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The Influencing Machine

CHRISTOPHER TURNER

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In 1919, Victor Tausk, a disciple of Sigmund Freud, committed suicide by simultaneously hanging and shooting himself. "I have no melancholy," he wrote in his suicide note, which was addressed to Freud. "My suicide is the healthiest, most decent deed of my unsuccessful life." His essay, "On the origin of the 'Influencing Machine' in Schizophrenia," which has since become a classic in psychiatric literature, had just been published.

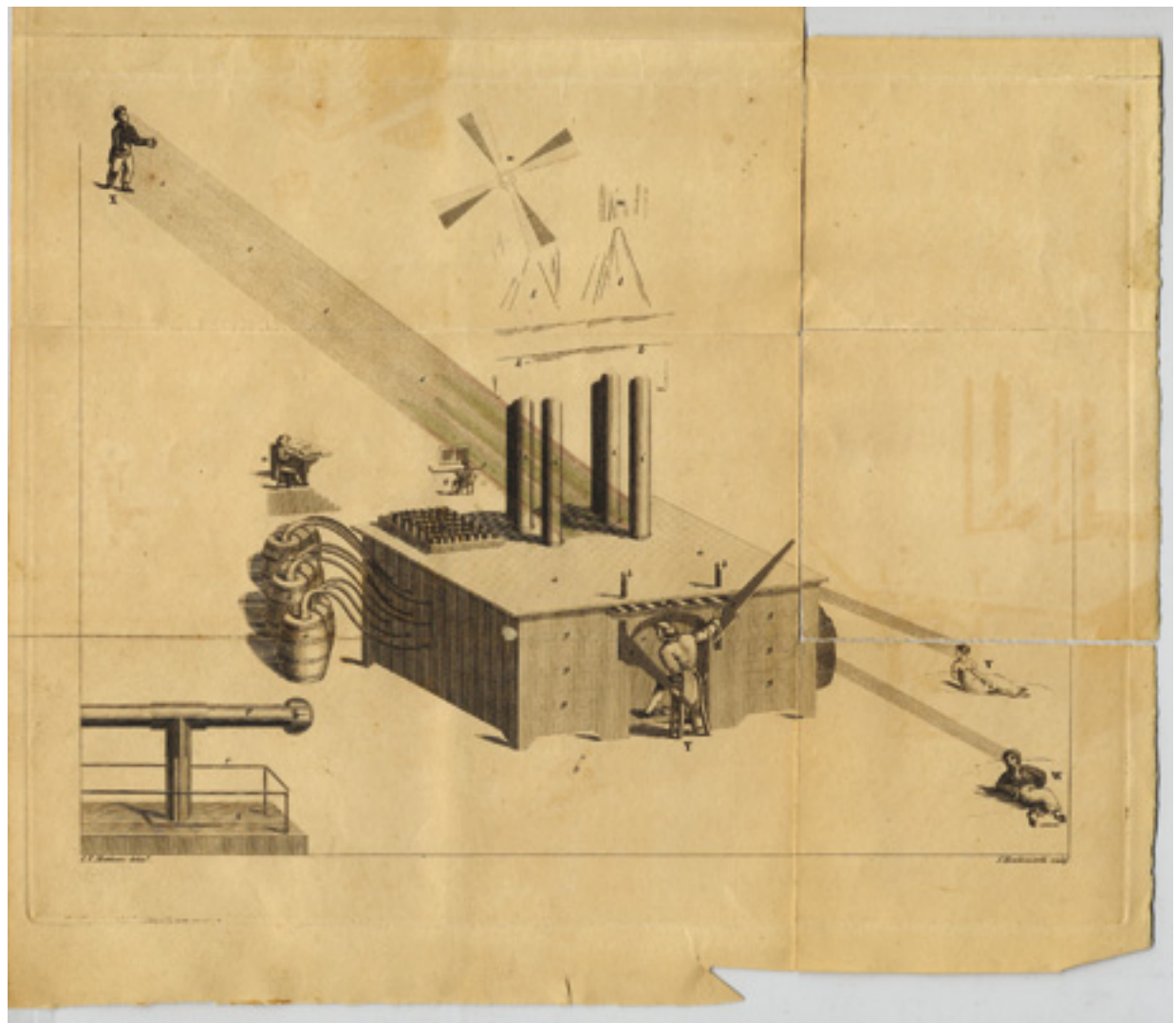
In the article, Tausk described the elaborate mechanical devices that paranoid schizophrenics invent in their imaginations to explain away their mental disintegration. As the boundaries between the schizophrenic's mind and the world break down, they often feel themselves persecuted by "machines of a mystical nature," which supposedly work by means of radio-waves, telepathy, x-rays, invisible wires, or other mysterious forces. The machines are believed to be operated by enemies as instruments of torture and mind-control, and the operators are thought to be able to implant and remove ideas and feelings, and inflict pain, from a distance.

