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Issue 12: *Opening Peter Greenaway's Tulse Luper Suitcases*

## Tulse Luper Database: Peter Greenaway, the New Media Object and the Art of Exhaustion

Author: Benjamin Noys

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**Abstract (E):** How are we to characterise the art of Peter Greenaway, especially in the light of his new project *Tulse Luper Suitcases: A Personal History of Uranium* ? This essay follows Lev Manovich's suggestion that he can be understood as a "database filmmaker". The database form is the key to Greenaway's work and explains why he is attracted to the possibilities of new media objects. These objects meet his demands for an anti-narrative cinema and for the film as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art. The web site *Tulse Luper Network* offers us a model for the new project as a whole, allowing Greenaway to explore modes of interfacing and expanding the database beyond the limits of cinema. I argue that he takes up the baroque's art of exhaustion through the form of the new media object.

**Abstract (F):** Comment définir l'art de Peter Greenaway et plus particulièrement son nouveau projet "The Tulse Luper Suitcases" ? En suivant une proposition de Lev Manovich, on pourrait décrire l'art de Greenaway comme une illustration de la forme symbolique de la banque de données. Celle-ci est la forme clé de son oeuvre et explique pourquoi Greenaway est tellement attiré par les nouveaux médias. Les produits des nouveaux médias répondent au désir de l'auteur de développer un cinéma non-narratif et de travailler le film comme un *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Le site web *Tulse Luper* démontre de façon décisive les possibilités d'interface et d'extension du cinéma à l'aide et à travers des nouveaux médias. Ce nouvel art médiatique est en plus lié à une esthétique baroque de l'épuisement.

**keywords:** Peter Greenaway; new media; the database; the internet; baroque

### Article

"I should define as baroque that style which deliberately exhausts (or tries to exhaust) all its possibilities and which borders on its own parody." Jorge Luis Borges (12)

### The Art of Exhaustion

How do we characterise Peter Greenaway's art? In particular how do we characterise the precise relation between image and narrative in his work, which is the focus of his obsessive concern? These questions are given a new urgency by Greenaway's latest project *Tulse Luper Suitcases: A Personal History of Uranium*. Tulse Luper has been a recurrent character in his career, not least in the early, more "avant-garde", films: as the ornithologist of *A Walk Through H, or The Reincarnation of an Ornithologist* (1978); as the structuralist filmmaker of *Vertical Features Remake* (1978); and as "a thief, cartography expert, ornithologist, conspirator, hoaxer, as well as spiritual advisor and guide" (Lawrence 44) in *The Falls* (1980). "Born" in Newport, South Wales in 1911 (Greenaway's birthplace), Tulse Henry Purcell Luper disappeared in 1989. During the period between 1928 and 1989 he deposited ninety-two suitcases around the world, which will be the subject of four two-hour feature films, a book, fifty-two TV programmes, several CD-ROMs

and an Internet site.

Ninety-two is the atomic number of uranium, and *Tulse Luper Suitcases* aims at nothing more or less ambitious than a history of the twentieth century as the "uranium century". It is also a number that Greenaway has constantly associated with Luper: it is the number of maps in *A Walk Through H*, which can also be found in Luper's book *Some Migratory Birds of the Northern Hemisphere*, and it recurs throughout *The Falls*, firstly as its basic structural unit in terms of the number of biographies of the characters affected by the Violent Unknown Event (VUE) and then within the film itself. The counting system of ninety-two elements originates in Greenaway's miscounting of the ninety parts of John Cage's *Indeterminacy Narrative*. Greenaway's work has always been preoccupied with such systems of classification: "If his work is tirelessly systems-based, his systems - his games, lists, alphabets, countings, variously simple, intricate, playful, philosophical, comic - are above all ironic, self-referential, never in conflict with the surplus of material available for classification, a surplus which they display as much as they discipline" (Woods 22).

The usual understanding of this desire of Greenaway's, expressed both by him self and his critics, is that it indicates his "taste for the encyclopaedic" (Lawrence 2). The web site for *Tulse Luper Suitcases* describes this three-year project as "encyclopaedic in scope". Of course this taste is also the taste for the parody of the encyclopaedia, hence the *de rigueur* reference to Borges' "Chinese Encyclopaedia" and the reading of this passage by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* when critics write on Greenaway (Lawrence 20-21; Woods 20). This strange taxonomy divides animals into:

(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.

