Blackpool After Freud;

The Machinic Unconscious from Dream Factory to Ghost Train

MOUTH

(Edia Connole & Scott Wilson)

in association with

Caoimhe Doyle, Petra Jackson, Kathy Tynan, Suzanne Walsh,

and

Caroline Campbell and Niall. W.R. Scott

for Nicola and Zoe

‘We are all freaks on the inside.’

Albert Grass

---

1 Unless otherwise indicated all images are courtesy of Zoe Beloff or are from The Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society and its circle, ed. Zoe Beloff (New York: Christin Burgin, 2009).
Introduction

It is a little known fact that Sigmund Freud visited the fairground attractions of Blackpool in 1908, letters written to his family at this time describe his fondness for the place. Such was his fervour in fact that the following year, on his only trip to the United States, he would also pay a visit to New York’s Coney Island, while en route to a lecture series at Clark University. Notes from folios 7 - 9 of his recently discovered Ephemera relay the sights, sounds and smells he found emanating from the Bowery:

Busy blocks - eating booths, hot frankfurters on the grill, beef dripping on the spit, wash-boilers of green corn steaming in the centre of hungry groups which gnawed on [them] as if playing harmonicas; photograph galleries, the sitters ghastly in the charnel-house glare ... open-faced moving picture shows [that] invite effrontery from the jocose crowd; chop suey joints, fez-topped palmists, strength tests; girls ... in tights and spangles (except on Sabbath). Bands, orchestras, pianos at war with gramophones, hand-organs, calliopes; overhead, a roar of wheels in death lock with shrieks and screams; whistles, gongs, rifles all busy; the smell of candy, popcorn, meats, beer, tobacco, blended with the odour of the crowd redolent now and then of patchouli; a steaming river of people, arches over by electric signs ...\(^2\)

When Freud arrived in New York in September 1909 the air ranged from muggy to stifling. The city streets smelled of industrial fluid and sweat from the crowds. The museum exhibition he had high hopes for, the one on antiquities, turned out to be substandard. Back at his hotel, his stomach was heaving from American food. His mouth had the tang of sour milk. His neck was stiff. ‘I’m truly a mass of symptoms,’ he told himself. ‘I’m a neurasthenic woman... I need a day by the sea,’ and so in the morning, before the sewer vapours saturated the city, he took a ferry to Coney Island.\(^3\)


\(^3\) Klein, ‘Freud in Coney Island,’ 19.
Freud loved the sea, he loved the sand, he even loved the food, at least when he was in Blackpool. ‘England in general is for holidays and eating,’ he told his family in a letter from St. Annes, September 5th 1908.4 ‘You will readily believe,’ he says here, ‘that one feels very well by the sea which one sees all the time.’5 In fact Blackpool is where Freud first saw the sea in 1875, aged 19. His memory of this day, a day spent beech-combing along St. Annes-on-sea, would prove so persistent it would pop-up years later in The Interpretation of Dreams (1913). Here Freud recounts a dream based on strong memories of ‘a whole day on the shore of the Irish sea,’ when a ‘charming little girl’ asked him if he found a starfish and inquired as to whether it was alive. ‘Yes,’ Freud replied, ‘he is alive,’ and at once, embarrassed by his mistake, ‘repeated the sentence correctly.’6 On his return-trip in 1908, one pictures him leaving the same strand for the promenade and making his way passed the North pier toward a Pleasure Beach reeling against the Blackpool skyline, like that of Coney Island, aglow with a ‘shape’ he would come to marvel ‘resembles my model of the mind.’7

In DREAMLAND artist Zoe Beloff uses Freud’s fascination with these sites of fantasy as a starting point to display the history of the Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society. This Society, which consisted of a small group of self-taught Freudians, most of them working-class men and women, did not spring directly from Freud’s visit to Coney Island in 1909, it was established in 1926 by Albert Grass. Like many early converts Grass believed psychoanalysis could change the world. In braving moral outrage from a society that equated psychoanalysis with free love, his Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society and its circle are now regarded as working-class utopians; their repertoire of cinematography conjoining Freudian theory is hailed as providing a missing link between ‘the Workers Film and Photo League of the 1930s

---

5 Maev Kennedy, ‘Freud’s travel letters of happy days in Blackpool,’ The Guardian.
6 Maev Kennedy, ‘Freud’s travel letters of happy days in Blackpool,’ The Guardian.
7 Klein, ‘Freud in Coney Island,’ 30.
and today’s YouTube activists and dreamers.”

Though largely considered an urban myth, the society appears to have been active until the early 1970s; its demise is said to coincide ‘with decisive developments at Coney Island, such as the closure and demolition of some of its seminal attractions,’ as well as what Beloff suggests was the 1970s counter-cultural emphasis on ‘Eastern philosophies and self-help therapies, which replaced psychoanalysis in the popular imagination.’

Extant minutes and letters indicate that while active the society met once a month for discussions, screenings, and lectures in a small office above the Shore Theatre on Surf Avenue in Coney Island. Until the recent discovery of its Blackpool Chapter, it was not believed that the Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society had attracted members beyond New York’s five boroughs.

