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The Freud-Lissitzky Navigator Text

Lev Manovich on Jul 26 1999

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Game Narrative by Lev Manovich & Norman Klein

"From the boardwalk, I saw women in bustles and women in stone, but not stone. It was a warm day, as warm as the Prater on a Sunday in summer. I remember New York from the boardwalk, and have hidden what it suggested about some of my work. I do not suppose anyone will need to know about my casual impressions of Coney Island in 1908."

Attributed to Sigmund Freud.

"For a few weeks in 1928, I found a hole in my research on Freud. A former patient of his, whose name I must keep in confidence, told me that he met a Russian Jew, an architect. Based on her descriptions, it would appear to be El Lissitzky, the Russian artist. But then the record gets rather confusing. I am told that Lissitzky left a diary for 1928, but not in Russia. It is floating somewhere in Germany, with sketches of something with Freud and New York (that is if I can trust B.). I am exhausted by all this trivia. My back is aching from the rotten seats at the Bibliotheque Nationale. I'll have to leave and book passage home before I wind up crippled by the silly corners of this project."

M. David Wiley, "Freud: Another Life," (New York: Putnam and Son, 1948), p. 73.

In the summer of 1928 Sigmund Freud meets with the avant-garde Russian designer El Lissitzky and his wife who are spending some time in Vienna after a stressful period working on the Soviet Pavilion at the International Press Exhibition in Cologne.[1] They talk about psychoanalysis and modern architecture. Freud tells Lissitzky that in 1908 he visited Coney Island and went to a park called "Dreamland." There he got the initial idea for the architectural realization of his theory. Lissitzky gets very excited about this idea. They decide to create an architectural construct based on Freud's model of the mind. What shall it be? Lissitzky points out the parallels between Freud's model of the consciousness/unconsciousness as articulated in [Interpretation of Dreams](#) and Marx's model of base/superstructure (they don't know that it also parallels Saussure's model of signified/signifier). Freud still thinks of the "Dreamland" park, but Lissitzky convinces him that rather than building a one of a kind museum or park, they should design mass housing -- a popular idea with the avant-garde architects of the second half of the 1920s and something which Lissitzky, who until now could not realize any of his big-scale architectural projects, was eager to do. Freud's first impulse is to have a house with three vertical levels corresponding to his typography of id, ego and super-ego. He wants to put a second, smaller house inside a garden, also with three levels corresponding to his first typography of the Conscious, Preconscious and Unconscious,

with staircases to allow communication between them.[2]

Lissitzky persuades Freud that the modern house should have only one level with horizontal divisions, i.e. it should follow horizontal rather than vertical development. They discuss how to implement the concepts of condensation and displacement via mobile walls, an extension of Lissitzky's design for the exhibition pavilion which he did in Dresden in 1926.[3]

Around the same time Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein happens to pass through Vienna and he meets with Freud and Lissitzky. He tells them that he is planning a film "adaptation" of Marx's Capital. Eisenstein is having difficulties with realizing his film project in Russia; however, there is indeed funding for the mass housing projects in Vienna. Eisenstein realizes that he can try to test his ideas by "displacing" Capital into Interpretation of Dreams. He convinces Freud and Lissitzky to commission him to do a short film which presents a "walk through" through the model of a house.[4]

Eisenstein now faces a fundamental problem: how to reconcile his method of montage with an essentially continuous experience of navigating through a space? He keeps thinking about this problem when he gives a lecture in the Institute of Psychoanalysis in Berlin in 1929.[5] Later this year he visits Bauhaus where he talks with Hungarian artist and Bauhaus professor Moholy-Nagy to see if his students will build a model of the house which Eisenstein can film (Moholy-Nagy is in charge of the Metal Workshop). However, Moholy-Nagy is frustrated with art school politics and he already made plans to go to Berlin to start his own advertising agency.

While at Bauhaus, Eisenstein happens to catch a lecture by a young American engineer Edwin Link about his flight simulator design. The Link Trainer is a simulation of a cockpit with all the controls, but, in contrast to a modern simulator, it has no visuals. [6] Eisenstein conceives of adding a projected film to the simulator.

Link has connections in Hollywood; he arranges an invitation for Eisenstein so they have an opportunity to work on this new project in America. In Hollywood, Eisenstein completes a twenty second film test. After meeting Disney, Eisenstein, who was in love with Disney cartoons, adds Mickey Mouse to the film. He send a print to Freud and a copy to Lissitzky who is now in Cologne. Lissitzky soon has to return to Russia. Sensing changing political climate there, he leaves his notes on the Navigator in Germany.

