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Symposium: John Lardas Modern's *Neuromatic: Or, A Particular History of Religion and the Brain*

Blurring the Lines Between “Good” and “Bad” Religion: John Modern's *Neuromatic*

NEUROMATIC: OR, A PARTICULAR HISTORY OF RELIGION AND THE BRAIN

By John Lardas Modern.
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021
Pp. xv + 426. Paper \$32.50.

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“In the MRI I experienced the invisible tendrils of discourse...a particularly powerful construction of the social. For in the MRI I became aware of my paranoia, mindful of how theories of information, feedback, and self-organization...frame the social as comprised of discrete individuals in a giant communication machine” (20).

So begins John Modern's journey in *Neuromatic*. I felt an immediate kinship. I start my book *Biblical Porn* (2018) with a field tale that details paranoia generated by entanglements of brain, body, technology, and world while sitting alone at my laptop. Such moments call our attention to how, as Modern describes it, “discourse is a capacious analytic container, power circulating and surging in all directions through networks” (20). I resonated with his sense of visceral encounter as he is enveloped by systems technological as well as social, political, economic, and historical (18). Modern states that *Neuromatic* is “narrated self-consciously as a history of the present...to conjure the brain as a nexus of power relations, as a site of animated commitment to so-called secular *and* religious orders both” (18).

In my current research, I continue to examine paranoia as a social network and cultural feeling, rather than as a marker of self-delusion or individual pathology, particularly in relation to whiteness, Christianity, and masculinity. So, I was drawn to the interlude “Synaptic Gap: White Machinery,” where Modern riffs on a scene from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), during which the narrator receives shock treatment as a punishment that provides salvation. The attending physician tells Invisible to pray to his machine, which will deliver him from sin while making him physically and neutrally whole, capable of living with integrity. Modern writes, “Invisible loses his memory and becomes privy to the deployment of the paranoid view...induced by the cybernetic gaze. Normalized according to a neuromatic script...Invisible is absorbed into a vast whiteness in which he loses himself” (283).

I grooved to the hum of Modern's reading of Ellison, but the chapter that followed on the histories of electric shock therapy circa 1978 struck an odd nerve. Modern states that proponents of electric convulsive treatment (or ECT) in the 1960s and 1970s saw it as “a salvific technology,” a “miracle that achieved spiritual renewal through secular means” (298). I had flashbacks to the CIA project of mind control called MKUltra underway during the same time period. I kept thinking of the parallels between ECT, which Modern describes as a “moral treatment” (291), and MKUltra, which could be seen as its evil twin. As the chapter progressed, ECT and MKUltra increasingly sounded like they were in the same neuromatic key, although the latter placed a greater emphasis on chemicals, particularly LSD.

Modern describes ECT as “a nineteenth-century fever dream of reform come to life” (293) as it emerged in the 1930s as a technology of normalization. Moral treatment became, as Modern describes it, “a ritual of sympathetic magic and biopolitical performance” that was often “aimed at women in the service of training their irrationalities and enthusiasms” (291) by

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interrupting patterns of attention and memory. ECT managed conversion to sanity and inaugurated a season of contagious normality, particularly in sexual differentiation. As sexual deviance became a visible matter of public concern in the 1950s, ECT was enlisted to replace homosexuality with normal sexual desire. However, Modern notes, ECT was mostly administered to women who did not conform to the accepted standards of Cold War domestic bliss (297).

Government scientists saw LSD as a potential Cold War miracle drug. In 1952, when American POWs confessed on national radio to spraying the Korean countryside with biological weapons, the CIA declared them “brainwashed.” When the POWs returned to the stateside, the Army brought in a team of scientists to “deprogram” them through a technological project of patriotic renewal. This defensive program against Soviet brainwashing became an offensive one, the search for an all-purpose truth serum.

