are simultaneously the stuff for new collections, new suitcases.

But of course, in addition to a return to Greenaway's own origins, the suitcase is meant to reference as well the earliest cinema, most especially the Lumiere brothers. As mentioned earlier, Greenaway was thinking a lot about Lumiere as he began planning the Suitcases project, both in the Munich Stairs Projection and in his contribution to *Lumiere and Company*, where he had the opportunity to use *their* suitcase apparatus. For all Greenaway has decried the failures of film, he is one of its most attentive historians, seeking out the lost possibilities of early film and the pleasures and intelligences of its earliest audiences. As film theorists have attempted in recent years to imagine those early film audiences, they have turned to metaphors of mobility and engagement that summon a very different image than the pacified and paralyzed victims of the apparatus that dominated a half-century of film theory. Guilliana Bruno, for example, turns to the new species of Tourist in attempting to recover a 'genealogical "architectonics" of film . . . for viewing, perusing, and wandering about' (Bruno 1997: 17); Friedberg, of course, turns to the Shopper as the bearer of the 'mobilized virtual gaze.' Although acknowledging the presiding spirit of Baudelaire's flaneur, for both Bruno and Friedberg the lost film user is no

Figure 3: From L'arrivée d'un train à la Ciotat *(1895).*

gentleman stroller, hands idly clasped behind his back. Instead he always has bag in hand. And here we might think of the travellers in Lumiere's station in *L'Arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat* (1896), who cradle their valises and return our gaze, unabashed (Figure 3); or *Arrivée des congressistes à Neuville-sur-Saône* (1895), where the attendees of a photographers' congress disembark a riverboat, all carrying suitcases and cameras and returning the gaze of the *cinematographe* with keen fascination. (Indeed, the subjects of this latter film were also its first audience, as the brothers showed off the remarkable abilities of their suitcase apparatus to serve simultaneously as camera, lab, and theatre by projecting the film that evening.)

In this return to origins, then, Greenaway does invoke the freedom and mobility of the earliest films and film audiences as a kind of ideal for the new media age. But his new media suitcase is already laden with other burdens that cannot, and should not, be discarded. For if Greenaway's suitcase invokes these earliest cinematic travellers, it reminds us as well of travellers boarding other trains decades after Lumiere's train left the station, a history to which *Tulse Luper* alludes in Luper's many imprisonments at the hands of fascists of all shapes and sizes. Art Spiegelman has suggested that he learned his ability to pack the frames of his comics panels from his father, an Auschwitz survivor, who taught him how to fit as much as possible into a suitcase and warned him 'to always keep my bags packed' (Spiegelman 2004). The abandoned suitcase is a symbol centrally associated with the concentration camps, with genocide, with the one-way voyage, and it is for this reason that the Auschwitz museum

collects and exhibits such suitcases as a memorial to the lives interrupted. In Luper's case, his suitcases are both the cause of his imprisonment (he is arrested time and again for mysterious contents of his suitcase) and his most potent weapon against the fascists. The fascists seek methodically to discover the true meaning of his collections and lists by setting an army of typists to work transcribing them – efforts which, in *Moab Story*, literally drive the Nazi Station Master mad.

And this brings us to the other aspect of the suitcase which is vital to understanding its multiple meanings in Greenaway's late work. In addition to serving as a libratory figure for the earliest filmmakers and audiences and as a tragic memorial for the victims of twentieth-century fascism, the suitcase also serves a more epistemological function in *Tulse Luper*. After all, as the Station Master's experience demonstrates, making sense of another's suitcase is by definition an impossible task, even with less ambitious packers than Luper. It is hard here not to think of the suitcase the soldiers bring home from the war in Godard's *Les Carabiniers/The Carabineers* (1963), whose plundered loot – picture postcards – proves utterly mystifying to their wives. Or, more recently, in Agnes Varda's *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse/The Gleaners and I* (2000), where the filmmaker, returning from her travels, encounters her own suitcase as an alien and mystifying collection compiled by the different self she was abroad. Greenaway means similarly for us to think of our own packings, our own decisions as to what to take with us on our trip and what to forgo – and, on the other end of our travels, what souvenirs to bring home. The suitcase is always about limits: size, weight and never more so than in our post-9/11 world where the suitcase has been re-imagined as an object of terror: suitcase bombs, suitcase nukes.

For all of these reasons, Greenaway's suitcase cinema must be differentiated from the idealized new media database just as surely as it is from the traditional narrative film. The suitcase announces its limits, its unrecoverable, personal choices; it foregrounds precisely the questions that Hollywood cinema has spent a century training us *not* to ask, and the question which a utopian vision of database cinema promises, through its theoretical plentitude and interactivity, we will not need ask in the future: Why these objects? Why this arrangement? Greenaway's suitcase cinema requires the viewer to come to the film as a researcher of impossible questions, like Greenaway's first cinematic researchers in the 1970s of the mysterious life of Tulse Luper – studying not only what is there, but imaginatively filling in all that is lost, abandoned or rejected. And like all systems of knowledge, what is reconstructed is ultimately the story about the Researcher, not the Subject.

In the ongoing online game developed as one of the components of the larger *Tulse Luper* project, Greenaway and his collaborators invite users to become Tulse Luper Researchers, to collect, through the completion of various puzzles, games and challenges, fragments of a larger film, pieces of a lost puzzle. The promise of course is of a coherent whole, but in the end it is but another suitcase full of objects, another collection – not a key, but

a supplement to a body not-yet recovered. The game is an invitation to new acts of collection and exchange, and in fact, completing all the puzzles still leaves the user with many missing pieces that must be earned through exchange, pleading and scavenging. In truth, it is not at all clear that the game *can* be completed, which is no doubt as intended, as the frustrations send the players out into the internet searching for clues, promises, new collections.

Walter Benjamin describes the Collector as redeeming objects by rescuing them from their 'functional relations', allowing them to stand in for the World (Benjamin 1999: 207). But it is not an order that can be reconstructed for any but the Collector himself: to the outsider, the logic of the arrangement must remain forever an 'incomprehensible connection'. It is only in 'the liberation of things from the drudgery of being useful' and the transcending of rational organization for the inspiration that comes once objects can speak not their utility but their unproductive volumes that the collection comes alive. As he put it in the *Arcades Project*, the collector is motivated by 'the confusion, the scatter, in which the things of the world are found' (Benjamin 1999: 211). But the response is not to make order of the world, but to select a segment of it and know those objects so completely that they might, like Proust's madeleines, summon worlds of memory and knowledge.

If we learn at the end of the three *Tulse Luper* films that Luper is in fact a fiction, the projection of his childhood friend, Knockavelli, guilty over the tragic collapse of a garden wall, such knowledge should not dissuade our future researches into Luper's life any more than the knowledge that the online game cannot be finished should dissuade our attempting to solve its puzzles. Instead we are encouraged to embrace Luper as the only worthwhile object of research, as the Institute of Research and Reclamation had first insisted thirty years ago. He is the patron saint of collectors, and himself a suitcase into which we can store the objects that can truly 'stand in for the World'.

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