

Peter Greenaway, *Tulse Luper Suitcases (Parts I-III, 2003-04)*, The Montreal Festival of Nouveau Cinema, October 14-24, 2004

Colin Burnett

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[See table of contents](#)

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Peter Greenaway

Tulse Luper Suitcases (Parts I-III, 2003-04)

The Montreal Festival of Nouveau Cinema

October 14-24, 2004

Even under “normal” circumstances, Peter Greenaway is a “difficult” director. With *Tulse Luper Suitcases*, the filmmaker makes the viewer leap out of trenches to confront three films totalling seven hours in length – and not just any three, but three that make up a much larger, and up to now inchoate, multimedia magnum opus set to include ninety-two DVDs, a sixteen-part TV series, and an interactive Web site. The film series itself is nothing if not taxing, tugging the viewer back and forth between stylistic patterns and a plot that strains to give these patterns some context. Happily, *TLS*’s images, shot using high-definition video technology, are as sharp and precise as have ever reached this reviewer’s eyes. Greenaway’s notoriously plentiful compositions, staged and shot in depth, show not a hint of grain, flicker, or blur.

Easily the director’s most ambitious project, *TLS* follows its globetrotting hero, Tulse Luper, over a period of seventy-eight years, from his youth in South Wales to his last days in Siberia and beyond, but this scarcely tells the whole tale. The rules of Greenaway’s game start to reveal themselves as we discover clips from the director’s previous films used as one of a variety of the documents assembled to help reconstruct the life of the film’s elusive protagonist. Luper is an author of some repute (mainly of lists, catalogues, and inventories) and the originator of the works upon which these films are based, unseating Greenaway himself. Exactly where Greenaway stands in relation to the creative material described in the story is difficult to say. In hiding behind the panoply of historians, actors, and characters that crowd the narrative and usurp his “authority,” it would seem that the filmmaker playfully disowns this oeuvre. This ironic distance, and the fact that by film’s end we learn that Luper’s lengthy list of life-long exploits is but a figment of his best friend’s imagination, a massive hoax eaten up by the film’s possessed experts, signals to the attentive viewer that the drama of Luper’s farce of a life is hardly the main reason that Greenaway hopes to hold one’s interest.

TLS is a rich tapestry of a film that uses digitally assembled and self-referential patterns to impose an intricate order upon the film’s already convoluted and episodic plot. Greenaway’s experimentation with digital media manipulates an array of “data layers” in the single “shot” (here a strained term), to erect screens beyond which it is difficult to decipher a narrative through-line, or even a set of consistent characters. At any moment, and with an increasingly familiar rhythm, the space of a scene’s master shot is invaded by a series of imbedded shots usually depicting experts sounding off on the events of the scene, or by the same actors speaking the same lines again but seated on a row



Peter Greenaway

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Kassander Film Company

2004

of stools in front of a black background, or by different actors offering their interpretations of the parts. These “intrusions” pierce the frame and float upward or downward or from left to right or vice versa. Insofar as the master shots are made to compete for storytelling authority against a cacophony of opposing assessments and dramatizations of the events, they are never able to sustain their integrity; a scene’s meaning is a combination, at times shaky, of what is seen and what is said about it. At times, what is said refers to much more than what is seen, leaving the viewer to question either what is seen or what is said or both. Follow?

Each of the three parts bears its own narrative characteristics that comment on how narratives and characters are constructed; *TLS* is not so much a story as a meta-story. Part I, “The Moab Story,” investigates the concept of auditions, with shots of alternate sets of actors taking their stab at the principle roles. Pondering the use of character roles as storytelling tools, Part II, “From Vaux to the Sea,” introduces us to ninety-two different archetypes – kings, queens, fools, detectives, policemen, and others. Part III, “From Sark to Finish,” reflects upon storytelling in general, with imbedded images popping up at random (or so it seems) to show characters reciting the beginnings of tales tangential to the main narrative.

Yet *TLS*’s stylistic norms function as a layer of constancy among the changes. These include the rhythmic insertion of shots of the film’s ninety-two suitcases, quite like the presentation of the books in *Prospero’s Books*, which function not only as symbols of the plot, but as punctuation marks signalling transition points; a fascination with classical architecture and arches that perform structurally to add symmetry to the compositions; the use of golden overhead lighting to act as a focal point for the staged action; and the interminable parade of “talking head” historians who either float in on inserted images or address us from within the staged action. The apparent expertise of these historians, belied by their inability to distinguish fact from fiction, is perhaps this work’s most sustained and accessible preoccupation.

Because staging this polyphonic film means more than orchestrating actor movement on the set, *TLS* constitutes a pioneering foray into the possibilities of digital *mise en scène*.

Colin Burnett

Colin Burnett holds his Master’s in Film Studies from Concordia University.