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### Circuitry of Fright – Is Public Opinion of ECT Justified?

#### Introduction

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is a form of behavioral psychotherapy that is commonly used to treat various forms of mental illness, most commonly depression. The treatment revolves around shocking the patient's brain in order to cause minor controlled seizures, through which the brain is altered, and the illness is hopefully cured. Public opinion of ECT is resoundingly negative, mostly due to the terrifying nature of the procedure at face value. However, ECT is actually very safe and very useful for curing mental illness!

In the following literature, I will be discussing why ECT is a safe and practical form of treatment, and showcasing how media portrays it in an unjustified evil light. First, I will be going over the literature review, in which I will extrapolate what scholarly sources have to say regarding ECT and aversion therapy, which is a similar form of psychotherapy with a similar negative stigma. Next, I will discuss a related psychotherapy treatment that has a similar negative stigma. Then, I will be analyzing a particular song that features ECT to display how media portrays it exceedingly negatively. Finally, I will conclude this essay with my final thoughts on the matter.

#### Literature Review

Despite public opinion, the only real danger regarding ECT is amnesia, and it has been widely studied throughout the field of psychiatry (Rasmussen, 2019). All forms of amnesia caused by ECT have been studied individually, and treatment methods have been altered in order to reduce the risk as much as possible. Furthermore, most types of amnesia that can occur as side-effects of ECT are strictly temporary, posing no long-term detriment to the patient. The most problematic form of amnesia that may be caused by ECT is retrograde amnesia, which can cause patients to forget memories or knowledge they had before receiving treatment. Unfortunately, this also happens to be the most difficult side-effect to study, as scientists cannot be aware of everything their subjects have ever done or known before the test. Despite that, due to the importance of it, many studies have still been held and the risk and severity of this side-effect have been reduced over time. Lastly, though this single issue may be enough for somebody to decline the treatment, it is still generally preferable to the illnesses that may be cured by undergoing ECT. Some of them, including major depression, can even cause memory issues themselves, so it is very much worth the risk to dispel them (Rasmussen, 2019).

ECT is highly stigmatized in the public eye as being a horrible form of psychological treatment, more akin to torture than to medical treatment. This public view has been mirrored in many fictional works featuring ECT and has served to perpetuate these beliefs even further with some people refusing ECT treatment solely because of how they have seen it portrayed in stories (Walter, 1998). If more people were aware of all the facts surrounding the treatment, many people would be far more willing to undergo ECT themselves. As has already been mentioned, ECT can serve as an extremely powerful and beneficial treatment for depression, but it is not utilized to its full potential because of the irrational stigma surrounding it. C. H. Kellner, a professor of psychiatry with a focus on ECT treatment, says that “If scientific and clinical

evidence were the only determining factors, ECT would be used much more commonly for severe, treatment-resistant depression, and as a first-line treatment for psychotic depression” (Kellner, 2019). ECT can also be used to treat other extreme forms of mental illness, such as mania and schizophrenia. In most cases, ECT should be administered as soon as possible, yet it is often put off both by patients and doctors alike due to its undeserved reputation (Kellner, 2019).

### Another Victim

ECT is not the only form of behavioral psychotherapy to have an unreasonably terrible stigma throughout media. Another therapy in this predicament is aversion therapy. Aversion therapy is often also associated with electric shocks, using them to make a patient’s mind form a negative connection with something, generally a negative compulsion they have. This therapy is shown in a very negative context in the novel *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess as well as its film adaptation by Stanley Kubrick. It is likely that the story was not setting out to pain aversion therapy, specifically, in such a negative way. It seems more likely that aversion therapy was merely caught in the crossfire of an argument being made against torture instead. This does, obviously, have the effect of many people seeing aversion therapy as being a form of torture, rather than a useful and humane form of psychotherapy (Strange, 2012).

Even over 50 years ago aversion therapy was very helpful for preventing certain compulsions, leaving the patient and everyone around them thoroughly satisfied with the treatment. A fantastic example is that of a horse race gambler in 1968 who was treated with aversion therapy. The treatment was administered through random light shocks while the patient was performing activities related to gambling. It was quickly effective as, “On the fourth day of treatment the patient volunteered that he was having to force himself to open the paper and make

his selections” (Goorney, 1968). After treatment concluded, several check-ins were performed with the patient to ensure that positive effects persisted. In every check-in, the patient stated that he had no interest in his old gambling-related activities and was very happy with the treatment overall (Goorney, 1968).

### Artifact Analysis

“The Mind Electric” from the album *Hawaii: Part II* by Miracle Musical is a song which portrays the protagonist, Simon, going insane. In doing so, however, it portrays ECT in an extremely negative way. *Hawaii: Part II* is widely believed to tell one cohesive story, and this song marks a crucial turning point in the album’s narrative due to Simon’s ECT-induced insanity, which has consequences stretching out to the end of the story. In this essay, I will analyze the various musical techniques used to portray ECT and insanity, along with how inaccurate the song’s portrayal of ECT is when compared to scholarly sources on the subject.

