



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG



Victims, Victimizers, Voyeurs

scratching the surface of daily life in search
for evil

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Thesis for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts with specialization in Digital Media

Report No. 2009-010

ISSN:1651-476

University of Gothenburg
Department of Applied Information Technology and Valand School of Fine Arts
Gothenburg, Sweden, May 2009

SUMMARY

VICTIMS, VICTIMIZERS, VOYEURS: scratching the surface of daily life in search for evil

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In this paper, I discuss some of the main ideas that surround my art project *Interview*, which was created as my final master degree project. It included eleven volunteers who were filmed while they underwent an interview that used very soft interrogation and brainwashing techniques connected to daily life activities. The paper starts by explaining the project itself and how it was installed at an art exhibition, and continues with more general concepts related to oppression, power abuse, comedy, and the use of fiction as a means of discussing reality.

Keywords → video installation, interview, Second World War, totalism, propaganda, fascist architecture, psychological violence, victimization, double bind.

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PROLOGUE

I am subject number 117.

I will not call you by your name. From now on, you are subject number 117. [Pause.] *One-one-seven*, do you have your mobile phone with you?

Yes.

Please show it. [Pause.] It looks like a very good mobile phone.

It's alright.

Is your mobile phone in the silent mode?

No.

It should be.

Should I turn it off?

Please, set the silent mode on your mobile. [Pause.] How can you possibly come to an interview and not leave your mobile *phone* in the silent mode?

Oh, because I did not know that it would be a meeting. [Pause.] Sorry. [Pause.] I forgot.

We can proceed now.

Sorry?

We can proceed now.

O.K.

I am observing you, *one-one-seven*. [Pause.] I can hear you breathing. [Pause.] I can hear your heartbeats, *one-one-seven*. [Pause.] *One-one-seven*, are you a good girl?

I don't know...

You are a good girl. Would you like something delicious to drink or eat? Help yourself.

O.K. [Subject 117 pours water into a glass and drinks from it]

There is also tea and coffee.

Yes, but I don't want tea or coffee right now.

Why not?

Because they are both warm. I don't like to drink warm drinks now.

One-one-seven, I went through all the trouble preparing delicious tea and coffee for you, and you are drinking only water.

Yes. [Pause.] But you also went for water for me.

There is also beer.

Yes. But you can drink it later today.

One-one-seven, you should enjoy the pleasures of life.

Oh, I do, I drink-

One only lives once.

[Laughter] I know. That's-

Why are you laughing?

It's such a common phrase.

"Sir." Please, call me "Sir."

Sir. [Laughter]

Don't you want anything to eat?

No, I'm not hungry right now.

One-one-seven, I made a cake especially for you...

[Subject 117 laughs]

... and you are refusing to eat it.

Maybe I will eat later.

No. You should take the opportunity now.

I don't want now. [Pause.]

You are pretending you don't want.

I don't want!

Any person loves chocolate cake at any time.

[Subject 117 laughs]

Don't laugh at me.

What if I would say I just had chocolate and I don't want more chocolate?

I am the one asking the questions here.

[Laughter] O.K.

[Long pause]

Have some more water.

[...]

The excerpt above was transcribed from one of the filmed interviews used in the art project described in this essay.



For a better understanding of the essay, I recommend watching the interviews used in the project, or part of them. Five are available on the URL:

<http://www.vimeo.com/album/89011>

INTRODUCTION

What first directed me to express something with the use of language was an interest in structures of domination and abuse, an interest that grows from the wish to understand the irrationality of violence, not to be perennially angry and frustrated because horrible things make life sometimes unbearable. There should be a place for horrible things so that they become somehow “acceptable”. Nietzsche said that “almost everything that we call ‘higher culture’ is based upon the spiritualizing and intensifying of cruelty.¹” and I took him seriously.

The problem then is: if I talk about horrible things without comparing them with their opposite, that is, good things that should serve as examples, the whole project ends up being one of a cynic, a work that deals solely with the idea of evil. I worked with the hypothesis that some kind of knowledge can be achieved by using that which is considered wrong, and one of the ways that I found to touch cruelty was by reproducing in a minor scale the same mechanisms existent in structures of power abuse.

I believe that people are too aware of extremes of horror on a big scale and seem to urge for great demons (paedophiles, murderers, President Bush, Hitler) as a way to remain unconscious of the possibility of evil existing near us and in ourselves. By paying too much attention to these extremes, we become unconscious of the same evils permeating daily life. Great evils come from somewhere, after all; by scratching the surface, they can be seen underneath.

Philosopher Hanna Arendt developed a concept that she called “banality of evil”, the thesis that evil is not always done by fanatic and sociopath characters. In fact, ordinary individuals are capable of perpetrating mass killings, akin to the ones in the death camps of national socialist Germany. By displacing daily events to a new context, I expect to make apparent means of oppression in a smaller scale, the lesser horrors in the lives of law-abiding citizens and perfect families.

I do not entirely explain what happens in the interviews that were placed between chapters, which are different from the filmed ones, for I believe in the efficiency of narrative and fiction in demonstrating a hypothesis. As Noam Chomsky declared , “*It is quite possible—overwhelmingly probable, one might guess—that we will always*

¹ Nietzsche 1886, Beyond Good and Evil.

*learn more about human life and personality from novels than from scientific psychology.*²

² As quoted by Jonah Lehrer: *Misreading the Mind*, *Los Angeles Times*.

INTERVIEW - THE PROJECT

Why is it so uncomfortable to be watched? Why do we feel that the pointing of a camera resembles the one of a gun? One of the main triggers of the work *Interview* was the feeling of discomfort when being watched, and its connections between personal relationships and institutional surveillance. The one who is constantly watched is a suspect, someone who is not trusted, after all. The violence of being considered a suspect can be considered a punishment in advance. What happens then, when someone is punished for a crime that was not committed? What happens when one is constantly reminded that he might be guilty?

It was not only the discomfort of being watched, but also the additional discomfort of being reminded of small gestures that would otherwise just be ignored. That seemed to me like a forced neurosis; being forced to see the world from a neurotic's perspective; achieving extreme self-awareness through coercion. The one being watched behaves differently than he would when he thinks he is alone. Self is split in rebellion and surrender.

Wrong interpretations can lead to false accusations and repeated accusations can make one resentful. As a sad consequence, the one being suspected may incorporate the role that is being designated to him; the role of a criminal or betrayer perhaps. Voltaire said that

*Those who are suspicious invite betrayal.*³

[Quiconque est soupçonneux invite à le trahir.]

My question then is: how to detect that precise moment when implicit or explicit accusations in combination with gestures, become a trap? In what moment does someone turn into the role of a "betrayer" and starts to believe in the accusations against him?

Before I developed the final version of the art project, I made the following list of questions and comments while very impressed by phenomena like domestic tyranny:

³ Voltaire 1732. *Zaire, Tragedie en Cinq Actes*. Act 1 Scene 5.

AVOIDING IMAGINATION

- Don't come into the house with your shoes on. The floor will be dirty and the baby crawls on it.
- Don't let things fall on the tablecloth.
- Don't spend money on beer if you are poor.
- Don't leave dirty dishes in the sink, it is nasty and it disturbs everybody.
- Don't put your backpack on the sofa. It is dirty. It was on the floor before.
- Don't eat without having washed your hands.
- Did you wash your hands?
- Did you take a shower?
- Don't drink or eat in the living room.
- Never leave empty glasses in the living room.
- Don't bring your friends home, they will look into my drawers and destroy or steal my things.
- Don't forget to use a napkin.
- No chewing gum.

