

Resisting Implanted Desires in the Theatre of the Mind

by Iwan Brioc

Abstract

Imagine a psychopath who is also a master of suggestion and you have corporations in a nutshell. The new science of neuro-marketing is employing research on our neurocognitive vulnerabilities to devise advertising campaigns that burrow more silently than ever before into our synapses. In the battlefield of the urban landscape all our senses are bombarded by salvos of branding, we are surrounded in every direction by the steady stream of sensuous allurements to consume, muscling in on our primitive urges. Not only are we mindlessly consuming their 'goods,' we are also buying their ideas as facts, taking their values as ours, and self-prescribing with more 'goods' to numb us to the underlying meaninglessness of such an existence.

Yet knowledge about these techniques and where and when they are employed makes absolutely no difference to their effect on us, because they tap into innate hard wired reactions and exploit loopholes in the way our consciousness works to make us think that we have decided to act when we have not. The oppressor has won when the slave believes he is free.

This is not a new front in the resistance to oppression, but it's the one in which the oppressors have tooled up big time and which requires a response in the armoury of the Theatre of the Oppressed. I propose Mindfulness as one such weapon, which I have been bringing into play in my TO practice in the last 5 years. Mindfulness is simply being aware of what you are doing when you are doing it, and it is one of the hardest things to do, in particular for those fighting oppression, because it requires that we give up all resistance and accept things just as they are.

Anaesthetist vs Aesthetisist

In *'Mirrors,'* his recent history of the world as reflected in the broken shards of the shattered lives of the oppressed, Eduardo Galeano traces the origin of the anaesthetist to the street entertainers of medieval Venice. Alongside the mendicant tooth pullers at the carnival were acrobats, musicians, thespians and puppeteers.

"The anaesthetist did not put patients to sleep, they entertained them...and their humour and grace were so miraculous that pain forgot to hurt"

We who work with the Theatre of the Oppressed are not anaesthetists, although that too is sometimes called for, but rather *'aesthetisist'*. Through theatre we bring to all the senses our human condition, to remember how pain hurts and how the pain of others hurt us too. Together, in the aesthetic space of the stage we trace the contours of this continent of pain to know it better. As the poet Naomi Shihab Nye writes –

*"Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.*

*You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth”.*

It is then with this voice, that speaks with a solidarity based on compassion, that we can practice having a ‘*clear conversation*’ with our oppressors: those that exercise their power from the outside - in society and family; and from the inside - in our physical and mental conditioning. We rehearse the actions that will enable us to define ourselves and our lives according to what we really want and not by what we are told to expect.

Of course, I’ve enjoyed so many *anaesthetists* in my life. As I type this in a log cabin in rural Estonia I’m listening to a recording of Glenn Gould playing Bach’s Goldberg Variations and sipping a glass of port wine and life seems pretty perfect. There is so much humour and grace and beauty in this world. But when I dare to stop: when I resist the temptation to be carried away and let ‘me’ catch up with ‘I’ the pain remembers to hurt. This pain is the pain of separation from the world, the cold and brutal distance between the observer and the observed which was born with the invention of theatre and the eating of that apple of ‘self-consciousness’. There are only two places in my life where I feel able to sidle up to this pain and make friends with it – in the ‘aesthetic space’ of the stage and in moments of mindfulness: and my life’s work, it seems, is to make these two places one and the same.

An Orthogonal Shift

Part of this life mission is to introduce an orthogonal shift to the Theatre of the Oppressed: a perpendicular turn to the current view that adds a new dimension without diminishing at all what already exists. This new approach to TO is the approach of mindfulness – a Mindfulness based TO. Mindfulness defies conceptualization. Its operational definition – “*Paying attention to the present moment on purpose and non-judgementally*” (Kabat-Zinn, 2005) does not and cannot cover the complexity and yet utter simplicity of the term which contains within it the aim, the practice and the consequence all in one. Another way of describing it is as simply being with ‘what is’, without wanting ‘what is’ to be different in any way...because that is literally ‘how it is’. Already, I can see some fundamental conflicts arising from this approach to TO. We instinctively want the reality of oppression to be different to how it is and TO is a rehearsal for changing that reality.

Mindfulness is also a bit of a bandwagon with a recent surge in books and courses in Mindfulness Based approaches to depression, parenting, eating, sex and various other aspects of living. Its roots are in Buddhism but in the last 30 years it has become a secular and operationalised approach that has a lot of medical research to back it up and which is having a huge influence on the cognitive sciences.

