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By Tom McCarthy

Earlier this year, the Hayward Gallery exhibited the work of the Belgian artist who answers only to the pseudonym 'Panamarenko'. Consisting mainly of large flying machines supposedly both designed with actual flight in mind and also, in several cases, tested in laboratory and field environments, the collection also contained a video showing the artist dressed in pseudo-military clothing delivering a lecture on his (patently bogus) theories of physics and aerodynamics. The pieces were framed by often fantastical narratives in which Panamarenko imagined, for example, floating over Brigitte Bardot's garden and rescuing her, or hopping from mountain-top to mountain-top.

Rather than ask the art critics, **Tom McCarthy** turned to psychoanalyst Chris Oakley and military historian Joanna Bourke (both of whom spoke at a recent conference on Panamarenko), and followed the artist's trajectory through the arcs of their divergent disciplines...

[IMAGE]

>> Panamarenko, *K3, Jungle Flyer*, 1992-93

Tom McCarthy: Chris, you've said in the past that when, as a psychoanalyst, you look at Panamarenko's work, you see models and structures central to psychoanalysis. What do you mean by this?

Chris Oakley: What is absolutely fundamental to the psychoanalytical project is paradoxically – and I'm not talking about the clinical work, but psychoanalysis as a discourse – that it *doesn't work*. And this is what is central too to Panamarenko's, what I, culling from the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, term a form of 'scientific delirium'. One of psychoanalysis's hallmarks is that entangled right in its own discourse is that which is ultimately resistant to meaning itself. And it's this crucial thing that then means that the whole trajectory, that appears as if ultimately it's going to render the way in which we are together completely intelligible, eventually founders; it comes up against what Freud designates 'the navel of the dream', that which is resistant to all analysis and interpretation. And I think this is something which Panamarenko, consciously or otherwise, is on about as well. That's why I think Panamarenko is of great interest to psychoanalysts.

TMcC: You give one particular example – I think it was the *VI Barada Jet*, and he does it in *The Bernouilli* as well – where there are two seats in the plane, and you read that as a metaphor for the process of transference, the way the patient, the subject, puts himself in the hands of 'the one supposed to know', the co-pilot, the analyst.

CO: Indeed. People enter into the psychoanalytic situation not necessarily for the production of self-knowledge, but for a particular experience, and I would describe this as an experience to do with trance, to do with trance-formation, and it has an affinity with Panamarenko's projects of flight.

Joanna Bourke: But what's interesting here about this plane you're talking about is that there are positions for two people in this plane, but both are actually equal. The steering and everything is done between the people moving backwards and forwards. So there's not a driver and a passenger: both people need to be in balance in order to steer the plane and keep it balanced – and this is very interesting from a psychoanalytical viewpoint...

CO: Absolutely, because it dismantles this idea that there's the one who's supposed to know, the analyst, who's driving the situation. Because hopefully both parties situate themselves in what I would designate as 'the influencing machine'.

TMcC: In your field, Joanna, military history, this relational structure is twofold. The ‘other’ to whose authority the subject, the soldier or fighter pilot, entrusts himself, is firstly the commanding officer and secondly the designers and technicians who’ve built the technology through which he acts: the machines that keep him alive and airborne and able to fight. You could say he entrusts himself to science itself. You’ve looked in your work at this type of relationship...

JB: The relationship between men and their machines is very intimate, one of great love and desire. When you actually look at the way in which men cope with battle, the dependency on the machine becomes absolute. They speak of their machine very much as though it were a person or a lover. They call them ‘my arm’, and talk about caressing the machine gun; they talk about the ‘maternal bulk’ of their tank; they write about the ‘lithe body’ of their aeroplane. And when that machine lets them down, it’s absolutely traumatic.

TMcC: Another ‘other’ with whom the fighter pilot has a relation is the people on whom his bombs are falling. You’ve written about how technology both distances the killer from his victim but also opens up this whole realm of fantasy, imagining...