In collating drawings, photographs, artefacts and films purportedly made by members of both the New York and Blackpool Chapters, Zoe Beloff’s latest inauguration of *Dreamland* for Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool, is a timely reminder of the activities of this society of amateur Freudians. In its entirety Beloff’s collation is an apposite exploration into the unconscious of two of the world’s great amusement parks - depicted as forgotten even repressed repositories of society’s dreams and desires.

---


Albert Grass and Dreamland

The principle focus of Zoe Beloff’s collation and ongoing investigation into the Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society is its founder Albert Grass, a visionary amusement park designer. Grass had ambitious plans to build an amusement park that would embody the workings of the unconscious as put forth by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1913), thus bringing psychoanalysis to the attention of the working people through the medium of popular culture. From what Beloff has been able to piece together through public records and notes kept on file at the Society’s New York office, it appears that Grass first encountered Freud’s writing on his tour of duty in the Signal Corps during the first World War. As an amusement park designer he had gotten his start as a boy before the war working for George Tilyou (the owner of Steeplechase Park, Coney Island’s Great Pavillion of Fun), in the now notorious ‘Insanitarium with Blowhole Theatre.’ After the armistice of 1918 Grass was re-hired by Tilyou’s son, Edward, to design new attractions for Coney Island. Grass returned with a vision that would become a lifelong quest, to rebuild, as Beloff attests, ‘the Dreamland amusement park ... he [had] loved as a [kid,] as a true “Dreamland,” constructed according to strict Freudian principles.’ Unfortunately money was not forthcoming, and all that remains of his designs from this time are a working model, commissioned by William Mangel’s Coney Island Museum of American Recreation, and an abundance of sketches and plans which spectacularly anticipate, by about fifty years, the move made in France by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari; whose *Anti-Oedipus* enthuses about ‘desiring machines’ that provide the general model for desires that are both organic and inorganic. This was in 1972, but as we see from Beloff, Grass was aware of this tendency or theoretical possibility in Freud as early as the 1920s.

---

10 Beloff, ‘An Introduction to The Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society,’ 56.
Dreamland sketches from the notebooks of Albert Grass, 1928.
Dreamland sketches from the notebooks of Albert Grass, 1928.
It is true that Grass’s explication of Freud’s theory of dream formation through a series of designs for pavilions is a little too-literal - ‘The Unconscious,’ ‘The Psychic Censor,’ ‘The Dream Work Factory,’ and ‘The Consciousness,’ all linked by a ‘Train of Thought’ and revolving around a fifty-foot tall prepubescent girl designating ‘The Libido,’ is indeed indicative of an amateur reading of *The Interpretation of Dreams.* But Grass’s designs are also singular in their depiction of the manner in which the fairground’s use and exploitation of electricity, engines, machines and vehicles like the train and the car - in rides as diverse as the roller coaster, the carousel, the switchback, dodgems and the various walls of death - exacerbate the ‘mechanical excitations’ that Freud famously talks about in his *Three Essays On The Theory Of Sexuality* (1905); the combination of fright and mechanical agitation becoming a source of sexual excitation when elicited in small intensities. With this relocation of desire and the unconscious away from the couch and into the fairground, Grass’s hope was that the new Dreamland amusement park could become the model for a politics of social as well as psychic liberation, conjoining Marx and Freud in a re-conceptualisation of the dream not simply as an unconscious wish but as ‘a site of struggle … in which historical and social constellations’ shape inner life pace Freud ‘I have often wondered’ he said, ‘if the shape of Coney Island park resembles my model of the mind. By that I mean, does real space reproduce unconscious space?’ Unfortunately, as mentioned, money was not forthcoming, and Grass’s vision for a new Dreamland amusement park never materialised. Beloff’s exhibition, which features ‘fundraising letters along with a rather curt rejection from Edward Tilyou, ... who wrote, “I do not believe that the public would enjoy your medical attractions which appear to cater to rather prurient tastes,”’ [gives] a sense of some of the barriers he faced.'

12 Beloff in conversation with Niels Van Tomme, Art Papers.
14 Beloff in conversation with Niels Van Tomme, Art Papers.
Dreamland sketches from the notebooks of Albert Grass, 1928.
October 6th, 1930

Mr. Albert Grass,
1801 Surf Avenue, Coney Island

Dear Sir:

In reference to your letter of September 29th, I do not believe that the public would enjoy your medical attractions which appear to cater to rather prurient tastes. I have never heard of the foreign doctor whose name you mention and I cannot imagine that the public would find his ideas to their liking.

I must decline your offer.

