

Cabiria, a young prostitute, walks into a vaudeville theatre. The man on stage is performing magic tricks. He invites her to join him, she hesitates, the audience shouts encouragement, she reluctantly climbs onto the stage. The magician hypnotizes her, then tells her to describe her most secret love fantasies. She naively evokes a scene in which a young man offers her flowers and pure love. When she awakens from the trance the audience is roaring with laughter. The scene is from Fellini's *Notti di Cabiria*, and it evokes the image most of us have of hypnosis: a music hall act in which people reveal their innermost secrets under the command of an irresistible wizard.

Hypnosis is the ancestor of psychoanalysis and of most modern psychotherapies. As a young neurologist, Freud used the technique to free his patients from the terrible secrets that burdened their souls. But he abandoned it as he gradually developed new techniques to treat them.

Hypnosis today, as practiced primarily by psychiatrists, has begun to regain its therapeutic credibility. It has proven most effective in cases of psychologically rooted symptoms. One major step in the development of hypnotherapy has been the work of American psychiatrist Milton Erickson, whose approach reached Belgium in the past decade. A department of hypnotherapy now exists at Brugmann Hospital and there is a Milton Erickson Institute for the training of future practitioners.

The Belgian analyst, Professor François Duyckaerts, is currently writing a book about psychologist Joseph Delboeuf who taught at Liege University during the last century and practised hypnosis. Freud referred to the Belgian pioneer frequently in his early writings and, in his *The Interpretation of Dreams*, was very much influenced by Delboeuf's research. Duyckaerts explains that Delboeuf was a precursor of modern hypnosis as used by the

Erickson school, an empathetic rather than an authoritarian method.

Hypnosis has a long history that goes back to antiquity when it was often incorporated into religious ceremonies. From the Middle Ages to this day, witchcraft and possession have been the primal expressions of this still inadequately understood mental state. The German doctor, Anton Mesmer, born in 1734, was perhaps the first recognized medical hypnotist. He managed to induce convulsions in humans by passing a powerful magnet over the prostrate forms of his gullible patients. Claiming to be able to cure any illness, he soon became a cult figure in Paris.

POWERS OF SUGGESTION

Long discredited as a form of therapy, hypnosis is making a comeback. Lucy Magosse investigates some of its practitioners

Mesmer who, among other accomplishments, introduced the harmonica into France, was a friend of Mozart. In *Così fan tutte* there is a scene of magic medicine in action; Despina, the maid, disguised as a wizard, manipulates a giant magnet that makes the tenor and baritone suffer convulsions, or pretend to.

In reality, the hypnotic state is not quite so mysterious as it may seem. The power of a hypnotist is no greater than the person under hypnosis will allow. Jean-Martin Charcot, with whom the young Freud studied in Paris, treated severely afflicted hysterical patients, a pathology one rarely sees nowadays. He concluded that the hysterical illness with its strange symptoms was similar to the state reached under hypnosis. In the case of hypnosis, the hypnotist could induce such hysteria-like symptoms as partial paralysis or the absence of physical

sensation. Through these observations, Freud came to understand hysteria from a different angle; if they had no organic cause, then the body was saying something that words could not express.

Research in the field of hypnosis came to a halt in France after Charcot's death in 1893. No further progress was made until the Pavlovian school of psychology conducted research into hypnosis in the Soviet Union and a handful of psychiatrists examined the phenomenon in the United States.

Freud eventually gave up hypnosis because he wanted to extend treatment to pathologies other than hysteria; he also noticed that whatever

progress his patients made quickly disappeared when their personal relation to the therapist ran into trouble. Hypnosis appeared also to stimulate erotic feelings; a young woman waking from a trance threw herself into his arms and attempted to kiss him, a scene he has described in his autobiography. Later, he developed the technique of free association, encouraging the patient to let his or her thoughts flow forth in a verbal stream, like a traveller on a train describing the landscape as it passes by.

French analyst Léon Chertok was consulted in 1948 by a 35-year-old woman who had suffered from amnesia for 12 years. She thought she was 22. With no idea what his chances of success might be, the young doctor hypnotized his patient and her 12 forgotten years came back to her. Chertok devoted most of his career to hypnosis and its many therapeutic applications. He faced a great deal of hostility from sceptical colleagues in France.

Isabelle Stengers, the Belgian philosopher of science, has recently written two books in collaboration with Chertok. Together they consider the ethical and philosophical questions of hypnosis versus psychoanalysis in *L'Hypnose, blessure narcissique* (Laboratoire Delagrangé), *Le Coeur et la raison. L'hypnose en question* (Pay-

ot) describes Chertok's research and his adventurous life.

His technique is considered traditional, rather in the vein of Charcot. The aim is to break through a repressed event and bring it back to the patient's conscious memory. This approach is unusually effective in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorders. Chertok's books describe many case histories with successful outcomes, especially in the field of psychosomatic medicine.

The important innovation brought about in hypnotherapy by Milton Erickson is the technique in which the traumatic event could be changed by the patient. Under hypnosis, the patient relives the event and changes the course of it by entering the scene himself as an adult, or by asking the therapist to intervene. The new insight this experience brings to the event restores the patient who can see him/herself in a different light and thereby move away from the crippling past. The emotions attached to the tragic or terrifying scene will now have changed significantly.

This form of therapy does not apply exclusively to victims of a specific trauma. Its range of application is vast; psychosomatic ailments like asthma, spastic colon, and allergies may benefit a great deal from it. Dr Eric Mairlot, who founded the "Institut de Nouvelle Hypnose" and works at Brugmann Hospital, has helped many people to stop smoking by working on their nicotine addiction.

Mairlot claims that most stress-induced symptoms — such as repetitive failure patterns both professional and emotional, or compulsive and obsessional behaviour — improve dramatically under hypnotherapy. "Among my patients are actors and other stage performers

who have been handicapped by severe stagefright," says Mairlot.

He sees a structural connection between phobic states and bouts of compulsive eating. "In both cases," he says, "the attacks are caused by an uncontrollable state of modified consciousness. Hypnosis, too, is a state of modified consciousness, but a controlled one. Pathologies that are characterized by a negative modified consciousness will respond to the positive and controlled effect of hypnosis."

Hypnotized people are not unconscious; they are free to move, talk, say what they wish. The frequently noted inability to remember what has hap-

pened under hypnosis — a form of amnesia — is generally caused by the patient's unconscious desire to forget what may have been an emotionally painful experience.

Hypnotherapy is a treatment. It can last for months and is not compatible with other psychotherapies, except for group or couple therapy. The technique not only focuses on getting rid of the painful symptom; its aim is to help the person to feel better within himself. The Ericksonian therapy respects the patient's symptoms, unlike the hypnotists of the last century who gave strict commands and insisted on blind obedience.

Today, hypnotherapists explain that their treatment induces positive modifications of behaviour. The criticism that analytically inclined therapists make is that there is no analysis of the patient-doctor transference. The transference is used, but not worked over; the hypnotist assumes virtually magic authority. It also means that the patient does not experience the conscious working-through process, as he does in analysis.

The hypnotic state has been known to bring about some dramatic changes, even in the case of depression. One of the most extraordinary examples occurred in 1900 when Sergey Rakhmaninov suddenly recovered from three years of creative despair after undergoing hypnosis and went on to compose his Second Piano Concerto.

In Dr Mairlot's words, "Coming out of depression means that patients can once again develop their full creative potential. It is like discovering spring after a long dark winter."



Top, Charcot expounding his theory of a woman's ways to his male colleagues. Above, Mozart's friend Mesmer, with magnets, caricatured as a quack in *Così fan tutte*