JB: Most definitely. They cope very very well by telling stories. Other people may want to say they are lies, but I don’t think they are: they’re ways of putting into language things which it’s difficult to find a language for – and so they draw upon traditions from popular novels, popular tradition, popular film...

TMcC: The philosopher Paul Virilio says that war in the age of technology is a cinematic experience. In your book you say that soldiers sometimes got pissed off because explosions didn’t happen ‘the right way’, like in films...

JB: ...and people didn’t die ‘the right way’ – they simply flopped down instead of throwing up their arms and uttering a piercing cry...

TMcC: So the soldiers didn’t feel that their experience was authentic enough...

JB: ...and they also tried to imitate their heroes: the ‘John Wayne Syndrome’. The military have loads of reports on how to combat this. It’s good for morale but bad for strategy. It’s really dangerous: men tend to go forward when they should be going back. So the army introduces ‘Realism Training’, which uses live ammunition, and smoke and loud speakers making noises of war.

CO: I’m fascinated by the way in which the imaginary is perpetrated through cinema and television and video. For me it begs the question: is it possible to live outside this? You find in psychoanalysis that someone will have a theory, and then you get patients coming along who engage mimetically in precisely that which confirms the theory in the first place – in other words they just enact what they’re suggested by the psychoanalyst. There’s a truth to that about how we all live our lives. We’re endlessly subject to a proliferation of stories.

JB: I agree completely. And that’s precisely why history is important. A historian says: we can never get outside these stories, these different imaginaries, but let’s look at when they change. When do people stop using popular instinct theories and evolutionary theories to understand their experience and start using popular psychoanalysis? What causes that change? Is it new technology? Is it that they’re being exposed to new languages, new theories?

TMcC: But do paradigm shifts fundamentally change the way humans are constructed?

JB: Very much so. This is apparent if we look at breakdown. During the American Civil War, the experience of what they called ‘homesickness’ or ‘soldier’s heart’ is fundamentally different from post-traumatic stress disorder in the Vietnam War. People experienced, actually *experienced*, shell shock during the First World War as something physiological. And the external manifestations of this psychiatric breakdown – hysteria, paralysis – were somatic, of the body. By the time you get to Vietnam, they experience disorders from within, anxiety disorders. The whole way people understand their psychological make-up has changed. So I think that the actual languages and technologies we have actually create the experience.

TMcC: The experience of flight is historically quite gendered, especially in war: you’ve got the male pilot dropping bombs on people who I think you’ve said he imagines as women...

JB: Yes. But women are also much more likely to be bombed in actual fact: until 1943 more British women than men were killed in the War, by a long stretch. But if you look at the way female combatants relate to the technologies of warfare, there’s less difference than I’d expected – except of course that they make their instruments of war into masculine objects.

TMcC: You’ve jumped out of aeroplanes, and you said that the parachuting formations were themselves gendered...

JB: Yes. I was the only woman in a club, and their favourite – and one of the most difficult – formations used to be called ‘intercourse’, and it was a formation whereby everyone jumps except one person, and they form a circle in the sky, and then the sperm, the one person, jumps through the circle. Well, when I got proficient enough to do it, when it was my turn to be the sperm, all of a sudden it became ‘The Doughnut’. That really pissed me off.

TMcC: I want to talk about science, and when science stops being science. Panamarenko uses the language of science, but he’d never actually achieve status as a scientist. The parallels with psychoanalysis are very strong here: Freud always wanted it to be taken as a science, but it never to this day got recognition. When Panamarenko talks about his lectures on what he called ‘The Toy model of Space,’ he says that *neither* the science world *nor* the art world could accept them, and he adds that this is just as well, because if either system were to accept the theories he’s proposing it would collapse. I wonder whether both art and psychoanalysis take systems to their limit, what you, Chris, term ‘delirium’, where they’re virtually collapsing.

