Behind the Screen / Russian New Media

author: Lev Manovich

year: 1997

Should we be surprised that as the new computer-based media expand throughout the world, intellectual horizons and aesthetic possibilities seem to be narrowing? If one scans Internet-based discussion groups and journals from London to Budapest, New York to Berlin, and Los Angeles to Tokyo, certain themes are obsessively repeated, like mantras: copyright; online identity; cyborgs; interactivity; the future of the Internet. This follows from the Microsofting of the planet, which has cast uniform digital aesthetics over national visual cultures, accelerating the globalization already begun by Hollywood, MTV, and consumer packaging: hyperlinks and cute icons, animated fly-throughs, rainbow color palettes, and Phong-shaded spheres are ubiquitous and apparently inescapable.

So, given its intellectual traditions, totalitarian experience, distinct twentieth-century visuality (a particular mixture of the Northern and the Communist, the gray and the bleak), and finally, its continuing preoccupation with the brilliant avant-garde experimentation in the 1910s and 1920s, can we expect a different response to new media on the part of Russian artists and intellectuals? What will — or could — result from the juxtaposition of the Netscape Navigator web browser's frames with Eisenstein's theories of montage? It would be dangerous to reduce heterogeneous engagements to a single common denominator, some kind of unique "Russian New Media" meme. Yet a number of common threads do exist. These provide a useful alternative to the West's default thematics, while articulating distinctive visual poetics of new media.

One of these threads is the attitude of suspicion and irony. Moscow's Alexei Shulgin writes of the excitement generated by interactive installations: "It seems that manipulation is the only form of communication they know and can appreciate. They are happily following very few options given to them by artists: press left or right button, jump or sit." He views artists as manipulators employing the seductions of the newest technologies "to involve people in

their pseudo-interactive games obviously based on [the] banal will for power... [The] emergence of media art is characterized by transition from representation to manipulation." [1]

Shulgin views interactive art and media as creating structures that are frighteningly similar to the psychological laboratories the CIA and the KGB operated during the Cold War era. I was born in Moscow and grew up there during Brezhnev's era, so I find his thoughts not only logical but enthralling. Yet my investment in his conclusions doesn't blind me to the limitations of his analysis, or rather, its cultural specificity: it takes a post-communist subject to frame interactive art and media in such stark terms.

For a Western artist, that is, interactivity is a perfect vehicle both to represent and promulgate ideals of democracy and equality; for a post-communist, it is yet another form of manipulation, in which artists use advanced technology to impose their totalitarian wills on the people. Further, Western media artists usually take technology absolutely seriously, despairing when it does not work; post-communist artists, on the other hand, recognize that the nature of technology is that it does not work, that it will necessarily break down. Having grown up in a society where truth and lie, reality and propaganda always go hand in hand, the post-communist artist is ready to accept the basic truisms of life in an information society (spelled out in Claude Shannon's mathematical theory of communication): that every signal always contains some noise; that signal and noise are qualitatively the same; and that what is noise in one situation can be signal in another.

In this spirit, Moscow conceptual artist and poet Dmitry Prigov organized a performance during the International Symposium on Electronic Art in Helsinki (1994) in which he used business traveller's software on one of Aleksander Pushkin's nineteenth-century poems, translating it from Russian into Finnish, and then from Finnish into English. For Prigov, the final product was not a miserably misbegotten translation, twice removed from the source, but a new poem, its originality indebted — however ironically — to the operations of the lowest level of artificial intelligence.

Like Prigov's performance, Shulgin's own new media projects can be described as meta-art. In contrast to many of his western colleagues who feel that they have to colonize and appropriate the Web through a distinct category of "artists" web projects," Shulgin proceeds from the assumption that the Web "is an open space where the difference between "art" and "not art" has become blurred as never before in the 20th century." In this spirit, he established the WWWArt Medal http://www.cs.msu.su/wwwart/award to be awarded to "web pages that were created not as artworks but gave us definite "art" feeling". Visitors check links to a variety of "found" Web pages (importantly, not a single one of them is an "artists" web project"), which have been singled out for "flashing," "moderation" and "valiant psychedelics," among other categories. Like Prigov's poem, another of Shulgin's sites, "Remedy for Information Disease" http://www.desk.nl/~you/remedy, functions as a noise generator, implying that the cure for data overload is to shift from receiving to broadcasting.

