

Sofiya Khovanskaia-Vasenkina
Gaslighting

Edited by
Hans Rainer Sepp

Editorial Board

Suzi Adams · Adelaide | Babette Babich · New York | Kimberly Baltzer-Jaray · Waterloo, Ontario | Damir Barbarić · Zagreb | Marcus Brainard · London | Martin Cajthaml · Olomouc | Mauro Carbone · Lyon | Chan Fai Cheung · Hong Kong | Cristian Ciocan · București | Ion Copoeru · Cluj-Napoca | Renato Cristin · Trieste | Eddo Evink · Groningen | Matthias Flatscher · Wien | Jean-Christophe Goddard · Toulouse | Andrzej Gniazdowski · Warszawa | Ludger Hagedorn · Wien | Seongha Hong · Jeollabukdo | René Kaufmann · Dresden | Vakhtang Kebuladze · Kyjiw | Dean Komel · Ljubljana | Pavlos Kontos · Patras | Kwok-ying Lau · Hong Kong | Mette Lebech · Maynooth | Nam-In Lee · Seoul | Monika Małek · Wrocław | Balázs Mezei · Budapest | Viktor Molchanov · Moskwa | Liangkang Ni · Guangzhou | Cathrin Nielsen · Frankfurt am Main | Ashraf Noor · Jerusalem | Karel Novotný · Praha | Markus Ophälders · Verona | Luis Román Rabanaque · Buenos Aires | Rosemary Rizo-Patrón de Lerner · Lima | Kiyoshi Sakai · Tokyo | Javier San Martín · Madrid | Hilmar Schmiedl-Neuburg · Boston | Alexander Schnell · Wuppertal | Marcia Schuback · Stockholm | Agustín Serrano de Haro · Madrid | Tatiana Shchytsova · Vilnius | Olga Shparaga · Minsk | Michael Staudigl · Wien | Georg Stenger · Wien | Silvia Stoller · Wien und Graz | Ananta Sukla · Cuttack | Toru Tani · Kyoto | Detlef Thiel · Wiesbaden | Lubica Ucnik · Perth | Pol Vandeveld · Milwaukee | Chung-chi Yu · Kaohsiung | Antonio Zirion · México City und Morelia.

The *libri nigri* series is edited at the Central-European Institute of Philosophy, Prague.
www.sif-praha.cz

Sofiya Khovanskaia-Vasenkina

Gaslighting
On Doubt and Stress

Verlag Traugott Bautz GmbH

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie.
Detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet abrufbar über
<http://dnb.de>



Středoevropský institut
pro filosofii

Verlag Traugott Bautz GmbH
D-99734 Nordhausen 2025

Gedruckt auf säurefreiem, alterungsbeständigem Papier
Alle Rechte vorbehalten
Printed in Germany

ISBN 978-3-68911-054-3

I would like to thank my academic supervisor Hans Rainer Sepp for supporting this thesis and providing an incredible academic atmosphere that fostered creativity and critical thought. I would like to express gratitude to James Pfaus for his involvement and help in writing this thesis and all of the knowledge in the field of neuroscience that he taught me. Further thanks go to my friends and my family.

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	9
The Movie Gaslight	10
The Onset of the Relationship	11
Life in London	13
Jealousy	15
The Loss of the Brooch and Appearance of Flickering Gas Light	17
Accusations of Incompetence	19
A Visit from a Neighbor	20
The Missing Painting	22
The Music Concert	24
Brian to the Rescue	27
Summary of the Analysis	30
<i>Theoretical Discussion of Gaslighting</i>	32
Melanie Klein's Object Relations theory and projective interjection	33
Kate Abramson's Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting	37
Gaslighting and Epistemic Injustice	42
The Tangent	44
Anger Gaslighting and Emotional Uptake	51
Sociology of Gaslighting by Paige L. Sweet	52
Developing the Discussion on Gaslighting	54
Mental Flexibility	56
History of Stress Research	59
The Rubrics of the Stressed Body	65

The Way Out	75
Plato's "Phaedrus"	75
Paris Hilton's Autobiography	80
Conclusion	87
Bibliography	91

On one occasion at another person's house, my friend offered me lunch. He made a passing joke about vegetarianism being stupid, which was not particularly funny for me as a vegetarian. He then proceeded to put vegetables onto the pan and then dump a can of tuna onto them. I inhaled and calmly told them that I appreciated his offer of food; however, now that the vegetables were mixed with the tuna, I would be unable to eat the food. I turned to my laptop to proceed with my work. Minutes later, a plate with vegetables appeared in front of me. I looked at him, confused. He told me it was fine because he pushed the tuna aside. I declined once again. "What's wrong with you? I told you I pushed it aside. There's no tuna here" "No, thank you, I said", feeling like there truly was something wrong. I said no three times; why wasn't it working?

