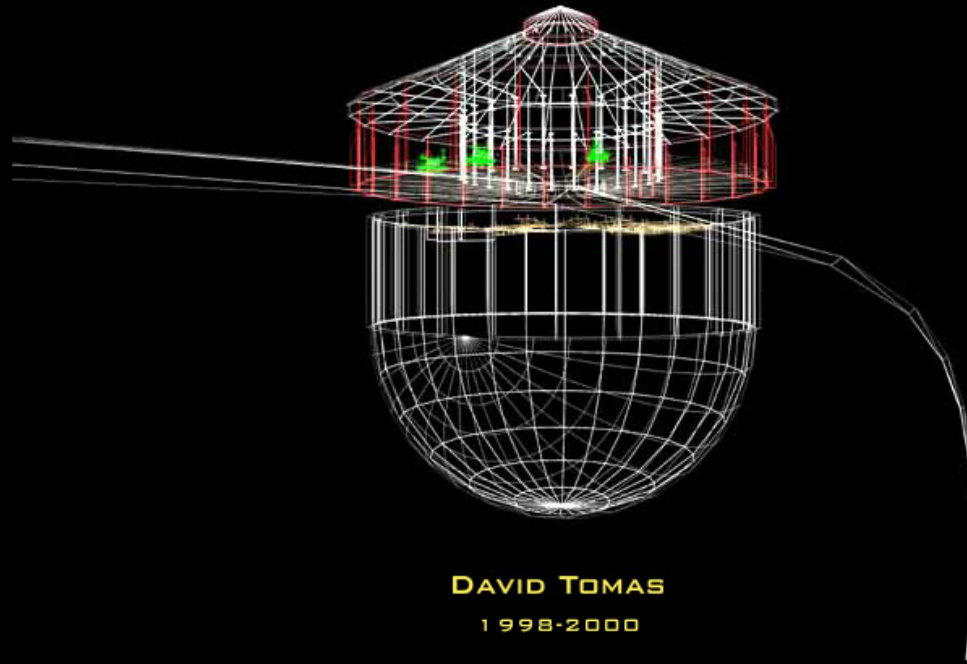# THE ENCODED EYE, THE ARCHIVE, AND ITS ENGINE HOUSE
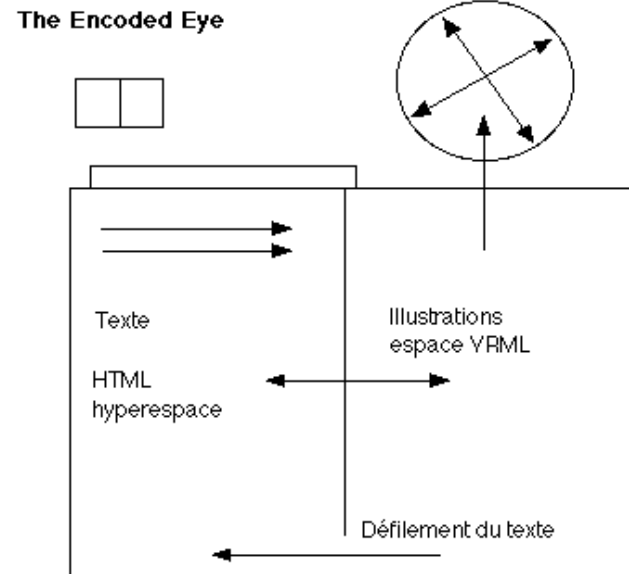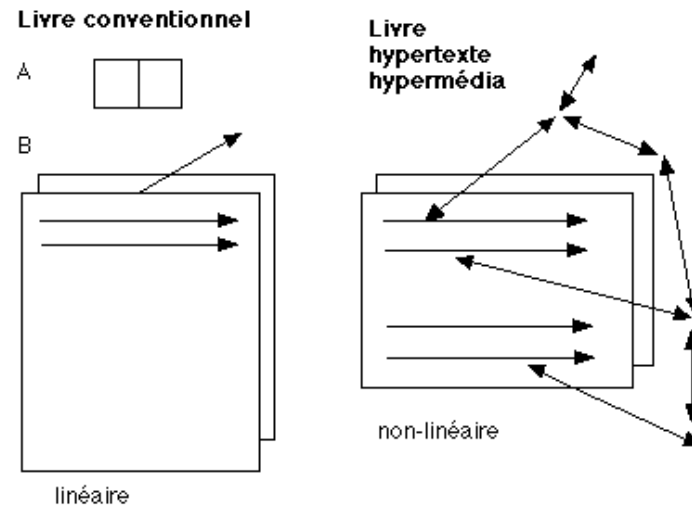
DAVID TOMAS

1998-2000

- **L'objectif du projet est de mettre en suspension le processus de lecture situé entre deux technologie de traitement de l'information : son archivage et sa distribution à savoir le livre conventionnel et l'ordinateur.**

Rapport écran <--> page

Livre conventionnel

A

B

linéaire

Livre hypertexte hypermédia

non-linéaire

The Encoded Eye

Texte

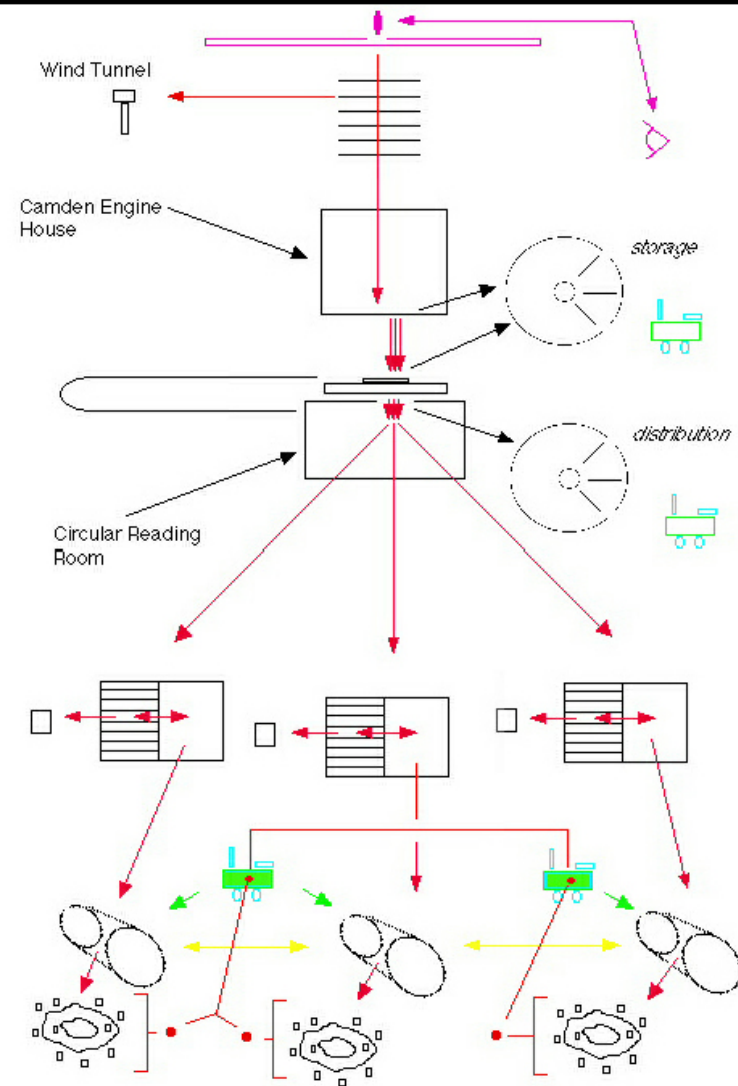HTML hyperespace

Illustrations espace VRML

Défilement du texte

Quelques questions importantes dans l'étude de l'art informatique à partir du livre-internet :

- transformations de l'état matériel et épistémologique du livre traditionnel

- la question de sa présentation versus l'orientation et la navigation du lecteur/trice dans l'espace cybernétique

- la nature et l'état du savoir cybernétique/multimédia

- savoir écrit versus savoir visuel

- histoire des systèmes imagerie versus l'évolution d'un culture du virtuel dans le contexte d'un histoire de L'oeil et de la culture virtuel

- transformation vers une/des autre forme(s) humaine(s)

- statut de l'image informatique

- Les espaces interieurs des systèmes imagerie

- éléments d'une Archéologie des médias dans un espace numérique

Étapes principales dans la conception de « Encoded Eye »

- **Accès** : selon les étapes qu'un lecteur doit suivre lorsqu'il emprunte un ouvrage de la British Library Circular Reading Room.

