Wilhelm Reich and the Corruption of Ideals:  
A Discussion in the Context of Dusan Makavejev’s  
WR: Mysteries of the Organism

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Abstract 
This article utilizes Dusan Makavejev’s semi-documentary film on Wilhelm Reich, WR: Mysteries of the Organism as case material for an examination of the interplay of idealization and ideology in Reich’s work and that of his followers. The article seeks to clarify the original political and clinical intent of Reich’s work (first presented at a meeting of the Pittsburgh Psychoanalytic Society and Institute, October, 13, 2006).

Key words 
Wilhelm Reich – Body Psychotherapy – Idealization – Ideology – Dusan Makavejev

INTRODUCTION TO THE FILM: Idealization & Ideology 
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World War I had left Sigmund Freud deeply dispirited. Freud determined that his psychoanalytic movement had a fundamental social (though not political) responsibility (Danto, 2005), and at his urging each city with a major psychoanalytic center established a clinic offering free psychoanalysis and education to the poor and working class, first in Berlin in 1920 under Karl Abraham and then in Vienna in 1922.

Reich’s experience in the Vienna clinic had a profound influence on him. In The Function of the Orgasm, Reich described his experience in the clinics as pivotal in his work:

The psychoanalytic clinic became a fountainhead of insights into the mechanisms of neuroses in impecunious people. I worked in this clinic from the day of its opening as the chief assistant physician…

The consultation hours were jammed. There were industrial workers, office clerks, students, and farmers from the country. The influx was so great that we were at a loss to deal with it… Every psychoanalyst agreed to give one session every day without charge. But this was not enough. …According to the standards of the time, it was believed that treatment required one session per day for at least six months. One thing became immediately clear: psychoanalysis is not a mass therapy. The idea of preventing neuroses did not exist—nor would one have known what to say about it. Work in the clinic soon made the following very clear:

Neurosis is a mass sickness, an infection similar to an epidemic, and not the whim of spoiled women, as was later contended in the fight against psychoanalysis.

Disturbance of the genital sexual function was by far the most frequent reason given for coming to the clinic.

Neither the psychiatrist nor the psychoanalyst thought to inquire into the social living conditions of the patients. It was known, of course, that there was poverty and material distress, but somehow this was not regarded as relevant to treatment. Yet, the patient’s material conditions were a constant problem in the clinic. It was often necessary to provide social aid first. All of a sudden there was a tremendous gap between private practice and practice in the clinic. (1947/1961, pp. 74-75)

In this passage we see the themes that dominated Reich’s work—the influence of peoples’ actual life circumstances on their psychological and emotional well-being and the role of sexuality in emotional health. The experiences in the polyclinic radicalized Reich and drew him to Marx and the Communist movement as potential solutions to the mass-social problems he witnessed there.

By the time Reich moved to Berlin in 1930 and became involved in the free clinic there, he was deeply involved in Marxist politics, to the dismay of many of his psychoanalytic colleagues (including Freud, especially Anna Freud). The German Communist Party set up an organization called the German Association for Proletarian Sexual Politics, under Reich’s leadership, and the Sex-Pol era, “celebrated” in a certain way in Makavejev’s film, was born. Within years, Reich became deeply disenchanted with the gulf between Marxist theory and its practice in the Soviet Union. He was especially dismayed by the Communist turn away from a freer and more informed sexuality, returning to conventional, state-imposed moralities. In speech and writings he began to criticize the Party. In 1933 he was expelled from the Communist Party, and in
1934, having escaped from Nazi Germany, he was expelled from the International Psychoanalytic Association, which—for more than a decade—he had both inspired and criticized.

A word about the structure of the film—it is, in Makavejev’s words, “a satirical paraphrase, a black comedy in the form of a pop art collage, of documentary, political circus, philosophical essay, and science-fiction” (Durgnat, 1999, p.55). How accurately it portrays the work of the man it seeks to honor is the question we will take up in our discussion of the film. The editing, at times, is difficult to follow. I saw it when it was first released and imagined the editing represented Makavejev’s effort to recreate an experience of free association. But Makavejev explained it as his effort to reflect the fragmentation of life, which he saw as an essential element and emphasis in Reich’s writings (Makavejev, 1972). Much of the cutting of the film is to diametrically oppose scenes of freedom of movement and expression with those of frozen or sadist reactions (often at the hands of authoritarian governments). It was his intention to maintain a certain ambiguity of message and perspective, so as to allow the audience its own meanings and interpretations.