(December 2008)

The cruelty of these sentences resides in the fact that most of them are not easy to be questioned because they are "correct", and being "correct" makes them efficient. These are not necessarily wrong things to say; it is a combination of context and intentions that can make them cruel. I call it *Avoiding Imagination* because the people who only think and express themselves in those terms lack a very important capacity for abstract thinking. I consider that a monstrosity. The overemphasis in correctness perhaps hides a willingness to punish, a way to give free reign to repressed aggressiveness.

Inspired by the list above I started to think of ways to use the same line of argumentation in other contexts, as I was trying to find out how to use these ideas. I imagined a poster with a list of actions expected from visitors in an art gallery. The initial idea was to hang the poster as far as possible from the door, so that the visitor would have to walk across the whole space to be able to read:

POSTER

It is disgusting that you crossed the gallery with your shoes on.

Now you brought all the filth (vomit, pee, dust) from the streets. It is appalling. Think if a baby comes crawling here on this filthy floor. Think of all the germs.

You should also hang your coat near the door, on the hanger.

Also, you should avoid talking to people too close if you did not yet brush your teeth today. You may have bad breath, especially if you smoke. Just to tell you.

If you spill wine or beer on the floor during the opening make sure to clean it with some toilet paper.

Don't touch this paper with your fingers.

When I wrote the list above I was thinking about the Mexican artist Santiago Sierra, whose works often make use of the harsh realities of the legal system. I thought especially of the work *Loudspeakers*⁴, shown at the *Venice Biennale* in 2005, in which an audio recording is played uninterruptedly reproducing a long list of rules and facts like “1- Smoking is forbidden in enclosed spaces at the Venice Biennale.” and “7- Eating and drinking in the enclosed spaces of the Venice Biennale are forbidden.” Like Sierra, I am interested in structures of power, although I wanted to create a point of view that was also linked to the way individuals interact. My focus was more on what kinds of feelings are awakened in the person who is faced with oppression that is not openly aggressive. However, to be able to focus on those reactions I would have to either film or closely observe the viewer.

I thought I could only get to some conclusion by transgressing the limit of human respect, even if it was in a semi-fictional way. Thinking of that, I decided that I would develop a method very similar in outline to the methods used in psychological research, but mine would be focused on the appearance, the absurdity of such tests. I wanted to bring some of my analogies to light by ridiculing what I criticize. Such mockery of psychological-tests would also enable me to understand how oppression works from a first hand experience.

When I developed the final form of the project, I started to compile all sorts of sentences and examples that could be useful. I used daily life experiences, books, films, NSA⁵ guides for interrogation in South America, among other sources, mainly

⁴ Santiago Sierra's website. Accessed on July 8 2009.
http://www.santiago-sierra.com/200502_1024.php

⁵ National Security Agency (USA)

focusing on the kind of rules that are not easy to contest. I felt the need for something that could be used as a catalyser for more actions, which I found in having food and drinks on a table. It is invariably possible to criticize anything someone does in the sphere of table manners.

-You make noise when you drink tea.

Seemingly harmless sentences like the one above, together with the oppressive set, became torture techniques.



As part of the psychological test mockery, I decided to interview the subjects without being seen. Thus I prepared a closed circuit TV system between two rooms. In one room, the subject sat facing a camera and a megaphone, with food and drinks on a table, the door should be closed to provide a feeling of isolation. In the other room I could see the subjects on a monitor and communicate via a microphone connected to the megaphone.

There was a very bright light on a vertical angle over the heads of the subjects as well as noise being played during the interview sessions. The noise was made of a combination of *white noise*, which allegedly is used during interrogations and torture sessions (in much louder levels, though), and sine waves, that are used for some kinds of hypnosis. The difference between frequencies of the sine waves on the left and on the right ears creates a new frequency that can only be perceived in the brain and that is said to heighten suggestibility. On the table there were cake, cookies, candies, tea and coffee with sugar, beer, and water.



The interview format gave me the opportunity to show both discourse and gestures in a balanced way: discourse re-enacted the stupidity of irrational authority while actions from the interviewee showed spontaneous reactions.

My method would completely ignore individual qualities. By ignoring individuality, the interviews would be something closer to interrogations, which are focused on a specific outcome, information; individuality being only valuable when used for manipulation, as opposed to a genuine interest in human inner life. These interviews would not be portraits of individuals but rather an evil depiction of the individuality shattered by irrational authority.

The answers to any of my questions are largely irrelevant. All that mattered was to be able to use questions and comments as a way of oppression. This becomes

obvious when watching a few interviews, because there are few things that make sense. There is no point, there is no information that is really expected from any of the subjects and I – as an interrogator – often contradict myself. I see these contradictions as a satirization of bureaucrats who might be helpful or not according to their mood, but always justified by power structures.



Figure 1 Installation view at Gallery Rotor 1 in Gothenburg, Sweden.

Eleven from a total of twenty-two interviews were used on the video installation (Fig. 1) which will be discussed further on.

INTERVIEW WITH Y.T.

[...]

Y.T.: When I look back now I see clearly that it did not matter what I did, it would be invariably wrong. I couldn't get it. Trying to please him was a really stupid thing to do. He wanted to make sure that I knew that he was observing every movement I made and that made me behave in a very weird way after a while.

What do you mean?

If I did not have the consciousness of being constantly observed I would merely go on with my daily activities, be spontaneous as I always try to be. I don't plan my day in detail and I like it that way, you know... But with that constant pressure I started to act stranger and stranger. I don't like to be observed. I could not concentrate anymore and that seemed to him even more suspicious, as I changed my daily behaviour out of pure tension. I tried to explain to him that I was acting weird because he was being suspicious. I think that he deliberately provoked many of the things that happened by playing a kind of dirty game, like good cop/bad cop. And I could never, ever, know whether he was in a good or in a bad mood, or when and why his mood would change.

I told him what I thought, how difficult it was for me.

He made me oscillate between feeling sincerely sorry for him and feeling entrapped, without a middle point. When I felt sorry for him, it was because he seemed truly willing to change. He would then say how much he loved me, and I know that he depended on me, emotionally, but after all those years without ever changing I was forced to realize at some point that that was a just part of his "method". I think many people mistake control and dependency for love.

Why did you stay with him for so long?

I don't really know. It feels so stupid now; I am happy this interview is anonymous... I thought I would never find anyone better, perhaps, and that life was easier living with someone, paying the bills, and other things.

Were you also afraid of solitude?

Partly, yes... It is very surprising to realize how much energy other people manage to drain from you, though. I guess you only realize it when you manage to stay alone for a while.

How did you start to be conscious of what he was doing?

One day my mother called me and there were things we wanted to discuss that I did not want him to hear. Private things that she did not want me to tell anyone. So I talked on the phone without saying much or very silently. His reaction afterwards was very exaggerated. I laughed at first, it was so unthinkable and ridiculous. He said we should not have secrets and then asked me a million questions that I did not want to answer. I told him it was my mother, but that was put into question. He implied that I had a lover [laughter]. That was the first time he did something bizarre like that, which sadly became more and more frequent, as I refused to give in. It was very tough because my attempts to conserve my own dignity and individuality were seen as betrayal.

Did he ever use physical violence as a form of coercion?

No. His method of torture was only psychological. I would have left him much earlier if he had used physical violence of any kind. He made me realize that even intellectual people can be cruel and irrational. Maybe intelligence makes cruelty more efficient.