- **Architecture du site** : les deux lieux/sites sont liés à partir de leur structure spatiale et de leur visée culturelle communes. (À savoir, un lieu d'entreposage circulaire [le Camden Engine House] et un lieu de distribution circulaire [le Camden Engine House et la British Library Circular Reading Room]).

- **Mise en place des chapitres** : une superposition des plans du Camden Engine House, du Circular Reading Room avec ses tables de lecture, et de l'esquisse originale de Panizzi qui ne représente que trois tables de lecture, déterminent le choix des trois chapitres et de leur mise en espace.

- **Lien entre les chapitres et les illustrations** : À partir d'illustrations du Camden Engine House superposées à trois différents plans de conception du bâtiment (1848, 1853, 1856). La mise en espace des illustrations correspond au déplacement d'un visiteur/lecteur dans l'espace de Panizzi.

Wind Tunnel

Camden Engine House

storage

distribution

Circular Reading Room

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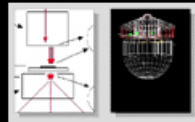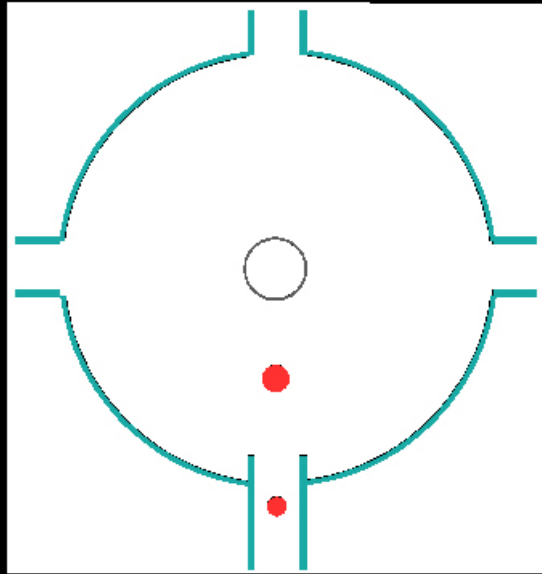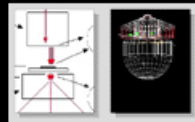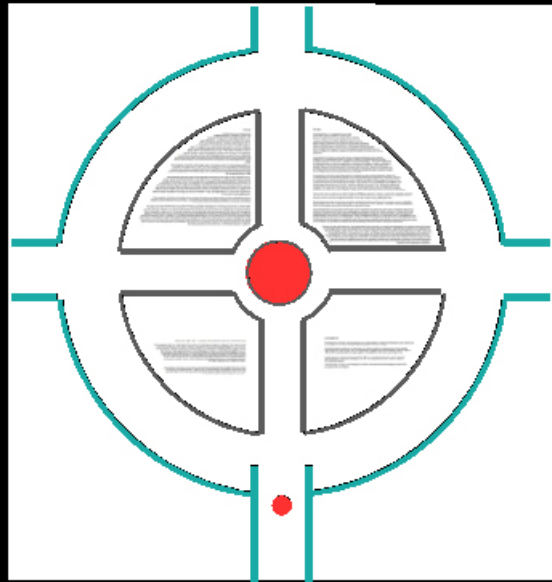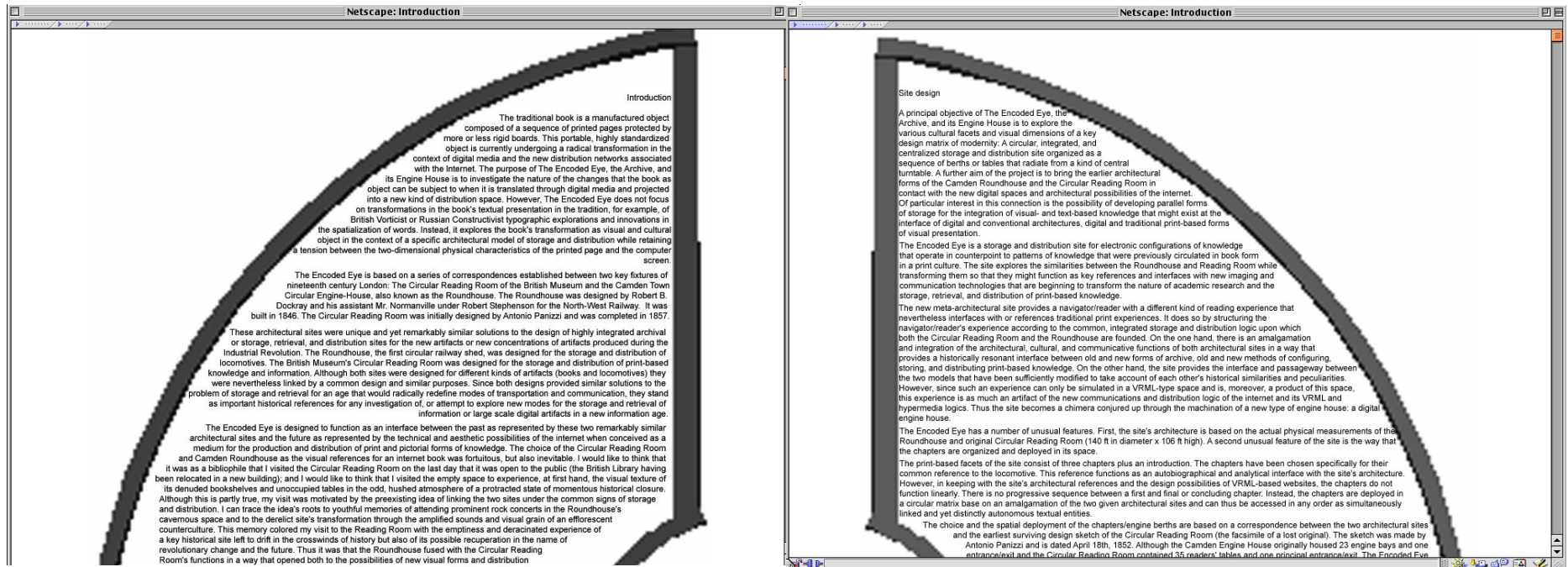
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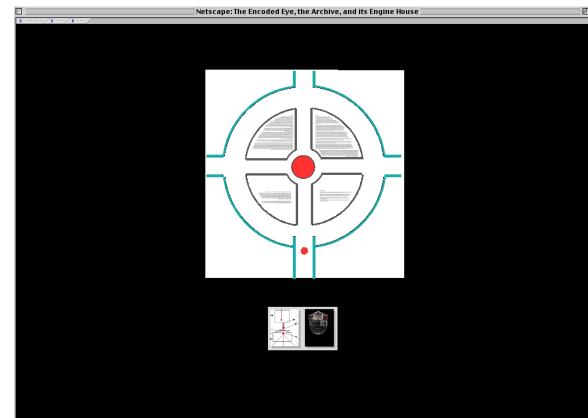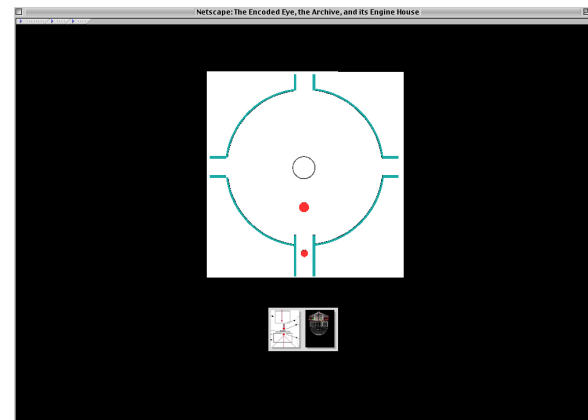
Introduction

