

Blinded with Science: the Gateway of the Mind

The Gateway of the Mind is a 2010 creepypasta.

I'm going to be looking at the original text post, as well as the videos and images that have been used to spread the story to other platforms.

I'm about to get into a synopsis, so if you want to take a minute to read a 500 word horror story now would be the time to pause.

The story focuses on the work of a group of "pious scientists" and their experimentation on an old man with "nothing to live for."

The story is that in 1983 these, no other way to put this, Christian Scientists, came to believe that the five senses were blocking human contact with God.

They theorized that separating the mind from sensory input would allow people to open a direct line with the Big Man.

To "test" this "theory" they found an old man who was willing to participate and "performed a complex operation in which every sensory nerve connection to the brain was surgically severed."

The operation was a success.

But to answer the age old clickbait "has science gone too far?"

Yes, science did, the old man spends days in unspeakable agony, tortured in the prison of his own mind.

However, he begins to speak with the ghosts of the scientists' families, telling them things only their dead relatives would know.

The story ends with the old man saying "I have spoken with God, and He has abandoned us," and dying for "no apparent reason."

I'm about to out myself as something of an old man myself.

I chose this topic because I had a memory of reading this story in high school and being spooked.

Revisiting it now, I felt pretty unshook, but I do think it's still an interesting story.

A bizarre, oddly Christian story.

That might go some way to explaining why the understanding of the scientific method is about the same as the troubled kid who microwaved your class hamster.

There's also the weird decision that the story is explicitly set in 1983, the same year that Risky Business, Return of the Jedi, and, of course, Octopussy were released in theaters.

That's a prime Stranger Things year.

1983 is also after the National Research Act of 1974 and the Belmont report in 1979, which served to better regulate and protect human research participants.

In a world with Institutional Review Boards there is no way that an experiment like the one proposed in Gateway of the Mind would be approved.

In light of what I see as some slight issues in the premise and setting of the story I'd like to introduce a new segment to the show.

What I think we can do is take a creepypasta and make it into a creamy pasta.

Working segment title: pasta punch-up.

JD, we good with this concept?

So for starters, I would push it back at least ten years, to pre-empt basic scientific ethics being a concern.

Another issue we need to address is that fucking someone up and seeing what happens is not an experiment.

From a narrative perspective, this could be addressed in one of two ways:

Either the experiment would need to be changed in order to reflect the actual process of a scientific experiment.

Or, to make things easy, just make it the work of a solitary weirdo, and don't worry about the experiment not making sense.

The mad scientist is a horror trope for a reason, we love the concept of one sicko who wants to do something weird.

Mad science by committee doesn't work as well.

Think of the classics:

Frankenstein, little freak wants a Frankenstein.

Human centipede, little freak wants a human centipede.

Tusk, the universal desire to torture Justin Long.

So, my pitch is to either retool the format of the experiment and change the date back ten years, or just control F scientists and make it singular.

With the critiques of an anonymous story aside, I do think that the story is effective.

I think it's effective for two main reasons, for one, I think it works as a psychological horror.

The idea of being completely shut off from the world, trapped within your own mind, is pretty disturbing.

On the other hand, I think it is effective because there is a cultural mistrust of science and scientists, and this has some historical basis.

Let's start by looking at the video and the psychological aspect.

If you search for Gateway of the Mind on Youtube you'll probably see several videos which feature a disfigured face.

JD I'm going to share the link to this with you:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pySDIX_rIIg&ab_channel=CreepsMcPasta

These videos are the same basic format, someone reads the creepypasta while the man in the video appears to tear apart and mess with his head.

But the sickening feeling in your gut isn't the same as seeing a video with a Liveleak watermark, it's the sickening feeling of French performance art.

The video is a recording of Olivier de Sagazan's series, Transfiguration.

Specifically, the portion used by the creepypasta videos comes from a 2008 performance of Transfiguration posted by de Sagazan.

The video is described as "footage," and in some cases it has been edited, made to look grainier and black and white.

But what is this series, and why is it paired with an anonymously written horror story?

De Sagazan has been working on his Transfiguration series since 1999.

