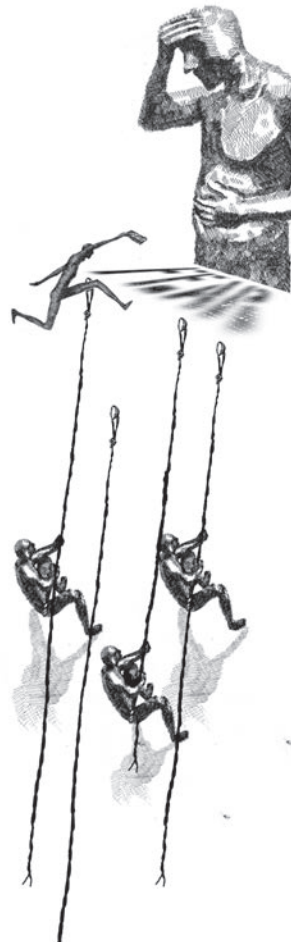


UNPARALYSIS



On the Usefulness of Anxiety

Two Evil Media Stratagems

MATTHEW FULLER + ANDREW GOFFEY

The following sections of text are stratagems selected from a work-in-progress that aims to capture the changing nature of power in contemporary media, especially in its increasingly technosocial aspects, and to distill them into a series of useful ploys or tactics. Drawing its practical inspiration and modular structure from the writings of Nicolo Machiavelli, Baltasar Gracian and Arthur Schopenhauer, amongst others, and founded on substantial research into corporate literature, technical and strategy documents, these stratagems are offered as a means of working with the many kinds of power articulated through media systems.

Traditional media studies works on power relations in terms of ownership, access, identity, representation and interpretation. Whilst these have their place, in a context in which media are increasingly becoming directly operational (as control systems) and biological (in their closer correlation with the triggering and monitoring of affect and information), and at the same time are growing more distributed, autonomous and integrated both amongst themselves and with multiple scales of reality, a pragmatics is required which is capable of recognising the collapsing of the technical into the cultural, social and ecological whilst at the same time being explicitly cognizant of the opportunities for power that such a situation presents.

This given, the Evil Media approach works with a broad conception of mediality that, whilst it includes the usual repertoire of systems of signification that can be detached from the body, also works at scales that are beneath the level of the whole body – on brains, neural entrainment and physiologically potent chemicals partially handleable as signals.

Alongside these, the approach works extensively with much of contemporary grey media such as expert systems, workflow, databases, human-computer interaction and the sub-media world of leaks, networks and permissions – structures that establish what eventually appears as conventional media. These systems are now far more widespread and functionally significant than those which are most often apparent as media. Their relative invisibility,

or naturalisation through ostensibly neutral technicity, and their fusing of the cultures of the workplace with those of consumption and policing offer numerous opportunities for interesting uses.

Machiavelli emphasised that rulers should be feared rather than hated, but first of all, they should be rulers. Fear is indeed preferable to love in that it carries less unpredictability and risk of loss. A technics of fear, as something transmissible, calculable and directional, needs to be supplemented by the cybernetic recognition of feedback. Evil Media approaches provide this necessary reflexivity.

Invite Everyone into the Psychodrama

In a world of ruse, cunning and manipulation, nothing is unambiguous or unproblematic, everything is pliable, biddable, suggestible. The question of the tools one uses, the forces one has at one's disposal, and the ways in which these can be made to work to one's advantage is thus permanently open, despite the sleek façades and seamless, transparent interfaces which seem to tell another story. In the multiple fields of knowledge production, the exercise of strategic or stratagematic intelligence requires an attentiveness to what would otherwise remain irredeemably obscure epistemological discussion, hair-splitting conceptual distinctions, even throwaway comments and off-the-cuff remarks. Chairman Mao knew this only too well, pointing out – in the field of politics – that trouble is an excellent thing. Even the emergence of a controversy in a scientific field can furnish crucial indicators for otherwise imperceptible shifts, geopolitical impasses and social problems, offering a toehold for the astute media operative. In this way, the cracks, faults and disturbances marking our mental universes offer the same kinds of opportunities for exploitation as do bugs in the algorithmic universes of software, and one stratagem is always in the position of being able to turn another to its own account.¹

The domain of the 'psy' disciplines, the once-favoured epistemo-technical resource for public relations gurus, cold warriors and wizened imperialists, drawn on pell-mell in the development of strategic ambiguity (psychoanalysis would have been a good name for the fantasised practices of mind control), once again proves a crucial resource for following the shifting configurations and shadowy actions of mediums.