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The traditional book is a manufactured object composed of a sequence of printed pages protected by more or less rigid boards. This portable, highly standardized object is currently undergoing a radical transformation in the context of digital media and the new distribution networks associated with the Internet. The purpose of The Encoded Eye, the Archive, and its Engine House is to investigate the nature of the changes that the book as object can be subject to when it is translated through digital media and projected into a new kind of distribution space. However, The Encoded Eye does not focus on transformations in the book's textual presentation in the tradition, for example, of British Vorticist or Russian Constructivist typographic explorations and innovations in the spatialization of words. Instead, it explores the book's transformation as visual and cultural object in the context of a specific architectural model of storage and distribution while retaining a tension between the two-dimensional physical characteristics of the printed page and the computer screen.

The Encoded Eye is based on a series of correspondences established between two key fixtures of nineteenth century London: The Circular Reading Room of the British Museum and the Camden Town Circular Engine-House, also known as the Roundhouse. The Roundhouse was designed by Robert B. Dockray and his assistant Mr. Normanville under Robert Stephenson for the North-West Railway. It was built in 1846. The Circular Reading Room was initially designed by Antonio Panizzi and was completed in 1857.

These architectural sites were unique and yet remarkably similar solutions to the design of highly integrated archival or storage, retrieval, and distribution sites for the new artifacts or new concentrations of artifacts produced during the Industrial Revolution. The Roundhouse, the first circular railway shed, was designed for the storage and distribution of locomotives. The British Museum's Circular Reading Room was designed for the storage and distribution of print-based knowledge and information. Although both sites were designed for different kinds of artifacts (books and locomotives) they were nevertheless linked by a common design and similar purposes. Since both designs provided similar solutions to the problem of storage and retrieval for an age that would radically redefine modes of transportation and communication, they stand as important historical references for any investigation of, or attempt to explore new modes for the storage and retrieval of information or large scale digital artifacts in a new information age.

The Encoded Eye is designed to function as an interface between the past as represented by these two remarkably similar architectural sites and the future as represented by the technical and aesthetic possibilities of the internet when conceived as a medium for the production and distribution of print and pictorial forms of knowledge. The choice of the Circular Reading Room and Camden Roundhouse as the visual references for an internet book was fortuitous, but also inevitable. I would like to think that it was as a bibliophile that I visited the Circular Reading Room on the last day that it was open to the public (the British Library having been relocated in a new building); and I would like to think that I visited the empty space to experience, at first hand, the visual texture of its denuded bookshelves and unoccupied tables in the odd, hushed atmosphere of a protracted state of momentous historical closure. Although this is partly true, my visit was motivated by the preexisting idea of linking the two sites under the common signs of storage and distribution. I can trace the idea's roots to youthful memories of attending prominent rock concerts in the Roundhouse's cavernous space and to the derelict site's transformation through the amplified sounds and visual grain of an efflorescent counterculture. This memory colored my visit to the Reading Room with the emptiness and deracinated experience of a key historical site left to drift in the crosswinds of history but also of its possible recuperation in the name of revolutionary change and the future. Thus it was that the Roundhouse fused with the Circular Reading Room's functions in a way that opened both to the possibilities of new visual forms and distribution

Site design

A principal objective of The Encoded Eye, the Archive, and its Engine House is to explore the various cultural facets and visual dimensions of a key design matrix of modernity: A circular, integrated, and centralized storage and distribution site organized as a sequence of berths or tables that radiate from a kind of central turntable. A further aim of the project is to bring the earlier architectural forms of the Camden Roundhouse and the Circular Reading Room in contact with the new digital spaces and architectural possibilities of the internet. Of particular interest in this connection is the possibility of developing parallel forms of storage for the integration of visual- and text-based knowledge that might exist at the interface of digital and conventional architectures, digital and traditional print-based forms of visual presentation.
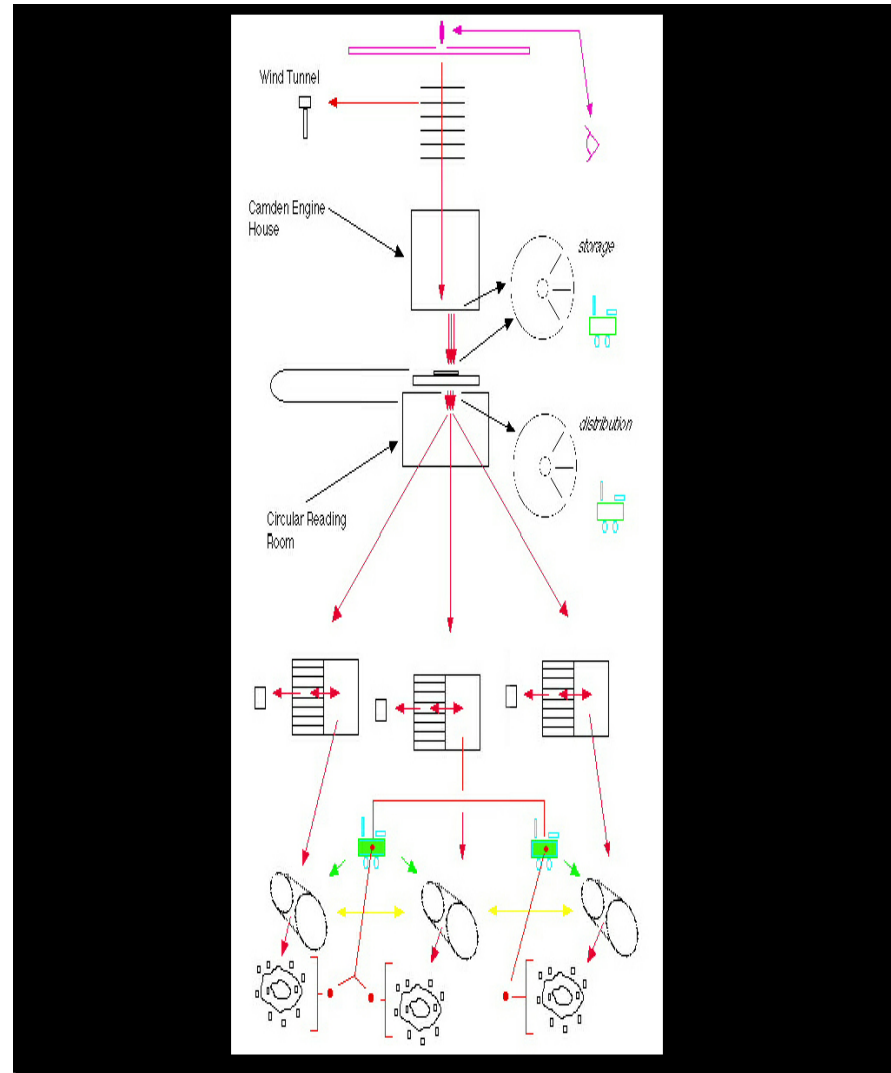
The Encoded Eye is a storage and distribution site for electronic configurations of knowledge that operate in counterpoint to patterns of knowledge that were previously circulated in book form in a print culture. The site explores the similarities between the Roundhouse and Reading Room while transforming them so that they might function as key references and interfaces with new imaging and communication technologies that are beginning to transform the nature of academic research and the storage, retrieval, and distribution of print-based knowledge.