According to Foucault the result is a laughter that shatters "all the familiar landmarks of my thought" (xv). [1] If we consider a similar "catalogue" from the early Greenaway film *H is for House* (1973) we can see the same parodic alphabetic and encyclopaedic impulse at work:

H is for Health, Happiness, Hearse, Hepatitis, Heretic, Heave, Hell, Holocaust and His Holiness . H is for Hat, [Hugh?], Hatchet, Hammer and Hitchcock. H is for Handicap, Handicraft, Handiwork, Handkerchief and Handle . H is for Cigars, Havana Cigars . H is for Hopelessness, Happiness, Homelessness .. Hesitation . H is for Bean, Haricot Bean and Has-Been. (qtd. in Pascoe 51)

Perhaps this paradox of classification, in the conflict between classification and its necessary surplus or remainder, is most wittily staged in *Vertical Features*. David Pascoe describes it as "one of the most beautiful experimental films of the 1970s" (46). It concerns the attempt to reconstruct Tulse Luper's "Vertical Features" by the Institute for Restoration and Reclamation (IRR). This fictional film within a film is an exercise in structuralist filmmaking based on the grid, the film frame, and the vertical features of the English landscape. The IRR's reconstructions of the film are constantly challenged by warring academics, even to the point where they claim that Tulse Luper himself is a

fictional character. The film not only neatly parodies the exercise of structuralist film but also the academic attempt to define film, and to provide the "true" interpretation of a filmmaker's work. As such it displays Greenaway's playful engagement with the encyclopaedic, and also his amusement at the expense of the academic criticism of film. Critics, Greenaway has written, "are like haughty, barren spinsters lodged in a maternity ward" (qtd. in Woods 25). Therefore, any attempt to define the "truth" of Greenaway's art or style academically, including this one, risks being caught in this game, a game that he plays very well.

## Databases and Anti-Narrative

However, we can risk a new definition of Greenaway's art that brings him in close relation to the new media object. According to Lev Manovich we might think of him, along with Dziga Vertov, as one of the only database filmmakers (xxiv). Manovich argues that the database is the key "symbolic form" of the computer age (219), which consists of the collection of individual items with every item possessing the same significance as any other. This form is characteristic of new media objects and is most evident if we consider the Internet, where many web pages are collections of separate elements, that is, mini-databases. For Manovich the exploration of counting and classification systems in Greenaway's work is what makes him a "database filmmaker", where the images he creates are organised by the database form rather than by narrative per se. This "database logic" (Manovich 238) means that with the emergence of the new media object Greenaway has found the form that best suits his work. As Alan Woods remarks of CD-Rom, it is "a medium which could have been invented for him" (21). In fact in utilising these new forms Greenaway "has been irritated by an insistence that his experiments within this non-linear, associative, encyclopaedic, hands-on mixture of text and image should be shackled by a demand for a story-board - an old solution for a new technology" (Woods 21).

Manovich argues that database forms are anti-narrative, collections and not stories, and so the story-board is very much an "old solution" that this new technology resists. As a collection of items, each with the same value, the database is opposed to the sequential cause-and-effect structure of narrative. This is not to say that such database forms cannot be arranged as a narrative but that their fundamental organisation is anti-narrative. From the Internet to the selection of items offered by most art or music software packages, when we use the new media object we are using a database. This "database logic" allows us to recast two of the most important impulses in Greenaway's art: his desire to break the stranglehold of narrative over cinema, with the call for "a cinema of ideas, not plots" (Woods 11-19), and his desire to produce film as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art, trying to solve Eisenstein's problem: "The problem of the synthesis of the arts, a synthesis realized in cinema, has not yet found its full solution" (qtd. in Woods 11). [2] The anti-narrative organisation of the new media object and its potential for expansion, to add new links for example, makes it the almost perfect realisation of these aims.