In the series De Sagazan sculpts onto his face and body with clay, then adds oil pants, creating some truly fucked up looking heads.

I have no way of knowing if the linking of De Sagazan's performances and the stories of the Gateway of the Mind were knowingly attached because they shared similar themes, or if it was just because it's a video with a nasty face, but here's a quote from De Sagazan from a 2017 interview.

Trigger warning for those of you who can't stand smart French people, we're gonna get through this together.

"This transformation of the body, a "deterritorialization" as Deleuze would say, becoming a blind person, is a means to synchronize my nervous system to a primal or primitive visual form—I'm not sure how to say it—to retrieve an animalistic view of language. I have an ellipsis to express this: "Transfiguration" is the passage of the "Saint Face" into the "Meat Head"; here, I re-become as Artaud would say a "body without organs," a totipotent body, a body of all possibilities, a hideous, terrible, and magical body. By the effacement of the face and its reconstruction, I want to reveal all the enigma of a face, and thus of the Being which animates it."

Take a deep breath, that parts over, now I'm going to try to translate it.

De Sagazan first cites Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialization.

Let's break it down this way: we understand territory as a relationship between a group and a place, it's where the group operates.

Consider a pack of wolves in the forest, or a pack of teens in a parking lot. They hunt in these spaces, they spend time and socialize in these places, it is their natural habitat.

Deleuze and Guattari saw that this concept can also work on the individual, psychological level, where the social and lived environment of a person, even their habits and routines, can be seen as a personal territory where they operate and return to.

The process of deterritorialization is one of subtraction. An example D&G use is to consider a tree branch, while on the tree the branch does tree things, its territory is the tree.

But if the tree branch is cut off then it is deterritorialized and it is reterritorialized into a different function, say as a baseball bat.

The other term De Sagazan cites is the "Body without Organs." Which he attributes to Artaud.

And yes, Artaud was the first to write the phrase here's the passage it came from (apologies for the man-centric language, it was written in the 1930s):

Man is sick because he is badly constructed. We must make up our minds to strip him bare in order to scrape off that animalcule that itches him mortally, god, and with god his organs. For you can tie me up if you wish, but there is nothing more useless than an organ. When you will have made him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom

But it was Deleuze and Guattari, again, who constructed what this concept meant philosophically.

I don't want to go too much further down the D&G rabbit hole, there's like 5 different interpretations of the Body Without Organs concept, so let's just consider the term as it relates to physical bodies.

D&G make distinctions between machines and organisms (or bodies).

A machine is defined by its function.

A lung is a machine for breathing.

An organism is defined by its components and the structure of them.

So our whole body, the structure, is an organism, made up by all our little machines.

A body without organs is a state of mind or being freed from the organizational, social and psychological constructs. A structure without its component parts.

It can be seen as a goal of transcendence, of breaking through the limits of rigid structures to a truer experience of reality.

D&G fans, do not sound off in the comments, please, I am not smart enough to understand it, I can't talk about the Dogon egg, my head hurts, please.

But when we look at the works in parallel we can see some similarities between De Sagazan's work and the Gateway of the Mind.

De Sagazan uses the performance art and clay to break apart and deterritorialize the face, and in doing so seeks the creation of a body without organs, this totipotent state where he is not just the sum of his parts.

The Gateway to the Mind makes it a bit more literal by having the story revolve around the literal separation between the mind and the senses, but still with that intention of creating something transcendent.

Both works consider the human body and its limits and potential ways to transcend these limits.

Both works seek to create a totipotent body, a person in contact with the infinite.

Unfortunately, no "real journalists" have asked de Sagazan about the connection or how he feels about having his performance art deep fried and described as evidence of an experiment gone horribly wrong.

But consciously or unconsciously, the use of de Sagazan's art helps us understand the first level where Gateway of the Mind is effective horror, as a reflection of the horror of the self, or an alien self.

It reflects an anxiety that the stirrings of the subconscious are more than our mind can bear.

That true isolation within the self, or within the mind is more than anyone can handle.

It is the fear that within ourselves is something unrecognizable, or potentially, nothing at all.

The other level where the Gateway of the Mind works is as a horror story about research abuse and mistrust of science.