The new meta-architectural site provides a navigator/reader with a different kind of reading experience that nevertheless interfaces with or references traditional print experiences. It does so by structuring the navigator/reader's experience according to the common, integrated storage and distribution logic upon which both the Circular Reading Room and the Roundhouse are founded. On the one hand, there is an amalgamation and integration of the architectural, cultural, and communicative functions of both architectural sites in a way that provides a historically resonant interface between old and new forms of archive, old and new methods of configuring, storing, and distributing print-based knowledge. On the other hand, the site provides the interface and passageway between the two models that have been sufficiently modified to take account of each other's historical similarities and peculiarities. However, since such an experience can only be simulated in a VRML-type space and is, moreover, a product of this space, this experience is as much an artifact of the new communications and distribution logic of the internet and its VRML and hypermedia logics. Thus the site becomes a chimera conjured up through the machination of a new type of engine house: a digital engine house.

The Encoded Eye has a number of unusual features. First, the site's architecture is based on the actual physical measurements of the Roundhouse and original Circular Reading Room (140 ft in diameter x 106 ft high). A second unusual feature of the site is the way that the chapters are organized and deployed in its space.

The print-based facets of the site consist of three chapters plus an introduction. The chapters have been chosen specifically for their common reference to the locomotive. This reference functions as an autobiographical and analytical interface with the site's architecture. However, in keeping with the site's architectural references and the design possibilities of VRML-based websites, the chapters do not function linearly. There is no progressive sequence between a first and final or concluding chapter. Instead, the chapters are deployed in a circular matrix base on an amalgamation of the two given architectural sites and can thus be accessed in any order as simultaneously linked and yet distinctly autonomous textual entities.

The choice and the spatial deployment of the chapters/engine berths are based on a correspondence between the two architectural sites and the earliest surviving design sketch of the Circular Reading Room (the facsimile of a lost original). The sketch was made by Antonio Panizzi and is dated April 18th, 1852. Although the Camden Engine House originally housed 23 engine bays and one entrance/exit and the Circular Reading Room contained 35 readers' tables and one principal entrance/exit, The Encoded Eye

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Netscape: Wind Tunnel

Camera01

Site Map

Return to Encoded Eye
Return to Introduction
Return to Sitemap
Return to Memoirs of a Trainspotter text

Wind Tunnel

Camden Engine
House

storage

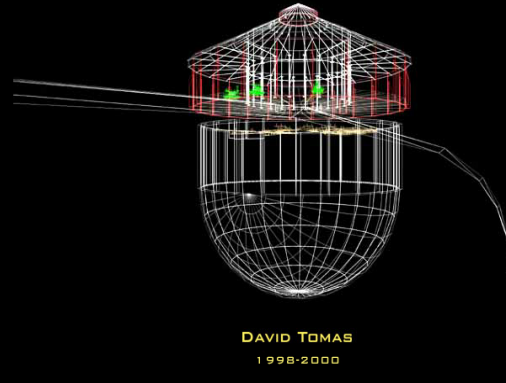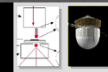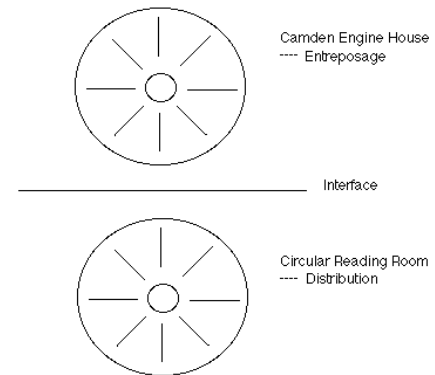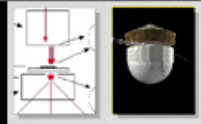Circular Reading
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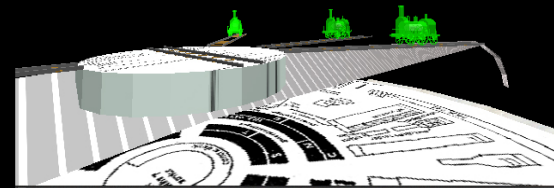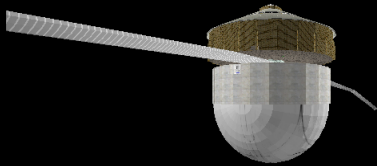
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Camera_outside
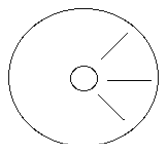

