

FROM  
ANXIETY

T

ZOOLANDER

NOTES

ON

PSYCHOANALYSIS

ANOUCHKA  
GROSE



FROM ANXIETY TO ZOOLANDER



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FROM ANXIETY  
TO ZOOLANDER  
Notes on Psychoanalysis

*Anouchka Grose*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Anouchka Grose** is a practising psychoanalyst and member of the Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research, where she regularly gives lectures. She is the author of two novels, as well as several non-fiction books including, *No More Silly Love Songs: A Realist's Guide to Romance* (2010), and *Are You Considering Therapy?* (2011). She is the editor of *Hysteria Today* (2015), a collection of essays on hysteria in the contemporary psychoanalytic clinic. Her journalism is published in *The Guardian*, and she also writes for numerous art and fashion publications. She has taught at Camberwell School of Art and gives talks on art and psychoanalysis in museums and galleries, as well as sometimes speaking on the radio.



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## INTRODUCTION

This book definitely begins with anxiety. Each chapter started out as a bundle of notes for a talk. Like so many other neurotics, I'm terrified of public speaking. I worry about saying something stupid, not making sense, being boring, inadvertently revealing unsavoury aspects of my character, and generally being a jerk. This means I have to make quite thorough notes—if I left things up to chance my mouth would dry up, I'd start to shake, and that would be the end of it. The problem is that watching someone read aloud is extremely tedious. In order to avoid sounding like a Dalek I've developed the brilliant technique of writing notes in pidgin English to make it impossible for me to read them aloud word for word. This way I have a hope of putting ideas across in a followable sequence while still appearing human. The word "pidgin" apparently originates in nineteenth century Chinese traders' mispronunciation of the word "business". Somehow my awful notes manage to broker a deal between my ego and my superego, making it possible to speak.

Most of the talks were given at The Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research, where I trained as an analyst. In a sense, the teaching there is quite old-fashioned; people give long, uninterrupted lectures followed by questions from the room. There are no "learning games", no going

off in groups to draw spider maps before feeding back to the class. Once, while I was training, a man became very angry about the archaic teaching methods, asking how on earth people were supposed to learn under such austere conditions. The person giving the lecture gamely replied that she wasn't there to teach anyone anything. If people got something out of the things she said, great, but it was entirely up to them. This is very much in keeping with the analytic approach of forgoing advice and education in favour of allowing analysands to deal with things in their own idiosyncratic ways.

All of which is to say that teaching at CFAR can be quite a burden. Speaking at length to a room full of quiet, analytically minded people, who might or might not give a damn, risks being an anxious speaker's worst nightmare. You really have very little idea of where your speech is landing, although you are probably aware that some people have come with the hope of finding out something about psychoanalysis, while others have PhDs on the exact subjects you're trying to tackle. It's a perfect scenario in which to face Lacan's question regarding anxiety: "Who am I for the Other?" There's no way you can even begin to kid yourself you're addressing a consistent, knowable entity.

On the bright side, it does mean you have to do tons of preparatory work in order to protect yourself from the baleful gaze of your imaginary listeners. As a result, you end up with loads of notes, albeit, in my case, written in the style of Tarzan. The good thing about these notes is that they aren't trying to be clever. They're just stating ideas as clearly and efficiently as possible. If you sit down and try to write properly about psychoanalysis you risk losing yourself in a labyrinth of contradictions. Anyone who's ever attempted to paraphrase Freud will know how difficult it is to come out the other side making any kind of sense. But if all you have to do is get a few prompts down on paper so you can speak for an hour and a half, the consequences of over-simplifying seem less dire. Your words will fly past people. Half of the audience will be asleep anyway. Even the ones who stay awake will lose concentration here and there. There can be fractures in your arguments, false starts, dead ends, but no one will be able to call you on all of it because listening isn't reading. People will be distracted by their phones, your hand movements, the person in the next seat's cough. Unless the things you say are brazenly idiotic you'll probably escape unscathed.

The problems come when you get it into your head that this huge pile of notes could somehow be put in order. The questionable things

you've been saying for the last decade suddenly start to look different. It's OK to prattle fleetingly, in real time, but what would it be like if those words stuck around? Plus, there's the hard labour of translating them into readable language. Still, it might be worth it if the brevity and directness of the notes made up for their obvious flaws. The trick would be to tidy up, maybe even redecorate a little, but not be tempted to build from scratch. The sketchiness would be the point.