Part of the genius of psychoanalysis was to have linked what it does as a set of therapeutic practices to a conception of knowledge and of truth. Its promise to uncover hidden truths, its use of the concept of transference to break down the unconscious resistances of the patient and mitigate the possibly distorting effects of suggestion and, more generally, to detect and disclose things that a patient couldn't or wouldn't acknowledge, has, one must admit, a certain strategic allure. More refined than the salivating hounds of Soviet behaviourism in the context of social power and geopolitical conflict, the theatrical *mise-en-scène* of its conceptual framework – its learned allusions to Ancient Greek culture – gives added value and a hefty payout of cultural capital with which to speculate and scheme. As with the resonant connections between counter-intelligence practice and literary criticism,² mapping furtive and clandestine dynamics into textual structures and theatrical scripts offers a tasteful sheen and a somewhat aesthetic ornamentation to the resolution of geopolitical problems.

The double reference to knowledge and to therapy, in fact, offers a flip-flop that can be utilised with impunity to avoid unwelcome accusations of trickery and manipulation. On the one hand, the therapeutic claim – we're only trying to help alleviate the suffering of psychological disorders – can be used to sanction any manner of improper suggestiveness in practice. On the other, the knowledge claim – that patients disclose in analysis the truth of their suffering – can be used to head off the criticism that maybe the analyst puts ideas into his patient's head and constructs the problems the analysis then claims to resolve. Unlike behaviourism, which quite openly acknowledged its debts to the model of reflex action by siphoning off the excess dribble produced in expectation of reward, the implications of the suggestive stimulations of reflex action were historically cast to one side on the royal road to the unconscious.³

Thus, one might say that in spite of the well-meaning, therapeutic intent of analysis, its appeal to Science offers a cover, an alibi, an air of benevolent neutrality and cultural sophistication, a confident feeling of being in the right, to what others might see as really a technique of influence.⁴ We've already seen the value of this in the polemical construction of brainwashing. So when Jung, breaking with Freud, remarks that in transference, that imprimatur of scientificity, the analyst can appear a devil, a god or a sorcerer,⁵ it's not difficult to laugh such things off as the obsessions of a mythomaniac. The archetype? Not a scientific concept, I'm afraid. But when we add to the balance-sheet the systemic downgrading of fear in favour of an endogenous logic of anxiety,⁶ and we factor in the findings of recent work on the psychology of torture (difficult to attribute those anxieties to the subject in question?), we can't help thinking that Jung might have had a point. Could it be that the reconstruction of the unconscious might have been at the service of forces other than those of pure science all along? Maintaining plausible deniability for the hex you've placed on the terrified libido is made considerably easier if you can excise in advance any connections that the unconscious might have with the outside world.

Part of the opposition that psychoanalysts, stalwarts of the Cold War of the psyche, have towards initiatives developing elsewhere – psychopharmacology, cognitive science and neurobiology, for example – stems from the complications they bring into the dynamic of transference (whose operative structural fantasies are rather homologous to brainwashing and mind control): what strange, active, possibly empowering effects might an anxiolytic or an anti-depressant have on a patient's unconscious resistances to the outing of the truth? The medium of psychoanalysis is speech, but there must be a powerfully motivated forgetting to make us ignore the possibility that the psyche is constructed through other media too. Irony fading, the analyst comments that "addiction opens a field where no single word of the subject is reliable and where he escapes analysis altogether".⁸ Fearing the spiking of the psyche, the analyst insists on the exclusion of any other agents than the medium of language.