When first shown at the Cannes festival in 1971, WR received a standing ovation of 15 minutes, won the Luis Bunuel Prize and was shown 6 more times at the festival. Long out of print and very hard to find, WR (Makavejev, 2007) has recently been re-released in a digitally re-mastered DVD with the original and current interviews with Makavejev.

We will use the film itself as a kind of case study in an examination of the interrelationships among idealization, ideology, and disillusionment.

Idealization and Disillusionment in the Life and Work of Wilhelm Reich
Lore Reich Rubin

During the 1960’s and 70’s there was a tremendous resurgence of interest in both the political and psychotherapeutic work of Wilhelm Reich in the United States and Europe. In the US, Reich seems most widely known (and discredited) for his theories of a universal “orgone energy” (1950, 1973) and his creation of the orgone energy accumulator. But in Europe there is a greater appreciation for his whole body of work, especially his early involvement in socialist politics and his evolution of a body-centered therapy out of his earlier psychoanalytic efforts.

Reich came to psychoanalysis while in medical school in 1919. He idealized Freud and was especially fascinated by Freud’s theories about libido energy, the development of human sexuality, and the role of sexuality in the formation of the neuroses. I think he never stopped idealizing Freud, despite their later differences and the ultimate dissolution of their relationship. Until the end of his life Reich thought that his work was truer to Freud’s most fundamental concepts than the ways in which Freud’s work had been promulgated by his more “loyal” followers (1967). Reich’s idealization of Freud was but the first in a series of intense idealizations over the course of his lifetime. As we’ll see, Reich’s life included several periods of intense, rather naïve, and ultimately tragic idealizations.

Basing his thinking on Freud’s theories, Reich developed a theory that psychic conflict about sexuality and aggression, with the consequent anxiety reactions, led to defenses which were incorporated into the character structure. Then going beyond Freud he postulated that the sexual energy which was being repressed in the conflict would be bound into unconscious patterns of muscular constrictions. He called this binding of the energy “body armor”. Reich went even further and decided that by working directly with his patients’ muscular patterns, one could undo the armor and release the bound energy, thereby opening up deeper capacities for sexual and emotional experience. At this point Reich no longer considered himself a psychoanalyst.

Reich further theorized that a proper sex life with a complete orgasm would prevent this binding of the energy and therefore would prevent or attenuate the formation of neurosis and character pathology (1947/1961, 1949). Though Freud, in a letter to Fliess, had had similar ideas about a proper sex life preventing neurosis, by the 1920 Freud made severe objections to these ideas. Much later Reich expanded Freud’s libidinal energy theory into a more universal energy which he called “orgone energy”.

Reich became radicalized in the late 1920’s as Austria was giving up its civil liberties. As Reich’s relationship with Freud became more troubled and he was increasingly ostracized by Freud’s more conservative loyalists, Reich entered his second phase of idealization. As his ideas were so deeply tied to the sexual liberation of society so as to prevent the neurotic, fascistic trends in society, he started going around with a mobile sex clinic in working class neighborhoods. He emphasized sex education, especially birth control, as this would free youths to express themselves sexually and prevent neurosis. At the same time he was prominently active in the Socialist Party.

All this activity was too radical for Freud, who feared that it would besmirch the psychoanalytic movement. There was a cooling off between the two men that finally led to Reich’s leaving Vienna in 1930 and settling in Berlin. There the Nazi’s were beginning to be a threat to democracy. So as he settled in the new city, Reich joined the Communist Party and, besides continuing his psychoanalytic researches, dedicated himself to fighting the Nazis (1970).

Reich at that time idealized the Russian revolution which he thought, because of their radical reproductive freedoms, would lead to a neurosis free society. But, just as he met Freud at the time that Freud was backing off his interest in sexuality, he found communism just as the Stalinists were becoming reactionary and backing off from their liberal stands on reproductive rights. However, Reich was not immediately aware of this.