Turntable Camera

Camden Engine House
---- Entreposage

Interface

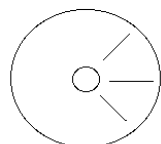Circular Reading Room
---- Distribution

Correspondance entre lieux/sites
d'entreposage et distribution

Camden Engine House
---- Entreposage

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Circular Reading Room
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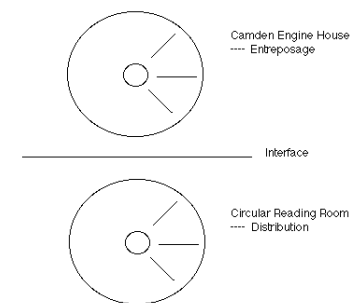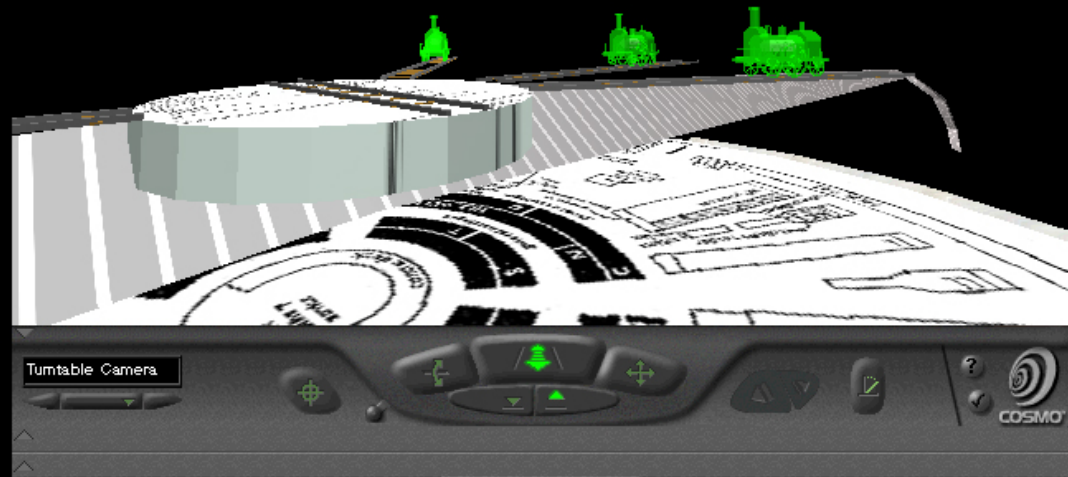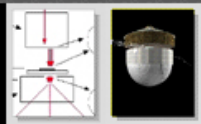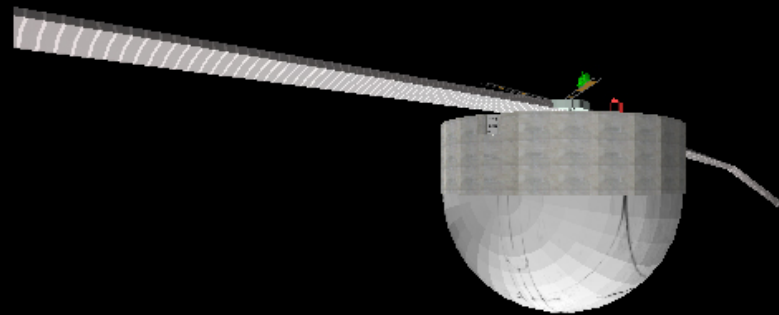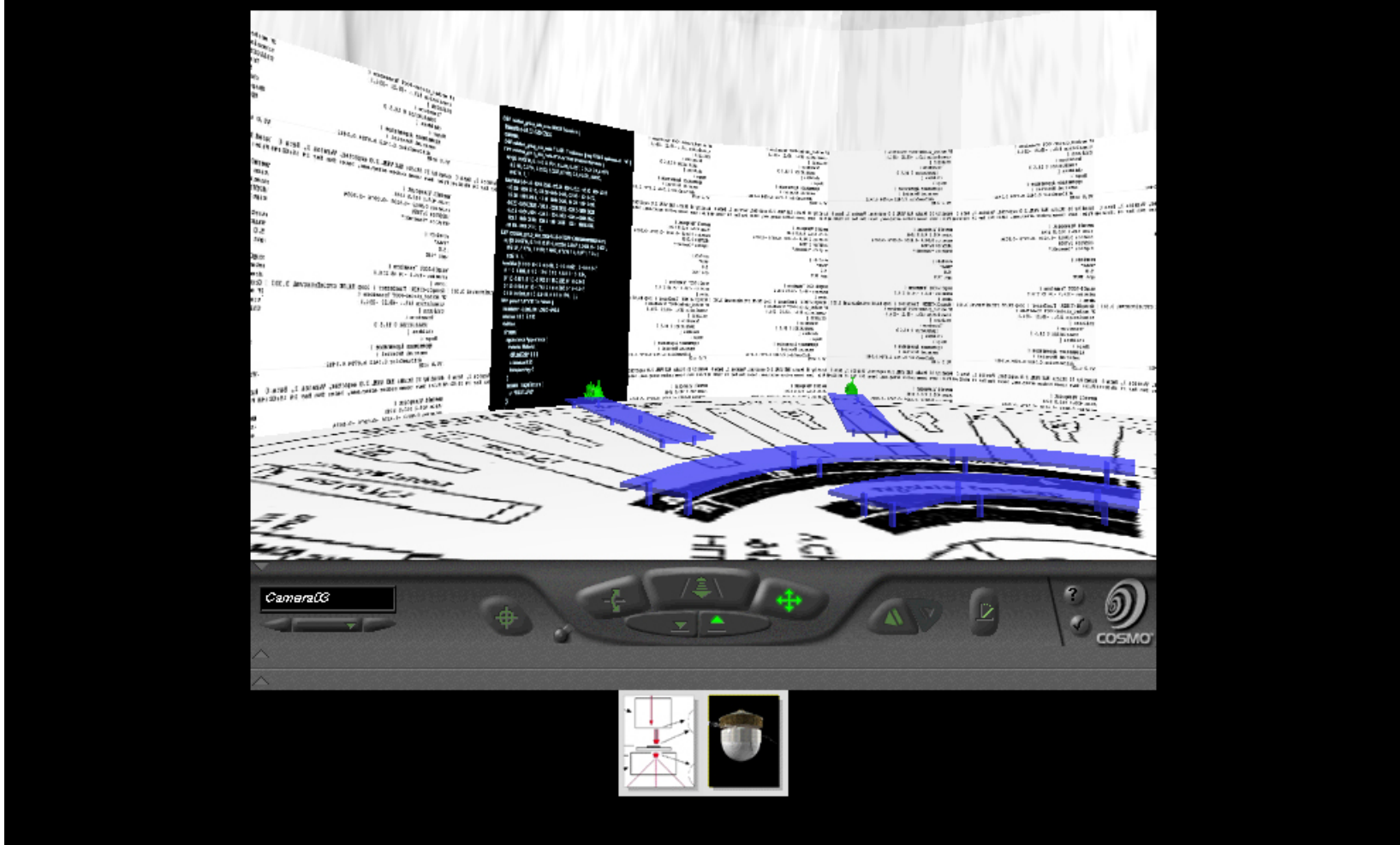
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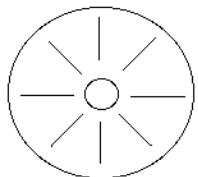
Camden Engine House
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Interface Logic
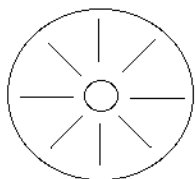
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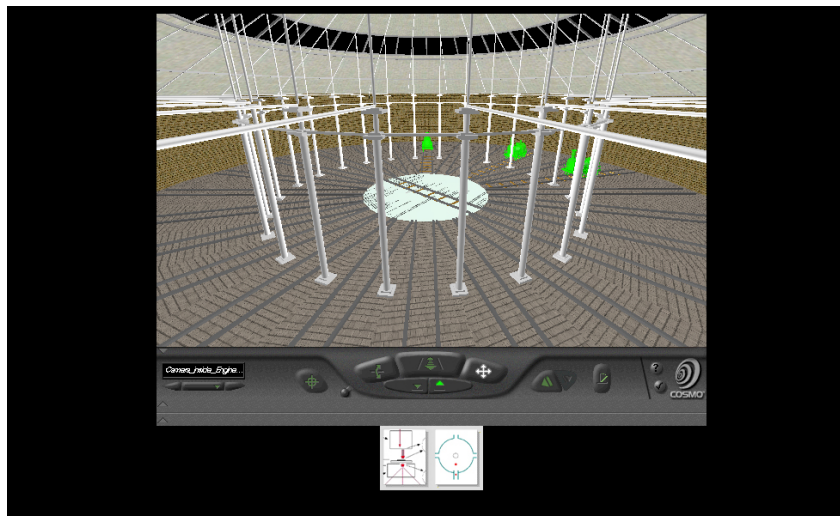
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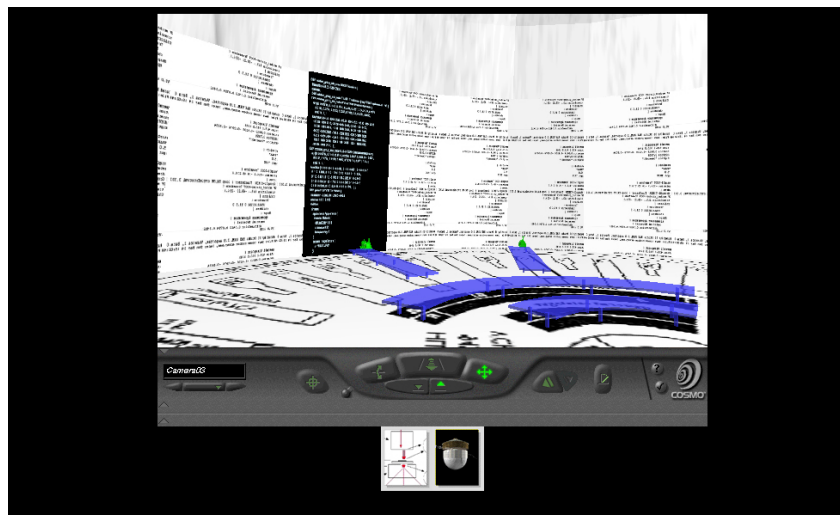d'entreposage et distribution**