What we are getting at is that a certain doctrinal (or theoretical – the difference is slight here) rigidity renders a practice open to the classic counter-intelligence scam and ruse of power: the turning of an agent. Given the wilderness of mirrors that analysis finds itself in, there is the strong possibility of no longer knowing who or what is running who – we can

ask in all seriousness whether Anna O., right at the inception of the analytic movement, was humouring Breuer and Freud all along. In any case, the hypothesis that the unconscious might be *simulated* in particular situations is one we can't ignore any longer.⁹ What becomes of your intelligence-gathering operations if the other you think you are controlling is ironically conforming to your demands or imitating you in a game of sly civility?¹⁰

One can always find a use for someone or something that so adamantly holds to doctrinal purity and the universality of its judgements, maintaining a haughty disdain for anything even moderately pragmatic: the fabrication of a terrain predisposed to certain kinds of affective configuration (anxiety, a disposition considered to be universal); a willing ignorance of the myriad other mediators by which an unconscious might be constructed; the belief and expectation that politicians, strategists, marketeers, will respect the autonomy of the scientist. Analysis, we might say, prepares the ground for depressed, anxiety-prone subjects and offers a remarkable set of tools for welding subjects to their symptoms. All the misery of the world, miraculously transformed into the exasperated comments of the parent to the child: you'll see, just wait until you're an adult...

So what was it that Jung glimpsed? Devils, demons, gods, sorcerers – mythic images going beyond the family, sure, but also something properly *frightening*. Castration anxiety? Perhaps. To the great benefit of already well-stabilised forces, analysis didn't really want to have that much to do with fear – Freud himself sometimes seems to say that by virtue of its connection with external objects, fear is unanalysable.¹¹ Anxiety, by contrast, is not only susceptible of analysis, but performs socially useful work in preparing us for the kinds of shocks that frightening situations create. But if this distinction seems quite uncertain to us, we cannot ignore the inestimable tactical value of focusing attention on what goes on inside a subject as part of the more general process by which zones of secrecy, culpability and shame can be fabricated. Turn the other to your cause; even if, deep down, they are afraid of you, it's always good to have people who can keep a secret on your side.¹²

Speak the Metalanguage of Metabolism

...although she's not really ill, there's a little yellow pill...

The invention of psychopharmacology – following the experiments of Loewi in the 1920s, demonstrating the *chemical* basis for the transmission of neural messages (whilst not definitively ruling out the previously reigning hypothesis of electrical transmission) – the commercial sale of psychotropic drugs such as chlorpromazine and the invention of benzodiazepines in the 1950s, along with the publication of manuals such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, have had a powerful effect on the constellation of forces making up 'the social'. If the irrational exuberance of psychosurgeons demonstrated that social relations and the imperatives of the state could sometimes be fabricated with ice picks and scalpels,¹³ the mythologisation of mother's little helper in popular culture not only confirms, as McLuhan has it, that the medium is the message, but it also acts as an index of complex shifts in the ecology of media.

The development of psychopharmacology and its steady infection of the social generate new media spaces, new media with their own messages. No longer electronic technologies working at a distance in extended space, but chemical technologies creating distances in intensive space; keying social relations into the bio-chemical strata of organic material; targeting and mobilising populations of neurons – not through the electronic messaging systems of mass media exactly but through the facilitation of neuronal transmission systems, meshing with the loops and hits of online connectivity; catalysing circulation through the topologies of networks linking synapses, minds, emotions, techno-science, geopolitics; creating grey media for grey matter and vice versa. Whilst there may be no simple, one-to-one mapping between the use of pharmaceutical substances and widespread patterns of thought, in matters of mind control, we should at least be receptive to the idea that new substances generate new stratagems.