Starting with the second half of the song, let us analyze the story of the song. The beginning of the song’s narrative sees Simon in the midst of a trial. The context for this predicament is found in the song “Murders”, which takes place before “The Mind Electric” in the album’s narrative. In “Murders”, the girl Simon loved was killed, and it is left unclear how. Many fans of the album believe that Simon was the one who killed her, and many others believe that he is perfectly innocent. “Murders” itself leaves this very unclear, but I believe evidence present in “The Mind Electric” itself may shed some light on the subject. The line “I’ve a good heart albeit insane” would seem to be Simon admitting guilt to the crime, but something odd occurs here in the song which I believe inverts the meaning. As the word “insane” is sung, the song distorts in such a way that the word could be heard as either “insane” or “innocent”, leaving the truth intentionally obscured. All of this is important because it makes it highly probable that

Simon is both completely innocent, and entirely sane going into the events of “The Mind Electric”.

After pleading insanity at the trial, likely falsely, Simon is sentenced to “the infirmary”. The line in question, “condemn him to the infirmary,” has exceedingly negative connotations with the particular word choice of “condemn”. Furthermore, the line is also accompanied by many vocal and musical distortions. The infirmary is made out to be a place of extreme darkness and evil, which is in line with many other fictional depictions of ECT (Walter, 1998), but rather incorrect in reality. Truthfully, ECT has no extreme side-effects or great risks that would incur this evil atmosphere (Rasmussen, 2019).

One thing which is important to confirm is that Simon does in fact experience ECT and not some other form of therapy or punishment. We can determine that Simon undergoes ECT in the infirmary through certain lines, which also furthers the evil atmosphere surrounding it. The most direct would be: “...as lightning strikes mine temples thus. Electrifying mine chambers, wholly scorching out thine sovereignty”. This line seems to be referring to electric shocks striking Simon’s head and driving him insane. Other evidence pointing towards ECT is that the treatment is commonly used for various mental illnesses including schizophrenia, mania, depression, and delirium (Kellner, 2019). Therefore, with Simon being found guilty of murder and insanity, truthfully or not, it makes perfect sense that he would be treated with ECT,

It was previously mentioned how distortions are present when Simon is sentenced to the infirmary, but that is not the only case of distortions in the song. In fact, the song widely features distortions which seem to be mostly present during the sections of the narrative wherein Simon is being administered ECT. The line quoted in the paragraph above, for example, is very heavily distorted, and is preceded by many others. These effects seem to indicate Simon losing his

grasp on reality, but they also add to the dark and unnatural atmosphere, which is commonly attributed to ECT (Walter, 1998). While ECT can cause confusion and disorientation for a while after undergoing the treatment, it does no such thing as terrible as what is present in the story of the song (Rasmussen, 2019).

Probably the most accurate aspect of ECT representation regarding “The Mind Electric” happens outside of the song itself. The narrative of the album following the events of the song largely hinges on one particular side-effect Simon received from ECT: he forgot his lost lover ever died. Although hyperbolized, this is actually accurate to real world ECT side-effects! Though it is unlikely someone would forget something of such great importance, and even less unlikely they would not remember it rather quickly afterwards, ECT has been known to cause amnesia. Though the rest of the song paints ECT in a negative light for unearned and unrelated reasons, this one aspect of it is mostly correct (Rasmussen, 2019).

One thing which still must be covered is the entire first half of the song. In the most abstract twist yet, “The Mind Electric” starts completely in reverse, which I believe is meant to represent Simon’s mind being jumbled. The feeling of confusion the listener feels upon first hearing the song is intended to parallel Simon’s confusion following his ECT treatment. Once again, while dramatized, this is at least somewhat accurate. The amnesia can cause patients to be disoriented following treatment, though this usually improves quickly and is not as big of an issue as the song suggests. It certainly does not truly relate to full blown insanity as it seems to relate to in the song (Rasmussen, 2019).

Overall, “The Mind Electric” certainly uses a wide array of very unique techniques to portray ECT, but the portrayal itself is either extremely dramatized or wildly inaccurate. To make matters worse, the album’s story ends with Simon’s death, possibly suicide, being a direct

result of his ECT-induced insanity. Unfortunately, the song continues the trend of fiction portraying ECT in an undeserved negative light and perpetuating the public fear and apprehension regarding the treatment (Walter, 1998).

### Conclusion

All things considered, ECT is a very safe and incredibly helpful procedure. The literature review showed that it would help many people in the long run if ECT was a more widely and quickly considered procedure. The negative stigma against the treatment serves to hinder its usefulness in the public eye, causing people who would otherwise choose to undergo ECT to decide against it, even if it would be hugely beneficial to their mental health. The artifact analysis of “The Mind Electric” showed off how media frequently perpetuates the stigma against ECT by hyperbolizing its real drawbacks, and misrepresenting what good it can actually do. Overall, I wish more people knew the facts about ECT so they would be more willing to make good use of it when necessary.

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