Camden Engine House
---- Entreposage

Interface

Circular Reading Room
---- Distribution

MEMOIRS OF A TRAINSPOTTER

Dark chamber of vision -- as if an eye had been extruded into a length of pipe, its lens a piece of optical glass. A tunnel capped by a small circle of pale light. There, floating, alive, struggling to escape -- the tiny image of an actual steam locomotive. A representation, distant in time and space, that conjures up an uncanny microscopic world. Like a spectral bridge to another sector of reality, this remote image can unlock hidden memories, strange correspondences and remote truths.
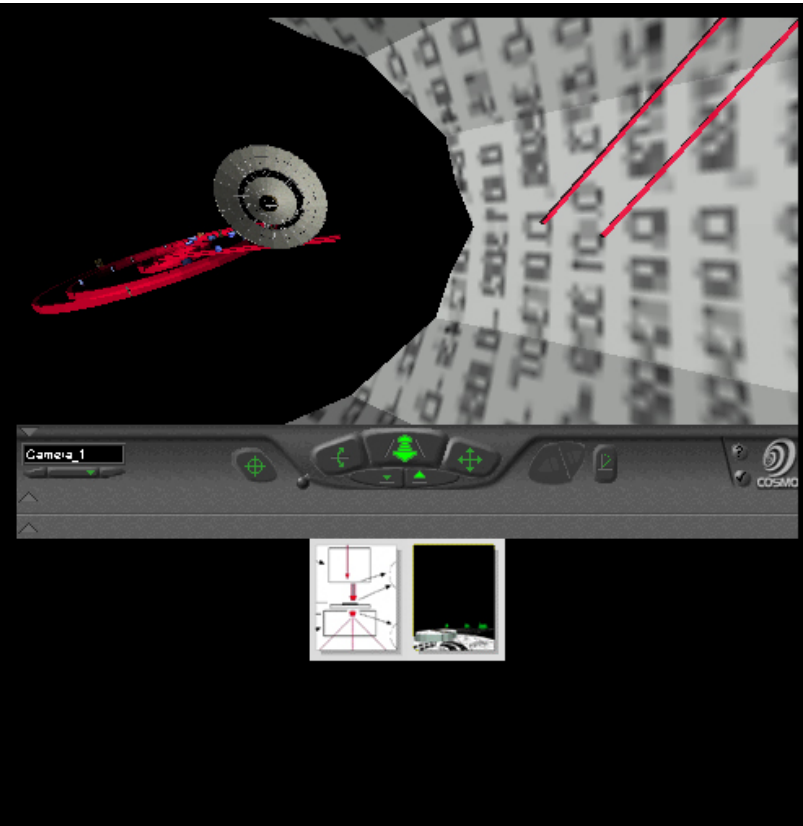
xxxxxx

The idea that modernity could have evolved on the basis of a synergy between systems of representation, communication and transportation began to take on a personal shape sometime in the early nineteen sixties, when he first directed a small telescope towards a distant train. The setting for this exercise was a boarding school's athletics field on the outskirts of a town in the north of England.

The train became a potent symbol of a vast and unseen world to a young boy cloistered, as if in exile, in an alien institution. Indeed, exile was perhaps the key to his relationship with the fleeting images of trains. As the only representative of the New World to attend the school, it was with a sense of placelessness that he haunted its athletics fields, corridors, classrooms, and library.
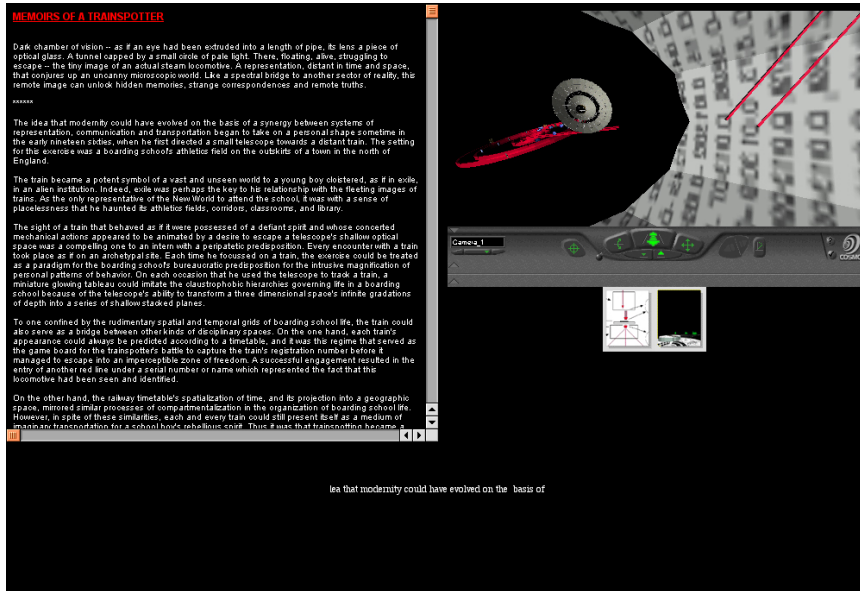
The sight of a train that behaved as if it were possessed of a defiant spirit and whose concerted mechanical actions appeared to be animated by a desire to escape a telescope's shallow optical space was a compelling one to an intern with a peripatetic predisposition. Every encounter with a train took place as if on an archetypal site. Each time he focussed on a train, the exercise could be treated as a paradigm for the boarding school's bureaucratic predisposition for the intrusive magnification of personal patterns of behavior. On each occasion that he used the telescope to track a train, a miniature glowing tableau could imitate the claustrophobic hierarchies governing life in a boarding school because of the telescope's ability to transform a three dimensional space's infinite gradations of depth into a series of shallow stacked planes.

To one confined by the rudimentary spatial and temporal grids of boarding school life, the train could also serve as a bridge between other kinds of disciplinary spaces. On the one hand, each train's appearance could always be predicted according to a timetable, and it was this regime that served as the game board for the trainspotter's battle to capture the train's registration number before it managed to escape into an imperceptible zone of freedom. A successful engagement resulted in the entry of another red line under a serial number or name which represented the fact that this locomotive had been seen and identified.

On the other hand, the railway timetable's spatialization of time, and its projection into a geographic space, mirrored similar processes of compartmentalization in the organization of boarding school life. However, in spite of these similarities, each and every train could still present itself as a medium of imaginary transportation for a school boy's rebellious spirit. Thus it was that trainspotting became a
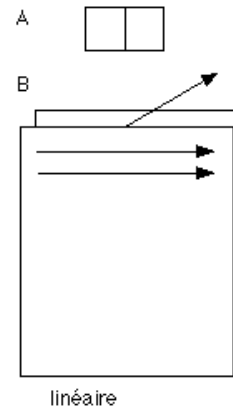
Camera_1

COSMO

lea that modernity could have evolved on the basis of

MEMOIRS OF A TRAINSPOTTER

Dark chamber of vision -- as if an eye had been extruded into a length of pipe, its lens a piece of optical glass. A tunnel capped by a small circle of pale light. There, floating, alive, struggling to escape -- the tiny image of an actual steam locomotive. A representation, distant in time and space, that conjures up an uncanny microscopic world. Like a spectral bridge to another sector of reality, this remote image can unlock hidden memories, strange correspondences and remote truths.

******

The idea that modernity could have evolved on the basis of a synergy between systems of representation, communication and transportation began to take on a personal shape sometime in the early nineteen sixties, when he first directed a small telescope towards a distant train. The setting for this exercise was a boarding school's athletics field on the outskirts of a town in the north of England.

The train became a potent symbol of a vast and unseen world to a young boy cloistered, as if in exile, in an alien institution. Indeed, exile was perhaps the key to his relationship with the fleeting images of trains. As the only representative of the New World to attend the school, it was with a sense of placelessness that he haunted its athletics fields, corridors, classrooms, and library.

The sight of a train that behaved as if it were possessed of a defiant spirit and whose concerted mechanical actions appeared to be animated by a desire to escape a telescope's shallow optical space was a compelling one to an intern with a peripatetic predisposition. Every encounter with a train took place as if on an archetypal site. Each time he focussed on a train, the exercise could be treated as a paradigm for the boarding school's bureaucratic predisposition for the intrusive magnification of personal patterns of behavior. On each occasion that he used the telescope to track a train, a miniature glowing tableau could imitate the claustrophobic hierarchies governing life in a boarding school because of the telescope's ability to transform a three dimensional space's infinite gradations of depth into a series of shallow stacked planes.