Introduction

Gaslighting refers to the manipulation of another person into doubting their perceptions, experiences, or understanding of events. Gaslighting is an interesting phenomenon because it puts one in an interesting position: no matter what you do or say, the other party involved in the encounter just does not care and only coils around your words to continue pushing through their own vision of the world, no matter what is being said. The term takes its origin in a 1938 play by British playwright Patrick Hamilton called "Gas Light", but the story became more widely known when a screen adaptation was released to theaters in 1944. The film was directed by George Cukor and starred Ingrid Bergman as one of the lead characters. In the movie, Gregory tries to convince his wife, Paula, that she is losing her mind. His main motive is for her to be hospitalized in a mental institution so that he can gain access to her jewels. He is deliberately creating situations that make Paula feel and seem to others insane. Gas light plays a significant role in this narrative, as Gregory regularly ventures into the attic in search of jewels, and when he turns the lights on there, the lights on the lower floor become dimmer and occasionally flicker. Paula sees the lights on the lower floor, and when she asks Gregory about it, he suggests it's only her imagination. Within the movie, the manipulation is deliberate, conscious, and planned. However, it is claimed that not all gaslighters are aware of what they do (see Psychology Today, 2017). Thus, within the narrative of the movie, gaslighting is pre-

sented as intentionally creating a sense of insanity in another person with the aim of personal gain. Since then, gaslighting's definitions have been updated. For example, the American Psychological Association defines it in the Dictionary of Psychology as "to manipulate another person into doubting his or her perceptions, experiences, or understanding of events" (2022). As exhaustive as this definition may be, it is still not enough to reflect all the nuances of the phenomenon of gaslighting.

Alternatively, gaslighting can also be defined as a conversational interaction between people with the goal of distorting the sense of real of one of the participants by simply and viciously insisting on a point the partner in the conversation falls into acceptance and submission (Gas; Nichols, 1988). Yet, in my opinion, this definition is still not comprehensive enough because gaslighting is not just about speech and not only about blunt insistence. Gaslighting can also involve actions that are used as references for furthering one's aim in terms of manipulation. Furthermore, insistence works because there were other moments when the gaslighter acted like "a normal person," creating an additional source of doubt. Namely, that his bizarre behavior is an isolated instance, since the person in question has acted 'normally' in the past. Gaslighting is extremely complex and lacks proper consideration in terms of its scope. Thus, the aim of this thesis is to conduct a detailed review and analysis of this phenomenon using the available sources.

The Movie Gaslight

I would like to begin the discussion with a more detailed review of the movie that made much more people aware of the manipulative tactics involved in gaslighting. In the following chapter, I specified the minutes in the movie when any given sentence was said to highlight how little time it physically takes to plant doubt in someone's mind. Additionally, the review of the whole story is necessary to demonstrate how priming the victim with the entirety of the relationship makes it possible to deliver a blow that reaches the target with greater force than it would if the whole relationship was not there in the first place.

At the beginning of the movie, Ingrid Bergman's character is distraught; a tragedy occurred in her life: her aunt, who brought her up, was murdered, and she was the one to find her body. The event shook her, so she travels to Italy to learn to sing as a way of distracting herself from this horrible occur-

rence and changing the scenery. In Italy, we see Paula happy; she is singing and finding connection with her body again by paying closer attention to her breathing and posture in the process of mastering her voice. Mr. Anton is the pianist who accompanies Paula during classes.

The Onset of the Relationship

Her teacher declares to her that she is too much in her head. The problem isn't her voice: "Your heart is not in your singing." (00:04:30,271 – 00:04:32,690). We immediately learn that the teacher was right – she was thinking about something else: she is in love. The teacher proclaims, "Happiness is better than art" (00:05:36,962 – 00:05:39,298).

At the end of the meeting, she informs maestro that she does not know when they will meet again; she is going to have a meeting with her beloved. She runs out of the building, and guess what? It's the pianist who was accompanying her during the classes. It is important to notice that from the very beginning, his presence is having a physical effect on her; she is less able to control her voice, and her thoughts are racing, distracting her from the singing. On the surface, it might seem that these are the symptoms of being in love, but in this story, they serve as an omen for the events that are coming later. On a more general level, it is possible to note that the kind of connection the gaslighter establishes with the gaslightee seems to have not only a psychological but also a physical effect.