Like many of Eisenstein's other projects, the Freud-Lissitzky navigator remains unrealized. There are notes in his archive dating to the late 1930s about constructing special movie theatres with moving platforms; he wants to use his montage theories to script the movement of a platform against other dimensions of a film. He also shoots a scene for Alexander Nevsky where we see the battle through the POV of a character who flies over the battle using the wings he constructed; but Stalin who understands that Eisenstein is making a reference to Russian avant-garde artist Tatlin's "Letatlin" (flying apparatus Tatlin has been developing for years) orders this scene to be cut.[7]

In 1956 a dinner party is held in Minneapolis in honor of the centennial of Freud's birth. Late that night Viennese architect Victor Gruen decided to add a monument to Freud's theory of the unconscious near the food court at a shopping mall he just designed. Gruen apparently said that night, "I invented the mall, Freud invented dream therapy. Two Viennese men who know how to make good use of the impulses!" Gruen also told the guests that his mall design was inspired by his experience of walking through Vienna's Ring, and that when he strolled there in his youth he would imagine himself following the footsteps of Dr. Freud.

In 1961 at MIT Steve Russel writes the first computer game. He calls it Spacewar.

In 1968 a French new wave filmmaker is working on a film about Mao's China. He wants to present it as a happy utopia which finally left alienation and exploitation behind. One part of the film is taking place in the future when America attacks China. The filmmaker wants to film using montage strategies of Eisenstein's October. While on

the rain from Paris to Brussels, he reads in the paper that Russian tanks are going through the streets of Prague. Completely pre-occupied by his film, the filmmaker ignores the larger political context of Prague events; he is excited about the opportunity to get some footage for the film. He rushes back to Paris, grabs his hand-held film camera and takes first train to Prague. There he indeed finds Russian tanks in big numbers, but there is a problem: the medieval streets of Prague look very different from China countryside where the scene is supposed to take place. The filmmaker pays the crews of two Russian tanks to drive to the countryside for half a day where he films the tanks. Happy, he returns to Paris where he finally realizes what actually took place in Prague. His first thought is to destroy all his footage, but his old Fluxus friend convinces him to donate it to the audio-visual division of the National Library. The librarians have difficulties deciding under which category to file the footage; eventually they file it under "travel films."

In the same year a Hungarian scholar of the Russian avant-garde is involved at the first large exhibition of Russian avant-garde art in Stockholm. While doing research in Germany he discovers the Lissitzky and Freud notes on the Navigator project. He publishes them in Hungary in a Hungarian art history journal. During the 1980s a great deal of computer development for American computer games was done in Hungary. One of the computer programmers has a girlfriend who studies art history at the University; she shows him the journal issue where the Lissitzky and Freud notes were published. In his spare time the programmer begins to work on a game based upon these notes. He completes a prototype in 1988, and there are plans to publish the game in the US; however, following the events of 1989 they fall through. The programmer, who previously was happy to be paid a tenth of his US counterparts salary, now starts asking for outrageous amounts of money. Through the programmer's girlfriend, the American game publishers steal the prototype and give it to their in-house development team to develop further. She and the programmer break up. Frustrated and heartbroken, the Hungarian programmer moves to Mitte in Berlin and takes up painting.

The US game designers run into difficulties. They say that the reward system in the game is not clear. And what is the point of traveling through Freud's model of the mind anyway? Having realized that what they have is not a game but a "scripted space" (Norman Klein's term) they try to talk to the Disney Imagineering to see if they would make a ride based on the prototype. But Imagineering people do not believe in the unconscious and hence are not interested.

However, one of Disney designers wonders if they can incorporate some elements from the prototype into the design of Euro Disney. He thinks that European visitors would like the references to Dr. Freud and the Russian avant-garde. While in Paris walking on the site, he spends some time in the National Library looking through amateur French films to see how the French navigate through landscapes. Looking through the "travel films" section, he comes across 1968 Prague footage and is struck by the similarity between its camera moves and the computer game prototype he saw back in the States. Inspired, he goes to Café du Dome on Montparnasse, which in its time served as a hangout for Lenin, Picasso, Soutine and other exiled intellectuals and artists. Keeping himself awake through the night on oysters, black coffee and cigarettes, he completes a detailed sketch of a Main Street design for Euro Disney by the morning. His design makes it through two committees and three focus groups but eventually is scratched. But some elements of it are incorporated in the final plans for Fantasyland at Euro Disney, now renamed Disneyland Paris.