Research programmes backing up into the early part of the post-World War II era already testify to an interest in the manipulative potential of psychopharmaceuticals.¹⁴ And the question marks that still hang over the funding of Timothy Leary's research, not to mention the propping up of a charismatic leader (John F. Kennedy) by amphetamines (that famous smile is holding back the strung-out grinding of teeth), are good indicators of the strange connections that become possible when active substances become a significant component of the clandestine relations and alliances of the polity.

Psychopharmacology alters the distribution – and hence balance – of forces political, technical and chemical, factoring in new agents for consideration in the strategic calculus of populations. Downplaying the strictly monitored conditions of the séance, the couch, the 50-minute hour, in the ongoing battle for hearts and minds, and embracing instead the gaseous dispersion and nebulous clouding of chemical media, allows for unsupervised processes of self-medication, permitting the confusion of therapy, governance and pleasure (albeit at the admitted cost of having to find uses for addictions) and requiring in turn a shift into the multi-dimensional spaces of non-linear thinking. The slow metabolising of power through a new alliance with chemistry and a corresponding molecularisation of conflict, where negotiations are now contracted through the prescriptive regimen of the dose (or the illicit regimen of the hit), requires an acceptance that bonds (both chemical and social) can be covalent as much as they can be ionic, in spite of the latter's oppositional attractions.¹⁵ Acceptance, then, of a troublesome shift in the characteristic operations of domination and control.

At the social level, as much as at the more strictly biochemical level, political talk about controlled substances¹⁶ risks an epistemological blunder of oxymoronic proportions (the jokey half-admission contained in the corresponding declaration of a war *on* drugs is actually more of the order of a strategic ambiguity and a tacit concession to a new ally). After all, if nature offers the allure of strictly deterministic processes, the scientific realism of something happening 'whether we like it or not', then, legal niceties aside, who's to say who is in control any longer? Is the confidence of *realpolitik* in realism misplaced?

The mathematical certainties of the causal chains of physics and the precision engineering of lock-and-key biological specificity might persuade the untutored that the identification of

the neuronal apparatus productive of affect could henceforth be played like a keyboard¹⁷ (imagine! with everything from do-re-mi to Schoenberg!). But if the hopeful hyping of drug design plays on a well-entrenched and neatly rationalised model of pharmaceutical practice, in reality, the chemical orchestration of inhibition and disinhibition and the corresponding dynamics of control require much greater forms of artfulness. More specifically, they call for a reckoning with the very great difficulties in making determinism – a useful hypothesis for the laboratory and a resonant strap line for marketing – scale up and into the variegated territories of ‘the social’.

It is here that the trials and tribulations of the weaponisation of chemical agents help demonstrate some of the new possibilities, risks and limits of control. Of course, the cartoon capers of government agents and scientists finding ways to break down enemy combatants using cigarettes laced with marijuana are one thing (as are the bigger budget giggles of the exploding cigar as highly targeted assassination device),¹⁸ but developing precise delivery systems for chemical weapons is quite another: the Moscow Theatre siege in 2002, for example, was not a well-orchestrated, precision-controlled military operation. Calibrating the impact of something which has to be dispersed by aerosol, as a mist in the atmosphere or through thermal bomblets (the case with BZ¹⁹), plays havoc with attempts to make the determinist logic of linear causality – which material intervention at the level of grey matter was supposed to offer – work at the supra-organic level. Doping up or doping down neuronal receptors is a tricky proposition once the subject is out in the open and there is both a blood-brain barrier and a targeted recipient problem to overcome. In an interrogation room, you can strap a suspect down and tease up a tender vein, but for battlefield ops and crowd control (CS gas and lacrimogens – don’t forget your soft contact lenses – notwithstanding), the aerosol effect disperses chemicals either too quickly or too indiscriminately. This creates obvious public relations problems and makes the development of tried and tested battlefield doctrine a complex task.²⁰ The propensity of unstable and unpredictable mediators to generate uncontrollable forms of *blowback* here²¹ presents a world- and possibly bio-historical challenge for crisis management and may or may not commend some chemical agents to a lengthy entry in any future manual of psy ops. Or spy ops for that matter.