Can psychological abuse be even more destructive than physical abuse?

[...]

"YOU ARE A LIAR"

[...]

The interview requires that you are absolutely honest.

I am. [Pause.] I just can't say because I don't know the answer.

No. You are not honest.

I don't know the ans-

You are a liar.

No.

I am sure that you know. But you do not want to tell me.

The time is too short to think about that.

***One-one-seven*, please cooperate. [Pause.] You should be absolutely sincere.**

[...]

(Excerpt from the interview with Subject 117)

Some of my comments and questions in the *interviews* are directly taken from the common knowledge of what abusive relationships involve. The manipulation methods used in these circumstances are not different from the ones used in situations connected to war and crime, they are simply not so easily detected, protected under the disguise of "love", "responsibility", "reputation" and other words and concepts that are easily distorted and mystified. I wanted to make clear the dichotomy between offering food and drinks as a form of kindness, and manipulating via cheap emotional strategies when food or drinks were not accepted. During the relatively short duration of the interviews, I intended to show big contradictions in behaviour – aggressive or patronizing – by making these contradictions absurd and self-evident. I would say for example "*You are so ungrateful not accepting the cake I had so much trouble making especially for you*" and later on, when the cake was accepted: "*There is a lot of sugar in the cake, you know? . . . Right now the bacteria are corroding your teeth. You should brush your teeth immediately after this interview*".

It was important that any comments and criticisms were “correct”, or socially accepted, like brushing the teeth. These kinds of comments and criticisms are difficult to reject and more likely to inflict guilt. I wanted to shed light on actions that are considered good in isolation, but that could be very cruel from a bigger perspective, when what was said before is known.

This kind of verbal inconsistency is very common in emotional abuse and brings us to the sphere of domestic tyrannies, when one member of a household exerts irrational authority on the other members.

In the partly autobiographical novel *To the Lighthouse*, English novelist Virginia Woolf attempts to capture the subtleties of this kind of abuse. In one of the passages of the book, the family is planning a trip to a lighthouse, which could only be reached by boat, but the father, Mr. Ramsey, insists that *"It will rain [...] You won't be able to go to the Lighthouse"*⁶. The youngest son, James, becomes very upset, and reflects: *"What he said was true. It was always true. He was incapable of untruth"*. Mr. Ramsey used the facts – that it could in fact rain – as a form of humiliation. Later on in the novel, the daughter, Cam, reaches another insight:

*[...]But what remained intolerable, she thought, [...], was that crass blindness and tyranny of his which had poisoned her childhood and raised bitter storms, so that even now she woke in the night trembling with rage and remembered some command of his; some insolence: "Do this," "Do that," his dominance: his "Submit to me."*⁷

In her portrait of an upper middle class woman in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf similarly *"demonstrates how the most effective ideological control is concealed, so that its subjects feel vaguely dissatisfied, without knowing why."*⁸ In a section of the novel that describes a moment soon after she had talked to her old friend, Peter, and after her husband Richard had left the house. Clarissa feels confused:

*....It was a feeling, some unpleasant feeling, earlier in the day perhaps; something that Peter had said, combined with some depression of her own, in her bedroom, taking off her hat; and what Richard had said had added to it, but what had he said? There were his roses. Her parties! That was it! Her parties! Both of them criticised her very unfairly, laughed at her unjustly, for her parties. That was it! That was it!*⁹



⁶ Woolf 1927. *To the Lighthouse*. Project Gutenberg Australia.

⁷ Ibid.

The connection between domestic tyrannies and totalism in their more extreme forms is clear. In both of them there is the “need” for total control over individuals through a series of rules that might be implicit or explicit, like the

- demand for purity: that there is only one right way of being and acting,
- the cult of confession: a partner has to be absolutely sincere; a prisoner has to confess;
- the believe, or the demand that one believes, in the infallibility of the leader.

These demands come very often disguised as the intent to protect:

- “we are protecting you against the terrorists” in the case of a government that wants to convince the population of the benefits of total surveillance; or simply protection in the case of a person who wants to make himself/herself absolutely indispensable, which in many cases they are.

[based on Lifton’s examples on totalism]¹⁰

State violence, as well as domestic violence, rarely happens without some kind of ideological indoctrination that justifies them and gives them meaning, to aggressor and victim. It is important to notice that these mechanisms rarely happen without a constant shift between extremes that include reward and punishment, “the carrot and the stick”¹¹.



Bellow are some examples freely taken from the NSA - *Human Resource Exploitation, Training Manual (1983)* “provided to countries in Latin America”¹²:

Sustained long enough, a strong fear of anything vague or unknown induces regression. On the other hand, materialization of the fear is likely to come as a relief.

Making subject repeat contradictory argument. Not allow him to explain.

Do not ask ‘yes’ ‘no’ questions.

You leave me no other choice but to . .

⁸ Johnsen 2003. *Violence and modernism : Ibsen, Joyce, and Woolf*. University Press of Florida.

⁹ Woolf 1925. *Mrs. Dalloway*. Project Gutenberg Australia.

¹⁰ Lifton 1961. *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism. A study of “brainwashing” in China*. Penguin Books.

¹¹ A donkey can be forced to walk either by being offered a carrot or by being beaten with a stick, and more effectively when there is an alternation between the two. The same expression in Japanese is translated literally as “Candy and Whip”.

¹² NSA 1983. *Human Resource Exploitation, Training Manual*.

(The subject should never be told to comply “or else”)

Why should I believe you? It’s all lies.



It might seem that my oppressive interviews are strongly based on interrogation. However, on researching about it I came to the surprising conclusion that *brainwashing* might be also a suitable definition. The term *brainwashing* was first used in China “as a translation to the colloquialism *his nao* (literally, ‘wash brain’)” which was reportedly used following the Communist takeover.¹³ The word has to be understood in a context of coercive indoctrination.

Political prisoners in Communist China were not only interrogated, they were subjected to physical and mental violence for very long periods of time – weeks or months – so that they could more easily be brought to the point of breakdown that was required for a total “re-education”. This technique follows certain psychological steps as described by Robert J. Lifton:¹⁴

- 1 The assault upon identity
- 2 The establishment of guilt
- 3 The self betrayal
- 4 The breaking point: total conflict and the basic fear
- 5 Leniency and opportunity
- 6 The compulsion to confess
- 7 The channelling of guilt
- 8 Re-education: logical dishonouring
- 9 Progress and harmony
- 10 Final confession: the summing up
- 11 Rebirth
- 12 Release: transition and limbo

The way I used these steps was obviously very soft. It can be argued that I did not use them at all, for doing so would require very high levels of threat. I can for sure

¹³ Lifton 1961. *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism. A study of “brainwashing” in China.* Penguin Books.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

state that these steps, together with the NSA manual, enabled me to take the right directions.



As said before in describing the room where the interviews were made, oppression is tremendously facilitated when the victims are in isolation.

Sometimes the right structure dispenses any human effort.

INTERVIEW WITH L.K.

[...]

M.H.: Why did you decide to move to Berlin?

L.K.: Well, I always had this fascination with abandoned places and ruins. When I moved to Berlin I used to walk endlessly around looking for bullet holes on the walls; remnants from the war. I like a lot Brutalist and Fascist architecture.

Any example here that comes to your mind?

I think that the Art Museum looks quite fascistic and I used to fantasize about it covered with those vertical Nazi flags, you know?

I know...