In Berlin he expanded the ideas of his sexual education clinics into a huge organization called “Sex-Pol,” an abbreviation for sexual-politics, which according to Stasi files had between 10,000 and 40,000 members. So he was a very
vocal and prominent figure in Berlin (Cattier, 1971; Reich, 1972; Cohen, 1982; Goggin & Goggin, 2001; Lothane, 2001). Sex-Pol was supposedly a communist front organization, and the Communist Party tried to control Reich and his activities. But, he was not a good party follower, refusing to follow the party line. He stood for birth control and the right to an abortion when the Communists were now opposed to both. They wanted control of his publishing house, but he refused. His final disillusion with the party came when they in the 1933 elections said “the Socialists are our main enemy”, “after Hitler our turn” Reich started calling the communists “Red Fascists” (1945).

In 1934 both the Communist Party and the International Psychoanalytic Association kicked him out of their membership. The psychoanalysts, using a technicality to expel Reich from the International Psychoanalytic Association, were afraid that people would think psychoanalysis was a communist organization and they wished to compromise and appease the Nazi government of Germany (Reich, 1976; Rubin, 1997; Lothane, 2001).

In the midst of all this activity and controversy Reich published a number of seminal books: Die Funktion des Orgasmus (1927), Der Sexuelle Kampf der Jugend (1932), Charakter-Analyse (1933), Massenpsychologie des Faschismus (1933), and Dialektischer Materialismus Und Psychoanalyse (1934).

Perhaps the most pertinent for today’s society is Reich’s conceptualization of fascism. In The Mass Psychology of Fascism Reich postulates that in all authoritarian organizations—the state, organized religions, and the family—control their subjects by suppressing sexuality. This is done either by law, codes of morality, or creating an atmosphere making sex shameful or evil. This creates a neurotic populace that subjugates its sexual energy to admiration and submission to the leader. But this suppressed sexuality creeps out sideways in resignation, pornography, sadism, and violence. At the same time the leaders feel free to keep sexual prowess, often of a pornographic nature, for themselves.

The “sexual revolution” as portrayed in Makavejev’s film was meant to allow youth freedom for sexuality. However, Reich’s concept of a sexual revolution was staid compared to the actual revolution in sexual mores that took place in the late 60’s and early 70’s, though paradoxically this burst of “freedom of expression” was seen as based in his writings. I suspect that many young men and women in that era owned his books, but few had actually read them. He would have been horrified at what transpired and would call much of it pornography or characterological acting out. He never anticipated the teenage pregnancy rate, the AIDS epidemic, was unfamiliar with the gay rights movement, the concept of transexuality, or sex change operations. Nevertheless, Reich is blamed in some circles for these events, especially as the French student revolt of 1968 held him up as a hero. In other circles, as these things go. Reich is credited and admired for his influence on the student and sexual revolutions (Chesser, 1972; 1980, Mann & Hoffman).

Reich fled the Nazis, settling first in Denmark and finally in Norway through the remainder of the 1930’s. It was there that he developed more fully his techniques for working with the body and engaged in research into the activities of the nervous system in anxiety and sexuality. He had left behind the psychoanalytic style of verbal free association and verbal interpretation. Reich now called his work “vegetotherapy” (a therapy of the vegetative autonomous nervous system) so as to contrast it with psychoanalysis. He now worked directly with the body, its movements and its patterns of muscular armor. In these years we see yet another period of idealization, this time of the body itself. Reich developed his theories of “self-regulation,” imagining a body that once freed of its arming would move naturally—like that of a healthy infant or child—into a life of emotional health, free sexuality and pleasure. Later, as he saw that his idealized expectations were not being met, he posited something called “the emotional plague of mankind” which seemed to tilt humanity inevitably toward neurosis and character pathology (1948, 1953). He seemed to view mankind as caught up in (and ultimately losing) a battle between the universal life energy of the orgone and the forces of the emotional plague. Reich’s vision seems to cast Freud’s speculations of the struggles between libidinal desires and the death instinct onto a grander, nearly cosmic plane of ideation.