Paula approaches the pianist, and he welcomes her with his open arms, drawing her into an embrace and kissing her passionately.

"What did he say?"

"He said I should take my happiness."

He interrupts her: "Will you?" (Without waiting for the answer) "Now?" (00:06:28,055 – 00:06:48,826)

It seems he is creating an air of immediacy around her to leave her no time for reconsideration of what is happening. Again, without waiting for the answer, he continues,

"Why do you still hesitate, Paula?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything about you."

"Nor I about you, but I want to marry you". (00:06:49,243 – 00:06:57,084)

“Why do you still hesitate?” is a sentence loaded with meaning in this scene: on the one hand, he is acknowledging Paula’s state of mind – he shows her that he sees and understands her, but on the other hand, his tone is restless when he says this sentence. He shows with his voice and body that he is feeling impatient, which seems natural under these circumstances, but it is not. Again, the situation is full of contradictions: on the one hand, it is possible to say that it is not very difficult to recognize what the other person is feeling, but on the other hand, to do it with precision in the moment requires a deeper understanding of the person with whom one is interacting. One requires the use of empathy.

Gaslighting necessitates tuning into the gaslightee; it would be impossible to push someone’s buttons without knowing which buttons to push. Therefore, arguing that gaslighters somehow lack empathy and that is the reason they use such methods of manipulation for interaction with others would fail because they need empathy for their gaslighting to work.

At this point, Paula is still resisting the pressure put on her, so she says, “You must give me time” (00:07:08,429 – 00:07:10,115). She goes to Como. Guess who’s there? Gregory. So let me break it down for you. She said she needed time. He said, of course. He did the opposite of what he agreed to in words. Though it was done in a very sweet context, the point remains the same. Yes, she was happy to see him. Still.

He then presents the idea of living in London as his long-standing dream, playing it as if it were a coincidence with the fact that Paula has a house in London. He’s a stranger, right? Does not know anything about the tragedy of her aunt’s murder, right? The moment when her face changes, he retreats from her and asks about her feelings. “Paula, why do you look like that?”. She tells him, “You’ve cast out fear from me,” meaning that his enthusiasm to go to London softens the unease she feels about living in the house where her aunt was murdered, about which she had told him earlier in the course of that conversation. Supposedly, this is the first time he has heard about it, so he expresses understanding and sympathy for her pain. What he gets in return is, “I have found peace in loving you. I could even face that house with you.” (00:15:27,802 – 00:15:34,142).

The next scene in the movie shows them already married and entering the house in London. Gregory notices Paula slipping her hand through a broken glass in the door, so he touches her and cautions her to be careful, expressing his concern that she might accidentally cut herself on the glass. The care here comes down to, “I don’t want you to be hurt, so it draws my attention to the moment when you are nearing a danger, even a minor one.” This scene demonstrates the minimal effort required to express care, yet it also illustrates how this fundamental aspect of any close relationship can serve as fertile ground for manipulation.

After this exchange, Paula notes that they will now be living a new and better life together in the house. She says, “We’ll have people here and parties again.” (00:21:31,165 – 00:21:33,501), and he suddenly becomes silent, in contrast to his previous state of constant chatter. His change of behavior is so radical and silently expressive that it is impossible not to notice that something is amiss. She correctly guesses that he does not like the idea of it.

So, she is immediately concerned and asks what’s wrong and he deflects by saying that he wants the honeymoon to go on longer. Which sounds legit, doesn’t it? He did not say anything, yet she understood his desires as she is, as well, tuned into him and returns the care, which is a rather normal process of building up emotional intimacy and understanding in a relationship.

Now that they are married, Gregory has full access to the house. When she finds a letter sent to her aunt two days before the aunt’s murder, Gregory changes his face again and rips the letter out of Paula’s arms. He immediately apologizes, but his behavior is quite startling. He says, “I didn’t mean to be so violent. It’s just that I am upset for all these things are reminding you of her.” (00:23:15,353 – 00:23:30,618) Such an interesting sequence of events. She finds a letter that we later learn was written by him under a different name; it is a letter directly connecting him to the murder; he reacts emotionally to it; he acknowledges it. However, he then shifts the explanation for his feelings back to the relationship that connects them and excludes any other reasoning. Thus, the established proximity is instrumental to the effectiveness of his lies and manipulations, as he can reference their closeness to explain his emotional states. Another aspect of this explanation of his feelings is citing circumstances that are outside of his control and presenting himself as a person drawn into something and not as an agent within the situation. He is angry about the letter because of his love for Paula; it is not

he as a person who is the source of his own feelings, but the feelings provoked by Paula to which he as an agent reacts.