To one confined by the rudimentary spatial and temporal grids of boarding school life, the train could also serve as a bridge between other kinds of disciplinary spaces. On the one hand, each train's appearance could always be predicted according to a timetable, and it was this regime that served as the game board for the trainspotter's battle to capture the train's registration number before it managed to escape into an imperceptible zone of freedom. A successful engagement resulted in the entry of another red line under a serial number or name which represented the fact that this locomotive had been seen and identified.

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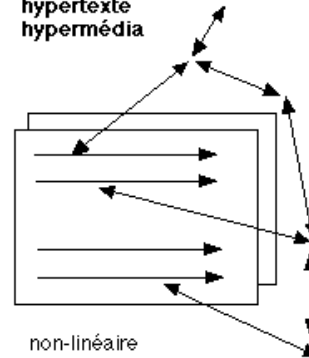lea that modernity could have evolved on the basis of
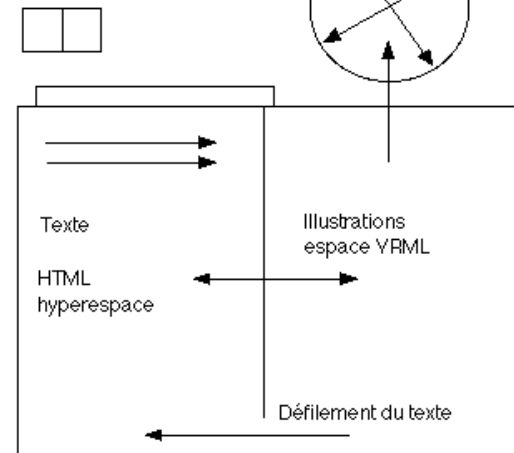
Rapport écran <--> page

Livre conventionnel

A

B

linéaire

Livre hypertexte hypermédia

non-linéaire

The Encoded Eye

Texte

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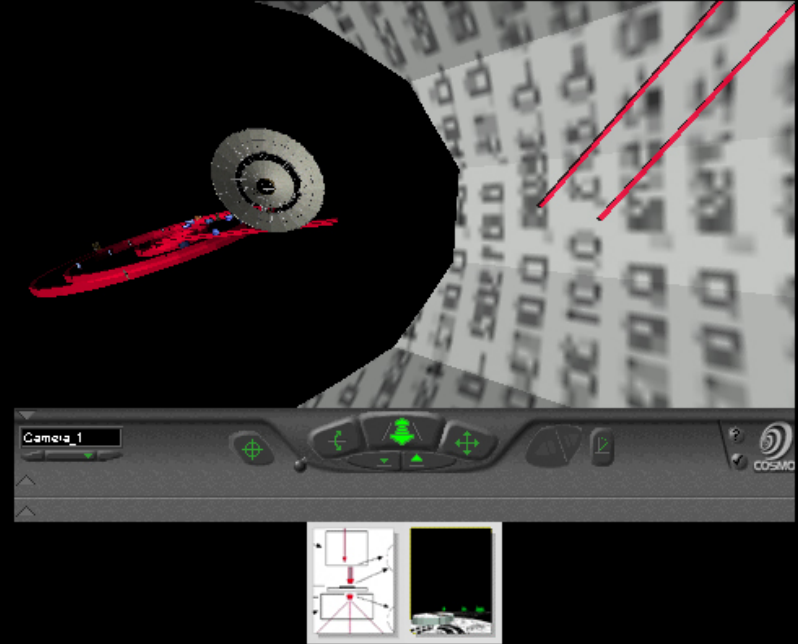
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Back to Text

Camera_1

OTTER   Dark chamber of vision -- as if an eye ha

THRESHOLDS OF IDENTITY

Old family photographs can be strange and disturbing artifacts insofar as they bind one to a past which is unseen, to people who are unknown or who no longer exist. While the invisible and dead are given a second life through the eyes of the living, the living are sometimes eclipsed in a powerful mnemonic embrace that seems to extend from a photograph's skin-like surface. A photograph's fragile surface is 'skin-like' because it is composed of a photo-chemical veneer that can on occasion have the sensuality and delicacy of an area of flesh whose palpability becomes intensely alive when fused with the image of a loved one or of one's kinsfolk. In such cases it is perhaps not an exaggeration to suggest that these images are transformed into tattoos on a surface that has become 'by common descent' an extension of one's own skin. And the older the tattoo, the older is the skin which seems to bind one's body to past bodies.

The photograph's uncanny ability to guarantee an epidermal-like interface is especially unsettling in the case of images in which childhood activities anticipate current professional interests and pursuits. For these images suggest a history which has not evolved, an identity which is frozen in time, in the unseen, the unknown and no longer existent. It seems, in these cases, as if the photograph's skin-like surface and one's own flesh have fused in such a way as to turn one's skin inside out as the past defines and governs the conditions of one's present activities, as well as the foundations of one's sense of self, one's identity as social being.

xxxxxx

During a search through old family photographs, the man came across a container of slides from the late 1950s, as well as an old cigarette package filled with unprinted negatives. Among these images, he unearthed a series of photographs that seemed to have anticipated twenty years of his own artistic preoccupations. As he began to examine them, as he moved from image to image, it seemed as if he were crossing a series of epidermal-like thresholds. As each threshold was traversed, childhood identity and contemporary artistic practice were progressively (con)fused and reconfigured. A parallel world slowly emerged whose imaginary features were situated *outside* of a present-day time and space. For the linkages and cross-references that these images began to evoke were neither completely anterior nor completely contemporary. Their logic depended on a subtle weave of past and future -- a weave whose raison d'être could only be provided in the present by an ongoing artistic practice.

Thresholds of Identity

Memory and identity are often rooted in the same images, objects or locales. Sometimes the three occupy the same place. Thus, one after another, images can appear in which an identity and an artistic practice are progressively entwined across space and time. A second skin can take form across these images, a second self can take shape, a figure whose fragmentary outline stands in for the diminishing autonomy of a present-day self. Thus, a contemporary interest in modern technologies of representation -- photographs, cameras and other kinds of imaging systems -- was anticipated in a 1950s slide of this man's sister and himself standing on the parapet of an ice castle that was a winter

Camera01
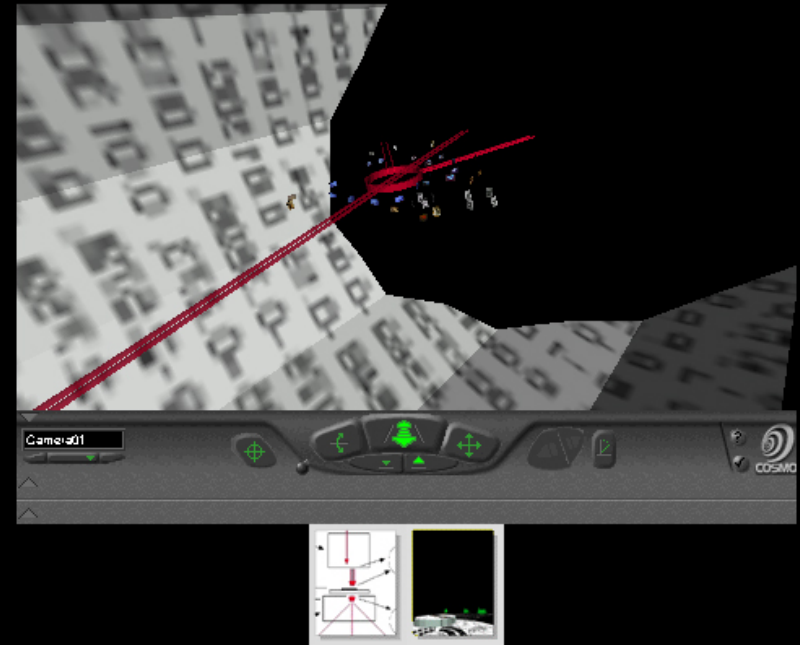
VAPORIZED MEMORIES & PIXELATED DREAMS

