The Dream Life of Technology

Zoe Beloff - Jamuary 1997

Beyond operates in a playful spirit of philosophical inquiry exploring the paradoxes of technology, desire and the paranormal posed since the birth of mechanical reproduction. One might call it an investigation of the "dream life" of technology, from around 1850 to 1940. There was an almost magical element in the way people saw these developments, an issue I feel important to bring to light as we enter this strange new digital realm.

Beyond is an interactive work which allows the viewer to explore a new kind of mental geography, in which they find themselves travelling through time and space encountering my virtual alter-ego who, as a medium, that "interface" between the living and the dead, transmits "movies" that record her impressions.

I am not interested in being literal or illustrative but instead letting the past breathe through small discarded objects. For the "dead" are represented by fragments of home movies from 1920's to 1940 found at the flea markets as well as early film footage from the Library of Congress Paper Print collection. Images stand in for other hidden ones, meaning conflict and new ones momentarily take hold.

The computer is central to the existence of this work. It could not be realized in any other medium. Indeed I had the idea for Beyond , a study of the relationship between imagination and technology for several years, initially inspired by Jonathan Crary's book "Techniques of the Observer" [1] as well as my own work resurrecting such antiquated technologies as stereo views and hand-cranked projectors. But I never quite knew how to approach making a work about a subject that seemed too theoretical to be a film and too visual to be a written essay. It was only when I started to work with a Quick Cam attached to my computer that I found a form that made it possible to deal with this subject. Moreover I could now make connections not simply theoretically but in practice between the birth of technologies of the past in relation to the media revolution of present.

I am fascinated by long outdated forms resurfacing anew in the digital realm. Such are panoramas. Actual panoramas painted around specially constructed circular rooms were a poplar form of entertainment in the nineteenth century. Long forgotten, they now reappear in the virtual realm as QuickTime VR. My QuickTime videos are made "live" without digital manipulation, by re-photographing film and text with the Quick Cam, using effects that would not have been out of place in Méliès studio. Just as the earliest film makers struggled to find a new visual language through the newly developed technology of cinema, here I aim to invent in a personal way, a new digital articulation of space and time that both grows out of cinema yet goes beyond it.

Unlike most digital work, it is really spontaneous and created over time so it is actually a record or sketch book of my investigation and thought process as it happened. There was no predetermined "master plan". Just some rough ideas in my head,

nothing was written down. Rather one line of research lead to another, one text to another. Movies were improvised with what I found at the flea market on Sunday mornings. Every week I go out looking for something but other than film I don't know what. I feel it is a little like the Surrealist way of walking through the city, a drifting of attention between in the inner and outer world, both sharp eyed and distracted at the same time.

In fact the project would have been impossible to plan in advance. Chance plays tremendously important part. Besides don't always know what I'm going to do in a QuickTime movie until I actually set it up and perform in front of the camera. Frequently I'm projecting film, playing some music and performing all at the same time so I can't see what I'm doing till after it is done. I've always secretly felt that making these QuickTime movies was more like "casting a spell" that conventionally shooting a film.

Moreover the possibilities opened up by interactivity allowed me to realize ideas of mental geography that previously could only be described rather than actually experienced in art, in the words of Baudelaire, "a city full of dreams where ghosts accost the passers-by in broad daylight." [2]

This work is designed specifically for an audience of one. It is intensely intimate. Here my virtual alter-ego speaks directly to the viewer becoming thus, an "interface" both between the real and the virtual, the past and the present, leading the viewer on a journey that is mysterious as it is unpredictable. Unlike film or video, it is a work that, is also designed to be experienced more than once. For just as when we walk the streets of a real city, we may cross and re-cross certain popular thorough fairs, while it might takes us as ages to find other out of the way buildings half hidden in the woods. Actually there are 2 methods of travel: literally, on foot, a filmed simulation of walking from place to place. Movies are also linked by ideas. Trains of thought connect the viewer from one place to another.

The location of the QuickTime VR's is a real abandoned asylum dating back to the nineteenth century. It stands in as you'll see for many places both real and fictional, from Charcot's clinic at the Salpêtrière, to Raymond Roussel's fictional world of Locus Solus, to the destroyed buildings of the two World Wars, to the Paris Arcades of the Second Empire, to the ruins of the great world expositions, to Edison's' laboratory at Menlo Park.