Very truly yours,

Edward Tilyou
Albert Grass and Surrealism

Despite the fact that Grass’s 1930 design for a new Dreamland never materialised, Beloff suggests it provides a missing link between the Beaux Arts structure of the original, which burned down in 1911, and the high modernism of the 1939 World’s Fair; which took place in New York under the motto ‘Building the World of Tomorrow with the Tools of Today.’ For example, she says that Grass’s plan for a pavilion representing ‘Consciousness’ (with its great glowing revolving head and two staring eyes) harks back to the designs for the Globe Tower proposed for Coney Island in 1906, at the same time as it prefigures the monumental Perisphere which presided over the World’s Fair ‘proper’ - the fair also consisted of a World’s Fair ‘improper,’ a vast amusement area of carnival pleasures set up adjacent to the main fair. As Ingrid Schaffner has noted in relation to the job of Director of Exhibits and Concessions, Maurice Mermey, who was in charge of developing attractions for the entire fair: ‘Fun as it sounds, the Amusement Area proved most challenging ... Admiral Byrd’s Penguin Island and Morris Geist’s Midget Town were easy shoe-ins for “streamlined festivity for the world of today.” But what exactly would give folks a sense of fun in the future?’ More fascinating still, in relation to this question, is the fact that Beloff’s research makes plain that Grass’s great glowing head not only prefigures the Perisphere which presided over the World’s Fair ‘proper,’ it is also a nod to the original Surrealist ‘Funny-House’ proposed to preside over the World’s Fair ‘improper.’ The proposal for this house, ‘built in the shape of an eye with a fantastically convoluted interior,’ was submitted by an architect, Ian Woodner, and an art dealer, Julian Levy, whose New York gallery - famous for trafficking in the art of dreams, desires, and the reality of the unconscious - was a pioneering venue for Surrealism in America.

The dream impul"se
the beginnings
of the dream,
it's motive
power, originates
in the unconscious.
It strives to gain
an admission to
consciousness,
during the day.
There is a continua-
tion coursing stream
from the psi system
of perception
(eyeball) towards
motility. This ceases at
night and no longer
hinders
a stream of current
excitation in
the other
direction.

1,500 dm motor
pneumatic eyeball

Elevation of the 'Consciousness' Pavilion, from the notebooks of Albert Grass, 1930.
Conceived not as a new or easier mode of expression but as a ‘means toward the total liberation of the mind, and all that resembles it,’ Surrealism was conceived as ‘a cry of the mind which turns back on itself and is determined desperately to tear off its shackles.’ Of course, the Surrealists, who were more or less contemporaneous with Freud, were heavily influenced by his theories, and viewed themselves as ‘revolutionaries set to change modern life along irrational lines.’ Soft-pedalling this revolution to the World’s Fair committee, Levy and Woodner advanced Surrealism’s public potential: ‘It need not only be applied to Art, but may also apply to other activities (architecture, fashion, advertising etc.) of which humour would not be the least significant. It is therefore possible,’ they said, ‘to build a “Surrealist House,” that is hilarious entertainment and at the same time an authentic Surrealist experiment.’ Their proposal described a building in the form of a giant eyeball with ‘a labyrinth of

20 Schaffner, ‘Dreaming the Dreams of All Mankind,’ Biblion.
21 Schaffner, ‘Dreaming the Dreams of All Mankind,’ Biblion.
corridors, special effects, tableaux, and attractions, including: a human kaleidoscope; a waxwork woman combing her hair; a glass woman built to spec on the “Song of Solomon” (a flock of goats for hair); a photo booth with Surrealist backgrounds; and a gallery of “serious works of art by leading Surrealist painters and sculptors, European and American.”

In the end, Woodner and Levy’s proposal was rejected, or at the very least transposed into something else Daliesque, but Beloff wonders whether the idea of building a fairground funny house in the shape of an eye - which was, of course, the symbol of Surrealism - to celebrate the unconscious, could have perhaps originated in Albert Grass’s head? She asks, ‘[w]ere cosmopolitan, Harvard-educated New Yorkers Levy and Woodner aware of Albert Grass’s designs and the activities of the Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society?’

The original proposal for a Surrealist concession at the 1939 World’s Fair, by Julian Levy and Ian Woodner. The commission ultimately went to Salvador Dali, with his ‘Dream of Venus’ pavilion.

22 Schaffner, ‘Dreaming the Dreams of All Mankind,’ Biblion.
Research Beloff has done around the Society’s ‘dream films’ would seem to suggest, yes. As she notes, when Grass did his stint in the Signal Corps in France during World War I, he was billeted near Nantes, where Andre Breton worked as an intern at a local hospital.\(^{24}\) It is likely that the two met and over the years exchanged ideas on the work of the man whose legacy we protect, Georges Bataille. Bataille, Surrealism’s ‘enemy from within,’ would publish his first text *Notre-Dame de Rheims* towards the end of the war in 1918. As Denis Hollier notes in *Against Architecture* (1989), all of Bataille’s writing will be a rewriting of this initial text, though he himself never mentions it; in fact, the centrality of Luna Park (whether that of Paris or Coney Island) to Hollier’s study would not only support the possibility of Breton and Grass’s correspondence, but would seem to suggest that Bataille himself was aware of Grass’s designs on the other side of the Atlantic.\(^{25}\) If we set aside the dissertation *L’Ordre de chevalerie* published as his thesis at L’Ecole des Chartres in 1922, his 1926 notes on medieval ‘Fatrasies’ for *La Revolution surrealiste*, and the various notes and articles on numismatics written for *Arethuse* between 1926 and 1929, ten years of a silence that is only broken for professional reasons separate *Notre-Dame de Rheims* from Bataille’s first published book *The Story of the Eye*. This notorious novella, which appeared under the pseudonym Lord Auch, was published in 1928, just two years before Grass conceived his glowing globular ‘Consciousness,’ a great beacon of light in the shape of a pneumatic eyeball. The novella climaxes with the excision of a priest’s eye, “‘made to slip’ [glisser],” as Nick Land puts it, ‘into the vulva of the book’s “heroine” Simone, once by her own hand, and once by that of Sir Edmond (an English roue). In this way,’ as Land attests, ‘the dark thirst which is the subterranean drive of the sun [a ‘libidinal consistency, which is (must be) alogically the same as the sun’] obliterates vision, drinking it down into the nocturnal labyrinth of the flesh.’\(^{26}\) When considered alongside *The Solar Anus* (1931), *Rotten Sun* (1930) and the

\(^{24}\) Beloff, ‘An Introduction to The Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society,’ 66.


posthumously published *The Pineal Eye* (manuscripts dated variously 1927 and 1931), the theme clearly conjoining Grass’s design for Dreamland with Bataille’s early writing is this surreal submission of vision to a solar trajectory that escapes it; ‘[t]he unconscious,’ Freud argues, ‘is oblivious to contradiction.’