Greenaway has always commented on the importance of the artist R. B. Kitaj to his work, stating that "he is a painter in whom I have not a single misgiving and I could not say that about any film-maker" (qtd. in Woods 106). One of the reasons for the impact of Kitaj on Greenaway was his legitimization of the combination of text and image. In a series of works Kitaj combined his images with pages from the *Journal of the Warburg and*

*Courtauld Institutes* , an academic art journal (Woods 105 and Pascoe 43). A work such as "Specimen Musings of a Democrat" is based around the account by Frances Yates' of an alphabet table devised by the Catalan philosopher Raymond Lull and it comes with a bibliography, offering an unabashedly intellectual art (Pascoe 43). This mixture of forms, which is also based around the grid, helped establish for Greenaway his own practice as an artist and filmmaker. It is also what helps make him a multi-media artist *avant la lettre* .

When we enter his work we do not enter an encyclopaedia but a database , and, of course, Tulse Luper is also a database filmmaker. *Vertical Features Remake* offers three remakes of Tulse Luper's "Vertical Features", a structuralist film that can be treated as a kind of database of images of the vertical features of the English landscape. We could imagine that with the possibilities of new media a CD-Rom of this film would allow us to remake it in various forms beyond the three attempts of the IRR. Luper, as Greenaway's alter ego, shares his "database logic". What this film also makes clear is that minimum material element of the database is the image itself. This is the fundamental element that the film manipulates and works on. As Greenaway says "the most entertaining and exciting part of making films for me is not necessarily working with the actors, but it's working with the cameraman and the art department, and creating those hundreds of thousands of images" (qtd. in Woods, 229). All a film is, for Greenaway, is a database of images: "In an hour-long film you've already achieved 86,000 images" (qtd. in Woods 229). The image , then , is the primary element which can then be organised into narrative but which retains its own anti-narrative autonomy.

This logic is taken further by *Tulse Luper Suitcases* . Not only is the project a database of ninety-two suitcases, but what these suitcases contain are images, even if these are images of texts, for example with the suitcase containing love letters. Now the image gains its autonomy through the arrangement of the new media object, which resist narrative ordering. Because of this the key "symbolic form" of the project may well be the Internet site [www.tulselupernetwork.com](http://www.tulselupernetwork.com) , which gives us the Tulse Luper database in its purest form. Here we confront the image elements themselves and also the suggestion that the feature films are themselves only narrative orderings of these elements and could, potentially, be read as collections of thousands of images. Not only do the images become elements but also the films themselves can be treated as higher-level elements within the Tulse Luper database, and not necessarily the most privileged elements. This raises the question of the interface and our access to the database of images.

## Interface and Expansion

One of the problems of cinema for Greenaway is that "it can conventionally only offer one viewpoint at a time" (qtd. in Woods 116). The new media object overcomes this problem because, as Manovich states " *The new media object consists of one or more interfaces to a database of multimedia material* " (227). While we can have a narrative interface with the material this is only one mode of interface among others to the anti-narrative database. Again, if we take the Internet site *Tulse Luper Network* we can see how it not only offers us multiple interfaces to the database elements but how it is also the key to our "interfacing" with the other media forms which the project takes (television, film, book, CD-Rom). Firstly, we have choice of multiple viewpoints within the web site itself. So, we can access information by timeline, by location, by category, by characteristics, by

stories and through the manual. Then, often, these initial interfaces are further complicated. So, if we chose by category we then have a choice between twenty-three categories, which include the suitcases, the characters, the atomic table, etc.

If we continue with the suitcases we are offered another level of interface to the ninety-two suitcases and then within the cases themselves, finally down to the minimal unit of the image. At this stage in the project many of these elements have not been completed ; however , when they are the project will be vast in scale, without considering the other forms to which it is linked. This , though , is the second key feature of the web site, that it offers us a model for interfacing with the project as a whole. Eventually Greenaway's ambition is for all the elements of the project to cross-reference with each other. If the web site itself is an arrangement of elements offering different interfaces to access the data available it also forms a model for the project as a set of elements accessible via different interfaces (cinema, television, CD-ROM, etc.).