The game company makes another attempt to make money on the prototype: they approach a corporation which develops expensive simulators for the US Army. But, with the end of the Cold War, this corporation lost most of its orders and it is now busy converting a multi-million dollar simulator into an add-on level for the popular computer game Quake. They try one more time, now approaching the US Navy Simulation Division directly; but their engineers are also not interested, instead they are converting their own simulator (which is based on the customized computer game Doom) into a commercial game for Sony Playstation. Frustrated, the game company recycles part of a computer code from the prototype for their own internal database, which tracks employee benefits, and permanently shelves the project.[8]

Freud-Lissitzky Navigator is being reconstructed from an early version of this prototype. It is converted from the original assembler code written in 1989. Following the usual practice of computer games to begin with a FMV (full motion video) sequence, we added Eisenstein test (1930), re-edited by the American game company (1993). At the end of the game to, to fill some of the gaps in the prototype, we appended a number of sketches and screen shots. They come from the 1993 version of the game developed by the company and from the presentations it gave to Disney Imagineering and the Navy Simulation Division (1990-1995). For the moment we conclude with the model sketch of Euro Disney Main Street, done by a Disney designer at Café du Dome in Paris after he came across 1968 Prague footage.

NOTES

[1] Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers, El Lissitzky (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 86.

[2] Jean Laplanche, The Language of Psychoanalysis, (The Hogarth Press, 1973), 449-453.

[3] Lissitzky-Suppers, El Lissitzky, 189.

[4] Freud sent Eisenstein his autographed autobiography which later disappeared from Eisenstein's library. Oksana Bulgakova, "Sergei Eisenstein i psikhoanaliz," Kinovedchiskie Zapiski 2 (Moscow, 1988), 175.

[5] Bulgakova, 176.

[6] Benjamin Wooley, Virtual Worlds (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwel, 1992), 43.

[7] Sergei Eisenstein, "Form and Content: Practice," in Film Sense (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942): 157-216.

[8] See the following email:

Date: Mon, 28 Dec 1998 22:51:50 -0800 (PST)

From: Mail Delivery Subsystem <MAILER-DAEMON@UCSD.Edu

Subject: Warning: could not send message for past 6 hours

To: <manovich@ucsd.edu

MIME-Version: 1.0

Auto-Submitted: auto-generated (warning-timeout)

The original message was received at Mon, 28 Dec 1998 16:39:17 -0800 (PST)

from va-maclew.ucsd.edu [132.239.126.42]

----- The following addresses had transient non-fatal errors -----

<tapio@meteori.com

----- Transcript of session follows -----

<tapio@meteori.com... Deferred

Warning: message still undelivered after 6 hours

Will keep trying until message is 5 days old

Reporting-MTA: dns; smtp.ucsd.edu

Arrival-Date: Mon, 28 Dec 1998 16:39:17 -0800 (PST)

Final-Recipient: rfc822; tapio@meteori.com

Action: delayed

Status: 5.1.2

Remote-MTA: dns; relay0.meteori.com

Last-Attempt-Date: Mon, 28 Dec 1998 22:51:50 -0800 (PST)

Will-Retry-Until: Sat, 2 Jan 1999 16:39:17 -0800 (PST)

Content-Type: message/rfc822

Return-Path: manovich@ucsd.edu

Received: from [132.239.126.42] (va-maclev.ucsd.edu [132.239.126.42]) by smtp.ucsd.edu (8.9.1a/8.6.9) with SMTP id QAA06307 for <tapio@meteori.com>; Mon, 28 Dec 1998 16:39:17 -0800 (PST)

Date: Mon, 28 Dec 1998 16:39:17 -0800 (PST)

X-Sender: manovich@jupiter.ucsd.edu

Message-Id: <v02130501b2ad653ae510@[132.239.126.42]>

Mime-Version: 1.0

Content-Type: text/plain

To: Tapio Makela <tapio@meteori.com>

From: manovich@ucsd.edu (Lev Manovich)

Subject: Re:

Thanks, I will follow up.

APPENDIX:

A memo found in Walt Disney Imagineering Library, Glendale CA.

"Dear Lenny,

I have to pass on this Vienna game, whatever it is. Just because I used to be married to a therapist, doesn't mean I know dick about Freud. I don't even have an

unconscious, according to my wife. (We broke up, in case you haven't heard.)

So let me review what we have here. A Viennese house or street somehow turns into a therapy session that looks to me like a Frankenstein laboratory or a wine cellar.

And the reward system. Remember all the shit we were told by Frank? I spent three years in therapy with my wife's brother (don't ask me why, I'll go into another anxiety attack. I'm out of pills I noticed). And the brother was not even close to a Freudian. No one is a Freudian anymore. So who is our market? A few balding therapists who studied before the war? Forget it. Shred it. If F. hears that it's based on a communist drawing, we'll lose our bonus.

By the way, to change the subject, are you free Wed. night? I want to show you my new girlfriend, more of a physical therapist. We can do the old thing. OK?

So finish with this. See you Wed. Bring the X.

Les"

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