While writing can look like the cowards' option in relation to live speaking—you can say what you like to your laptop—it's actually infinitely scarier. As Hilary Mantel warns writers, "Try to mean what you say. [... N]othing ever really goes away" (2016). If the spoken word is a fleeting vibration, the written word is more like an indestructible Christmas puppy that may turn out to bite. It's the polar opposite of sentences spilled in a psychoanalytic session, which can be as scurrilous/foolish/petulant/unreasonable as you like. Writing entails responsibility, and that's not always nice. As Walter Ong pointed out in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982) the shift from speech to writing is traumatic. When you move from the spoken to the written word you lose as much as you gain. Your printed words look sinister and stony, like they've been stared down by a Gorgon. They seem hideously transformed. Inside every nervous public speaker is undoubtedly a rampant megalomaniac trying to break out. Writing can help to set the monster free. Where before there was breathy hesitation, in its place comes uncompromising inertia. The printed word has something almost intrinsically hectoring and self-important about it. If you disagree with it, it doesn't care.

Another bad thing about publishing lectures is the possibility that you will look like a person who loves Lacan so much you want to be just like him. I don't want to protest too much, but I actually worry that I don't like him nearly as much as a Lacanian analyst is supposed to. I do feel sorry for him, though, because he *was* mostly just speaking, and the fact that his speech is now preserved in a form that we can pore over maybe isn't fair. He says terrible things all over the place, sometimes even berating himself for it. To attack him for his spoken blunders can seem a bit rough, but then again he has enough proper acolytes to make up for the odd backslider. And his written words can be pretty cruel and rash in places too.

It's strange, looking back through the notes, to see how much time is devoted to trying to sort out who's the best, the object relations people

or the Lacanians. This is perhaps because there are so many of the former and so few of the latter in the UK; any Lacanian training organisation risks feeling a bit embattled. A great deal of time gets spent on marking out the differences between the sets of theories and modes of practice. While one hopes it isn't always a foregone conclusion which side one will come down on, it's probably harder to disidentify with one's clan than one would like. All in all, my struggle to represent theoretical differences probably says as much about my own oedipal make-up as it does about psychoanalytic theory. What comes through most strongly, perhaps, is a schism between bossy/boring mother Klein and ludicrous/bombastic father Lacan, with lovely grandpa Freud holding everything together. This kind of family structure also happens to be echoed in many of the case studies that appear here—including the historic ones—suggesting it may form a pretty functional framework for large numbers of people. It allows parents to be flawed without triggering a total loss of belief in “grown-ups”.

The last thing I ought to apologise for is any idea that an A to Z suggests something complete. This book is anything but. I hope it's not too wheedling to say that I meant it more on the side of the arbitrariness of the letter than anything encyclopaedic. A great deal is left out. As Dorothy Parker apparently said of Katherine Hepburn, “She ran the whole gamut of emotions, from A to B.” So here comes the psychoanalytic equivalent ...

# Acting out

*Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research, 2007*

It's unfortunate that the term "acting out" begins with a letter "a" because it's hardly a natural starting point for a general book on psychoanalysis. It's a notoriously imprecise idea and, unlike "anxiety" or "wish fulfilment", isn't much in circulation in the outside world. On the bright side, it invokes the broader problems of speech, action, listening, and understanding, which are central to analytic work. While it might require a fair bit of untangling to get anywhere near the bottom of the concept, there's a chance it might be worth it if, *en route*, we stumble across a series of ideas or questions about what one person might be attempting to do with another, both in the consulting room and beyond. While there might be doubts about the validity of the term, its very imprecision could be the thing that ultimately proves enlightening; an attempt at an explanation should take us straight to the heart of some of the knottiest problems of clinical practice.

Here are a few very basic definitions, just to give some idea of the problems of trying to say exactly what "acting out" is. From randomly selected psychoanalytic websites we have; "discharge by a means of action rather than a verbalisation", "something repeated as opposed to remembered", or acting out as a form of defence; for instance, a man has an affair because he can't recognise or name the feelings of helplessness

he experiences in his marriage. From Wikipedia, we get: “Acting out is usually anti-social”, an example being a tantrum, or the so-called “cry for help” activities like shoplifting or self-harm.

Maybe at first glance these sorts of definition seem OK. At least we can say that they don’t *not* describe acting out, the trouble is that they also describe other psychoanalytic phenomena—bungled actions, symptoms, sublimation, the compulsion to repeat, or, on some level, any action at all. It might be worth bearing in mind Otto Fenichel’s warning at the beginning of his essay on the subject (1987); you can’t start with a definition of acting out, you can only end up with one having done a bit of work. Still, it’s far from certain that he ends up with anything very clear-cut so perhaps we should be wary of following his advice.