So what place does mindfulness have in TO? The theme of TO in the urban context allows me to confront these apparent conflicts by addressing a specific oppression that is overwhelming in urban environments and for which the weapons in the armoury of TO need adapting. While I have always been aware of this particular oppression it is only recently that I started to discover that there was a

whole industry and field of science dedicated to its perfection. It's called neuro-marketing and it is a legitimate form of brainwashing for the purpose of creating corporate profit. It's a kind of anti-mindfulness movement!

The Aspartame-ing of society

There's an old Sufi saying that Hell is where you receive everything you want. Well how about the prospect of a shiny new, sweet smelling hell where you receive everything you think you want, because that thought has been implanted in your unconscious by the neuroscientists who have been paid to market the product that's suddenly caught your eye. It's a closed loop and a done deal for the market driven world in which we live and it's already happening –

[Why Marketing minds have turned their heads to mind-reading by Hannah Kuchler in the Financial Times 12th April 2010](#)

“Hmm...I feel like I want to eat bread...woo...that thing there looks a bit like bread...or like my favourite thing...I don't know...it's just talking to me somehow...in fact, I must have it. What's it called?...a thneed! Nice name...what's it for? Doesn't matter, I have the strangest intuition that it's going to solve all my problems. I feel it in my bones, this thneed is so me. And, wow, it's so much cheaper than I expected. How on earth do they make it for that price? They must be so good and honest and beneficent in heart and mind these people who make thneeds, they are practically giving them away. Such God like charity. Oh! Look at that, I've bought it already in some kind of swoon. Ah! Well, I trust my impulse”.

Of course, subliminal marketing and manipulation of mass desires has been with us for some time. Sigmund Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays developed what we now call public relations in the 20's using his uncle's theories of subliminal desires. He commented once that he would have called it Propaganda but the Russians had a trademark on that name. Check out Adam Curtis' excellent documentary – [‘The Century of the Self’](#) about Bernays. In fact, check out any Adam Curtis documentary. They expose the thinkers and their theories behind the world views of our world leaders.

Only now, with the recent advances in neuroscience brought about in part by the technology that allows us to see the brain as it is thinking, the brainwashers are really getting a handle on their art. Take, for instance, the [selective awareness test](#), that video on youtube that catches us out and makes us laugh with surprise at how stupid we are...well, I met one of the scientist behind it and he's funded very well to explore how to place product adverts not moon-walking bears in the edge of our attention, so that it slips through to our unconscious from where it can sow the seeds of our innermost desires.

This is not a new front. We who are involved in Theatre of the Oppressed have been fighting the oppression of implanted desires through social conditioning but the enemy have a new armoury and if we are not to become salivating zombie consumers then we need to advance our technology of resistance. The irony is that the technology exists and is at least 2500 years old. It is Mindfulness – the core component of Buddhism, and it is a resistance through acceptance...only by accepting unconditionally and without judgement what is happening at the moment, in our bodies and in our

environment can we sensitise our awareness of ourselves to catch the moment before the impulse turns to action. But it will demand continual practice because those thneeds have us surrounded.

When Boal talks about implanted desires in *The Rainbow of Desires* he explains how osmosis works both ways. We can take action to democratise cultural production and reclaim our personal creativity and this is perhaps the main thrust of *'the aesthetics of the oppressed'*. Byron, the poet of the industrial age, said it had become easier to manufacture people than machines. The aesthetics of the oppressed is the creative resistance to this movement of mechanization. Byron was referring to people as the operators of machines - the manufacturers. However, robotics have to a large extent surpassed the human machine in this part of the production line. So in the last century the mechanization of the person as consumer has been the measure of civilization and implanting desires has been, next to making war, the fastest growing industry.

The surfaces of our urban environments are entirely mediated by the prerogative to implant desires. Branding is literally a product's ability to burn its image on the brain's amygdale, tapping into autonomic responses beyond our conscious control. We are all prone to our particular vices, our personal weaknesses for a certain confectionary or brand. The trick played by marketers is to suppress our capacity for analogical induction, so that we sense an intimate familiarity with a certain product, the consumption of which becomes a part of our 'unique' identity, without realising how it is a 'consumer experience' that is mass produced – the familiarity arising initially from its name and image being drip fed into our visual cortex over days, weeks, years.