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Why begin in 1850? Because it was the time of the birth of the great media technologies, unheard of scientific progress, opening in the mind almost limitless possibilities. It seems as if progress appeared so dazzling that the boundaries between the real (or conventionally scientifically provable) and the fantastic was far more permeable than we can imagine today.

And why Baudelaire, who I might add insinuated himself into the project from the start, always breathing down my neck, always having something to say, having the last word. Perhaps because he was the first great writer of the modern city, the first modernist.

He was the archetypal flâneur. (while my work might be described as an exercise in digital flânerie). He defined the new relation between the individual and the anonymous crowd. In his prose poems in particular he had an almost uncanny ability to empathize with random passers by, children, old women, even dogs and cats, to get under their skin, to imagine in an instant their whole lives.

It was like he was way too thin skinned. For too loose oneself too far leads to madness, the hysterics and mediums were to loose themselves too, to be taken over by forces beyond themselves. Indeed Baudelaire does describe this as extreme almost out of body experience, "What men call love is a very minute, limited and feeble affair compared wit the indescribable super-sensual joy, the saintly prostitution of the soul when it yields itself entire in all its poetry and all its charity , to the epiphany of the unforeseen, the unknown passer-by." [3]

Walter Benjamin was to comment later than Baudelaire could also get under the skin of objects, showing not commodities filled out with private dreams but private dreams as hollowed out as objects. Thus we travel from Baudelaire to Benjamin which also happens to come back full circle. For Benjamin became Baudelaire's great critic, illuminating not only Baudelaire but his time, and "the dream life of technology" in what was to be his great unfinished Arcades Project. [4]

Here Benjamin turns the whole idea of progress back on itself, as an illusion, a "phantasmagoria" (which was itself originally a specific kind of technology, a sound and light show with moving magic lanterns. The original "Smoke and Mirrors".) Thus progress becomes circular. He speaks of the 19th Century as a time of Hell, in which the desperate search for the new is itself a Sisyphus-like task. Not only does this turn the project into a circle but he also importantly politicizes the idea of the unconscious from the domain of individual to the hallucination of collective. He wished ,through examining the past, to make the mechanisms of our own delusion, or own dream state clear to us.

He aimed to do this, not through examining the big events of history but through examining its scraps and remains, images, objects, buildings left over, lost, the landscape of the everyday that has been discarded. It is just this debris that is washed up at the flea market, that I hope in my small way to make, speak again, but differently. To illuminate the present through the past.

This idea of the new as always the same, I think, should be looked at closely in relation to the digital realm with all the hype that is attached to it. Where a Picture Book CD-Rom is heralded as the latest breakthrough. Benjamin was also the only writer I know who talks about how new technologies bring with them odd archaism of form. [5] As I said one of the things that interested me about working with QuickTime VR is that it resurrects virtually, the archaic form of the Panorama. Long since superseded by inventions like cinema it now return as the latest thing.

Why did I chose to end the work around 1940? For several reasons. Perhaps because it was finally the moment when techno-logical advance was to lead straight to the gas chambers, and there it must end. They are never literally mentioned but the onrush of technology towards mass slaughter is nevertheless, I feel a specter, that hovers somewhere over the work. 1940

saw the suicide of Walter Benjamin. At the same time 1940 brought to a close the era of the great hysterics and the great materializing mediums. Something in the imagination shut down.

If Baudelaire and Benjamin might definite the circumference of the circle, then the center, I think of in the person of Raymond Roussel and his relationship with his Doctor, Pierre Janet. It is Roussel's madness in the form of his novel Locus Solus that radiates outwards setting the project alight.

Here we are confronted with a symptomatic work, symptoms of fact, symptoms of fiction, symptoms of an age. Each I believe illuminating the other. Written in 1914, Locus Solus simply recounts a tour of the estate of a famous Inventor Martial Canterel (who was modelled on Edison). One by one, bizarre mechanical inventions are described in a style at once dry and fantastic, in a tone and language very similar to an actual textbook of Practical Physics that I happen to have dating from 1886. [6]

What I began to discover was that a work of fiction written by a so called madman or at least in the words of his doctor, "a timid neuropath" [7] was not nearly as bizarre as it appeared on first reading instead this book might better be regarded as a strange mirror reflecting back symptomatically and with almost uncanny clarity the cross roads of media technology, and psychology at this time.

For Roussel's explanatory mania always goes beyond the fantastically detailed mechanical descriptions of moving parts, cogs and wheels to become as it were case histories of which the resulting machines are the outcome of some kind of psychological disturbance on the part of his characters. These machines are the externalization of the mind at work.