Influencing Machines are described by their troubled inventors as complex structures, constructed of "boxes, cranks, levers, wheels, buttons, wires, batteries and the like." Sometimes these devices are thought to be their doubles, unconscious projections of their fragmented bodily experience. Patients will typically invoke all the powers known to technology to explain their obscure workings. Nevertheless, they always transcend attempts at giving a coherent account of their function: "All the discoveries of mankind," Tausk asserts, "are regarded as inadequate to explain the marvelous powers of this machine."

Tausk took his term from an apparently magical device invented in 1706 by Francis Hauksbee, a student of Isaac Newton. His "Influence Machine" was a spinning glass globe, which cracked like lightning when touched, transmitting an electrical spark and emitting a greenish neon light when rubbed—a mysterious luminosity which was called "the glow of life." These apparently supernatural effects were caused by the introduction of static electricity into a vacuum; it worked like the shimmering vacuum tube of the modern TV. Its psychological incarnation had similarly mesmerizing effects: "The influencing machine," Tausk wrote, "makes the patients see pictures. When this is the case, the machine is generally a magic lantern or cinematograph. The pictures are seen on a single plane, on walls or windowpanes; unlike typical visual hallucinations, they are not three-dimensional."

The psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn began collecting for his famous Museum of Pathological Art the same year that Tausk published his essay (within a year Prinzhorn had acquired forty-five hundred works, which are currently housed in the Psychiatric University Hospital in Heidelberg, Germany). One of these images illustrates an Influencing Machine in strikingly graphic form. The artist was Jakob Mohr, a farmer and hawker suffering from paranoid schizophrenia, and his picture shows someone holding a small box which resembles an old-fashioned camera and transmits something like static at its victim. The structural workings of the contraption are explained in a palimpsest of scribbled notes, which Prinzhorn called "word salad." The operator, who is thought to be the psychiatrist (he wears headphones so that he can listen in on Mohr's thoughts), aims a radiation tube at his subject that emits "electric waves" and renders him a "hypnotic slave." The machine's energy flows two ways—it is a magnet as well as a gun: "Waves are pulled out of me," Mohr scrawled, "through the positive electrical fluorescent attraction of the organic positive pole as the remote hypnotizer through the earth." The appliance's malevolent power over Mohr is illustrated by a series of childishly drawn arrows and wavy tentacles which unite both men in a painful-looking spasm of electricity.

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James Tilly Matthew's "air-loom," early 19th century. Courtesy Library of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia.

Exactly a hundred years before Mohr drew his sketch, the first recorded clinical description of an Influencing Machine was published in 1810 by John Haslam, the apothecary at Bethlem Hospital (otherwise known as

Bedlam) in London. His book, *Illustrations of Madness*, extensively quoted one of his patients' descriptions of his persecutory fantasies. James Tilly Matthews, a Welsh tea-broker and architect, had embarked on a hopelessly optimistic solo mission to broker peace between Britain and post-Revolutionary France, only to be thrown into jail by the Jacobins. He was released three years later as a "dangerous madman" and returned to England in 1796. On his arrival, he noisily interrupted a session in the House of Parliament, accusing the government of "traitorous venality" and the Prime Minister of being under a "spell, ... a mere puppet" of French spies. He was declared insane and a public menace, and was once again incarcerated, though his family sought his release and persuaded several experts to testify to his sanity. Haslam countered with his book, which documented Matthews's bizarre conspiracy theory in enough detail to embarrass his professional supporters, perhaps explaining the book's sneering and unsympathetic tone. His patient remained in manacles (Haslam was dismissed in 1816, accused of maltreating his inmates).