This might not appear to be an oppression which seems anywhere near as serious as child slavery or people trafficking. It might not even appear to be oppression at all because we believe we are the 'captain' of our own minds and can walk away from this situation – while oppression is often defined as a situation you can't walk away from. However, in the urban context walking away from implanted desires is not an option and in at least two ways it has an impact on our capacity to initiate new and radical action. Firstly, it makes a cuckoo's nest of our consciousness. Like the Cuckoo bird which, while the other birds are away, throws their eggs out of their nest and replaces them with her own: what we REALLY want, what we are born to realize is usurped on a moment to moment basis by what we think we want. Secondly, writ large this effect is to create a society that believes instant satiation is a human right, above and beyond the rights of the environment or the enslaved workforce which suffer to produce the product at an 'affordable price'. The combined effect is a vicious and insatiable circle of enslavement to our immediate desires.

Buddhist, those experts of mindfulness, say that our modern addiction to pleasure is like licking honey off a razor blade – we can't taste our own blood. And what a honey pot modern life presents to us, smothered over the shattered mirror of the impoverished and enslaved peoples on which it continues to be built and in which we refuse to see our own reflection. Perhaps, a better metaphor for our civilization's obsession with satiating our every desire is aspartame.

This genetically modified chemical sweetener found in products labelled 'diet' or 'lite' is a modern wonder. A pinch is equivalent to bags and bags of that other substance associated in history with slavery: sugar. But recent research has discovered that the brain is not fooled, and when a diet drink enters the system advertising with its sweetness an equivalent energy that doesn't materialize, the body starts looking elsewhere to level the books. It gorges on the real thing beyond what it sought in the first place and 'lite' becomes 'obese.'

What, within the armoury of TO, do we have to answer to this '*aspar-taming*' of our urge for self-realization, the false catharsis of the consumer experience? While I believe the practice of TO in and of itself can bring about mindfulness and a greater clarity around our place in the world, there are elements that I emphasise in my workshops, training and joking style which I think start to address indirectly this aspar-taming effect. What I do not do is to confront directly the oppression I have just described. This needs to be done, with campaigns against neuro-marketing, but if we only do this we will never know if we have succeeded because it operates under the threshold of our consciousness- it oppresses when we are away from the nest. Therefore, resistance means sitting in our nest or as best we can being present to what is happening with equanimity.

What do we REALLY want?

The first element is to challenge ourselves to ask for what we really want, the second is the distributing of the aesthetic space and the third is a general attitude of mindfulness to the problem.

It was a poem by Rumi that first drew my attention to something I think is often absent in TO practice and which I've come to believe is an essential component.

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you
Don't go back to sleep
You must ask for what you really want
Don't go back to sleep
People are crossing back and forth across the doorsill where the two worlds touch
The door is round and open
Don't go back to sleep*

It was that line – '*you must ask for what you really want*' that really got me thinking. We ask people in TO to share with us what it is that oppresses them and I now believe that is the wrong question to ask first. Is it not the case that on first thoughts oppression is an obstacle between us and what we think we want? We might even prefer to tolerate this oppression, to find a way to live with it rather than try and overcome it, because overcoming it would mean that we would then have to ask ourselves '*what do I really want*'. If you start by asking and working with images of what we really want, or the future we most desire for instance, then the obstacles to achieving that stated desire are thrown into more detailed relief by the light that emerges from having already connected with that innate desire. It's not simply a matter a cursory asking of the question to a group, it often involves screwing down into the question through image and through repeated questioning.

One exercise is in pairs seated facing each other, and involves one partner asking the other partner three questions over and over again, listening openly to the answer to each question before asking the next and then starting again with a cycle – being as meiotic to new responses as possible. The questions are – What do you really want? What will you do to get it? Who will you be when you get it?

A second aspect which I will often use is what I call the new world exercise. It is an adaptation of an exercise I did in a training with Boal back in the 90's and that I haven't found described in any of his books. It is simply to assume that the working space is all that remains of the world and that we are

the remaining inhabitants. We have as our resources all that is contained in that space (if there is time and resources I will have brought some extra objects into the space to make it more interesting). We are permitted to rearrange the objects and ourselves to create a new world, perhaps an ideal world.

Once completed I then ask participants to go to the place in this new world where they least like to be, where they most like to be and where they think they belong. When they are in those different spaces I ask them to think how much of their lives they spend in this place, what they get from being there etc. In this way the space becomes potentized with meaning – it becomes an aesthetic space, and the journey from one point to the other is a ‘flowing of meaning’ – another definition of dialogue.