CO: It’s a very good question. I would say that that is right at the heart of the psychoanalytical experience. In saying that, I’m bracketing out a whole terrain that can be placed under the sign of psychosis. For the person who is ‘psychotic’, the idea that you’d want to take them to the very edge when much of their life is already spent in being absolutely petrified, looking into the void, the collapse of the symbolic order that holds us all together, would be monstrous. But, that domain aside, yes: in many ways we are to be driven out of our pathetic rationality, to dismantle all the particular stories we’ve been led to believe in regard to ourselves, to rendezvous with the ultimate collapse of any particular story. That may operate as an ideal regulator; it may be actually impossible; for all of us, at the very moment we approach that particular endpoint of complete fragmentation, disintegration, potentially some state of enlightenment, there’s some sort of pulling back and returning to a resting-up place – like a Panamarenko contraption. They filibrate with a potentiality of take-off, as though they’re heading off to infinity, but in fact they’re going nowhere. That’s very resonant with the psychoanalytical enterprise: it filibrates with those possibilities, but ultimately, after the fifty minutes we all come back down to earth and get on with our lives; we cling assiduously to certain narratives which we construct with regard to our own being and how we’re going to carry on.

TMcC: In the Science Museum Picture Library I found photos of two-seat prototype aeroplanes and strange round ones that look exactly like Panamarenko's. And many of these never flew, any more than Panamarenko's work did. So I wonder why they're not art and Panamarenko's work is.

CO: To an extent it's an effect of the desire of the person who's creating them. Panamarenko was always, from his earliest activities in Antwerp, manifestly seeking to take up his place, albeit a very disruptive place, but very much framed by the term 'art'. The people that he made contact with and so on were of that order...

TMcC: Beuys, Broodthaers...

CO: Exactly. The people who made Panamarenko-like contraptions that end up in the Science Museum were off on a different trajectory – where they rendezvous is an effect of their desire.

TMcC: Yes, desire. I know that you, Joanna, have written about the *pleasure of war* – and this is something that's central to flight as well: there's an element of release, of going beyond, of what Lacan would call *jouissance*. There's also an element of danger: each time you take off you might not come back, especially if you're a fighter pilot, or if you stepped into one of Panamarenko's machines. He keeps pointing out how dangerous they are. I just wonder what both of you, from the point of view of your respective fields, make of the fact that his work links technology, pleasure and death so closely.

JB: I think his work really does link that. It touches on something central to the aesthetics of war. What struck me when I went to the exhibition was the number of military symbols he was using: the khaki, the uniform, the officer's cap, the star on the submarine. They're beautiful objects. The pleasure these machines generate is part of what generates pleasure in wartime. He's trying to tell us something about valour: it's beautiful and exciting, but it's damn useless and it's getting us nowhere and it'll kill us in the end.

CO: One thing that's essential in thinking through Panamarenko is the double inscription within this term 'flight'. Flight is always also associated with being on the run from, the place of the fugitive. Panamarenko quite assiduously makes reference to how we all live our lives in flight from gravity, from the grave, and from death. Death renders all meaningless. All our strivings and ambitions don't amount to a hill of beans on the day we die. One potential effect of taking that on board could be to say: 'Well, what's the point of doing anything?' And that's not much of a place to live from. So it seems imperative that we be continuously engaged in this flight from our mortality, on the run from its significance. I'm of the psychoanalytical persuasion that what lies beyond the pleasure principle is *enjoyment*. Not joy, which would return it back under the motif of pleasure, but that which is in some way *meaningful*. *Jouissance* has not just *joy* in it, but also *sens*. There's no English translation. Panamarenko's contraptions are absolutely saturated with his enjoyment. The meticulous delight, the schoolboy exhilaration of these experiments. I remember trying to make bombs in the back garden with my mates – it's a fundamental aspect of childhood. And there, there's also a double inscription of enjoyment: it's *enjoyable* but also *meaningful*, to do with creating meaning. Panamarenko takes this on as a life project. And hats off to the man.

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