However psychopharmacology is not exactly chemical warfare (even if pharmaceutical companies willingly play on both sides of the military-civilian divide), and the displacements that pharmaceutical products accomplish in the ongoing production of the psyche still offer a latitude for manoeuvre worth exploiting. It may just be that psychopharmacology – especially in the grey area between (failed) covert military and (successful) overt civilian guises – offers the possibility of a more intelligently negotiated alliance with chemical agents. The use of pill technology for self-administered domestic consumption, for example, as opposed to the unpredictable mediations of weaponisation, or the complex, localised institutional apparatuses of lobotomy or ECT [electroconvulsive therapy], allows for more accurate delivery (even if it does depend upon a less tightly controlled chain of mediators). A pill embodies a strategy with much more tangible reliability than the shaky practices of quacks, headshrinks and other shamans, to say nothing of the eye-watering intrusiveness of the icepick.

The definite preference that the psychopharmacological machine displays for the production of short-term effects is as critical here as is the media form and can be of great value, especially if tied in to other apparatuses reliant on the up-down, high-low movements typical of machinic junkiedom (even the stock exchange needs a stimulus package from time to time).²²

Whilst the poor adaptation of double-blind clinical tests – which allow for the marketisation of drugs – to the evaluation of long-term effects may compound the problems of blowback over time, the molecules upon which such tests are focused are actually highly effective recruitment devices. Kingmakers of a new kind, they sealed the ascendancy of a new macropolitical actor – the pharmaceutical giant – and, while they may not possess the diagnostic power of a good doctor or psychoanalyst, in a highly pragmatic way, they don't require that a new recruit reveal the truth about him or her self. The massive success of diazepam (from the family of benzodiazepines) – according to some sources, the most widely prescribed drug in the United States between 1962 and 1981 – is exemplary in this regard. Whilst the curative effects of such a substance might blur the difference between a symptom and a cause, it has no real need for secrecy, guilt or shame. Look how quickly user groups set themselves up on the Internet – doctor-patient confidentiality doesn't enter the equation. Anyway, anxiety offers a useful cover story for dealing with harmful or fearful incursions from the outside world and, in the worse case scenario, under conditions of addiction (or influence, but for different reasons), as we saw elsewhere, the subject is easily discredited as an unreliable witness.

More significantly, perhaps, one of the invaluable side-effects of benzodiazepines, cyclopyrrolones, dopamines, and SSRIs [selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors such as Fluoxetine, i.e. Prozac] is to have accelerated the process of reforming and recomposing the very field in which and on which they operated. From an initial position where they complemented the medium of speech in the talking cure, pharmaceuticals end up taking over completely. And there wouldn't be any CBT [cognitive behaviour therapy] without the reorganising effects of drugs on psychology.²³ Liquidating the 'dependency on authority' effects characteristic of therapeutic speech, the bio-chemical end of deference creates an ambiguous situation. For whilst existential dramas of anxiety are replaced by effects of disinhibition that can, it is true, minimise the lacerating effects of the group superego (a distinct advantage when trying to operate in the amoral zone of strategy), there is a complete shift of affective investments, with group identities forming round the molecule.²⁴ Harnessing complex metabolic patterns and turning agents when the theatrical tragedy of the primal scene has been vapourised becomes a multimedia operation, and in the peculiarly interstitial spaces that are created when linearity doesn't scale up, negotiation, ruse and cunning are open even to the most hardened of addicts.²⁵