The great psychologist Pierre Janet came to treat Roussel when he was 19 and had undergone an extraordinary ecstatic experience. For 6 months Roussel believed he was engulfed in glory, he was to describe it thus, "This glory was a fact, an affirmation, I had glory...everything I wrote was surrounded in rays of light. I would close the curtains for fear of the shinning rays that were emanating from my pen would escape through the smallest chink... Each line was repeated a thousand fold and I wrote with a thousand flaming pen nibs". [8] But unfortunately when his writing actually appeared in print, it was with a dull thud. Still Roussel remained always unshaken in his belief in his own genius and could never comprehend why his books were not best sellers.

Unfortunately too and oddly, Janet never read his writing, rather he accepted the received opinion that Roussel utterly lacked talent and that he was (reflecting back on the characters of Locus Solus) nothing but a writing machine.

However I believe that if Janet had taken the time to read Locus Solus he would have found his own work and discoveries strangely reflected back at him. No more so than in Roussel's description of the "Ice House". [9] Here we see a series of dioramas which are open to public viewing behind glass. Within each little set an actor performs the same melodramatic set piece over and over again with uncanny exactitude. These scenes become truly strange when we discover that all the so called "actors" are dead. Through electricity Martial Canterel has mechanically re-animated these dead people since they are

not conscious but instead once revived repeat unconsciously with unvarying motions the most traumatic moments of their lives, in a suitably chilled environment, hence the "Ice House".

What are we to make of this grotesque scene? In my view a little research reveals that it was at the time perhaps much less strange than it appears now. Here it is very interesting to note ,as was recently pointed out in an essay by Vanessa Schwartz [10] that up until the turn of the century, the Paris Morgue was an extremely popular place of public entertainment. Indeed it was featured in all the Paris guide books. Here spectators lined up around the block to see dead people, criminals, unclaimed dead children, written up in the Tabloids. They were positioned behind glass, suitably chilled in rather pathetic tableau.

Schwartz connects this spectacle along with panoramas and the wax museum as pre-cinematic entertainment that this new technology more or less killed off. And in a sense it is this turning point that we discover in Roussel's writing. For the dead in his "Ice House" are not unlike those frozen figures that would mechanically be brought to life in the earliest movies.

Remember that the first films were show initially with a still frame up on the screen that would then suddenly come to life as the projectionist cranked the projector. At the same time these films, each 50 seconds long, were often shown as loops so that the same gestures were repeated with uncanny precision over and over again.

To come back to Janet, the other place where we discover this strange repetition of traumatic events was in Janet's own researches into hysteria. In his case histories he describes many examples of hysterical patients who would go into a state of somnambulism and repeat over and over unconsciously their most traumatic experiences with an uncanny exactitude, "In fact one of the characteristics of these somnambulisms is that they repeat themselves indefinitely, not only are the different attacks always exactly alike, repeating the same movements, expressions and words, but in the course of the same attack, the same scene may be repeated again exactly in the same way five or ten times." [11]

My point is not that the birth of cinema was in any way linked to psychological trauma though cause and effect but the two forms of knowledge were developing at the same time in an interesting relation to each other. People have always gone mad but through the discovery of the unconscious, its mechanisms were become clear and certain actions and structures were now recognizable. Similarly the persistence of vision had always existed but only through the development of the cinematic apparatus was this knowledge structured and used productively.

I have tried to make some of these links clear in the Somnambulist episodes, using Janet's texts and working with home movies of the 1920's. Home movies I believe, are always symptomatic of received ideas of performance as well as a rich field for the study of conscious and unconscious acting out. Here I have worked with actual film loops running through the projector, which are a kind of microcosmic for the work's larger circular structure. Using two projectors superimposing different thoughts or states of consciousness on top of each other to in a simple way simulate Janet's pioneering in work on multiple personality and alternating states of consciousness.

If Roussel was to provide each of his machines with a case history, then one must remember that in the 19th century there was a certain obsession with the question of whether a machine itself could possess a soul. (just as people today speculate as to whether a computer could be have consciousness).

"L'Eve Future" by Villiers de Isle-Adam, published in 1886, focuses on this theme of the soul of the machine. Here another fictional Edison creates an Android. Again as in Roussel, most of the book is taken up with an extremely detailed description of the assembly of mechanical body parts. Yet at the end this creature, as it were, takes flight for we discover not only

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for we discover not only does the android have a soul far more sensitive than that of a real woman but she is endowed with clairvoyant powers.