I think we can understand this reading by looking at an image that gets posted frequently alongside versions of the textpost.

I'm going to post the image to our chat and we can discuss what we see for a minute:

What the image shows is a Tuskegee syphilis study subject undergoing a spinal tap.

Actual trigger warning for the next couple of minutes because I'll be discussing systemic, racist medical abuse.

The Tuskegee Syphilis study ran from 1932 until 1972.

When the experiment began the primary treatment for syphilis were heavy metals; mainly mercury, arsenicals and bismuth.

The experiment, or as it was described by members of the U.S. Public Health Service, the "study in nature," aimed to study the progression of syphilis and compare the time for the disease to progress with the damage and risks associated with the heavy metal treatments.

For this "study in nature" the U.S. Public Health Service in Macon County Alabama, found 399 African American men with syphilis (and 201 African American men without syphilis to serve as a control group).

The use of black men was based in scientific racism, in particular a belief that black men would not seek out medical treatment.

To prove that black men would not want medical treatment they recruited them by promising to **treat** their "bad blood."

The men were also offered free medical exams, food on exam days, free rides to the Clinic at the Tuskegee Institute and burial insurance.

The only treatment the men received was aspirin and iron tonic.

In 1934 the Public Health Service provided lists of their subjects to doctors in Macon County and asked that they not treat these patients for their syphilis; in 1940 they did the same thing with the Alabama Health Department.

In 1941, when some of the men were drafted into World War II and their syphilis was discovered during entrance medical exams, the researchers had the men removed from the army rather than receive treatment for their syphilis.

Penicillin was established as the best treatment for syphilis in 1947.

The men with syphilis were not told this, they were not offered penicillin as a treatment. In some cases the men were told to avoid penicillin.

In 1965 the Public Health Service argued that the men's syphilis had progressed too far for syphilis treatment in order to justify the continuation of the study.

The study continued until 1972, when a whistleblower named Peter Buxtun leaked information about the study to the New York Times.

It wasn't like the Public Health Service grew a conscience.

The study only ended because of public outrage.

By the end of the study, only 74 of the original 399 men were alive, 128 of them had died from syphilis or syphilis-related complications, 40 of their wives had contracted syphilis, and 19 children were born with congenital syphilis.

The damage was not just to the men who participated in the study and their families.

The study, and the cultural impact of its disclosure, made existing health discrepancies between black and white communities even worse.

After the details of the study were released, the average life expectancy for black men dropped 1.4 years.

It irrevocably damaged trust for medical research in black communities.

The Tuskegee syphilis study is far from the only instance of medical racism, it is also not the last instance of medical racism in this country.

The study was the reason for the National Research Act of 1974 and the Belmont report in 1979.

It is the reason that ethical oversight is now a major part of all studies with human research subjects.

But regulations can only do so much good when there are decades of institutional racism and abuse within the scientific establishment.

We're living in pandemic times, and have seen first hand the resistance that many people have to following guidance from scientific institutions.

The fear and mistrust of the scientific establishment is very real.

We can see the impacts of this mistrust on news and social media.

We can see the basis for it in our history, and we can see the remnants of these cultural memories in our stories and our memes.

Knowingly or unknowingly, someone came across the Gateway of the Mind creepypasta and associated it with an image from the Tuskegee syphilis study.

The Gateway of the Mind is a work of fiction, but it is not presented that way.

I don't know if the person who meme-ified the Gateway of the mind with the picture from the Tuskegee study knew the history of the image.

But I do think they understood that it was a creepy image because of our cultural conceptions and mistrust of the medical establishment, and they understood that this could add credibility to the story.

The use of this image makes the story seem more real.

The footage of De Sagazan had to be edited and filtered to give the feeling of watching found footage.

But the image from the Tuskegee Study that is associated with the Gateway to the Mind is unsettling on its own, even if the decision to link the two was done based on vibes alone.

Even though I think the story itself could have used some notes, it is effective as a creepy pasta.

The Gateway to the Mind, like all good horror, can help us understand what a culture finds scary.

It is based in both psychological fear, and fears based on historical reality.

That's what I've got.

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