Packing up the Past, Packing for the Future A Personal Response to
Tulse Luper Suitcases

Zoe Constantinides

Zoë Constantinides offers a personal (and anxious) response to Peter Greenaway's spacious *Tulse Luper Suitcases*. Her elegant and thoughtful analysis of Greenaway's unrestrained intertextual project struggles to come to terms with unanswerable questions of anxiety, megalomania, and (begrudgingly) post-modernity itself.

There's something seductive about megalomaniacs. Perhaps it's their total faith in their own vision, perhaps it's their seemingly unfettered access to the means to realize that vision. Mostly, I think, it's their sanctioned disregard for others. So I was seduced by the prospect of attending a screening of Peter Greenaway's *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* (2003-2004,) a seven-hour cinematic instalment of the proposed multimedia opus, The Tulse Luper Network. The expansive project smacked of tantalizing hubris.

Like Greenaway's earlier epic experiment, *The Falls* (1980), *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* is a film for the anxious soul. Anxiety, like visceral fear, can be an enjoyable experience under controlled conditions. These two films offer a little glimpse into the murky recesses of the psyche, where a repertoire of expectations waits to be processed and alternately fulfilled or unfulfilled [1].

In *The Falls*, the slow unravelling of the film's closed hermeneutic system gives the viewer an opportunity to binge and purge on all life's questions that will never be answered. With testimony and clues from 92 biographies, the viewer still can't help but fail to solve the film's central mystery: what is the VUE (Violent Unknown Event) that has afflicted 19 million people with a variety of bizarre symptoms? Tulse Luper's 92 suitcases will similarly renege on their promise to reveal the secrets of our hero's life. But *The Falls* provides reassurance that is very much lacking from *Suitcases*: the world of ornithology and directories is ruled by stable systems. Numeric, alphabetical, taxonomic systems. It may all be an elaborate, apocalyptic ruse but it's an impeccably organized one that conjures the warm fuzzies that only cold order can. The film's systems may be arbitrary, but in a tautological way, they work: they soothe anxiety.

The same cannot be said of *Suitcases*. The film's infinitely pluralistic world defies containment in lists and albums. Although as hermeneutically lush as *The Falls, Suitcases* is full of holes… The contents spill haphazardly throughout the narrative, and then onto websites, television and online games—virtual spin-offs of the film. The speed of the film is dizzying; combined with the frame saturation achieved by the indulgent use of split screen, and the layering of conflicting images, text and sound. The experience of watching the film is one of sensory overload. Here, the systems seem to be spiralling out of control. It's lovely to watch, but it's enough to make one feel a little…anxious.

The Tulse Luper Suitcases made me think about post-modernity, which is something I had hoped never to think about again. Inescapably, however, this film screams post-modern. From its exploratory manipulations of the digital medium, to its exuberantly discontinuous narrative of the 20th century, to its G.K.

Chesterton refrain, "There is no history. There are only historians," this is a film about These Post-modern Times. In fact, perhaps Greenaway's project can be seen as a parody of post-modernism/post-modernity itself.

Herein lies my anxiety. You see, I never quite came to terms with post-modernity. I can't celebrate shifting signifiers and lost referents the way that Greenaway can. In its flagrant cataloguing of textbook tropes, *Suitcases* is a nostalgia film about post-modernity. Does *Suitcases* then signal the end of post-modernity? For me, there's always been something too final about the post. And this irrevocability is literally doubled, while simultaneously trivialized by post-post-modernity. Because, really, what comes after the end of history?

While *Suitcases* doesn't propose an answer, it seems to suggest that the troubling instability of reality can be assuaged by the joys of post-modern artifice. Greenaway places a premium on storytelling as a performative act. The auditioning of actors to play the various characters throughout the film reminds us that a good story requires a great storyteller. Historical fidelity is secondary to artistry. The film's best moments are those of exorbitant fabulation, when sheer narrative pleasure bursts the confines of Greenaway's encyclopaedic project.

One such moment occurs in the third hour when Cissie Colpitts (Valentina Cervi) takes over the announcer's post on a deserted platform of the Antwerp train station during World War II and proceeds to announce a long list of train destinations, all fictitious. Meanwhile, Tulse Luper, held prisoner somewhere in the bowels of the station, listens to Cissie through the ventilation system and, falling in love with the fanciful place names, crawls through the vents to reach her. It's a classically romantic move, but the mise-en-scène is stark, theatrical and haunting. The extended length of the scene allows for a tremendous heaviness to settle in. It is a momentary reprieve from the callous assault of images and words that have crowded the film up to that point. Cissie's slow, echoing list of imaginary lands evokes a strange beauty that intoxicates the viewer along with Tulse.

Tulse Luper, or Tulsey as I feel inclined to call him, possesses a similar power to mesmerize. Tulse (JJ Field) is a drifter and prisoner, a man who seems to have little agency over his surroundings or fate. Yet, despite his odd lack of defining characteristics, he manages to be disarmingly charismatic. His shy charm is enough to carry nearly six hours of the film (until he suddenly ages from a young man to middle age,

now played by Stephen Billington). Perhaps it is only the work of fiction that can strike such a fine balance between humility and allure. Perhaps the best purveyor of human ardour is artifice.

I'm looking forward to seeing Tulsey again in the online game, The Tulse Luper Journey [2]. It will be interesting to see if he retains his charm in a medium not particularly known for its capacity for compelling narrative and rich characterization. The trick will be to balance Greenaway's contradictory impulses: the playfully arbitrary archives of names, places and personal histories on the one hand, and the vivacious storytelling that threatens these systems and makes them interesting on the other. I worry that online, the film's moments of transcendent beauty and tragedy will stagnate. Without the poetry, the *Suitcases* world is just a collection of post-modern clichés. If the viewer can control the time spent with each suitcase, each character, each story, the film's anxious abandon can easily slip into boring redundancy. The idea of the game is tempting: to investigate the strange systems until one has mastered their inner logic through repeated clicking (like repeated viewing,) until those systems feel as organized as those of *The Falls*. Perhaps this urge should be avoided. "After all, if one tames the nervous energy of post-modernity, then there's nowhere to go but further post."

I am also curious to see how the notion of multiple authorship will play out in Journey. The interplay of meaning making in the film is palpable, but ultimately overshadowed by Greenaway's eccentric vision. Will he actually cede some authorial responsibility to the gamer? Or will the participants be just that; pawns in a predetermined choose-your-own-adventure? Because, alas, we can't all be megalomaniacs…

NOTES

1   The comparison of these two films is not arbitrary. Although Greenaway's oeuvre abounds with selfreferentiality and intertextuality, these films in particular seem to have a special connection. In addition to the usual recurrence of characters and themes, the films have a privileged position as Greenaway's masterworks. Not only do they share an epic scope, both films perform an inventory of cutting edge film techniques at their respective moments in cinematic history. The temporal distance that separates the two films is instructive in the development of Greenaway's

thematic concerns, especially in relation to history and modernity.

2   The online game, The Tulse Luper Journey is scheduled to go live at the end of this month (February 2005). The idea is that players will be able to interact with the characters and investigate the different storylines that were introduced in the film. Greenaway, who is intimately involved in the game's production, is apparently aiming to create a quintessential post-modern work of multiple authorship and shifting subjectivity. The website is located at http://www.tulseluperjourney.com.