But it's merely aesthetic! Or I would say "fictitious", since the only things I know about the war are photographs, horror films or even history books. You feel so insignificant in front of those buildings; they represent the ultimate horror to me. It is so oppressive and that it's fascinating. I think it has to do with the concept of *sublime*, in the highest philosophical sense.

Did you find many bullet holes in Berlin?

Oh, yeah, many. But the buildings are unfortunately being all renovated now. It makes me sad... I think it is good to be constantly reminded of past horrors.

Not to repeat them?

Yes.

What happens now that these real horrors are all turning into fiction, with the last witnesses finally dying?

Then we have a problem, as the past can be easily distorted.

Can you talk more about your fascination with destruction, specifically with the signs left by the Second World War?

While walking and looking at all the old buildings, I used to imagine what it was like for the families being dragged out from their houses and beaten up or shot, the women raped, and all other kinds of unspeakable cruelties. Those things happened a long time ago in the same place where I can now take a walk. It is not exactly a pleasant feeling, but...

But...

I can't explain why. Maybe I shouldn't even try.

Do you think you like it because your life has always been so safe growing up in a neutral country, and then you feel like "oh, so nice that my life is so safe, I don't need to be afraid"?

No, I don't think so. [pause] I think I have always been aware of some kind of irrational fear, but I've never been able to name it. It's like... something in the air that makes you apprehensive; it's more frightening when you don't know why. In Berlin I can identify that feeling with something concrete, even if it's in the past. It is scaring to think that Europe was nearly in ruins, how long ago? 70 years? It is maybe not such a very long time in the long run. Perhaps historians will consider this decade as a tiny part of a movement that started with the rise of fascism. Is it possible that we are in a period similar to the one between wars? Just that now it is... longer?

Are you dreaming awake now?

[laughter] I am sorry. Yes, of course I am. I constantly do that.

Never mind, it can be true, can't it?

Oh well, yes I guess. Why not?

Would you consider this kind of daydreaming paranoia?

Yes and no. I am well aware that I am imagining stories. It may be because I don't bother trying to know the specific facts and then I just fill the gaps with my imagination.

Don't you think that can be dangerous?

As long as I keep the distinction clear in my mind, no.

[...]



Figure 2 [Top left] Luitpold Hall, at one edge of the Luitpold Arena. Nuremberg, Germany. Source: <http://www.onelargeprawn.co.za/2009/02/18/totalitarian-architecture-of-the-third-reich/>

Figure 3 [Top right] Dasangwan Hall, the former Main Hall of Keijo Imperial University School of Engineering in Seoul, South Korea. Source: <http://www.rjkoehler.com/2008/06/30/bring-on-the-fascist-architecture-baby/>

Figure 4 [Bottom] Art Museum in Gothenburg, Sweden. May 2009.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A GOOD STRUCTURE



Figure 5 *Interview*, installation view. Photo Aoife Giles.

In my project, the physical structure was important in the two parts of creation. First there were the interviews, and it was fundamental that the subject and I were in different rooms, with me being able to see without being seen, his room dirty with unpleasantly bare walls, the window covered. In the second part, the installation (Fig. 1 and 5), I decided to present the videos in a structure that used all the main elements encountered in fascist architecture: symmetry, austerity, straight lines, neo-classicism. Chairs against a wall and a clock over them completed the set with elements which are found in the interior decoration of many institutions, from schools to prisons. Moreover, the TV monitors facing the chairs from a short distance served as a way of turning the experience of watching into oppression. The people sitting on the chairs had to be in a position where they could be seen from the visitors in the middle of the room; and to be able to get in front of the TVs, they had to pass through the narrow spaces in between.

The psychological features of architectural constructions is perhaps as important, and as useful in totalist¹⁵ environments as its practical attributes. Big buildings with imposing lines serve as symbols for the omnipotence of the leader and can be considered part of the war weaponry. A visit to Hitler's Chancellery in Berlin by Emil Hácha, Prime Minister of what was then Czechoslovakia, is described by Deyan Sudjic:

*Beyond the courtyard, itself a kind of summation of the Nazi state, was an elaborate sequence of spaces inside the Chancellery, carefully orchestrated to deliver official visitors to Hitler's presence in a suitably intimidated frame of mind. After a quarter-mile walk, visitors were left in no doubt of the power of the new Germany.*¹⁶

At the point Hácha reached Hitler's office, he was so overwhelmed that he suffered a heart attack.¹⁷ In this sense, aesthetics fulfilled a practical need and can therefore be considered part of warfare weaponry. This strategy of instilling fear through architecture was, for National Socialist Germany, as essential as having death camps.

Other examples of architecture that exude power are not hard to find in present-day cities. In the novel *Millenium People*, J. G. Ballard makes an analogy between the architecture of the Tate Modern Museum in London and the suspicion – by the main character of the book – that the middle classes of the 21st Century are becoming fascist-like:

*The building triumphed by a visual sleight of hand, a psychological trick that any fascist dictator would understand. Externally, its deco symmetry made it seem smaller than it was, and the vast dimensions of the turbine hall cowed both eye and brain. The entrance ramp was wide enough to take a parade of tanks. Power, of kilowatt hours or messianic gospel, glowered from the remote walls. This was the art show as Führer spectacle, an early sign, perhaps, that the educated middle classes were turning towards fascism.*¹⁸

Having the right structure can make the desired behaviour almost automatic, with no additional effort having to be put into the reinforcement of specific actions. The inventors of the gas chamber realized that the structure was important when they first experimented with diesel-driven vans with the gas from the motor piped into the storage compartment. There were a few problems, like the size, or a better

¹⁵ *Totalism* is an *all-or-nothing* way of thinking that is related to *Totalitarianism*. The word *Totalism* can be associated to any group; political, religious, etc, which promotes extremism. Like in totalitarianism, totalism seeks to control every possible aspect of life.

¹⁶ Sudjic 2005. *The Edifice Complex: How the Rich and Powerful and Their Architects Shape the World*. Penguin Books.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

soundproof system that would be made more efficient later on, but the principle was already there. The picture below is from the film *World of Glory* (*Härlig är Jorden*) by Swedish director Roy Andersson. The film starts with a scene that reconstitutes one of those first attempts at killing with a van during the Second World War. However, the scene is not connected to any specific time period.



Figure 6 *World of Glory*, dir. Roy Andersson (film still)

The woman standing at the bottom right was asked to laugh as a test once. We know from history that the witnesses sometimes found these horrendous procedures comical.¹⁹

[Kvinnan, som står längst ner till höger, fick provskratta vid ett tillfälle. Vi vet nämligen från historien att åskådarna ibland fann sådana här fruktansvärda procedurer komiska.]

¹⁸ Ballard 2003. *Millennium People*. Flamingo.

¹⁹ Andersson 1995. *Vår tids rädsla för allvar*. Filmkonst (33).

INTERVIEW WITH F.O.

[...]

F.O.: Me and my siblings have always had a very weird sense of humour, I think.

Can you give me an example?

Once we went to the cinema and there was this scene of a prostitute being slapped on the face and we couldn't stop laughing. It was embarrassing because we were the only ones laughing in the whole cinema [laughter].

What was so funny about that scene?

The way she agreed with her pimp and tried to smile at him, but he kept on slapping her at unexpected moments. It was very humiliating, but funny! Another scene that was hilarious was when a psychopath forced a couple to smile while they simulated sexual positions, with a gun pointed at them.

Do you always think that humiliation is funny?