In 1939 Reich fled the German invasion of Norway and came to the United States on the last boat. He was now virulently anti-communist and abhorred the psychoanalysts who had so rejected him and submitted to the authoritarian regimes around them. But now in the United States, Reich again found idealization in his admiration for the U.S. Constitution, democracy, and Eisenhower. As typical of his life, this idealization reached its peak just as the McCarthy era swept the country with its antidemocratic, quite fascistic, aims. There were campaigns everywhere, yet again, to root out “evil,” which was now enshrined as the Communists. Reich became a victim of this era. It is suspected that it was the Stalin Regime in the Soviet Union, which was trying to eliminate its enemies abroad, that facilitated an article by Mildred Brady in The New Republic, “The Strange Case of Wilhelm Reich”, which first turned the attention of the FDA to Reich’s experiments with the orgone box to cure cancer (Reich, 1973; Greenfield, 1974). It seems clear that the U.S. government’s campaign against Reich had much less to do medical science than with his having mistakenly associated with communism.

Makavejev’s film, WR: Mysteries of the Organism (Makavejev, 1971, 1972, 2007; Durgnat, 1999) documents Reich’s persecution by the FDA, the burning of virtually all of his books and publications, the injunction against transporting the orgone box and his published works across state lines, the contempt of court charges leading to an unusually long sentence of two years, and Reich’s subsequent death at 60 years of age in the Lewisburg Penitentiary.

A life like Reich’s would have exhausted many by the time of his arrival in the United States. This was the fourth dislocation and emigration of his life. His final decade in the U.S. was marked by two realms of idealization, the first being democracy (and the U.S. itself) and the other being cosmic orgone energy. Reich dedicated the final years of his life to what he saw as the scientific investigation and validation of orgone energy and into research into the mother-infant relationship and healthy child care, which he came to see as the only possible salvation from the emotional plague.

Now to turn to Makavejev’s movie portrayal of Reich and the implications of his presentation. I liked this movie despite its conveying of some serious distortions of Reich’s ideas. In the fictional Yugoslav story of Vladimir and Milena
which unfolds in the midst of the documentary portions of the movie, Makavejev directly illustrates Reich's concepts of character types, as well his ideas about authoritarian states suppressing sexuality and substituting subjugation to and an idealization of the state. Vladimir, the great Russian ice skater and sex symbol, can only deflect Milena's sexual advances by mouthing empty Stalinist propaganda. Though fluid on ice, he moves in real life with a bodily stiffness, reflecting severe body armoring. It is only after he is assaulted and humiliated by Radmilovic (Milena's ex-boyfriend) that he relaxes sufficiently to seem human. When Milena finally tries to overtly seduce him, his sexual urges overcome him but then turn into violent aggression and murder. This illustrates Reich's point that the sexuality will come out sideways in distorted ways when they are armored and suppressed, emerging in Makavejev's movie as an unfolding sequence of narcissism, masochism, sadism, and finally a release of sexual desire which triggered a violent assault and murder. But in the end, after the murder, we see the real, pitiful, Vladimir who plaints, “What about me?” more bereft for himself than guilty about the brutal murder. Here we see the original child who has been suppressed, destroyed and made into a puppet. Milena, on the other hand, represents Reich's idealized genital character: open to real relationships with others, and open to a deep sexual relationship. In keeping with Reich's observations, the “genital character” was destroyed by the forces of sexual and social violence.

There are other minor characters in this fictional part of the movie that portray other character types described by Reich. Jagoda (Milena’s roommate) and her soldier boyfriend, Ljuba, represent phallic narcissistic type character pathology. They have compulsive sex but without deep, satisfying orgasm. Radmilovic illustrates the impulsive character who has to act out his urges and cannot relate deeply to others.

In the political discussions in the fictional part of the film, as well as the scenes where Milena preaches sexual freedom and complete orgasm to the courtyard full of her neighbors, on can see that Makavejev idealized Reich’s sexual politics, and seems to believe that a “good” socialism is possible.

The other part of the film that impressed me was the magnificent portrayal of the repeated corruption of ideals during a history that is well within our memories, perhaps reflecting my own cynical view of the 20th century:

1) The communist revolution, surely idealistic originally, is portrayed as degenerated into the fake pomp of Stalin, representing Reich’s view of the psychopathic character, strutting in an old Tsarist palace with brilliant crystal chandeliers. At the same time the inhumane treatment of prisoners is illustrated with the torture of mental patients. The equally idealistic Chinese communist revolution is shown degenerated into an anti-sex society with the sex drive subjugated into hero-worship of one man.