---


Albert Grass and the Dream Films

Though no combat records remain of Grass’s time spent as a soldier in the Signal Corps in WWI, save for a snapshot taken during the Meuse Argonne offensive of 1918, it is clear that his experiences here had a lasting impression. It was in France, as we know, that Grass was first exposed to psychoanalysis, whether that was through Bataille or more directly, as Beloff suggests, through an exchange with Breton in one of the hospitals where his comrades were treated for shell shock, we can’t be sure, but we do know that it is here that he was also exposed to the science of modern communications: Morse code, wireless telegraphy and cinematography. Beloff’s interpretation, based on his archive’s chronology, is that Grass’ ambition became nothing less than to illuminate the unconscious through the medium of modern technology; ‘It was the core idea that sparked all that would follow.’ 29

Albert Grass (left) in the Signal Corps during the Meuse-Argonne offensive, 1918.

After the war, Grass, whose time as a military cameraman in the Signal Corps led to a fascination with the expressive power of cinema, returned to Brooklyn and resumed his job as an amusement park designer at Steeplechase Park and, as we know, founded the Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society in 1926. But whether the Society began independently or as a local branch of the Amateur Cinema League which was also founded that year, remains unclear. The ACL was established in Brooklyn by MIT graduate Hiram Percy Maxim. Like Grass, Maxim embraced modern technology, and saw amateur film as opening up a new form of knowledge. The scope of his thinking can be grasped in the ACL’s first editorial. Here he says: ‘Amateur cinematography has a future that the most imaginative of us would be totally incapable of estimating ... Instead of its being a form of light individual amusement, it is really an entirely new method of communication ...’

The ACL encouraged the formation of local clubs, and offered advice on releases, publications, equipment, competitions, rules and so on, as well publishing all submitted news of the clubs activities. The League also invited members to submit their own films for review. In 1930, in the fourth-anniversary volume of *Amateur Movie Makers Magazine*, a new feature announced the annual selection of the ten best amateur films of the year. As Beloff suggests, this move may or may not have been inspired directly by Grass, an active member of the ACL who, as well as launching a campaign to rebuild Dreamland in the 1920s, took advantage of the availability of a new 16mm camera and launched an annual ‘dream film’ competition.

When Kodak produced the first 16mm camera and the new ‘safety film’ in 1923, Grass, inspired by Freud’s writings, set about initiating a dream film series that would become, over the next forty years, a tradition in the Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society. As Beloff notes, ‘he firmly believed that the films would prove Freud’s dictum that dreams are always the disguised fulfilment of a suppressed wish.’ By the time the Society was established in 1926, Grass, who had been poring

---


over a dog-eared copy of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, was ready to initiate its members into the mysteries of cinematography and Freudian theory: ‘Sigmund Freud has written that the royal road to the unconscious lies in our dreams,’ he told Society members. ‘Each night we are plunged into a fantastical world as amazing as anything we see in Saturday night Photoplays. But how to capture the most effervescent of experiences so that they can be properly analysed and recorded for future generations?’ he asked. ‘The answer, my friends, lies in our new tools, the Cine-Kodak Camera and the Kaleidoscope Projector; enabling us to reenact our dreams on film, producing a perfect reproduction of our mind’s nocturnal wanderings, the strange adventures of our souls. As it will surely be with sound and color to perfect the illusion, we will open up our darkest dreams to the bright light of reason.’

In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud explains that the raison d’être of every dream is wish fulfilment, though this is often hard to discern he says because it is disguised by ‘various procedures including the condensation and displacement of ideas and the dramatization of thoughts and desires in the form of “mental pictures.”’ Hence, in dreaming, rather than experiencing a wish as an abstract, intangible concept, we experience it through a fully formed virtual world in which we find ourselves protagonists, caught up in strange and suspenseful situations. In expressing what he called ‘regard for dramatic fitness’ in dreams, Freud says ‘a thought, usually the one wished for, is in the dream made objective and represented as a scene or according to our belief as experience ... On closer examination, it is plainly seen that there are two pronounced characters in the manifestations of the dream ... The one is the representation as a present situation with the omission of the ‘perhaps,’ the other is the transformation of the thought into visual pictures and into speech.’ He goes on to explain how ‘secondary elaboration’ operates like a good screenplay, ‘to make the dream appear seamless and coherent, even suspenseful, to the dreamer while in fact it is a conglomeration of many ideas that must be approached separately in the course of

33 Beloff, ‘An Introduction to The Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society,’ 63-64.
34 Beloff, ‘An Introduction to The Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society,’ 64.
analysis.’