No. Of course not. I think humiliation has this potential for being either very funny or very sad. I tend to think that funny scenes always involve humiliation.

Did you use to laugh a lot about humiliating things with your siblings when you were a kid?

Oh, yes, for sure. We lived in a very rough environment. We were surrounded by Catholics in the town where we grew up.

So, you think that influenced your sense of humour?

Yeah... you bet. You think you grow up different from the people you hate around you but you catch a lot of their behaviour without noticing, by osmosis. Maybe laughing is just a way of telling yourself that it is not so bad. An escape?

[...]

THE ANGRY ART

“Comedy is at heart an angry, antisocial art. To solve the problem of weak comedy, therefore, the writer first asks: What am I angry about? He finds that aspect of society that heats his blood and goes on an assault.”²⁰

“A joke, by Freud’s account, is a way of sublimating hostility.”²¹

In spite of the intention to touch human weaknesses and suffering caused by power abuse, many of the interviews resulted comical. To be honest, I thought it would be possible that some interviews ended up very funny, I just did not know to what extent; I expected much more anger from the subjects. I did not realize at first that by mocking destructive systems and people, I was following a very old tradition of comedy as a way of saying the truth.

My research led me to the discovery that what I was doing was what is expected from a comedian, especially in what regards *satire*. Robert MacKee, in his book on the principles of screenwriting, makes the distinction between drama and comedy by stating that *“the dramatist is fascinated with the inner life”* while the comedian *“fixes on the social life – the idiocy, arrogance, and brutality in society”²²*. My own impersonation of an irrational authority figure demanding answers to often-absurd questions is a classic example of that.

However, is there any real use in satire?

Satirists can be *“like witches who stick pins in the effigies of their enemies.”²³* The whole thing can be like a mere superstitious ritual, or a guerrilla fought by resentful losers made for voyeurs to watch. Court jesters were probably some of the very few satirists whose jokes served any purpose.

The function of the court jester, once so important, is a good case of what degree of truth comedy many times conveys. The court jester was not only amusing, but an

²⁰ McKee. 1998. *Story*. Methuen Publishing Limited Reg.

²¹ Ibid. Quoting Henry Brackenridge. *Modern Chivalry*

²² McKee. 1998. *Story*. Methuen Publishing Limited Reg.

²³ Levin 1988. *Playboys and Killjoys*. Oxford University Press US

important source of advice to the king. He was the only person in the court who had the freedom to say anything that passed through his mind.

The jester everywhere employed the same techniques to carry out his this delicate role, and it would take an obtuse king or emperor not to realize what he was driving at, since “other court functionaries cooked up the king’s facts for him before delivery; the jester delivered it raw.”²⁴



I see my interview experiment as a case of truth being shown by exaggeration, or *Reductio ad Absurdum* (reduction to absurdity). The *Reductio ad Absurdum* is for Bertolt Brecht – “a *Verfremdungseffekt*, a deliberate alienation or psychic distancing.”²⁵ This technique is not always used for comedy; it is used whenever some distance is necessary for a better understanding of the core of a narrative, without obscuring it with strong emotional involvement. Laughter is a sign of emotional distance.

The very fact that people can be objectified is the illustration of McKee’s suggestion that comedy disregards people’s inner lives. In the process of my oppressive interviews, it became clear that by asking non-sense and simplistic questions, making prejudiced comments and giving one-sided advices, the person in front of the camera did not have so many chances of showing signs of individuality, he or she became an “object”. The suffering of being depersonalized is what I consider the essence of what I wanted to show.



Situations made to be comical on a stage are not necessarily so in daily life circumstances. Given the drive with which satirists show in ridiculing what they hate, the same situations can be extremely annoying, or worse, tragic, when there is emotional involvement.

²⁴ Otto 1996. *Fools are everywhere*. The University of Chicago Press.

²⁵ Also known as *Distancing Effect*. Ibid.

INTERVIEW WITH R.N.

[...]

R.N.: Would you like some tea?

MH: Yes please.

Sugar? Milk?

Three sugar cubes and milk, please.

[looks at me, surprised]

[Laughter]

That's a lot!

Oh, sorry. Well, I was going to ask you about the ideology differences between the catholic Americas and Europe. What do you-

You should not eat that much sugar, it's bad for you. ... Oh, please, put your spoon on the plate... Sorry, the table is very easily stained. [Smiles kindly] Oh yeah, the question... What were you asking?

I was asking about the difference in ideology between the Catholic Americas and Northern Europe.

Well, what can I say. I can't complain about many th- oh! Your plate, please, don't forget the plate under the cup!

You are annoying me, you know? We could have gone to the park all the same and we would not have to worry about cups and furnit-

But it's much more comfortable in here.

[Ironic]: Really?

[Undisturbed] Oh yes, obviously! It is warmer and there is no dog shit we could step on, or sick people sneezing around us in these times of swine flu. There are also all the drunk people in the Nordic countries. They are usually so inconvenient in public parks. Nasty old guys, they are terrible. I totally hate them.

Yes, of course, but here there are cups and plates, and carpets. It is not comfortable to worry about keeping everything tidy. It is very annoying to have to think about so many details.

Oh... [Pause.] I was kidding! Relax! [laughter]

Come on... You were certainly not kidding!

You have no sense of humour.

[...]

THINK OF THE CHILDREN!

“I repeat, the job of the Prime Minister is to protect the lives of our boys, on our ships, and that’s what I did.”

Margaret Thatcher²⁶

“Remember our boys on the Malabar front! And the sailors in the Floating Fortresses! Just think what they have to put up with.”

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

All societies, groups, and belief systems depend to a certain extent on a kind of simplification of language that serves as an affirmation of group identity that facilitates communication between its members. The problem starts when this reduction gets out of hand and becomes constriction, which can act as linguistic deprivation, compressing *“the most far-reaching and complex of human problems”* into *“brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorised and easily expressed”*²⁷. When widespread, the effects of such process are culturally devastating; a powerful weapon which is essential in all totalitarian environments. These changes may occur in written language, public speech and consequently on the minds of individuals, on their imagination. I use here the word *imagination* meaning “inner life”, and “mental independence”, in a loose interpretation that means that a person is a real individual. With the imagination impaired, people’s actions become more and more influenced by one common and external guiding force.

The concept of language being reduced is often called *“totalist language”* and characterized by an ostensible use of *“thought-terminating clichés”*²⁸. The existence

²⁶ In answer to a question by Diana Gould, on a BBC discussion show in May 1982. URL accessed on June 3, 2009: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWOy23MLY1I>

²⁷ Lifton 1961. *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism. A study of “brainwashing” in China.* Penguin Books.

²⁸ Ibid.

of *thought-terminating clichés* as an ideological manipulation device is one of the reasons that made English writer George Orwell develop the fictitious *Newspeak* in his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. *Newspeak* is the idea of *thought-terminating clichés* becoming grammar rules, whose gradual oversimplification and distortion of words makes it very difficult for an individual to have thoughts that are not in agreement with “The Party”. Another novel, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley is also a good example of *thought-terminating clichés* dominating language, but in an environment that emphasises pleasure instead of fear, a world that resembles western countries where consumerism is heavily present.

One does not need to go very far to witness the same principles of *Newspeak* in practice today in media, advertising, and politics. One only needs to become aware of how many times expressions similar to “*think of the children*” or “*our boys*” are used as an appeal to emotion, which is in itself “*thought-terminating*”. The consequences of a pervasive use of reduced language in a society can be felt when there is a clear tendency towards uniformity and conformity.