2) The Anti Vietnam Peace movement acted by Tully Kupfenberg in his pseudo military march in midtown Manhattan is comic, especially the studied ignoring of the bizarre performance by all types of New Yorkers varying from genteel old ladies, businessmen and the police. But it also depicts with comic amusement the degeneration of the ideal of peace into the revolutionary warlike slogans for more war, only revolutionary war.

3) The Reichian therapy of undoing the muscular armor with deep breathing and other exercises is turned by Alexander Lowen’s “Bioenergetic Therapy” into hyper-ventilation and strained muscular movements until muscular fasciculations and convulsions are achieved, which corrupts Reich’s ideal of undoing armor and misrepresents his style of work. The group sessions turn into screaming, stomping, aggressive riots which only sado-masochists would tolerate. Reich told his son, Peter, he hated this type of treatment.

But when we come to sexuality we see that Makavejev himself is a corrupter of ideals. In an interview he himself labeled Reich’s sexual revolution as tame. He idealizes the 1960-70 sexual revolution, with all its extremes. Here are some examples:

1) The film starts off in the first scene, depicting a couple having intercourse. This is declared to be actual footage of a sex-pol film. By proximity to other scenes it is meant to be intercourse between my parents Wilhelm and Annie Reich. But Reich would never have filmed this scene. He believed in privacy for the sex act. Actually this film clip was shot in 1969 at the hippie Woodstock music festival. Is Makavejev tweaking the nose of his admired idol, Reich?

2) In the fictional part of the movie Milena, who I think is Makavejev’s mouthpiece, defends the over-public, and over-extended sex scenes between Jagoda and Ljuba to an obviously sexually frustrated female neighbor. This is in opposition to Reich’s idealized complete sex with the merging of the partners and the full orgiastic experience. Makavejev is defending defiant sexual freedom. “In your face!!!” intercourse. But at the same time he portrays Ljuba as obsessed with his sexual prowess in a scene when he first meets Jagoda. Makavejev is portraying the phallic narcissistic character type, described by Reich. I believe this is an example of Makavejev’s ambivalence to Reich, both fully comprehending what Reich was saying and at the same time putting his own spin on it. Makavejev was born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, into a Serbian family and was raised under the Yugoslav communists. He was always an antiauthoritarian rebel, though perhaps at some time admiring authority. His biggest rebellion, I would suggest from what I see in this film, was about sex.

3) Milena’s rants on the balcony of her apartment house, preaching true revolution and sexuality. But this rant comes across as more of a parody of Reich’s sex-pol writings than as an homage to Reich’s political ideals.
4) In the documentary part of the film Makavejev films a sculptress as she makes a plaster cast of a man’s penis. In another scene a female painter lovingly paints pictures of people masturbating. Again, I believe this is Makavejev’s rebellion against Reich’s “tame” sexual revolution. Reich would have considered both these scenes pornographic, diminishing the value of true intimate, orgasmic sex.

5) Then there is a scene of people parading about nude, with defiant facial expressions, in the offices of the magazine “Screw”. Here again Reich would have disapproved, as it would go directly against Reich’s idealization of the seriousness of work. He believed in Freud’s dictum that mental health consisted of love and work. Reich idolized work; never would he approve of this mixing of work with sex.

6) It is not clear whether Makavejev deliberately and ambivalently distorts Reich’s concepts of energy streaming or whether he misunderstood the concepts. There are many examples of this in the movie: the mass streaming and swaying of the red guards in Tiananmen Square; the muscular fasciculations during Lowen’s bio-energetic treatments; the convulsions during group sessions which he juxtaposes to the convulsions of ECT. He extols these instances whereas Reich would have found them negative, destructive moments.

Why is Makavejev distorting Reich’s ideals? Why does it so often happen that we distort ideals and turn them into their opposite? We can’t know this personally about him save for the things he says in interview. It is really considered unethical to speculate about peoples unconscious without some verification. But let us talk about it in general.