Though Freud himself never grasped the oneiric potential of cinema, inaugurating what was in fact a great turn away from the visual, on this reading one could argue, as Grass does above, that the closest waking analogy to dreaming is narrative cinema: ‘If a dream is like a film in which the dreamer is the protagonist, why shouldn’t the most fitting medium for sharing and analysing a dream be cinema, now in the hands of ordinary people?’

In dreams anything can happen: we can be in one place and then all of a sudden in another. Through the medium of film, with the aid of ‘a simple editing bench and a hot splicer even the amateur could create a fantastic celluloid dream world and then take it apart shot by shot in the course of analysing and revealing the particular wish lurking within it.’

Of course not all Society members made dream films, though a surprising number did. These were often also members of the Amateur Cinema League, such as Grass himself, and Arthur Rosenzweig. From what we can gather from Beloff’s research, Rosenzweig was a shy scholar who graduated from City College with an MS in Zoology. He later became a high school teacher noted for his methodology; he encouraged students to take field trips, collect specimens, and make dioramas rather than learning by rote. He was invited to document these methods for a pilot program funded by Cornell University, and would incorporate some of this footage into The Bear Dream (1937). Here Rosenzweig dreams he is transformed into a bear and chained-up on the school roof. His students find the metamorphosis of their teacher

---


hilarious and waste no time in spreading the word. As a crowd gathers around him a strange thing occurs, humiliation gives way to elation, Rosenzweig finds himself actually enjoying the experience when a group of young women begin petting and fondling his fur coat, then fear, Rosenzweig realises that they might stop their loving should they find out who is really underneath all that fur. In the second half of the film Rosenzweig analyses this dream. He concludes that it conveys a repressed desire for sexual relations with one of his students, Dorothy, and that the bear skin fulfils the same function as that of a young man’s overcoat in a dream analysed by Freud, which signified fear that a condom would break and lead to an unwanted pregnancy. Rosenzweig also links the figure of the bear-man to his first feelings of sexual arousal, experienced as a young teenager at the freak shows his father would take him to on Coney Island. Here he was turned-on by the salacious young women who would pretend to be half-animal. Oddly, Beloff notes, in a nod to her own investigational skills, ‘Arthur Rosenzweig never mentions that the bear might conjure up Oedipal rivalry for the affections of the opposite sex. His father, Jacob, was after all in the fur business... Only in his dream could Arthur usurp the patriarch, surrounding himself
with a harem of women. Perhaps,’ she opines ‘it was something he simply could not imagine in his waking life.’

**The History of Dreams**

The film archive generated by the Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society over some forty years is a remarkable record of the hopes, fears and fantasies of ordinary men and women who made up the fabric of two of the world’s great amusements parks. An entire inventory here is impossible, but some notable highlights are Grass’ own *The Midget Crane* (1926), which recalls the psychic trauma of those who had to witness the fires that plagued these places on an almost daily basis, at the same time as it recalls the racy character and sexual innuendo of these Sodom[s]-by-the-sea.

Charmion de Forde’s *The Praying Mantis* (1931), recalls the cabarets which offered perfect venues for experiments in free love, at the same time as they perpetuated (along with the saucy seaside postcards; see for example the work of Blackpool Chapter member Bert Barrow) the reputation these parks had for illicit sex.40 Rosenzweig’s *The Bear Dream* (1937), as discussed, recalls youthful excitation at the freak shows with their nod to transhuman fornication. And last but not least, Eddie Kammerer’s *The Bobsled* (1972) recalls, through maternal abandonment, a dark decade for these attractions on both sides of the Atlantic, but in particular at this time, for Coney Island, when Fred. C. Trump, Donald Trump’s father, demolished Steeplechase Park, and tore Kammerer’s beloved Bobsled down.

Thinking about this project, Beloff notes of how she is often drawn back to a statement by Walter Benjamin in his 1927 essay ‘Dream Kitsch: Gloss on Surrealism.’ Here he says that the ‘history of the dream remains to be written, and [that] opening up a perspective on this subject would mean decisively overcoming the superstitious belief in natural necessity by means of historical illumination.’41 While Freud was busy exploring the psychic make up of the individual through the study of dreams Benjamin believed that he was not thinking about larger patterns of society or about how a changing society influences our unconscious. Benjamin speculated that a history of dreams would reveal who we are in a social context as opposed to relegating the imagination to an atemporal, ahistorical sphere. It seems to Beloff that this might just be the perfect lens through which to view the Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society’s dream films. If these films are at times poorly shot, and in the end little more than home movies, it all the better reflects the fact that for Beloff, as for Benjamin, the era of heroic or visionary dreams is over: ‘The dream has grown grey ... Dreams are now a shortcut to banality. Technology consigned the outer image of things to a long farewell, like banknotes that are bound to lose their value.’42

40 Bert Barrow, *Saucy Seaside Postcards and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, (unpublished) MS.
In 1965 Fred Trump bought Steeplechase Park with plans to destroy it. In 1966 he sent out invitations to a party on September 21 celebrating its demolition. He offered bricks to guests which they were to throw through the funny face painted on the windows. Models clad in bikinis posed for publicity photos in a bulldozer’s shovel. Demolition began the following day, and by January 1967 Steeplechase park was little more than a memory.
As an industrial art form, a thrill factory, the fairground and amusement park take their place alongside early cinema in their mutual development of an aesthetics of shock. As Benjamin noted, these forms managed to establish as a formal principle perception in the form of the shock experience. In his analysis of industrial forms of art and enjoyment, Benjamin draws extensively on Freud’s metapsychological work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Written towards the end of WWI, this text traces the ‘traumatic neurosis’ that is the result of the impact of objects, particularly technical ones, that become vehicles of identification and desire. In particular Freud highlights the experience of shell shock which he also links to the impact of high velocity machines and vehicles like trains and automobiles: ‘A condition has long been known and described which occurs after severe mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life; it has been given the name of “traumatic neurosis.”’