In the oppressive interviews that I used in my video installation, I thought about *thought-terminating clichés* when I said sentences like “*One only lives once*” or “*You have to give a good example to the children*”. Another example is the advertising-inspired sentence “*This cake is delicious because it is made out of products of the best quality*” which one of the subjects was told to repeat against his will. In many other instances I coerced subjects into repeating over and over sentences that they disagreed with. This compulsory repetition of jargons was one of the main forms of indoctrination that those who underwent *thought reform* in China reported: “*Using the same pattern of words for so long . . . you feel chained.*”²⁹



Another relevant linguistic strategy used for manipulation, is the “*double bind*”. Hearing a conversation between two people where a double bind is being used does not necessarily show the presence of it. Double binds can only be perceived when there are discrepancies between different situations where communication occurs become apparent. A double bind happens with the use of contradictory messages that are transmitted via different levels of communication, in a way that the one affected remains unaware of the contradiction.

“*Relax!*” is a double bind that was used many times during the interviews in my project. This order is a double bind in this case because the act of relaxing is contradicted by the message from the setting and the unpleasant sound of the voice

²⁹ Ibid.

coming from the megaphone. *Relaxing* should be something spontaneous, for the promptness at following orders is associated with tension. In spite of that, some of the subjects made an attempt at relaxing, which made them, I believe, more uncomfortable. The purpose of double binds is different from *thought terminating clichés*, as double binds manage to entrap someone in a process of immobilization caused by an unperceived contradiction, for example: “trying to relax” versus “impossibility of relaxing”. A successful double bind should always result in the individual being wrong, regardless of the choice made: “trying to relax when it is impossible” or “refusing to relax and facing criticism.”

Double binds are unpleasant. *Thought-terminating clichés* can be comforting.



Through what means can someone perceive hidden threats when language fails to make them explicit?

INTERVIEW WITH S.U.

[...]

How long have you been living in this country?

S.U.: Oh, it's a very long time, twenty years.

Most of your life...

Yes, I came when I was ten.

How was your adaptation? Was it difficult to leave all of your friends back then?

In the beginning, of course, it was terrible. But I adapted very fast and learned the language in very few months.

In these twenty years, do you see any change in the way you are treated?

Yes, I see a big difference... I think their eyes have changed; they look down on you now. People are becoming very cold. Polite... but cold. Funny thing, it's toward themselves, too...

[...]

“COUNT! . . . FASTER!”

“Count! . . . Faster! Once more from the top! . . . Count!” These orders, spoken in German by a Nazi Sergeant, dominate the score of Arnold Schoenberg’s “A Survivor from Warsaw.”

“Count!” Schoenberg had thematized the peculiar exactness that lurked beneath the monstrous Nazi atrocities. But hardly anyone has ever picked up on his interpretation of Nazi social policies and questioned how people were reduced to an entry in a registration, or how bureaucratic abstraction dehumanized individuals and transported them to a new reality—namely, death.³⁰

Very few would contest the importance of personal identification numbers; however, it is surprising to realize that the persecution of Jews and other groups by the Third Reich was only possible after years of a thorough and detailed registration of the vast majority of the German population. By reducing people to a number in a registration it was easier to start the process of abstraction and unreality required to the dehumanization and further extermination of “life unworthy of life”³¹ in Germany and German-occupied territories in the 40’s. Genocide was not done with generalized chaos, as one imagines the French Revolution and other past bloody revolutions, on the contrary, it was done with unprecedented exactness. It was the use of numbers that made Nazi atrocities possible, and not “the ideology of blood and soil” or “the principle of guns and butter”³². Hatred had become unnecessary, as is evident in the personal experience of Józef Paczynski, a Polish political prisoner at Auschwitz, when witnessing mass killings in a gas chamber:

I went into the attic. I stood on a crate. I lifted a roof tile and I could see everything that was going on right there in front of me. They were very polite with those people, very polite. ‘Undress, pack your things here, this here, that

³⁰ Aly & Roth 2004. *The Nazi Census, Identification and control in The Third Reich*. Temple University Press.

³¹ *Lebensunwertes Leben*

³² Aly & Roth 2004. *The Nazi Census, Identification and control in The Third Reich*. Temple University Press.

*there...’ Then an SS man climbed onto the flat roof of the building. He put on a gas mask, opened a hatch, and dropped the crystals in.*³³

Bureaucratic language in general, not only numbers, can be twisted to the point when it is possible to talk about the most atrocious acts using euphemisms. “Bureaucracy helps render genocide unreal”, it “deamplifies genocide”³⁴. During the mass killings in German camps, the language of bureaucracy, together with huge quantities of alcohol³⁵, became indispensable as a form of psychological numbing for camp employees to be able to undertake unpleasant tasks like the selections of new arrivals for the gas chambers. Robert Jay Lifton, writing about Auschwitz, states that

*[t]he language [...] was crucial the numbing. A leading scholar of the Holocaust told of examining “tens of thousands” of Nazi documents without once encountering the word “killing”, until, after many years he finally did discover the word – in reference to an edict concerning dogs.*³⁶

This kind of tactic is intrinsically connected to the language reduction discussed in the previous chapter.



Hanna Arendt, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, discusses the concept that she calls “The Banality of Evil” which is an attempt at explaining how it was possible for ordinary people to commit atrocities like the Holocaust:

*[...] [W]hen I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial [...]. Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III “to prove a villain.” Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all.*³⁷

Eichmann was not the monster that was expected from someone who had committed such horrendous crimes as his. His “normality” instead, was so obvious that it left everyone at his trial shocked. What became evident was his degree of obedience, which had made him compliant with a destructive system that praised obedience and action: “...the cult of action for action's sake. Action being beautiful in

³³ Paczynski 2005. *Auschwitz : Inside the Nazi State*. Accessed on June 7, 2009. <http://www.pbs.org/auschwitz/40-45/orders/1941b.html>

³⁴ Lifton 1986. *Nazi doctors: a study of the psychology of evil*. Macmillan.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Arendt 1963. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil*. Penguin Classics

itself, it must be taken before, or without, reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation."³⁸

By the time when Arendt wrote about Eichmann, Stanley Milgram, a North American social psychologist, trying to explain the psychological mechanisms that make the "banality of evil" possible, made an experiment whose aim was to measure levels of obedience to authority in the general population. Milgram had two subjects separated in different rooms, "the teacher" and "the learner". "The teacher", using a list of questions, had to punish "the learner" with electroshocks in increasing voltages every time an answer was wrong. The panel of the machine showed numbers that went up to 450 Volts, followed by the letter "X" three times and a sign saying that they were deadly dangerous. In spite of that, sixty-five percent of the subjects went to the very end when told to do so by an authority, without any physical coercion or life threat. The "learner" was actually an actor and the screams of pain heard through the wall were pre-recorded. The results of the study raised big discussions on the dilemma of obedience, since obedience has been generally accepted as a very desirable personal quality. This new discovery made it clear that obedience is, in fact, more potentially destructive personal trait than expected.



The use of a system that resembled the Milgram Experiment proved necessary when I made the first test interviews. Perhaps for the simple reason that it can be very difficult to act in opposition to a person face-to-face, saying the wrong things, I had to create a system in form of a list of questions, comments and orders³⁹. Together with the separation between interviewer and interviewee in different rooms, this bureaucracy parody was helpful to keep the necessary distance, allowing myself to "receive orders" from the list. I had to willingly put myself in a position of obedient victim of those pieces of paper for the project to succeed. An unpleasant job which became easier and easier as certain procedures became automatic.