When we log on to this network we have access to a continually expanding network, which although limited to the time scale of three years, threatens to expand exponentially, like the Borges' map that exceeds the territory. Not only will it expand as the various elements on the site are completed, and the other elements of the project to which it refers, there is also the possibility of adding to the web site through comments, through contributing to the site itself and through live events. Again this expansion without closure, which is a feature of all networks, indicates how we can interface with the whole project. Even when we interface with more closed and narrative elements of the project, such as the films or the book, we must still deal with how open they are, both in themselves and to the other elements. As Alan Woods has noted , one of the many pleasures of Greenaway's work is the necessity of "losing count", "the inevitable failure of the viewer, of any viewer, to catch all the references" (25). This is not only a loss but also our freedom as "for every 'lost' meaning there is a new meaning - or association, or connection - which is the viewer's creative contribution" (Woods 25).

The proliferation of explanatory materials Greenaway provides for his art may well obscure this process, as Woods suggests (25), by closing off or limiting the meanings we can bring to his work. However, this material also generates more connections as well, as the navigator of the database tries to track down his references and explanations. Also, the responses to the work, including this one, may well try to contain it and give it meaning but are always threatened with the expansive exhaustion of Greenaway's Baroque art. For each attempt to close the connection to the network more connections are generated and the network "structure" of the Internet site for *Tulser Luper Suitcases* brings this paradox into relief: with the constant play of closure, of meaning, against the opening of new meanings or even the exhaustion of meaning itself. This art of exhaustion also exhausts the totalising ambition of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* . The total work of art is transformed from the attempt to subordinate art to a political or cultural idea by Greenaway "literally playing out the self-destructiveness of metanarratives" through a layering of media elements (Oosterling 33).

The drive to create a spatialised database is not a sign that Greenaway is simply abandoning narrative. Rather he works in the space of tension between the database form and narrative, between these two different ways of ordering the world. His irony is directed against the "totalitarian" ambitions of both these modes and he always insists upon the troubling "surplus" or remainder that is put into play by any form of

classification. This offers a critique of the political *Gesamtkunstwerk* that, in Nazism's appropriation of Wagner or in the complex relationship between Eisenstein and Stalinism, aims at producing the State as total (and totalitarian) work of art (Lacoue-Labarthe 17). The political total work of art tries to subsume any surplus within the national community figured as a work of art. Greenaway, on the other hand, insists on the surplus as what creates the desire to produce the total work of art and as what always frustrates the realisation of this desire.

His insistence on the troubling surplus of totalisation has generally been directed against narrative, as this is the dominant cinematic form, but it extends, no less I would say, to structure or structures as well. As Woods argues all classifications are suspicious for Greenaway and "It is not just the particular narrowness of conventional or 'dominant' cinema that is exposed by Greenaway, the cosiness of its fictions and structures, but the more dangerous cosiness of those other systems and categories of value and belief which we do not regard as fictional, but live by" (23). Certainly he has taken up the database as the dominant principle of his art, but his irony does not spare this new key symbolic form of the information revolution.

For Manovich Greenaway is a possible model for new media artists attempting to find a bridge between the anti-narrative database and some minimal narrative organisation. If I have emphasised the anti-narrative organisation of *Tulse Luper Suitcases*, then, we must remember that narrative is also at work. In fact, the play of the films against the other elements is precisely articulated as the organisation of the material in a more narrative form. However, this is only one interface among others and the single viewpoint of cinema finds itself displaced, or lost, in the database. Also, although this database is organised around certain structuring principles based primarily on counting (ninety-two suitcases, the sixteen prisons in which Tulse Luper has been incarcerated) these principles border on parody. They are, like the counting game of the Skipping Girl in *Drowning by Numbers* (1988), arbitrarily finite. [3] Of course, due to the nature of the web site, they are also always in a state of expansion and potential exhaustion. We can have no faith in the database as structure but only as a network that threatens to exhaust the world.