### *Show and tell*

Phyllis Greenacre tells us to look for the first appearances of the concept in chapters eight and nine of Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901b). These are the chapters on bungled actions, and symptomatic and chance acts. She seems to be referring to a couple of vignettes where the “mistake” is very clearly addressed to someone else. Unlike other examples—for instance when Freud flips off his slipper with exquisite precision and breaks an ornament—these aren’t private acts but ones that seem to require a viewer. There’s the young boy who sits making figures out of dough as he talks to Freud. Each time he finishes one he scrunches it up and starts again. He makes a figure with an enormous penis and crushes it immediately, then proceeds to make other figures where the giant appendage appears out of the shoulder or the head, as if to cover up for the first one. Freud recounts a story where a king sends a message to his son via a dumbshow. The boy gets the idea, accepts that the bread figures may carry a meaning, and allows Freud to get on with curing him. Or there’s the case where a young man meets Freud for the first time with a huge stain on the crotch of his trousers. He clocks Freud noticing it and explains that he had a sore throat so swallowed a raw egg, and that some of the white had spilled onto his clothes. As soon as Freud gets him alone he thanks him for making his diagnosis so much easier and they go on to discuss his compulsive masturbation. In each case the person has done something apparently quite inadvertently, perfectly designed both to conceal and reveal unconscious material. Greenacre seems to be suggesting, then, that acting out may be a special

kind of bungled action or symptomatic act intended to be witnessed by someone else.

A decade or so later the concept of acting out comes up again in the technical papers, where Freud falls just short of representing the whole of analytic treatment as a battle against the patients' tendencies to act out. He says:

The unconscious wishes do not want to be remembered in the way the treatment desires them to be, but endeavour to reproduce themselves in accordance with the timelessness of the unconscious [... The patient] seeks to put his passions into action without taking any account of the real situation. The doctor tries to compel him to fit these emotional impulses into the nexus of the treatment and of his life history, to submit them to intellectual consideration and to understand them in the light of their psychical value. (1912b, p. 108)

In other words, in psychoanalysis, the point is to try to make people remember things and verbalise them rather than to rush around actually *doing* stuff. Freud represents the patient's capacity to act out as something of a menace that has to be brought into line. But there's an interesting paradox here in that the main weapon at the analyst's disposal is the transference, which is itself, according to some, a form of mindless repetition, or even a type of acting out. If the analyst is lucky and the patient has a positive transference then that will make them want to please their shrink by coming up with all the right information, and producing all sorts of fantastic memories and associations. This "good patient" performance is largely built on a person's wish to make herself lovable to her analyst, using the means constructed in her own history in relation to her early caregivers. Freud tells us, "It cannot be disputed that controlling the phenomena of transference presents the psychoanalyst with the greatest difficulties. But it should not be forgotten that it is precisely they that do us the inestimable service of making the patient's hidden and forgotten erotic impulses immediate and manifest" (Freud, 1912b, p. 108). It's a form of mindless repetition that can be put at the service of analysis by making something present and visible, as well as by making the patient more biddable and engaged in the work.

This brings to mind a distinction that's often talked about in the world of fiction writing; new writers are always told that they must

show, not tell. They have to construct scenes and demonstrate ideas through action rather than using reportage. This way they will apparently draw the reader in and captivate them on a gut level rather than presenting them with a detached account which will fail to engage them emotionally (assuming the reader likes action-packed, realist fiction). In psychoanalysis, Freud seems to be saying, we have to work towards the opposite. We have to tell and not show. Perhaps by “showing” something to our analyst we are hoping to draw them in rather than simply to present them with the information. Their job will be to resist the allure of the scenes we present.

In another of the technical papers, “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through” (1914g), Freud brings up the old analytic rule (which we no longer use because of the extended length of so many contemporary analyses) concerning a ban on the patient making important decisions during treatment. This will supposedly save her from taking certain catastrophic actions. But, Freud says, there’s nothing you can do to stop your patients putting smaller decisions and choices into action, “even if they are foolish; one does not forget that it is in fact through his own experience and mishaps that a person learns sense” (Freud, 1914g, p. 153). This is a good one coming from Freud as it goes against all psychoanalytic thought and experience, which tells us that we don’t learn from our mistakes but carry on repeating them our whole lives. In terms of disingenuousness, it’s up there with, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.”