Other similar psychological experiments that are similar to Milgram's are the *Stanford Prison Experiment*, whose purpose was very similar, and *The Third Wave*, which was done in school where a class of students was taught to behave like Nazis for five days.

³⁸ Eco 1995. *Eternal Fascism: Fourteen Ways of Looking at a Blackshirt*.

³⁹ See Appendix 2.

INTERVIEW WITH D.L.

[...]

M.H.: You were telling me that once you just stopped reading the newspapers, is that true?

D.L.: It is true. In fact, I have never read the newspapers that much. I tried. I swear I tried. I did read the cinema program and my horoscope almost every day. [laughter]. But it seemed a complete waste of time to read more. I did not understand it at first. I thought I was merely a stupid person who only cared about entertainment. Being well informed did not seem compatible with reading or watching the news. It was not very clear to me what I was doing. It was a strong decision, a kind of covert rebellion, perhaps, but against what? I had the newspaper delivered to me every day, but it accumulated in a pile in the corner, which gathered dust until it was finally thrown away.

This decision sometimes put me in difficult situations, like not knowing anything about the horrible killings of children in a school in Russia, which I got to know days later. Does it really make any difference? People could be raped and murdered under my window and it would not receive the same attention from the media. I felt very often stupid for not being able to discuss simple headlines with whoever was trying to talk to me. Once I felt like I was living in an episode of the Twilight Zone when I realized everyone was talking about the Big Brother and I knew nothing about it. I read something about a Buddhist nun who had been without any contact with the external world for nine years. That gave me some comfort. She got to know about the Gulf War many years later. Isn't that refreshing? However, unlike her I was surrounded by people who could tell me everything they had seen or read on the news, so sometimes it ended up not making that much difference.

Did anyone react to that?

Oh Yes. During an attempt to explain myself I said something about keeping space in my mind by not filling it with too many things; "useless things". I felt like a charlatan, but how could I feel differently when my firm conviction was no more than an urge, not very different from madness? No one understood it.

I found out that partly literature and partly films could give what I wanted, what I craved from culture. It was not anything that could supply me with that. It took me years to stumble across the authors that could give me any answer or make me reflect and think. The important thing was to be able to enlarge the space of my mind so that I would be able to understand.

I decided not to trust anything or anyone. All opinions can be deceiving, it does not really matter if people are being honest or not, as they can believe in the most stupid things. The same with television and cinema. Why would a sunset be more meaningful in a cinema or TV than in real life? It was a big shock to realize that there was a time when I thought that direct perception was less real than images on a screen.

Do you regret this process of alienation?

No. Even when I commit mistakes, I am happy to know that I have to take full responsibility. I don't need to blame anyone else. At first I thought that I was very selfish but then I realized it had nothing to do with that.

[...]

“IS THIS REAL LIFE?”

Life can be full of illusions that make it more unreal than fiction.

A video called *Rebecka* by Swedish artist Miriam Bäckström was important to me before I developed the project *Interview*. The work by Bäckström seems like an ordinary interview with the actress Rebecka Hemse. It starts with the question: “*Are you going to be sincere when you answer my questions?*” which is repeated even after Rebecka Hemse says “*yes, I will*”. As the “interview” proceeds, it becomes more and more evident that some parts are staged, because the performer contradicts herself when asked the same question again. Off-camera, Bäckström asks questions as well as directs Rebecka’s actions. The ambivalence between what we think is real and what we think is staged traps “us in the hazy space between fictionalized reality and being”⁴⁰. The actions seem pointless or and sometimes disturbing for the actress. These moments of disturbance were what inspired me most; they made me imagine a whole interview where they would be so dominating that there would be very little left from an actual interview.

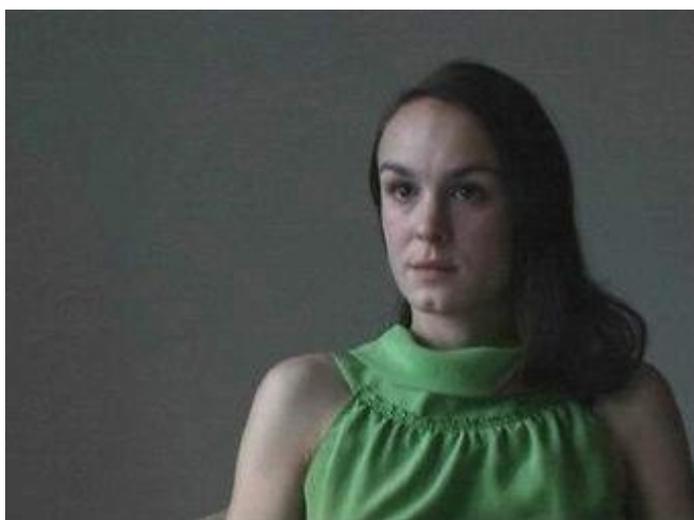


Figure 7 *Rebecka*, by Miriam Bäckström (video still)

⁴⁰ Drawn by Reality - *Encapsulated in Life*. Catalogue. URL: <http://www.drawnbyreality.info/rebecka.html>

Another piece that gave me a similar feeling I envisaged while watching *Rebecka* was the YouTube video *David after dentist*⁴¹, an amateur video made by a father of his son under the effects of anaesthetics after a dental procedure. The video is very short but it has all of the elements of an exploitation documentary, with the father asking questions and making comments.



Figure 8 *David after dentist*. Amateur video on YouTube.com (video still)

Two of the questions I used in my work were taken from *David after dentist*. The first is the one asked by the boy: “Is this real life?” the other is a comment made by the father on the effects of the drugs: “It’s good isn’t it?” The first question was asked to most of the subjects and only one answered “no”. His reason was that “*in real life I don’t usually sit in an empty room with a camera pointed at me*”. Most of the other subjects thought that it was real life for the simple fact that it was not a dream, or that they were alive.

Bruce Nauman is not one of my influences in the project mentioned in this paper, but I would like to refer to his work *Good Boy Bad Boy* (1985), a two-channel video installation. The monitors show two actors, a man and a woman, who repeat a list of one-hundred sentences that seem like a reduction of human life to its most basic actions. The actors repeat the list three times each, starting very neutral and gradually increasing the expressiveness. Examples of these sentences are:

<i>I like to shit.</i>	<i>I pay.</i>	<i>I am having fun.</i>
<i>You like to shit.</i>	<i>You pay.</i>	<i>You are having fun.</i>
<i>We like to shit.</i>	<i>We pay.</i>	<i>We are having fun.</i>
<i>This is shitting.</i>	<i>This is payment.</i>	<i>This is fun.</i>

⁴¹ *David after dentist*: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txqiwrbyGrs>



Figure 9 Bruce Nauman, *Good Boy Bad Boy* (1985), installation view.

In this work Bauman makes perfectly banal activities sound bizarre, which creates a distancing effect. I found that the use of language and repetition, associated with the set up were similar to some of my techniques.



The perversion of a traditional interview into the realm of interrogation and brainwashing, when seen from a mass media perspective, can be associated with TV programs like most *reality shows* (or *humiliation TV*).



What distance from reality is needed in order for one to keep mental sanity so that horror does not become merely comical and entertaining, nor tragic to the point of being unbearable?

INTERVIEW WITH J.W.

[...]

What exactly are you afraid of?

J.W.: I am afraid that the ignorant will once again rise, triumphant in victory. Books burned on the streets. I am afraid of a new dark age.