Notes

1. *We aren't trying to make a point about science 'in general' here, just observing that the psy disciplines are a fascinating resource and topic for explorations in the (ab)use of power. See, for example, Isabelle Stengers, Cosmopolitiques Vol. 7: Pour en finir avec la tolérance (La Découverte, 1997, Paris).*
2. *Michael James. Jesus Angleton Holzman: The CIA and the Craft of Counterintelligence (University of Massachusetts Press, 2008, Amhurst). Also see the review by Terence Hawkes, "William Empson's Influence on the CIA" in The Times Literary Supplement, 10 June 2009.*
3. *See Marcel Gauchet. L'inconscient cérébral (Seuil, 1992, Paris).*
4. *Stengers, op. cit.*
5. *Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Anti-Oedipus (Minnesota University Press, 1983, Minnesota), p. 46.*
6. *See, for example, Freud's comments in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle". In (ed.) James Strachey, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 18 (Hogarth Press, 1955, London), ch. 2.*
7. *Françoise Sironi. Bourreaux et victimes (Odile Jacob, 1992, Paris).*
8. *Jacques Lacan. Cited in Avital Ronell, Crack Wars (University of Nebraska Press, 1992, Lincoln), p. 53.*
9. *Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen. "L'inconscient simulé". In (ed.) Tobie Nathan, La guerre des psys (Les Empêcheurs de Penser en Rond, 2006, Paris).*
10. *Jean Baudrillard. In The Shadow of the Silent Majorities (Semiotext(e), 1983, New York). Homi K. Bhabha. "Sly Civility". In October 34 (1985), pp. 71-80.*
11. *See Freud, op. cit.*
12. *Vinciane Despret. "Le secret est une dimension politique de la thérapie". In Nathan, op. cit.*
13. *In the words of Walter Freeman, the intent was to turn "taxeaters" into "taxpayers". See Jack Pressman, The Last Resort: Psychosurgery and the Limits of Medicine (Cambridge University Press, 1998, Cambridge).*
14. *The ARTICHOKE programme, for example. See Alan Schefflin and Edward Opton, The Mind Manipulators (Paddington Press, 1978, London), and Dominic Streatfeild, Brainwash: The Secret History of Mind Control (Hodder, 2006, London).*
15. *cf. Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (1973).*
16. *The Controlled Substances Act was passed in the USA in 1970. Nixon declared his war on drugs in 1971.*
17. *As in the scenario imagined by Alfred Hitchcock and relayed by Slavoj Žižek. See the brief discussion of this in Philippe Pignarre, Les malheurs des psys (La Découverte, 2006, Paris), pp. 44-45. On specificity, see Jean-Jacques Kupiec and Pierre Sonigo, Ni dieu ni gêne (Seuil, 2000, Paris), pp. 17-60.*
18. *See Streatfeild, op. cit., pp. 44-49.*
19. *Reid Kirby. "Paradise Lost: The Psycho Agents". In The Quarterly Journal of the Harvard Sussex Program on CBW Armament and Arms Limitation 71 (May 2006), p. 1.*
20. *ibid., p. 4.*
21. *cf. Chalmers Johnson, Blowback (Holt Paperbacks, 2004, New York).*
22. *See Félix Guattari, "Machinic Junkies" in Soft Subversions (Semiotext(e), 1996, New York). See also Christian Marazzi, Capital and Language (Semiotext(e), 2008, New York), on the short-term movements of credulity inherent in the financial markets.*
23. *The full argument is developed in Philippe Pignarre, Les malheurs des psys, op. cit. Pignarre's Comment la dépression est devenue une épidémie (La Découverte, 2001, Paris) is a crucial text for following the logic of recruitment in the pharmaceutical industry.*
24. *See Sylvie Le Poulichet, Toxicomanies et psychanalyse: Les narcoses du désir (PUF, 1987, Paris), on the fate of "transference" in addiction, Pignarre, op. cit., and Tobie Nathan, A qui j'appartiens? (Seuil, 2007, Paris), on new complexes of attachments in psychology, and Carole Rivière, "Le lien de dépendance addictive à Internet: Une nouvelle forme d'addiction?" Available at: http://www.omnsh.org/article.php3?id_article=94 (accessed 2 September 2009), for an analytic approach to new media.*
25. *Emilie Gomart. "Surprised by Methadone: In Praise of Drug Substitution Treatment in a French Clinic". In Body and Society 10 (2-3), pp. 85-110.*