In his history of the train, Wolfgang Schivelbusch notes of contemporaneous ‘reports about railroad accidents that describe travellers as exhibiting signs of strong psychic disruption, phobias, obsessive actions etc., without having suffered any actual injury.’ Freud was no different in that he sought to investigate these strange psychic disturbances, but he also seems to have suffered from them. His friend and associate Ernest Jones reports that Freud suffered from a phobia of trains and travel. This was especially active in the years 1880-1899, and Jones links its origin to a trip Freud took to Freiberg. Seemingly, when the train he was on passed through Breslau, Freud saw gas jets for the first time and ‘they made him think of souls burning in hell.’ Here is a brilliant evocation of that famous fairground ride the Ghost Train which of course thematises ‘siderodromophobia’ or a phobia of trains, evoking the dead of the crash but also the undead ghosts, slaves to

---


the compulsion to repeat, that have sacrificed themselves to the death drive that is embodied by the train, metaphor for technological progress.

In this context, the thrills offered by the fairground and amusement park are analogous to those ‘dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses [that] have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of the accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright.’ It is entirely characteristic of the fairground ‘dream factory,’ then, that it would stage locomotive crashes as popular spectacles and amusements. For example the Coney Island Switchback Ride called ‘The Leapfrog’ which sends two cars racing towards one another on an apparent collision course. Noting the proximity between early accounts of technological shock and psychoanalytic theories of trauma, Schivelbusch turns to Freud for an explanation of both the habitation of travellers to new modes of transportation and the after-effects of accidents. Endorsing the hypothesis in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that organisms develop a ‘protective shield’ to cope with the excitations of external stimuli, Schivelbusch applies it to the experience of rail travel. As a new stimulus, the speed of travel and its effects on perception is a mildly distressing and irritating experience. With habituation, however, the velocity is ‘psychically assimilated,’ the result of a thickening of the protective shield of consciousness. Shock thus becomes

---

This is essentially the argument developed by Benjamin, of course, in his famous essays ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ and ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production,’ wherein his materialist account is that working class entertainments produce experiences in which subjects are reshaped by the system of urban capitalist industrial organisation: ‘technology has subjected the human sensorium to a new kind of training,’ capturing the life drives by the death drive and the precipitous momentum of technocapitalism.\(^5\)

\(^{49}\) Schivelbusch, \textit{The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the 19th Century}, 158.

\(^{50}\) Walter Benjamin 1973, 176.

\(^{51}\) Available at Coney Island Bulletin Board and Paperspast respectively, \url{http://community.coneyisland.com/cgi-bin/yabb/YaBB.pl?num=1316764185/0}, \url{http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&d=TS19050909.2.33} (last accessed 18-11-13).
In his analysis Benjamin characteristically emphasises the element of capitalist manipulation and training, but he does not dwell on the libidinal power of machines, something that Freud notes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and elsewhere. The fairground is a dream factory that produces machines that enables workers to live out their unconscious desires, repeat and imaginarily master traumas and infantile sexual disappointments, no doubt, but also to ‘get off’ on machines, to become excited and aroused by them. Freud acknowledges that there is a real pleasure, an eroticism in

![The Dodgems at Blackpool Pleasure Beach ca. 1970.](http://www.flickr.com/photos/uk-charlie/4087109558/in/photostream/)

automotive thrills and even in actual impacts. Discussing why a gross physical injury caused by an impact actually diminishes the chances that a neurosis will develop, Freud argues that firstly ‘mechanical agitation must be recognised as one of the sources of sexual excitation, and secondly that painful and feverish illnesses exercise a powerful effect, so long as they last, on the distribution of libido.’ The fairground and amusement park sets in train a process that leads directly to the auto-destructive sexual fantasies of JG Ballard’s *Crash*. As Ballard writes in relation to this: ‘A car crash harnesses elements of eroticism, aggression, desire, speed, drama, kinaesthetic

---


factors, the stylizing of motion, consumer goods, status – all these in one event. I myself see the car crash as a tremendous sexual event really: a liberation of human and machine libido (if there is such a thing)."54

Ballard’s equivocation indicates that it is not a question of separate human and machine libidos, but of a general machinism that generates its own ‘endogenous libido’ in which Eros is shredded by a ‘cyclonic compulsion to repeat’ that, as it gathers momentum in the digital revolution of the 70s, 80s and beyond, engenders


‘generalized sexual disorder, cyberviral contagion, mutant gender schizzling and hardcore technophilia.’\textsuperscript{56}