[...]

EPILOGUE

The project *Interview*, as well as many of my previous art works, is the consequence of indignation and anger caused by power abuse. When reflecting upon how creative works are the result of indignation and anger, I cannot help recalling what Virginia Woolf wrote about the difference between Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë. According to Woolf,

*the woman who wrote those pages [Brontë] had more genius in her than Jane Austen; but if one reads them over and marks that jerk in them, that indignation, one sees that she will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage where she should write calmly. She will write foolishly where she should write wisely. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters. She is at war with her lot. [...]*⁴²

The interest in structures of power abuse mentioned in the introduction is intrinsically related to a sense of hopelessness and anger. Is it enough to express this frustration and anger by means of an art work, and make the viewer experience it as well? Or should I reflect further not to be trapped in cynic bitterness, so that my work will not be “deformed and twisted”?

One of my main intentions nowadays is the creation of artworks that are connected with these feelings, but that still take into consideration artistic / aesthetic qualities that are valuable, meaningful. I do not think an artwork should serve as mere protest. I do not believe that art is a very good tool of political change. In fact, I think that art that does that has more to do with propaganda than with art.

Nevertheless, is it my task to give a good example via the affirmation of positive values? Do I need to offer an alternative to the injustices that I am angry about? At some moments, I feel convinced that the destruction of what I hate is enough, since “destruction leaves that which is essential intact.”⁴³



⁴² Woolf 1928. *A Room of One's Own*. Project Gutenberg Australia.

⁴³ Bataille, *Essential writings / edited by Michael Richardson*. London : SAGE, 1998.

APPENDIX 1: CATALOGUE TEXT BY DAVID CRAWFORD

Martin Heuser's *Interview* is a video installation rooted in the artist's fascination with subtle forms of interrogation. This work is as dark as it is playful, with Heuser continually rediscovering a more subtle balance between the two with each question that he asks. The artist sits hidden off-camera and provokes his subjects with questions such as "Do you know how to cook?" Heuser's techniques are derived from both CIA interrogation manuals and members of his extended family. A larger sphere of influences would include the writers Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, as well as artist Miriam Bäckström. In Huxleyian terms, the artist speaks of "inflicting pleasure" through such gestures as offering subjects sweets and then ridiculing their table manners. If such tactics are rooted in the subtleties of language, these interrogations become their most powerful when Heuser's figures of speech dissolve into purely numerical abstractions, such as "Rate yourself as a person, on a scale from 1 to 5." Here, the interrogations begin to reverberate against their context within a media art exhibition, a context in which the abstractions of numbers and multiplicity cast light upon our increasingly abstract everyday world.

Written by David Crawford

Variables of Attraction – Exhibition Catalogue – April 2009

APPENDIX 2: TEXT USED DURING THE INTERVIEWS

The following text suffered many alterations during the filming and does not convey the text exactly as it was used in all of the filmed interviews. Many of the changes were incorporated as a result from improvisation and from the answers and suggestions from the subjects.

(ALWAYS) (INSIST)

Start background sound + Light

(2 papers: the first with the questions in order, the second with comments for special moments like eating, gestures, sounds, etc.)

FIRST PAPER – QUESTIONS IN ORDER

1 – Give subject numbers in a box. He/She chooses randomly.

Please pick a number. Thank you.

--

(In the other room)

(suddenly) What is your number?

...

Please, show it.

Now please say to the camera: "I am subject number XXX."

I will not call you by your name. From now on you are subject number XXX.

(pause)

2 -----

You will call me SIR!

114

110

108

I am observing you, XXX

(pause)

I can hear you breathing.

(pause)

I can hear you heartbeats.

(pause)

3 -----

XXX Do you have your mobile phone with you?

Please show it.

Hummmm, (comment on the model, color, etc)

Is your mobile phone in the silent mode?

(yes) good

(no) But it should be. Please set the silent mode on your mobile. How can you possibly come to an interview and not leave your mobile in the silent mode?

We can proceed now.

4 -----

is this real life?

Are you a good girl/boy?

XXX, You are a good girl/boy. Would you like some something delicious to drink or eat? Help yourself. You are a good girl/boy.

(No) Are you not a good girl/boy?

(refusal to eat or drink) I went through all the trouble to make a cake, to buy expensive candies, to make fresh and delicious tea and coffee. You are so ungrateful.

You are not a good girl/boy.

COOKIES
CANDIES

XXX, How do you know if those delicious cookies were not expired?

Read the validity date of the cookies.

(opening the candy) Do not make so much noise when opening the candy, please.

→ ALLERGIES?

(accepting beer) How can you drink beer so early in the day. Besides, this is not the kind of situation one should drink beer. This is an interview, you should not have accepted beer. I was testing you. You failed.

(water) Why are you are drinking only water? I went into all the trouble buying beer, making delicious coffee and tea for nothing? You should enjoy the pleasures of life. One only live once.

(eating) Did you wash your hands? //

(No) You should have done it.

(on intention of washing hands) It is too late now. That is something you should have done before we started. We can not interrupt the interview now. You should have washed your hands.

DRINKING
(eating) Please don't spill _____ in the microphone. Don't destroy my equipment. Do you have an insurance?

My equipment is expensive. How are you going to pay for it if you destroy it?

5 -----
Subject XXX, What kind of questions do you imagine I am going to ask you?

Think of the worst question someone could ask you.

(long pause) *(No) I AM SURE THAT YOU KNOW BUT YOU DO NOT WANT TO TELL ME (ETC)*

Please be very sincere when you answer my questions. The interview requires that you are absolutely honest.

is this real life?

Do you have a driving license?

(if yes) Do you have a car?

Do you own an apartment?

Do you have a summer cottage?

Do you know how to cook?

Do you have any children? ... How many children do you have?

Do you like wine?

(yes) Wine is for people want to show off. *(How do you feel being used for an art project? (refrangible))*

(no) Wine is for elegant people.

DO YOU HAVE A GIRLFRIEND/BOYFRIEND?

-- (pause) --

Rate yourself as a person, on a scale from 1 to 5.

You look very shy on the video. (or anything else)

You have to relax to look good on the video.

Relax!

*(anything more) → I AM VERY GENEROUS.
→ Brush your teeth (don't forget it)*

E - You leave me no other choice but to interrupt the interview. / Astinor paper!

Fast

QUESTIONS

SECOND PAPER – SPECIAL COMMENTS

Sorry but you behaved bad.

That's the way it is, sorry.

(bureaucratic mind. Information without knowledge, banality of evil. Hierarchy, institution. No hatred, just bureaucracy)

“this noise is to make you relax”

I know if you are lying.

Is this the world you want for our children?

Delicious tea.

Delicious coffee.

Delicious cookies

Delicious cake

Refreshing water

Delicious candies.

-After a self-depreciative comment, agree, or don't do anything whatsoever to comfort.-

Don't touch your nose.

Don't scratch your arm.

Etc.

You are making a mess.

Look at what you are doing!

You will have to relax to look good in the video. You look too self-conscious right now.

You leave me no other choice but to... (subject should never be told to comply or “or else”, according to CIA interrogation method)

Why should I believe you?

-Repeat questions about the same thing that was already answered.-

Random silences.

In case of comments off topic say coldly:

Please, answer the questions.

Please, do as you are told.

Please, just relax, and you not interrupt me.

Excuse me, we have to proceed with the interview. We need to be practical now.

We need to do it the best way.

You have to agree that this way is the best.

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