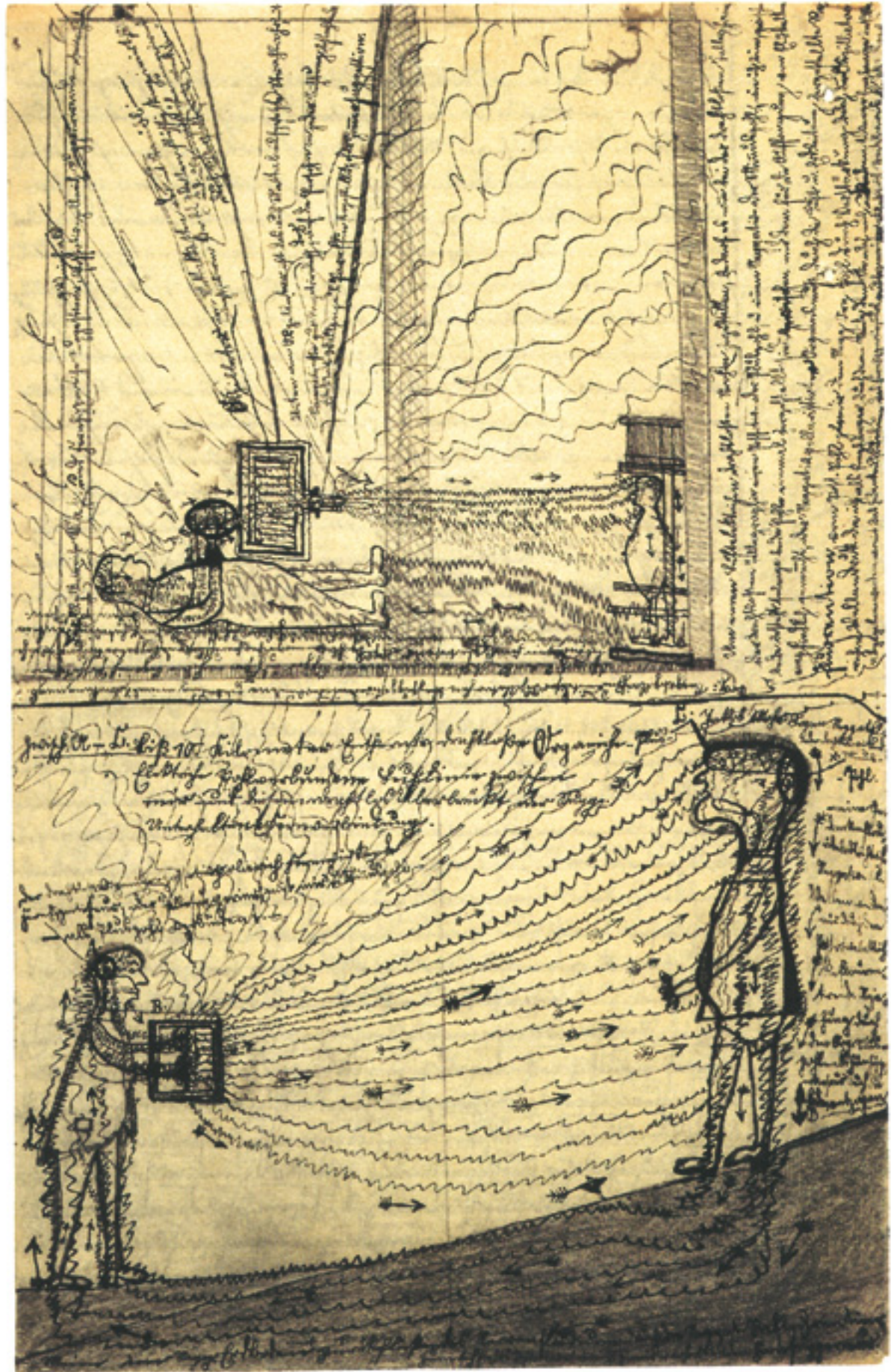
Matthews, who signed himself "James, Absolute, Sole, Supreme, Sacred, Omni-Imperious, Arch-Grand, Arch-Sovereign ... Arch-Emperor," thought French agents had placed a magnet in his brain and were manipulating his mind, and those of other important figures, with waves of animal magnetism emitted from an Influencing Machine, which he termed an "air-loom." From their hideout in London Wall, he claimed the "gang of seven" controlled him from a distance, using their sinister machine to carry out a horrible litany of tortures: "foot-curving, lethargy-making, spark-exploding, knee-nailing, burning out, eye-screwing, sight-stopping, roof-stringing, vital-tearing, fibre-ripping, etc." In his sleep he was plagued by "dream-workings," as the gang acted out gruesome performances with "puppets" which were projected straight onto the retina of his mind.

Haslam reproduced one of Matthews's sketches of the air-loom—thought to be the first picture by a mental patient ever to be published—which shows the artist being struck by rays, his arms outstretched as though he were screaming operatically or receiving the stigmata, as he falls under the mesmeric spell emitted by the machine. Matthews depicts himself in the throes of "sudden death-squeezing" or "lobster cracking"; anyone wanting to understand what this might feel like is asked to imagine themselves being throttled by a large pair of "lobster-crackers, with teeth, which should pierce as well as press him through every particle within and without; he experiences the whole stress, torture, driving, oppressing, and crush all together."