## A New Media Baroque?

What expands in particular is the minimal material unit of the image, even if that unit is an image of text or the combination of text and image. In viewing the web site on the computer screen this "imaging" effect becomes evident. A collection of images that threatens to exhaust the world and that threatens to fold over on itself in parody; no wonder the reference to Greenaway as a Baroque, or neo-Baroque, artist is a critical commonplace. Woods states that "The combinations, familiar in Greenaway, of spiralling, intricate ideas and references, of the importance of text as a skeleton or driving force of image-making, with an intense fixation on the body, its physicalities, embarrassments, pleasures and cruelties, a body displayed within an often self-referential framework and represented without either 'realism' or idealism - all these are conscious echoes of mannerist and Baroque painting in particular" (15). Amy Lawrence has quoted Deleuze's claim that "the essence of the Baroque entails neither falling into nor emerging from illusion but rather realizing something in illusion itself" as indicative of Greenaway's Baroque art (164).

If Greenaway's art draws on the Baroque then his use of this form of art in a modern or "postmodern" context could be considered as an example of the neo-Baroque. Omar Calabrese defines the neo-Baroque as a new form of contemporary taste that consists of "a search for, and valorization of, forms that display a loss of entirety, totality and system in favor of instability, polydimensionality, and change" (xii). In particular he identifies one feature of this cultural form which seems particularly relevant, the play between limit and excess. The neo-Baroque *mixes* the limit and excess together, and it suspends, but does not bring into crisis, these categories of value (Calabrese 66). If these seem very close to Greenaway's art then I would suggest it might better be understood through its use of the new media object, rather than in terms of a more general account of cultural taste. Also, where Calabrese emphasises *suspension* as the mark of the neo-Baroque I would suggest Greenaway's play between the limit of a classificatory system and its excess takes a more *destabilising* form. This is what Angela Ndalians has called the "polycentric logic" (3) of the neo-Baroque, pushed to the point of collapse.

This neo-Baroque "polycentric logic" is particularly well exemplified by the network information flows of the *Tulseluper Suitcases*. Again this echo of the Baroque, this "neo-Baroque" art, can be given a more precise sense through Greenaway's relationship to the new media object. If we bring them together then we can name his art as a *new media Baroque*. Here the art of exhaustion, which is, according to Borges, the definition of the Baroque, is pursued to the border of parody and beyond through the new media object. Woods' definition of the Baroque elements of Greenaway's art (the expansion of references, the importance of text to image-making, and an intense fixation on the body) could also serve as descriptions of the Internet. It may well be that the Internet is a Baroque or neo-Baroque form in which Greenaway's art finds its ideal home. However, what he also does is push this art to the border of parody and beyond. In this way, Greenaway has become one of the first artists of the new media Baroque, and one of the first critics of the stability of the neo-Baroque as a form of taste.

## Notes

[1] Jacques Derrida has pointed out "For the laughter becomes less euphoric, and above all less communicative, more uneasy indeed, when the *object* of division or classification stops being *read* in a naively realist way (taxonomy of the things themselves, of the animals *themselves*, animal individuals or species) but rather as the series of characters, attributes, modes of apprehension, qualities of activity or intentional experience that can be referred to animals. It wouldn't then be animals that were being classified, but, like a number of possible themes or noemata, the *experiences* of relation to animals. Borges's list would then remain incomplete, of course, an alphabet would not be long enough for all its entries, but it would no longer be laughable, uneasy or aberrant." (286)

[2] The concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* has also been used to characterise Baroque art, as, according to Deleuze "the Baroque establishes a total art or a unity of the arts" (123). Henk Oosterling pursues a genealogy of this concept in relation to Peter Greenaway and he argues that Greenaway's work comes out of a rejection of the failures of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (32-35). Oosterling suggests that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* has often taken been a megalomaniac form "aiming at totality" (32). In the political version, with "totalitarian" Nazism and Stalinism, "politics and art are reduced to each other" (32). The new modern or postmodern name for the political *Gesamtkunstwerk* is globalisation, which

Greenaway resists through his simulation of a world history in *The Tulse Luper Suitcase* (Oosterling 35).

[3] As Woods summarises, "when you've the first 100, she says, all the rest are the same - for her, 1-100 is like those primitive language we hear about with a word meaning 'a lot' for anything after three or four" (24).

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Benjamin Noys (2005)

Lecturer in English, School of Cultural Studies, University College , Chichester .



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