The idea of acting out as a problem that has to be guarded against in analysis is brought out again by Otto Fenichel in his 1945 paper, “Neurotic Acting Out”. He describes the phenomenon as an “acting which unconsciously relieves inner tension and brings a partial discharge to warded-off impulses”, but concedes that this won’t do as a definition as it would also do for too many other things besides; it’s something one might just as easily say about the psychological symptom. Elaborating on Freud’s ideas about transference, Fenichel says that analysis itself, as well as encouraging transference, also inadvertently encourages acting out. It does this in two ways: on the one hand the analyst, by being quiet and unresponsive, doesn’t react to the patient in the manner that he may have come to expect, and this may push him to greater extremes in order to force a response. On the other, analysis mobilises repressed impulses and encourages people towards less convoluted forms of satisfaction, which is why acting out tends to be so frequent during treatment.

Fenichel introduces the idea of an “acting out type”; someone who is inclined to deal with psychic tension with action, whether they are in analysis or not. He defines these types as narcissistic, orally fixated people who don’t deal well with frustration, comparing them to addicts. He argues that their impulsive acts are often desperate bids at warding off depression. Inside analysis their actions have to be treated as resistances because they are attempts at avoiding repressed thoughts or wishes—exactly as Freud had said too—although they don’t *necessarily* do damage to the treatment. In fact, they may even be advantageous, providing a good source of material and serving to persuade the patient that childhood influences aren’t so distant from his present state. But this will only be so if the actions are interpreted immediately, before they can be written off as simple mishaps. Another fortuitous aspect of acting out would be in the case of the patient who is very introverted and cut off from his feelings. A spell of acting out may be a sign of progress, although it may also present a danger if it isn’t kept in check by the analyst. Fenichel recommends careful, well-timed interpretation of the transference and states rather melodramatically: “Some types of acting out are reminiscent of inoperable malignant tumours whose operation was omitted.” Alarming, in this account, acting out is seen as a potentially fatal menace which it is the analyst’s responsibility to defuse. If it can’t be done subtly the practitioner may even have to resort to a prohibition, creating the further risk of his being identified with a castrating parental figure. This in turn will then have to be interpreted back to the patient as soon as possible and with any luck it’ll all work out in the end. By the conclusion of Fenichel’s essay, not only do you still have a very imprecise idea of what acting out is, you have the added worry that it’s extremely difficult to deal with clinically and that your failure to handle it adequately might have dire consequences for your analysands.

Five years later Phyllis Greenacre steps in with her article “General Problems of Acting Out” (1950), where she elaborates on Fenichel’s ideas. She takes up his notion of acting out as a particular form of remembering, describing “memory expressed in active behaviour, without the usual sort of recall in verbal and visual imagery”. She adds to Fenichel’s idea of orally underpinned acting out the possibility that certain behaviours may be informed by “a special emphasis on visual sensitisation producing a bent for dramatisation (derivatives of exhibitionism and scopophilia), and a largely unconscious belief in the magic of action”. Ostensibly, certain people act out because they are fascinated

by the ideas of seeing and being seen, or because they think they can make something true by acting as though it is. Greenacre also talks about chronic acting out in patients whose early speech was delayed or disrupted, and who now show a preference for action over discussion. She associates neurotic acting out with the tendency to somatise in hysteria, pointing out its structural similarity. As in Fenichel's paper, Greenacre's text has the advantage of not taking the term for granted, and of showing it to be more problematic than it may at first appear. Still, Greenacre suffers the same uncertainty around the question of what qualifies as a symptom and what can properly be called acting out. Would the compulsive hand-washing of one of Freud's female patients, which both drew attention to and away from the "dirty" thing she'd been caught doing with her hands as a child, be called an acting out? (Her mother had caught her masturbating and now, whenever the doorbell rang, she had to greet the caller with the spectacle of her freshly cleaned hands.)

To give a contemporary clinical example, a male patient used to turn up every week with a little request. In his first ever session he asked for a glass of water. After that he would come up with something every single week; another glass of water, an umbrella, could he borrow my A to Z? Then one week, could he take off his trousers and put them in my drier? (I didn't hesitate to say no.) He had problems with paying for his sessions—an uncle was going to cover the first few and after that he would have to do it himself, but he could only manage if I gave him a reduced fee. When the time came for him to handle his own payments he asked whether he could do it in the form of gardening (again, a no). The favours and demands for special care really were incessant. He described growing up with two rather bohemian parents, who separated when he was ten years old. Even before the separation his life was chaotic. They were incapable of getting him to school on time and sometimes he'd be so embarrassed about his lateness that he'd hide in a bus shelter all day rather than go in and face comments from his friends and teachers. Home times were just as bad—no one would collect him and finally the porters would have to lock up the school, leaving him out on the pavement. During these moments, he would long for his mother to appear and take him home, allowing him to feel that he was loved after all.

After his parents' separation, he lived for a while with his mother but found her too erratic so asked to move in with his father. His dad gave him a key and made sure there was food in the fridge, but little