I am not talking about cynical politicians who utilize the idealism of their subjects by perverting them to their own purposes. But even politicians can have psychological needs. We can say that for instance Stalin, having exerted so much power and killed so many people can no longer trust anybody. This heightens his need for grandiose power, a form of being loved by the masses instead of individuals. Here narcissism is replacing real object relations.

But why do individuals corrupt ideals?

The formation of ideals often requires the repression of conflict revolving around aggression. The ideals are generous and good and altruistic, opposite negative trends have to be pushed underground into the unconscious. Freud labeled this “reaction formation,” through which excessive goodness denies or covers excessive badness. But then we get the “return of the repressed.” The repression cannot hold down the unconscious and the aggression and hostility will out. The aggression is now expressed in sadism.

The idealization is now marked by ambivalence toward the idealized object. As an example we can think of this in terms of the Oedipus complex described by Freud. The son loves the Father but is at the same time his rival. He wants to take the father’s place, but to do so he has to “kill” the father first, thus losing the thing he loves.

We can also view this as a narcissistic struggle, wanting to get the glory for oneself, envy of the famous man, a kind of one-upmanship. So we might say that Makavejev admires Reich and wants to promote his ideals and theories to let us mourn his unjust imprisonment. But at the same time he feels rivalrous and wants to be the famous man himself. The upshot is that he begins to make fun of Reich and his theories after making a film showing just how wonderful and original the theories were.

Nevertheless, taken as a whole, “WR: Mystery of the Organism” is a powerful and moving film, at times brilliant and insightful, at times horrifying, and at times amusing. It also is a wonderful reminder of the ethos of the 1970’s and a strong warning about the perilous times we find ourselves in at present.

MIS/REPRESENTING REICH: The Psychotherapist

William F. Cornell

To my reading of Reich’s work and my practice as a body-centered psychotherapist, the images in Makavejev’s film often outweigh the spoken text and create substantial distortions of both Reich’s body-centered psychoanalysis and theories of sexual functioning. I first discovered Reich’s work as an adolescent, and encountering his writing was a revelation, perfect for the adolescent mind. He was radical. He was passionate, a stunning contrast to other psychoanalytic writings I was exploring which seemed to me so often pretentious and distant from lived experience. In stark contrast to other analysts of his time, Reich did not wish to simply understand human misery. He was dedicated to relieving human misery, to eradicating it. He wrote explicitly about sex. I reveled in his sexual and political writings. As a young man and naïve therapist, I aggressively pursued training in neo-Reichian body therapy. My early training was very much in the mode you witnessed in the scenes of the bioenergetics therapy. Rather quickly I became dissatisfied with this mode of work, and returned to a more informed reading of Reich’s clinical papers. I discovered that the way I had been trained was a significant distortion and simplification of his work.

Crucial to Reich’s evolution, and central to the work of body psychotherapists, was what he came to call “the breakthrough into the vegetative realm” (1961; pp.234 ff), “vegetative” then referring to the autonomic nervous system, a realm of psychological and emotional organization operating outside of conscious awareness and reflective cognitions. Reich’s “vegetative realm” would now be framed in the language of implicit memory or subsymbolic experience, arenas of contemporary attention in both psychoanalytic theory and cognitive research. With this theoretical breakthrough, Reich
began to create a new psychotherapy, one grounded in precognitive neural and somatic processes, leaving behind his identification as a psychoanalyst. He opened a new realm of understanding and technique to the therapeutic process centered in careful attention to shifts in bodily aliveness and movement within the therapeutic hour. In Reich’s words from Character Analysis:

…We learn much about this phenomenon [of inner emptiness and deadening] if we make the patient relive the transition from the alive to the dead condition as vividly as possible, and if we pay the closest attention to the swings from one condition to the other during treatment. If one does so, one observes very peculiar reactions. One patient, for example, experienced the transition by having to repeat mechanically, “it’s no good, it’s no good at all,” etc. The meaning of this was, “It is no good to try, to make sacrifices, to try to get love, because I’m not being understood anyhow.” Small children have the most tragic experience: Not being able to express their wishes and needs in words, they appeal to the adult in some form for understanding; the adults, as they are, are quite unable to feel what is going on in the child; the child tries and tries to make himself understood in vain; finally it gives up the struggle and resigns: “It’s no good.” The transition from full living experiencing to inner deadness is usually caused by severe disappointments in love. (1949, pp. 325-326)