\textsuperscript{57} Available at Lylyby, \url{http://lylybye.blogspot.ie/2009/01/crash-david-cronenberg-steven-klein.html} (last accessed 18-11-13).
In his seminal essay ‘Machinic Desire’ Land embraces the conjunction of neoliberal economics and technological innovation, and the compulsion to repeat that becomes the sole modality of ‘desire’ as it defaults to a machined demand rendered limitless by exponential increases in computing power, and enthuses about its ability to produce new ‘artificial desires’ such as addictions that lubricate economic growth in epidemics of psychic ‘disorders’ and psychoses. In the critique offered by another Amateur Psychoanalytic Society called Club Acephale, desire is actually foreclosed here and ‘devolves to the site of the drive, of a nonorganic hard-wired intensive body extimate to the site of control and addiction.’ As Land enthusiastically suggests: ‘Addiction is … a replicator interlock with money operating quite differently to reproductive investment, but guiding it even more inexorably towards capitalization.’

The final sense of eroticism, writes Bataille, is death, but here the process of ‘making it with death’ has become automated such that the remnants of shredded Eros are expelled from a machinism that has sought to erase the erotics of crashing – Google’s driverless cars are poised to expel all eroticism, aggression, desire, speed and drama from the mix as this and other corporate structures graft themselves onto an entirely machinic temporality that locks out libido entirely relative to a purely undead process of replication. In the late 1990s, Club Acephale wrote on the emergence of a new form of atemporality that displaced modern humanity to a spectral realm as an effect of the death of time: ‘temporality accedes to aleatory movements … to an a-temporality whose mirror is the drifts, speed and hyperconductivity of electronic pulsation’ in which Eros flatlines, ‘no pulse at all, but a residual, ghostly non-machinic temporality.’

59 Land, ‘Machinic Desire,’ 337.
60 Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, ‘Dead Time (A Ghost Story),’ 76.
**Blackpool After Freud**

A year after his visit to Blackpool Freud saw his first moving picture in New York, most likely in Coney Island. Unlike the young Grass, he was singularly unimpressed. Like so many turn-of-century modernists, who were shaped before mass entertainment took charge, it was difficult for him to understand its imagery as little more than fascist excitation. Recalling Kafka’s classic statement ‘that movies were only “iron shutters” that disturb one’s vision, forcing the eye to jump from one vision to another, “putting the eye in uniform,’” Norman Klein reminds us that for all Freud liked Blackpool, he compared his day at Coney Island ‘to the hounds of world war.’

As in references to the hounds of war as a thrill ride, ‘it was basic to the place that could not be mapped onto his topology, even at the end of his life.’

---

61 Groop Index, ‘Excerpt: The Blue of Noon,’ *experimental video based on the work of George Bataille.*

62 Klein, ‘Freud in Coney Island,’ 29.

63 Klein, ‘Freud in Coney Island,’ 29.
map brick by brick,’ he says in the Ephemera: ‘But the exception makes the map.’ Here we see Freud dying of cancer of the jaw on the eve of World War II. One of his final notes as the pain and opium ripen refers to a dark Coney-Island like hallucination, in which he describes the ‘spiral dream,’ where phobic play converts into ‘spiralling machines’ crushing his Europe. ‘Machinic desire can seem a little inhuman,’ writes Land insouciantly. Certainly this is the impression one gets from Bataille who, like Freud, saw these ‘spiralling machines’ on the eve of WWII. Here in the last lines of the quasi-autobiographical *The Blue of Noon* (1935) we find Troppman aka Bataille embarking a train somewhere in Germany. The figure of the train, which the very last line of the novel tells us ‘lost no time in departing’ (foreshadowing the fact that Bataille's book would for the next twenty years remain consigned to history), is prefigured by another ‘Coney-Island like hallucination’ outside the station:

I was standing in front of many children who were lined up on tiers of the stage in military formation. They were in short black velvet pants and short jackets adorned with shoulder knots; they were bareheaded; fifes to the right, side drums to the left.

They were playing with such ferocity, with so strident a beat, that I stood breathless in front of them. Nothing could have been more abrupt than the beating of the side drums, or more caustic than the fifes. As they faced the vast, empty, rain drenched square and played for occasional passerbys, all these Nazi boys (some of them were blonde, with doll-like faces) seemed, in their stricklike stiffness, to be possessed by some cataclysmic exultation. In front of them, their leader - a degenerately skinny kid with the sulky face of a fish - kept time with a long drum major's stick. He held this stick obscenely erect, with the knob at his crotch, it then looked like a monstrous monkey's

---

64 Klein, ‘Freud in Coney Island,’ 29.
65 Klein, ‘Freud in Coney Island,’ 29.
66 Land, ‘Machinic Desire,’ 337.
Undated photograph of Bert Barrow from the Blackpool Chapter of the Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society.
penis that had been decorated with braids of colored cord. Like a dirty little brute, he would then jerk the stick level with his mouth; from crotch to mouth, from mouth to crotch, each rise and fall jerking to a grinding salvo from the drums. The sight was obscene. It was terrifying - if I hadn't been blessed with exceptional composure, how could I have stood and looked at these hateful automatons as calmly as if I were facing a stonewall?67