Bill the King, or the "Middle-Man" ("who has never been observed to smile"), sits at the controls of the diabolical instrument and is shown operating its levers, tubes, and piano-forte keys to sadistic effect. The rest of the villainous gang are shown lying around it "in promiscuous intercourse and filthy venality." The air-loom resembles a large organ, capped by a windmill or whirligig, and is fuelled by several barrels of disgusting gases ("effluvia of dogs—stinking human breath—putrid effluvia," etc.). It is the product of the industrial revolution, a bizarre mechanical loom which produces strings of "spermatic animal-seminal" rays. The artist Rod Dickinson gave Matthews's fears tangible form when he

recreated the bulky air-loom in a Newcastle gallery in 2002.

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Jakob Mohr, *Beweisse* [Proofs], ca. 1910. Courtesy Prinzhorn Collection, University of Heidelberg.

In his essay, Victor Tausk tells the unhappy tale of Miss Natalija A. to shed new light on this schizophrenic delusion and to explain the origins of the extraordinary phenomenon of these curious and fictional mind-controlling machines. Natalija A. was a thirty-one-year-old former philosophy student who had been deaf for many years (she communicated solely by writing),

and who was haunted by the image of her own double. She felt that she had been controlled for six and a half years by an electrical machine which she said was manufactured in Berlin, though its use was illegal and prohibited by the police. The machine resembled her in every way.

Her doppelgänger looked something like the outstretched figure on a sarcophagus; the torso lifted off like the lid of a coffin, and was lined with velvet or silk, to reveal the inner workings of the machine, which consisted of batteries supposed to represent the internal organs. Freud, referring to the case of Natalija A., made a reference to Egyptian mummies, a mode of burial that represents the comforting return to the mother's body. In other words, the Influencing Machine into which Natalija A. withdrew represents her paranoid attempt to rebuild a fragmented world.

Natalija A. thought that the uncanny device which manipulated her worked by telepathy and was operated by a rejected suitor, a jealous college professor; when he struck the machine she felt the pain, when he stroked its genitals she felt the sexual sensations. She believed that an ulcer on her nose first appeared on her double, and that, as Tausk put it, "those who handle the machine produce a slimy substance in her nose, disgusting smells, dreams, thoughts, feelings, and they also disturb her while she is thinking, reading or writing." In fact, she felt that all her family and friends were under the influence of similar machines, an exact simulacrum of her world, connected to it like a series of voodoo dolls.

Tausk thought that all Influencing Machines were perhaps once the doubles of their victims, narcissistic projections conjured up by their inventors. The machine, which seems to totally control the patient, was the embodiment of the schizophrenic's own sense of alienation from his or her body and a mad attempt to forestall it. In the course of his analysis of Natalija A., Tausk noticed how the machine ceased to resemble her. Her double was becoming flat and indistinct in her descriptions of it, shedding its human attributes as it became purely mechanical.

At what point does this slippage between an anthropomorphic double and a complex machine occur? Hanns Sachs, Freud's colleague and biographer, responded to Tausk's essay in an article which asked precisely this question. Modern machines, Sachs wrote, like the mechanical loom, the steam hammer, and the locomotive, replace man, requiring him to "only play the role of the master-mind in control." Modern contraptions introduced a new, estranged relationship to technology; they were operated remotely, and in turn controlled the men who operated them by turning them into automatons. Sachs thought that schizophrenic devices reflected common anxieties about the Machine Age, and perhaps the fantasy originates with the industrial revolution; Matthews's mechanical "air-loom," for example, represents a paranoiac's distortion of these contemporary fears.

Natalija A. helped Tausk to see that this evolutionary process was typical—that the schizophrenics' machines were not merely indecipherable fictions, but tangential representations of themselves. However, mechanically complicated, Tausk believed, these confabulations were once the patients'

doubles, who would inevitably always become lost over time in the cogs and wheels of the Influencing Machine.

Tausk's patient broke off her analysis before her analyst could get to the bottom of the matter. Usually, Tausk wrote, the patient suspects that it is their physician who operates the device that persecutes them. But, in this case, Natalija A. thought that he too had fallen victim to the hostile forces of the machine, and that she could no longer trust him.

Christopher Turner is writing a book, *Adventures in the Orgasmatron: How the Sexual Revolution came to America*, to be published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. He is currently a visiting scholar at Columbia University.

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