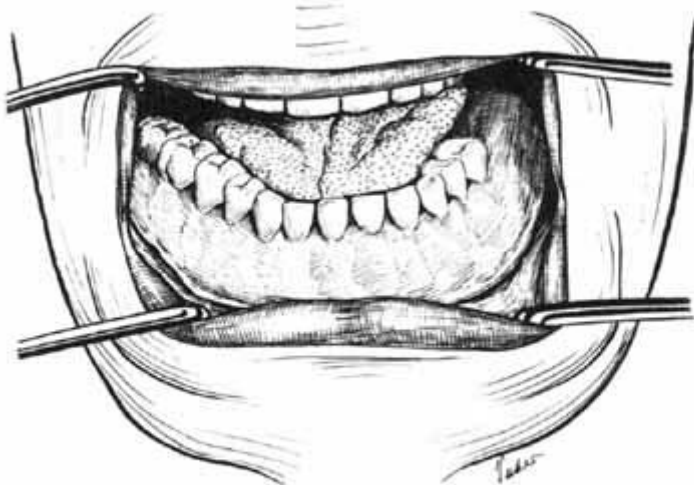


Bernhard Loibner/Tom Sherman
Nerve Theory: Shades Of Catatonia



"... the victims of today's psychological warfare are the mentally dislocated people who cope in various ways with widespread conditions of information poverty, a trans-societal malaise engineered by wave after wave of redundant, though empty, message forms ..."

Nerve Theory (Bernhard Loibner/Tom Sherman)

Bernhard Loibner (A) and Tom Sherman (CDN/USA) have been dealing with the psychology of alienated, dislocated individuals in their voice/music works since 1993. Their fascination with the victims of the information age is not a cynical celebration of dislocation and dysfunction (a kind of absolution by default from responsibility), but is based on a belief that intense identification and personification with contemporary dislocation phenomena may lead to a recognition of these societal ills and a transcendence of immobility and depression, and a relief from chronic low information drive and the need for overload to feel anything at all. In other words, we hope to help people recognize widespread information consumption disorders.

We do not have to look very far to find the casualties of information warfare. While the military's use of C2W (command and control warfare), IBW (intelligence-based warfare) and EW (electronic warfare) is exotic, these contemporary forms of conflict remain abstractions to most of us. Closer to home, the contemporary information environment is clearly a brutal zone for psychological warfare (PSYOPS or PsyWar) and PsyWar affects everyone. PsyWar is the use of information to affect the perceptions, intentions and orientations of the society as a whole (everyone from military personnel to civilians of all ages and backgrounds).

Military establishments and governments conduct PsyWar, as do entertainment, educational and even artistic sectors. This diverse spectrum of strategic info-sources spread hundreds of thousands of manipulative messages per month, messages designed to steer and corral the target populations into certain mindsets. These diverse info-sources seem to deliver highly coordinated, complementary, synergetic messages (military, governments, entertainment corporations, education institutions and even some artists seem to operate in lock-step) and none of these sources seem to have any concerns about the overall psychological welfare of their human targets beyond their strategic intentions to manipulate and control.

One of the first things Nerve Theory has noticed is that representatives of the target populations are frequently polarized under fire and often perceive their plight and formulate behavioural options from totally opposite perspectives. We consider this polarization to be symptomatic of societal bipolar disorder, where the active intellectuals of any advanced information society divide into opposing, polarized points of view, forming mutually repellent forces and expressing diametrically opposed natures or views.

A message from Tom Sherman

"There are two ways to look at the current information environment in developed information societies: 1) Never before has so much data and information been accessible to the individual. Institutional, government and corporate affiliation is no longer necessary as a criteria for information access. Or 2) Institutions, governments and corporations control data and information flow more tightly than ever before in history. Individuals are limited to information designed for their own, respective manipulation, and data backing up this aggressive manipulation (i.e. entertainment, educational material, investment lures, political advertising, lifestyle and healthy living instructions, etc., etc.).

"The above conflicting viewpoints are utopian and dystopian perspectives defining either optimists or pessimists, libertarians or social realists, both arguing that THEY are THE critical thinkers. Millennial hype compounds this dichotomous split-perspective. It appears that either we are headed into a period of unlimited freedom, individual

empowerment and democratic social development, or it is simply game-over for non-aligned individuals and non-profit organizations with positive, inclusive, democratic social goals.

"Many individuals (although critical thinkers in any society represent a small percentage of the total population) can be sorted according to this polarity of outlook. For some, tomorrow cannot come soon enough as it appears full of hope and promise. Others dread an infinite period of darkness, knowing we are, for all practical purposes, doomed. The reasons for this polarity are generally expressed in ideological or national rationales, although genetic and biochemical determinations cannot be discounted."