As one or other of us has noted elsewhere: ‘In Europe, it is said that certain nations pride themselves on one characteristic above all others. That doesn’t mean they don’t value other qualities, but they overvalue one singular trait so that those who are perceived to lack it seem to appear a little less human ... And for the English that something is humor, especially irony... Americans of course lack irony, and are brash. The Germans have no sense of humor at all, and therefore can’t see how hilarious ...’ this sight would have appeared to a bawdy Blackpool.68 If Freud liked Blackpool, and not Coney Island, it was most likely because there is something innocuous about machinic desire in the context of English humor; even and especially here in the context of Henri Bergson’s Le Rire (1900) which, concluding that humour consists in the momentary transformation of the physical into the machinic, is considered alongside Freud’s Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1905), the theory of laughter to have exerted the greatest influence in the twentieth century.69

Here at last it is timely to be reminded of the Blackpool Chapter of the Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society, and in particular of Bert Barrow. A plumber by trade, Barrow was passionate about art from an early age. As a teenager he enlisted in a drawing class through a mail order company that advertised in Beano. He wanted to draw comic postcards for Blackpool’s thriving tourist industry. It was to this end that


These early examples (1918) of saucy seaside cards barely disguise their sexual content. The gentleman’s walking stick can be read as a visual substitute for a certain part of his anatomy.
he undertook a short hand drawn book *Saucy Seaside Postcards and their relation to the Unconscious* to analyze the psychology behind the risqué postcard. (Whether he was ever hired as a commercial artist in this field is not clear but Beloff has collated some of his original sketches, including an image of a giant corkscrew superimposed over a moonlit beach with the caption “Who were you with last night?”) Barrow’s analysis drew heavily on Freud’s book *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*.

In this text Freud explains how humor, like dreams or slips of the tongue offers a brief look into the unconscious workings of the mind, particularly in relation to sexuality and aggression. Like dreams, jokes make use of the mechanisms of condensation, displacement and absurdity. The same word can accommodate multiple meanings depending on the interpretation. Quite impulsively, we can express by means of jokes, thoughts and feelings that would normally be considered inappropriate in a public context. Certainly the funniest jokes are at heart hostile or obscene, expressing indirectly feelings that should be repressed in civil society. It is in this sense that Beloff says ‘the joke represents a rebellion against authority.’ As she notes more specifically in relation to the work of Barrow:

[While] Freud drew from a treasure trove of Jewish jokes for his examples, ... Barrow worked with his own source of vernacular humor, Blackpool’s seaside postcards. Unlike Freud’s jokes which are purely verbal, the postcard contained both image and text that together give rise to rich double entendres. Barrow, following Freud, identified the themes represented in the postcards with issues of infantile sexuality. They return the viewer to a time when the child wishes to see the private parts of the opposite sex, when the little boy still longs for his mother depicted in the postcards as a huge and amply endowed matron. It is a world where oral lust triumphs and phallic prowess is celebrated in the form of giant sticks of Blackpool rock.70

---

70 Zoe Beloff, ‘(Text accompanying Bert Barrow’s) *Saucy Seaside Postcards and their relation to the Unconscious*, MS.
A banned saucy seaside postcard by Donald McGill, Blackpool ca. 1930.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{71} Available from AOL Travel UK, \url{http://travel.aol.co.uk/2012/10/16/banned-saucy-seaside-postcards-from-the-past} (last accessed 18-11-13).
Here, in an homage to Zoe Beloff and her DREAMLAND project, we invite you to suck on sticks of Blackpool rock while sound artist Suzanne Walsh evokes spectres of political desire and ghosts of the libido in a performance of a seaside classic from the 1930s by Blackpool’s own George Formby. Formby’s comic subversion of the phallicism immanent to the fascist automatism of marching bands evoked by Bataille in The Blue of Noon echoes in the reverberations of a musical machinism that precipitates desire beyond the confines of technological objects. ‘Eroticism,’ wrote Club Acephale, ‘is not the immediate seizure of – or by – objects of desire, but a precipitation beyond objects and images.’ That is to say a movement beyond that is enacted through a perversion and abuse of objects in a reversal of technological assimilation wherein technology (highly processed, technological food) is re-eroticised through Freud. In so doing, the superego of capitalism (Enjoy!) is evoked even as it is sweetened to the point of sickness and subverted in the spirit of the fairground through a selection of perverse delicacies from Sacher Masoch to Sachertorte!

Edia Connole & Scott Wilson

72 Available at MOUTH Channel, YouTube, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBipvS0QyM&feature=youtu.be (last accessed 21-11-13).
73 Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, ‘Dead Time (A Ghost Story),’ 76.
Films cited:

*The Midget Crane* (1926), Albert Grass, 16mm black-and-white safety film original, 2 minutes 17 seconds; transfer note by Beloff, copied at 18 frames per second.

*The Praying Mantis* (1931), Charmion de Forde, 16mm black-and-white Kodak print with variable density optical sound track, 6 minutes 24 seconds; transfer note by Beloff, copied at 24 frames per second.

*The Bear Dream* (1937), Arthur Rosenzweig, 16mm black-and-white Kodak safety film original; transfer note by Beloff, copied at 18 frames per second.

*The Bobsled: A Recurring Dream* (1972), Eddie Kammerer, 16mm black-and-white Kodak reversal camera original and Kodachrome original with magnetic sound, 2 minutes 25 seconds; transfer note by Beloff, copied at 24 frames per second.