It occurred to me while watching this process that perhaps this is how indigenous peoples experience their whole environment: everything around them, the trees, the animals, the river is speaking to them. Just as the placement of chairs, of mats, of windows had a particular significance in the journeys of participants in this exercise, above and beyond their everyday utility. It also occurred to me that this state of awareness is almost entirely obscured from view by the modern urban environment, with its ever changing hoardings and shop fronts that tyrannize into silence the more subtle meanings that arise as we walk through the landscape. People almost all love this exercise, and drink from it hungry with thirst for such meaning.

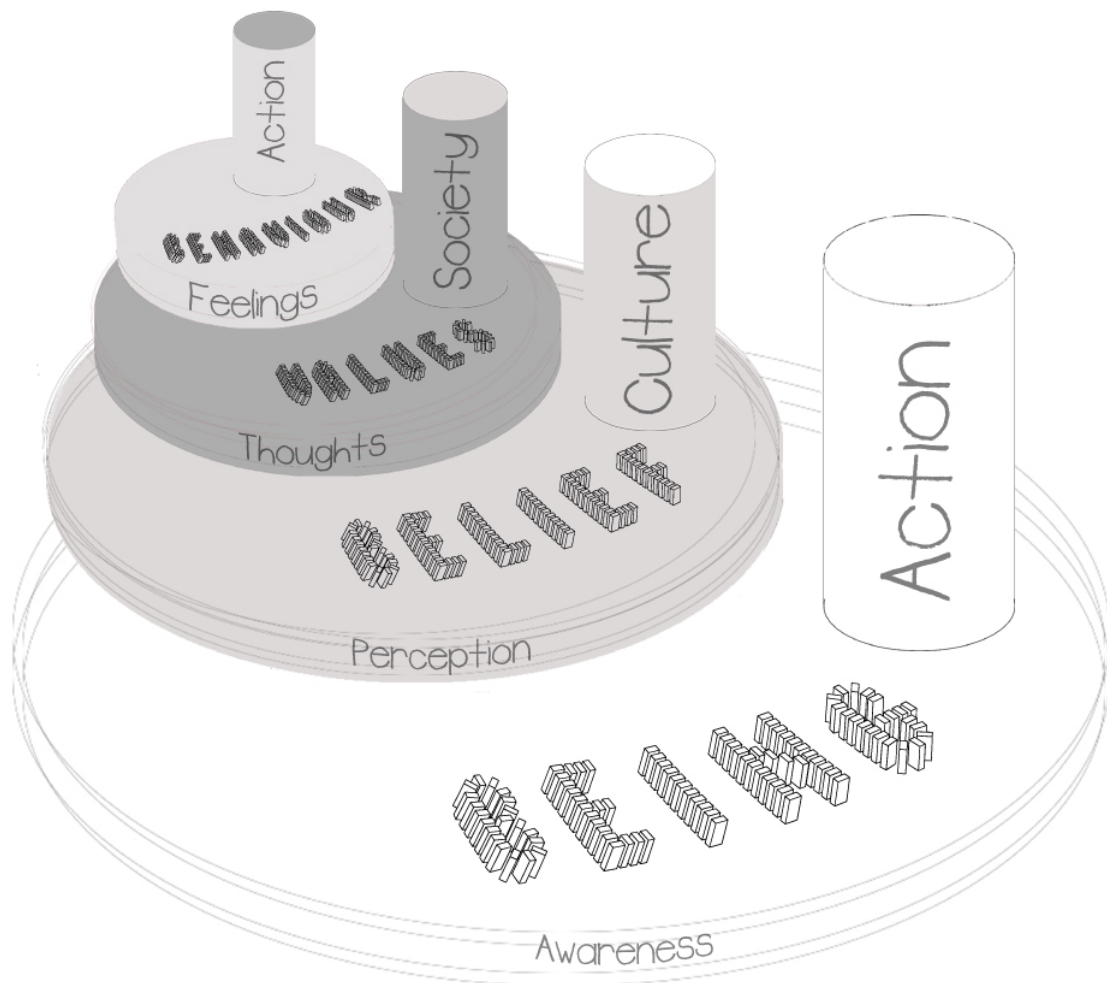
The exercise is further developed by identifying and embodying the obstacles in the journey from where we least like to be or where we belong to where we most want to be. These are elements that inhibit us through the mechanization of our movement, through the thoughts that think they are facts and in the external forces of oppressions. In this way we lay the foundations for working in a deep way with oppression at all the levels in which it impacts – physical, mental and social. It also can provide the basis of a scenography a choreography, and a script of thoughts on which to build a forum piece.