Prigov and Shulgin exemplify how the conceptualism which has recently dominated the Moscow art scene offers a valuable strategy for approaching new media. Another strategy positions Russian new media within a larger historical tradition of "screen culture". For Russian thinkers, the meaning of the screen expands far beyond its function as a surface displaying an image originating from elsewhere: it is also a bridge across two spaces, one physical, one imaginary; a link between a human subject and an audio-visual stream; and a rectangular window which opens onto alternative (virtual) reality. So understood, the "screen" is that which unites old and new media, still and moving images, analog and digital culture.

The emphasis on the screen as a space that opens onto an alternative reality is echoed in much modern Russian art which remains firmly committed to the tradition of easel painting. In contrast to the West, where artists gave up on illusionistic pictorial space in favor of the notion of a painting as a self-sufficient material object, many Russian artists, both representational and abstract, continue to conceive of a painting ("kartina") as a parallel reality which begins at the picture frame and extends towards infinity. Thus, Eric Bulatov has described his paintings as windows onto another, spiritual universe, while Ilya Kabakov conceptualizes his installations as a logical expansion of pictorial traditions into

the third dimension — a materialization of reality models previously presented by painting. [2]

Young Russian media artists are using the computer as an excuse to re-think basic categories and mechanisms of screen culture, such as frame, montage, and illusionistic space. Thus, rather than representing a radical break with the past, the computer screen becomes, for them, a re-articulation of the models which have defined screen consciousness for centuries. "My boyfriend came back from war!" is a Web-based work by the young Muscovite Olga Lialina http://www.heise.de/tp/sa/3040/fhome.htm. Using the web browser's capability to create frames within frames, Lialina leads us through a series of pages which begin with an undivided screen and become progressively divided into more and more frames as we follow different links. Throughout, an image of a human couple and of a constantly blinking window remain on the left part of screen. These two images enter into new combinations with texts and images themselves engendered by the user's interaction with the site. In this way, Lialina creatively bridges principles of traditional parallel montage, as it existed in the cinema, and the evolving possibilities of interactive hypertext.

St. Petersburg-based Olga Tobreluts uses a computer to expand the possibilities of cinematic montage in a different way. In "Gore ot Uma" (1994), a video work based on a famous play written by an early nineteenth-century writer Aleksandr Griboedov and directed by Olga Komarova, Tobreluts seamlessly composes images representing radically different realities on the windows and walls of various interior spaces. In one scene, two characters converse in front of a window which opens up onto a shock of soaring birds taken from Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds"; in another, a delicate computer-rendered design fades in onto a wall behind a dancing couple. Because Tobreluts bends composited images to follow the same perspective as the rest of the shots, the two realities appear to inhabit the same physical space. The result is a different kind of montage for digital cinema. [3] Which is to say, if the 1920s avant-garde, and MTV in its wake, juxtaposed radically different realities within a single image, and if Hollywood digital artists use computer compositing to glue different images into a seamless illusionistic space (for instance,

synthetic dinosaurs composited against filmed landscape in "Jurassic Park"), Tobreluts explores the creative space between these two extremes.

Lialina and Tobreluts' projects offer a vision of how Russian new media artists can negotiate between the extreme materialism of Western computer art practice and the historicism and conceptualism characteristic of their country's art. The question remains, however, will Russia be able to stop the march of Bill Gates' aesthetic imperialism, the way she previously froze out the armies of Napoleon?

References:

[1] Rhizome Digest: October 11, 1996, http://www.rhizome.com.

[2] Eric Bulatov, conversation with the author, 1980; Ilya Kabakov, On the "Total" Installation (Bonn: Cantz Verlag, 1995).

[3] I explore digital compositing in relation to the history of cinema in more depth in "To Lie and to Act: Potemkin's Villages, Cinema and Telepresence," in Mythos Information — Welcome to the Wired World. Ars Electronica 95, edited by Karl Gebel and Peter Weibel, (Vienna and New York: Springler-Verlag, 1995): 343-353.