(Tom Sherman, 6/12/98)

It is Nerve Theory's strategy to examine the primary sites of today's psychological warfare, the minds of individuals, plugged-in to various degrees in an integrated global data and information system. On a societal level, it is clear that a small percentage of critical thinkers are radically polarized by positive and negative perspectives, and respond accordingly. To use an electrical analogy, these critical thinkers are positively or negatively charged. And yes, opposites, positive and negative, attract with the resulting sparks flying as a necessary condition of their arguments. Concurrently, the vast majority of individuals in developed information societies appear to operate with a more balanced, more common bipolar charge. Although these more balanced individuals appear to be more stable and less prone to external arguments when managing their personal levels of data and information flow, they oscillate (vacillate) back and forth between internal polarities and most of the time they appear confused when not totally incapacitated, frequently not knowing what they think.

The main problems with societal bipolar disorder are the difficulties individuals have in developing a self awareness of thought disorders and in correcting disorganized thinking. Individuals have trouble recognizing, abstracting, conceptualizing and expressing coherent thoughts that represent their own point of view. If they are subjected to the constant bombardment of redundant, though empty, message forms of the seemingly coordinated, coherent forces of the military, governments, entertainment corporations, education institutions and most disappointingly, some artists, then they probably suffer from disorganized thought and exhibit the expression of same. This does not mean that these individuals no longer think their own thoughts, or no longer maintain their own points of view. The widespread thought disorders in societies characterized by societal bipolar disorder are really disturbances in the form of thought, to the extent that the form of thought can be distinguished from the content of thought.

The combined, massive message barrage of the purveyors of psychological warfare is loud and brash but ultimately empty and vacuous because it refuses to acknowledge the individual's mind as the primary site for the transformation of data into information. Messages that appear to be information, or worse yet, messages that label themselves 'information', are simply structured data-sets, and whether these data-sets are significant and/or useful remains to be determined during the perceptual processes of the individual in the act of reception. As Gregory Bateson said, "Information is any difference that makes a difference." Nerve Theory recognizes the individual mind as the primary site of information production.

A message from Bernhard Loibner

"Actually, I am not sure whether "infowar" is information and war, war and information, information about war, war about information, war for more (or maybe less) information, war against more (or maybe less) information. It may well be that infowar takes place on an imaginary front, where hackers and their agents embody the inevitable roles of good and evil, sending out their software agents to break into each others' databases and download or wipe each others' data. For me personally it is certainly more interesting to observe how the average individual is affected by the everyday manifestation of whatever this infowar actually is.

"As Nerve Theory points out, the victims of psychological warfare are the mentally dislocated, suffering from information poverty ... from the consumption of redundant, empty, message forms. As far as I am concerned, redundancy and emptiness result from the act of monitoring a high volume of traffic on many channels simultaneously. I push myself to stay in touch. I am simply afraid to miss something 'important'.

"I dive in, enjoying this high level of noise, the bombardment of my senses, the constant stimulation of my perception. But sometimes I am unable to process all the signals that I receive, and I overload, I may blank out, experiencing a fracture in what it is that gives me a feeling of individuality, uniqueness and self direction. I may feel like I am a countless body within a faceless mass while studying the bizarre postures of people sitting opposite me in the tube. It can take a while to overcome this inertia towards dislocation, this drift to nowhere, and the accompanying mental stupor.

"A similar thing happens with my acoustic perception. I like to dive into the sea of white noise, facing walls of sound, repetitive machine-like patterns of sound at high volume. It is like looking into a bright, white field (a Ganzfeld), like a painting by Fontana, a white canvas with a gash cut through it. This kind of visual image has a highly meditative aspect and therefore it is not very far from the acoustic phenomenon we label as silence, however we may define it. For me, as an urban species, this means listening to nothing but the slight but constant drone of the city."

"A degree of catatonia is embedded in all of this. Command automatism (automatic compliance with instructions), which is described as one of the basic symptoms of catatonia, can be seen as a very common pattern of behaviour throughout our so-called 'information society'. It definitely is a fundamental principle of our machines. This leads me to close with a mutation of a line by Tom Waits. Waits said: 'not me is drunken, my piano is'. I say: 'not me is schizophrenic, my laptop is'..."

(Bernhard Loibner, 6/14/98)

Nerve Theory has charged itself with the sometimes uncomfortable task of assessing and reporting on the damage of PsyWar. Severely alienated and dislocated individuals are often in denial, their perceptual processes in a shamble, their thinking badly disorganized. Command automatism rules. It seems impossible for the victims of PsyWar to express coherent thoughts that represent their own point of view.

With such a state of affairs it is hard to know where to start. We simply begin by revealing shared trauma, by connecting over strategies for maintaining control of the primary territory of today's psychological warfare, the minds of individuals, plugged-in as they are to various degrees in an integrated global data and information system. With PsyWar there is no safe distance, no single enemy, and often no recognizable pain or discomfort until it is too late. Most of the time we do not even know when we are wounded.

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