A third element I try to bring to my work in TO is mindfulness in general. There is too much to describe about the practical aspects for the scope of this essay, but very simply it means slowing things down and giving space for the spect-actors to notice what is happening in their bodies and minds as it is happening and to try to accept entirely what is happening in every moment...even the urge to resist what is happening and to want it to be different (which is also part of what is happening). By staying with what is happening in all its often appalling barbarity and injustice we start to see the whole mechanism, and our part in it. In this way the action, when we take it, is more comprehensive and effective in achieving what we really want. This doesn't mean that spect-actors just sit there contemplating the oppression and not sharing opinions or proposing and enacting actions. It's more to do with the emphasis of the joker, the questions asked and the intensity of the listening.

The Mindful Joker

I've observed that actions for change in TO, interventions in a forum for instance, aim for certain levels of change. There is the proposal to change the behaviour of the protagonist to incite feelings

in the oppressor that will lessen or resolve the oppression. There is the direct confrontation with how the oppressor thinks - the values of the oppressor and therefore the society which he/she represents. There is the challenging of the oppressor's belief system by attempting to change their perceptions of reality and the 'culture of oppression' to which they belong. And then there is an action that comes from a spect-actor's quality of being that just dissolves the capacity of the oppressor to oppress, because they become aware through the presence of the other of their shared humanity...of the human being.



This last intervention comes from the most unexpected sources and is the one that brings a transformational awareness in the audience, a 'consciousness' in the root meaning of that word – a knowing-together in the audience that undermines the capacity of oppression at its root – the illusion of our separation.

In TO terminology this spontaneous quality of awareness brought about by an intervention can be seen as a kind of super-analogical induction or meta-metaxis, where the specific and the general of the situation and the image of reality and the reality of the image become a singularity. In mindfulness terminology it is called meta-cognitive insight. The term I prefer, from David Bohm, is proprioception - a sudden insight into the whole movement of perception, thought, feelings: not

through intellectual analysis or even creative exploration but from a choiceless awareness – from mindfulness.

The Only Revolution

What these kinds of transformative interventions have in common is a radical acceptance of the situation as a prerequisite to it changing and it is this seeming contradiction, this paradox, which needs to be embraced to enable the orthogonal shift mindfulness can bring to TO. The oppression of neuro-marketing is useful in illustrating how without this orthogonal shift we cannot hope to challenge modern and sublime forms of manufactured consent and mechanisation of our sense-responses through osmosis.

Let's take the scenario of the 'thneed' again. If we were to address this oppression through TO from a mindfulness perspective we could practice our senses to notice the rising and falling of sensations in response to neuro-marketing and notice in particular how the sense of something 'lacking' arises which leads to the basic urge to consume. The problem with this is that this sense of lack is not simply something we feel or think about it is where we think from: in our culture it is where we perceive from. What that means is that it is only by 'being' with it all in the present moment, even inviting difficult sensations without wanting them to be different, that we start to see the whole movement and then we are able to notice the manipulation. We can feel the pull of the thneed, we can even enjoy the sensation to acquire, surfing the urges to consume, but without acting on it. Then the urban landscape becomes a jungle of meanings which we journey through aware of the sense predators, rather than at their beck and call.

If you think this is a trivial issue, take a walk down any big street in any city and notice how much control you have over where your attention goes. As an experiment, try walking without offering any sensory resistance to the environment: allowing everything to be just as it is and letting go to all that you encounter. What you might notice is how the view widens; how movement becomes a dance; the cacophony of sound a concerto; and how posters with buff or busty torsos, texts shouting '*look at me*', become just part of the swirl of colours. With practice you might start to notice that not only do you not have control of your attention or your thoughts; but also that there is a tendency for you to retrospectively ascribe your actions to a rational decision making process when in reality you have already physiologically started to act. It is this noticing...over and over again that starts to release you from enslavement to your conditioning, and to inoculate you to top-down osmosis. This is why in some ways 'inaction' is the most positive 'action' and why I believe Mindfulness, and not Marxism alone, at the heart of TO will bring about the only revolution which can bring peace, justice and equality – and that will be a revolution in consciousness.