As I have said, what fascinates me is that the birth of mechanical reproduction opened up in the mind of the nineteenth century viewer almost limitless possibilities. Was it simply that people then were just more gullible and that now hard science has dispelled their fantasies? I don't know. One could argue equally in the opposite direction that because something was conceivable then it became perhaps possible.

My thesis is that if something which we now take for granted like photography was experienced as an uncanny phenomena which seems to undermine the unique identity of objects, creating a parallel world of phantasmal doubles, then the possibility of the production of say Spirit Photographs was not nearly as implausible as it might today. The 1870's witnessed the birth of Parapsychology as an area of serious study in the scientific spirit and many of the early researchers in this field were well known scientists.

The work of Dr. William Crookes might be a good illustration of blurring of the boundaries between traditional science and the supernatural. He was a distinguished British scientist, discoverer of the new element Thallium (essential to the later development of the cathode ray tube). Here I quote from my 1886 Physics textbook on his experiments with fluorescence. "The theoretical views to which Crookes has been led by his experiments have met with a considerable degree of criticism and it must be added that none of the explanations of these singularly beautiful experiments have met with general adoption." [12]

This critique could be applied almost word for word to another set of experiments that Crookes undertook in the 1870's, that resulted in 44 photographs of the materialization of the departed spirit of Katie King produced during seances by the medium Florence Cooke. It should be notes here that Crookes was a keen photographer and in this series he pioneered the use of the magnesium flash . At the same time there was clearly a certain erotic charge to this adventure for he was quite enraptured and charmed by Katie herself.

In this light all media technologies could be said to be shot through with this idea of artificial resurrection, with time and death. They are time machines. Cinema is a time machine of movement. Stereo photography brings about the artificial reconstitution of space.

Is it then so strange that people believed in the literal possibility of travel in time. I end my project with a quotes from Janet, both of whom actually believed in the possibility of time travel. Janet said that "the past exists and endures in a place we do not know and cannot go". [13] But one might add that in its own way the past does endure in film, in photography and now in the digital realm. It is up to us to imagine the rest.

[1] Jonathan Crary *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* Cambridge:MIT Press, 1990

[2] Charles Baudelaire *Les Sept Vieillards in Les Fleurs du Mal*, trans. Francis Scarfe ,London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1986 p.177

[3] Charles Baudelaire *The Poems in Prose*, trans. Francis Scarfe, London: Anvil Press Poetry Ltd., 1989 p.59

[4]Walter Benjamin *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* London: Verso, 1983

[5] Susan Buck-Morss *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project,* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989. See p111 for a discussion of how new technologies in the nineteenth century clothed themselves in outdated styles, for example the first electric lights were shaped like gas flames.

[6] E. Atkinson Ganot' *Physics*, New York: William Wood and Co., 1886

[7] Pierre Janet " The Psychological Characteristics of Ecstasy." *Raymond Roussel: Life, Death and Works*. Ed. Alastair Brotchie, Malcolm Green, and Anthony Melville, as Atlas Anthology No. 4. London: Atlas Press, 1987 p.39
 Note that for the purpose of this case history, Janet gives Roussel the alias of his own fictitious character Martial.

[8] Janet op.cit. p38. Actually Roussel was quite proud of his case history and published it in *How I Came to Write Certain of my Books*. trans. Trevor Winkfield, Boston: Exact Change, 1995

[9] *Locus Solus* pp118-185

[10] Vanessa R, Schwartz. "Cinematic Spectatorship before the Apparatus: The Public Taste for Reality in Fin-de-Siècle Paris." *Viewing Positions*. Ed. Linda Williams. New Jersey: Rutgers University 1994

[11] Pierre Janet. *The Major Symptoms of Hysteria*, New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1965 p.31

[12] E. Atkinson Ganot' *Physics*, New York: William Wood and Co., 1886 p.892

[13] Quoted in Henri F. Ellenberger. *The Discovery of the Unconscious: the History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*, Basic Books, 1970 p.354 Benjamin was also the only writer I know who talks about how new technologies bring with them odd archaism of form. [5] As I said one of the things that interested me about working with QuickTime VR is that it resurrects virtually, the archaic form of the Panorama. Long since superseded by inventions like cinema it now return as the latest thing.