Sidney Gottlieb was the CIA’s master magician—dubbed the agency’s “poisoner in chief,” by biographer Stephen Kinzer. As the head of MKUltra, Gottlieb directed experiments at secret prisons on three continents and paid prostitutes to lure clients to CIA-run bordellos, where they were dosed without their knowledge or consent. MKUltra spread LSD across the United States, making Gottlieb a hidden godfather of 1960s counterculture. According to Kinzer, he considered himself deeply spiritual, living in a remote cabin without running water and meditating.

The CIA hoped to implant false memories and remove true ones without peoples’ awareness, produce “couriers” embedded with hidden messages in their brains, convert groups to opposing ideologies, and create hypno-programmed assassins (O’Neill and Piepenbring 2019). This work was farmed out to scientists at colleges, hospitals, prisons, and military bases throughout the United States and Canada, where they used electronic brain stimulation, sensory deprivation, ESP, ultrasonic vibrations, radiation poisoning, and magnetic fields (O’Neill and Piepenbring 2019). MKUltra’s “patients” were “people who could not fight back,” in the words of Gottlieb (Kinzer 2019). When the program was exposed in the mid-1970s, surviving records listed the involvement of 80 institutions, including 44 universities and colleges, and 185 researchers (O’Neill and Piepenbring 2019). None of their victims were notified.

As MKUltra made headlines and the industrial economy crumbled, Dr. Tien of the Michigan Institute of Psychosynthesis, Modern notes, insisted that the administration of ECT “should be wholly voluntary, a process by which patients willingly participated in their own psychic rebirth” (301). Modern reports that Tien’s innovation along these lines was Electric Love Therapy, or ELT, a system purportedly “infused with warm human communication,” as a “person undergoes an actual electro-chemical transformation of a personality” (301). ELT’s success was premised on respect for the patient’s ability to choose their best self (321). In this sense, ELT was the “good religion” to MKUltra’s “bad.” During ELT, the patient would recall disturbing memories; there would be the selective erasure

of those memories with electroshock and the immediate reprogramming of the patient’s personality (336–337). This process returned the patient to an infant-like state (337), a result that resonates with existing accounts of MKUltra’s unknowing victims, such as Esther Schrier. Esther received electroshock therapy and massive amounts of drugs as part of her “depatterning” treatment for anxiety at Montreal’s Allan Memorial Institute in 1960. After six months, she was considered “completely depatterned”—incontinent, mute, barely able to swallow, and unable to care for the baby that she gave birth to one month later (Shephard, Ellenwood, and Oke 2020).

As I read in *Neuromatic* the transcripts of patients who underwent ELT (339–348), the line between the deprogramming of MKUltra and reprogramming of ELT struck me as blurry to nondistinct. Wendy was bottle-fed by her husband and coached to drink by her daughter while the synthesist told them to tell her that she will love life when she grows up (339). “Let’s see you smile,” the synthesist encouraged (339). Wendy’s husband affirmed this command, “We told you the future looks good. Come on. Smile a little bit for us. We want to see you smile. Can’t you smile” (339)? Wendy says yes, but without smiling. Her husband badgers her until she does (339). Modern notes that ELT “possessed its own form of brutality,” citing the case of another patient named Cyril as he struggles to become Stan, transforming from an impotent crossdresser to “a normal heterosexual male” (340). “Tien’s journal called for a new kind of liberal subject and liberal society free from the inequalities that inhibited the economic success of the family unit,” Modern writes, a “version of liberal subjectivity achieved by Wendy who, after a series of ELT sessions...[held] a steady job as a drill-press operator, working 40 to 60 hours per week in an automobile factory” (344).

The notion that kept nagging at me was that the management techniques of the asylum—biopolitical technologies of normalization and reform like ECT that served to discipline and produce liberal subjects of capital—seem insufficient to fully serve Modern’s genealogical project. MKUltra’s scope, secrecy, and baldly coercive methodology seem more fitting for a history of the present, as nationalist renewal and conspiratorial thinking blur the line between good and bad religion.

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