In Makavejev’s film, the powerful and supposedly representative images of body-centered psychotherapy were those of Alexander Lowen and bioenergetic therapy. I suspect other therapists and analysts were unwilling to exhibit their patients in that way. The other body-centered psychotherapist besides Alexander Lowen, was Myron Sharaf, whose style of therapy was much closer to Reich’s than was Lowen’s. Sharaf became Reich’s major biographer. Sharaf’s brief description of his therapeutic experience with Reich captures Reich’s clinical work much more accurately than the bioenergetic scenes. To remind you, Sharaf said, “He would ask me to breathe first of all…Breathe!…your eyes!…your eyes are going out!…Look at me! I looked at him…your mouth…you’re hiding your smile!…Let it go…Oh!…even in the sobbing…don’t stop, breathe!…because everybody cries…I mean, it would be nothing to get someone to cry, you can get any sadist to get you to cry!…but to cry and feel the person keep pressing forward…keep the breathing!…Don’t stop the breathing…Let it come through fully! With a full sob!…Let it come, don’t stop…Don’t! No. You’re running away, don’t run…Let it come!” (Makavejev, 1972, pp. 53-54). As we can see here, Reich was a more active participant in the therapeutic hour than the standard psychoanalyst. He was directive, deeply engaged, and could be mercilessly confrontive, but also deeply tender and compassionate.

What I want to stress here in the context of this movie are two aspects of his work, the first being that Reich worked in the here and now, carefully tracking the shifts on the patient’s bodily and interpersonal experience that either brought the patient more fully alive in the session or deadened internal and interpersonal contact with the therapist. He actively called the patient’s attention to the mechanisms, the means by which, one deadened and defended oneself or opened oneself up. The second is that his work, at its heart, was profoundly interpersonal. Reich did not simply seek the discharge of affect; he sought to promote the expression of feelings to the therapist. “Show me… let me see… give me your eyes… let me hear it in your voice….” The goal for Reich was to develop the capacity for deep emotional experience and surrender in the presence of another. Much is required of the therapist as well as the patient in such an enterprise.

There has been a revolution in body-centered psychotherapy within my generation, and it represents a return to Reich’s original therapeutic intentions. Body psychotherapy today rarely engages in the massively physical and characterological interventions that have typified bioenergetics and some periods of Reich’s work. Our understanding of the centrality of the body in therapeutic change is now framed in models of the transference and countertransference matrices, of implicit memory processes, and of the enduring effects of subsymbolic experience and organization. We work with body process and expression as a process of interpersonal communication, often imbued with transference needs and distortions, inhibited by shame and anxiety, often delicate and easily disrupted. We no longer take touch for granted and often work with body process without direct physical contact. It is an intimate psychotherapy.

In WR, Makavejev seems to applaud the expressions of sexual freedom (although he may be mocking them). Unlike the multitude of scenes in WR, Reich’s emphasis in sexuality was on intimacy, tenderness, freedom, and surrender. He wrote a deeply personal diatribe, Listen Little Man, shortly before his imprisonment. It was illustrated by the cartoonist William Steig. One of the cartoons is that of a judge attired in militaristic garb seated behind a high bench on which there is a sign declaring: “Love is Against the Law – Fucking is Allowed” (1948, p.82). Another cartoon shows two men and two women smoking, eating and cavorting, more with themselves than with each other, with the caption “You devour happiness” (1948, p.48), a scene quite like those of Jagoda and Ljuba fucking their way through the apartment. Accompanying the cartoon, Reich writes, “Never have you enjoyed happiness in full freedom. That’s why you greedily devour happiness, without taking responsibility for securing happiness. You were kept from learning to take care of your happiness, to nurture it as a gardener nurtures his flowers and a farmer his crops. …it is easy to devour happiness but difficult to protect it” (p.47).