Vaporized Memories

The Reader read that the age of steam produced a fundamental shift in the relationship between the human body and nature. For the first time, with the appearance of railways, the human organism's contact with its natural environment was transformed into an exclusively machine-based experience whose ultimate limit was set by the speed generated by locomotive steam power and the geometry of the railway line.
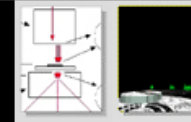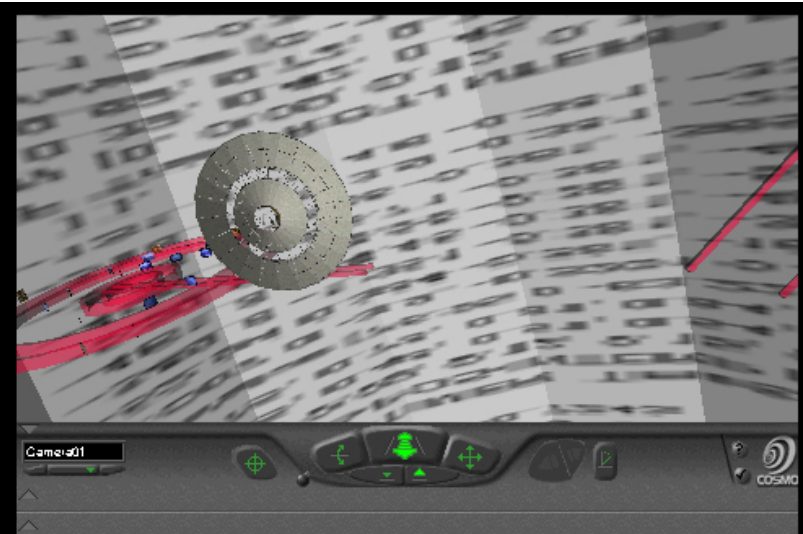
As Wolfgang Schivelbusch pointed out in a book on the subject, "preindustrial traffic is mimetic of natural phenomena."

> Ships drift with water and wind currents, overland motion follows the natural irregularities of the landscape and is determined by the physical powers of draft animals (Schivelbusch 1979: 12).
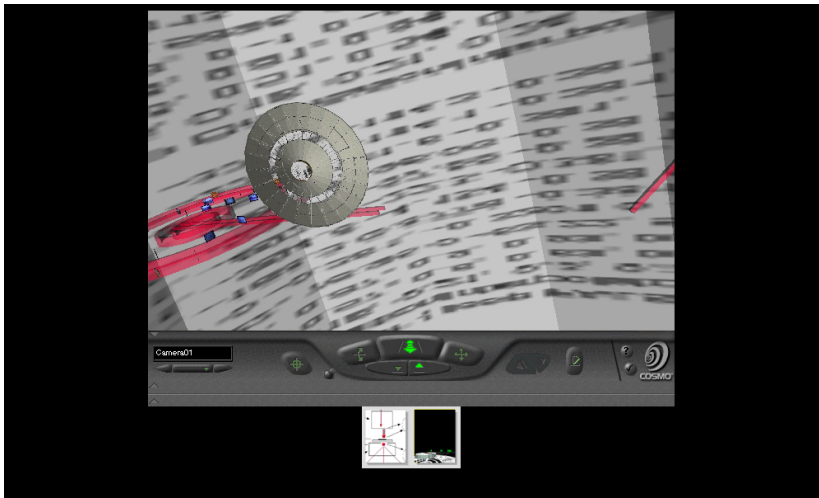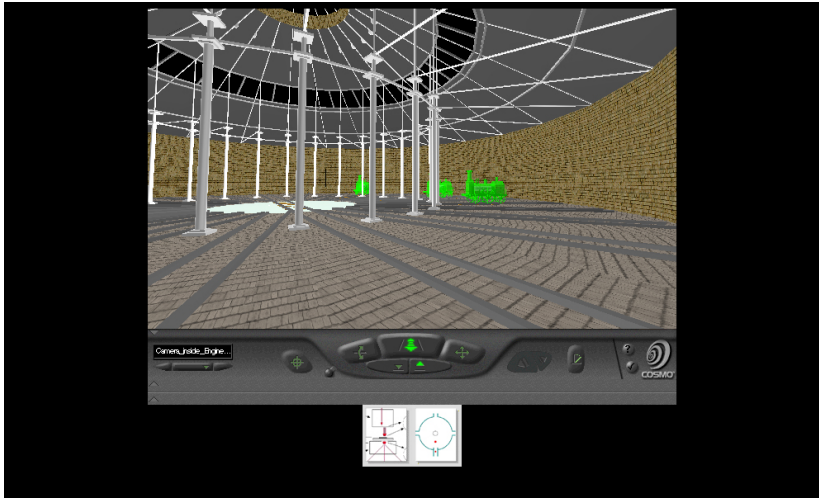
The appearance of steam locomotion's "machine ensemble" -- a term coined by Schivelbusch to describe the system "consisting of wheel and rail, railroad and carriage" -- inaugurated a new era in the history of the human body and its perceptual environment. On the one hand, space was compressed in terms of time, or speed of travel, as the capricious powers of draft animals, winds and currents were replaced by the steam engine's regulated power. The Reader understood that this compression was perhaps the most prominent feature of modernity, whose definitive attitude, in the words of another author, "took the domination of nature as a necessary condition of human emancipation" (Harvey 1990: 249). On the other hand, there was the formation of powerful new perceptual experiences that accompanied the total immersion of the human body in artificially created technological environments composed of iron, wood, and glass animated by steam locomotion. [1]

The Reader concluded that the railway system had rapidly evolved into the first large-scale, fully integrated, completely immersive transnational perceptual system. It was the first of this type of system not because it enveloped an ordered collection of human bodies in a common artificial shell (architectural structures and wooden ships already provided these kinds of environments) but because it provided a new and greatly expanded version of these shell-like environments coupled to an unprecedented source of power. It was because of this new source of power that groups of people could be propelled through space and time at ever increasing speeds; and it was also because of steam locomotion that personal and collective visions were transformed into new types of visceral threshold experiences. As Michel de Certeau pointed out in a short but singular article, it is every passenger's eyes that "continually undoes and remakes the relationships between [the] fixed elements" of static interior and exterior environments in railway locomotion:

> Between the immobility of the inside and that of the outside a certain quid pro quo is introduced, a slender blade that inverts their stability. The chiasm is produced by the windowpane and the rail .... The windowpane is what allows us to see, and the rail,

Wind Tunnel

Camden Engine
House

storage

Circular Reading
Room

distribution

Quelques questions importantes dans l'étude de l'art informatique à partir du livre-internet :

- transformations de l'état matériel et épistémologique du livre traditionnel

- la question de sa présentation versus l'orientation et la navigation du lecteur/trice dans l'espace cybernétique

- la nature et l'état du savoir cybernétique/multimédia

- savoir écrit versus savoir visuel

- histoire des systèmes imagerie versus l'évolution d'un culture du virtuel dans le contexte d'un histoire de L'oeil et de la culture virtuel

- transformation vers une/des autre forme(s) humaine(s)

- statut de l'image informatique

- Les espaces interieurs des systèmes imagerie

- éléments d'une Archéologie des médias dans un espace numérique