Reich believed fervently that the capacity for sexual pleasure within a loving relationship was rendered virtually impossible by authoritarian family, social and political structures. He argued that social and political structures had to kill the capacity for healthy sexuality in order to create and sustain the kinds of submissive masochism and hate-filled sadism necessary to maintain authoritarian social structures and economic arrangements. During the Sex-Pol period he campaigned for the freeing of sexuality from social and governmental restraints, with a program that was decades ahead of its time. Reich
demanded the free distribution of contraceptives and public programs for birth control to minimize the need for abortion; elimination of all obstacles to abortion, free abortions in public clinics and financial and medical safeguards for pregnant and nursing mothers; the guarantee of sexual privacy for adolescents; the abolition of laws against homosexuality; the abolition of legal distinctions between married and unmarried couples; public teaching about venereal disease and maintenance of sexual hygiene clinics; and the training of all health care professionals in matters of sexual hygiene. Three sex education books were published for the public. The first, for mothers, *If Your Child Asks You,* was written by Annie Reich (Reich’s first wife and Lore’s mother); the second, *The Chalk Triangle,* for children 8 to 12; and *The Sexual Struggle of Youth* written by Reich, which was to be published by the German Communist Party, but it was rejected by the Party, so Reich published it himself.

Reich became a hero of the student movements in the U.S., France and Germany during the late 60’s and early 70’s. His work became the hallmark of what was considered sexual freedom. I doubt that most people at that time had ever bothered to read his work in any detail or subtlety. His was not an advocacy for casual or promiscuous sex. While Reich was stridently opposed to the legislation of sexuality, his was a sexuality of passion, tenderness, and mutual responsiveness—freed from the intrusions of church and state. Reich was keenly aware that true freedom also entailed deep interpersonal and social responsibility.

But Reich was also a deeply haunted man. He often lived a profound contradiction between his written ideals and his actual life. There was often a naivété to his thinking and a relentless sense of being driven in his life and work. Nick Totton, a body psychotherapist in the United Kingdom, recently observed, “Reich has a repeated tendency noisily to assert some unimportant and often untenable theses, while quietly articulating something else of great importance and originality” (Nobus & Downing, 2006, p.142). Reich would become intensely fixated on every new idea he had, always framing them as revolutionary discoveries, typically leaving earlier work behind—thrown aside, rather than reconsidered: left behind. His writing was strident and often breathtakingly self-certain. He wrote, for example, in the 1926 preface to the first version of *The Function of the Orgasm,* “I publish this work fully aware that it deals with very ‘explosive material’ and that I must therefore be prepared for emotionally-based objections. …there is always danger of distortion or ideological coloring of factual judgment. The question, however, is not the presence or absence of an ideology but rather the type of ideology involved; that is, whether an ethically evaluative attitude toward the problem of sex leads one away from the truth or whether a different moral attitude compels one to pursue it” (1926/1980, p.5). Reich deeply believed he was driven by the quest for the truth and was willing to suffer repeated ostracism in a quest he could not question in himself.

We have focused here on Reich, but the patterns of idealization and ideology have carried on among his followers. The second generation of Reichian theorists and trainers has, more often than not, recreated these patterns. Medical Orgonomy is little more than a cult, slavishly dedicated to Reich’s theories, treating his writings as sacred script, offering fundamentalist, literal renditions of the Reichian bible. John Pierrakos and Alexander Lowen were charismatic and authoritarian leaders, each deeply identified with their own work, with little dialogue with other disciplines. Charles Kelley, the founder of Radix body education, called his short-lived journal, Chuck Kelley’s Radix Journal and was the only person allowed to publish anything of substance in it. Our field as body psychotherapists has not been served well by these authoritarian leaders, each deeply identified with their own work — thrown aside, rather than reconsidered: left behind. His stridency in his writing was, and is, very easily confused with the idea of the leader/teacher.

Reich invited idealization; he longed for it. And he dreaded it. In *The Murder of Christ,* another deeply personal and anguished diatribe, he wrote, “Disciples have no hearts. They only want to get inspiration and warmth from the master.” The stridency in his writing was, and is, very easily converted into ideology. Reich’s work changed constantly, but at each stage, those who worked with him far too often idealized him, seemed certain that only they knew the true Reich. Reich’s self-proclaimed loyalists and true believers simultaneously enshrined and embalmed his work in idealization and ideology.

### References


**Biography**

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