In the next scene, Gregory is hiring a new housemaid, and he explicitly tells her that any questions she might have should go through him and never the mistress; she should never be bothered. He literally says, “I don’t want you to bother your mistress about anything... Ever. If you have any questions, just come to me... Your mistress is inclined to be rather highly strung.” (00:25:04,795 – 00:25:29,987)

Later, we learn that their honeymoon lasted for 3 months, and Paula spent all of them in isolation, with her only company being Gregory, and we understand that she rarely encountered the staff as they were explicitly told to avoid her. Now, it is their first time leaving the house. He gives her a brooch that is supposed to be his family heirloom. He shows the depth of his love for her by giving her an object that is precious to him. She appreciates the gift from her husband.

Very naturally. She tries to put it on. He tells her, “I’m afraid the pin is not very strong. I’ll have it mended. You better not wear it until I have. You might lose it” (00:27:38,449 – 00:27:47,458). So far, the reasoning behind these sentences is sound: the brooch’s weak needle increases the likelihood of it falling and causing her to lose it. However, he then adds a small sentence: “You know, you are inclined to lose things, Paula.” (00:27:47,625 – 00:27:49,585). Thus, he begins with something endearing, expresses his care for her, and then declares that although she has a flaw in her character, it’s okay because he will take care of it. No need to even think about it. Then he does a rather strange thing. He says, “I’ll put it in your bag for safekeeping.” (00:27:53,923 – 00:27:56,717). Because his actions carry such an air of confidence, Paula does not question them, which is an understandable behavior in a marital relationship where one trusts the other and does not have the habit of explicitly questioning their motives, especially when it comes to minuscule actions. I have a question: why not just leave the bloody brooch at home? If you don’t want to lose something, the soundest decision is to not take something out of the house that is secure and is not at risk of being bombed, as this is London in a time when there were no wars. Of course, this is Gregory’s design, the significance of which we learn only later.

Jealousy

During their time outside of the house, they encounter a stranger who greets Paula because he mistook her for her aunt, and Gregory launches a proper inquiry into the reason why in the situation when a stranger greeted Paula she smiled at him. For her, it was an act of politeness, but he addressed it with the air of a grievous offense. In the conversation that followed, Gregory sank even deeper into his manipulative behavior. Ironically, they selected an exhibition featuring devices for torture and execution for their excursion. This scene draws an interesting parallel between what they see during the exhibition and what Gregory does to Paula. The difference is, however, that torture and execution are very open forms of violence: the victim knows exactly what is going to happen in the end, while Gregory's behavior mimics that of a caring husband to disguise the torture he is imposing on her. She, thus, hasn't yet come to the realization of what is happening to her. Going back to their dialogue about the man:

Paula: I have no idea who he is, Gregory. He seemed to know me, and...
Gregory: Do you usually bow to people you don't know?
Paula: No. I supposed I'd met him somewhere. Gregory: Are you telling me the truth?
Paula: Of course. Why should I lie? I don't know who he is. Gregory: Yet you smiled at him. Why?
Paula: I tell you, I wasn't thinking. I don't know why I did it. Gregory: Like the other things.
Paula: What other things?
Gregory: Oh, nothing. Only, I've been noticing, Paula, that...You've been forgetful lately.
Paula: Forgetful?
Gregory: Well, losing things and...Oh, now, don't look so worried, Paula. It's nothing. You get tired, and...
Paula: Yes. That's probably what it is. I get tired. I'm tired now. Can't we go home? Gregory: Oh, no. We still have the crown jewels to see. They're in that building over there.
Paula: How do you know? Gregory: What did you say?
Paula: I said, how do you know where they are? You haven't been here before. Gregory: The guide told us inside. Are you becoming suspicious as well as absent-minded, Paula?
Paula: No, of course not, Gregory. (00:30:37,044 – 00:31:41,567)

During this exchange, which lasted only more than a minute, several things happened:

1. Gregory expresses jealousy towards another man, treating a rather unimportant occurrence as something significant, riling Paula up, and putting in question a behavior that is considered common courtesy: if someone smiles at you, you smile back.
2. He uses her confusion as a pretext for a bigger conversation about Paula's behavior. Noticeably, Gregory positions himself as an expert on Paula's tendencies. The problem is that he has the grounds for such a position (although with some moral limitations, but Gregory is definitely not the one to care about such mundane things as moral limitations). He is her husband: he is with her at most times of the day and is an observer of her behavior more than other people are. She still has doubts about it, but they will be resolved soon.
3. His manipulation is again grounded in his recognition of Paula's emotions. He tells her not to worry when she has a concerned look on her face. The issue, of course, is that he acknowledges only a part of the truth – he brought her to a state of worry: her husband tells her that she is becoming forgetful, and she more likely believes him than not, but then he underscores only her reaction to his words and omits his role in it.
4. He goes further and adds another ascription – you are tired. By this point of their conversation, Paula is confused, as her own thoughts are conflicting with the reality that her husband is presenting to her. She does not consider herself a forgetful person, yet she is told she is. Profound confusion, in my personal experience, is exhausting. So now she is feeling tired, and, right on cue, Gregory tells her she is. His words align with her inner experience, yet Gregory conveniently omits his role in the creation of this reality.
5. Now that Paula is actually tired and wants to go home, Gregory decides to win a power play and asks her to stay a bit longer, implicitly demonstrating that his desires are important enough to override her own well-being in the moment. He makes a mistake and shows that he knows where the other part of the exhibition is, although he is not supposed to know as it is his first time being here. He uses this accidental slip in his facade to his own advantage. He bluntly lies that the guide has mentioned it, but Paula was with him the whole time and does not remember the guide saying this, but, in the context of the suspicion of her own forget-

fulness creeping at her, she chooses to believe Gregory because what he is saying is logically plausible: they were just on a tour; there was a guide who was describing the facilities of the building they were visiting; it is only natural that he would mention where other parts of the exhibition were.

Coincidentally, the person who greeted Paula was a detective who was acquainted with her aunt a long time ago, when he was a child or adolescent. It is interesting that the only thing that the detective has to say in the matter is that he has a feeling that something peculiar is going on. We could theorize that, perhaps, we do sense that something is wrong when a manipulation occurs, but for a variety of reasons, grasping it with our minds at the moment of its occurrence is difficult, and only intuition and the body are telling us that something is wrong. I draw this special attention because on most of the occasions that I was being manipulated, I had this strange feeling - this is not okay, but the feeling was so bleak at the moment that I chose not to pay attention to it. Only when external sources of information, such as friends and literature, pointed it out and shared what it was like for them and in what context it occurred, did I start listening to it more carefully and drawing my own conclusions. I write this not to highlight my personal necessity for external validation of internal feelings for them to acquire shape, but to underscore the pattern related to gaslighting specifically: the dissonance caused by gaslighting is so subtle yet so invasive that the mind on its own fails to nail it down.

The Loss of the Brooch and Appearance of Flickering Gas Light

When they come home, Gregory suggests that Paula should give him the brooch so he can have it repaired. Paula opens her purse and looks for the brooch. Her face changes. Gregory says, “What’s the matter? Anything wrong?” (00:33:50,779 – 00:33:53,365). Drum roll, please. The brooch is not there. It’s gone. Now, any doubts Paula had about her forgetfulness begin to fade as she clearly remembers placing the brooch into her purse. Of course, Gregory sings his song: “Oh, Paula, didn’t I tell you? How did you come to lose it?” (00:34:29,818 – 00:34:35,115). I want to pay attention to such a minor detail as the grammatical voice Gregory uses here – active and not passive. He says, “How did you come to lose it” instead of “How could it get lost”. Such a minor subtlety, but even on a grammatical level, Paula is put

at the center of accidents without any mention of Gregory himself. Plausibility again comes into play. Paula is agitated and says, “I don’t remember opening my bag. Well, I suppose I must have... But suddenly I am beginning not to trust my memory at all.” (00:34:55,177 – 00:35:12,486) Interestingly enough, Gregory attempts to play it down by saying, “Oh, Paula. I tell you, you’re just tired, that’s all. It doesn’t mean anything.” (00:35:12,653 – 00:35:20,119). The thing about the human brain is that it requires narratives that help us anticipate the reality we are facing and fill in the gaps. Things must make sense. Thus, when something fits the narrative, we tend to believe it, and gaslighting works, among other reasons, because of that cognitive feature.

At this point, gas light explicitly enters the narrative, and we witness the conception of the term. Nancy, the maid, enters the room, and Paula asks her whether Nancy turned up the gas in the other room. Nancy is confused and says, “Turn it up? No. Why?” (00:36:03,078 – 00:36:04,872). Paula saw the gas light go down in her room, which usually happens when the gas is turned up somewhere else in the house. Since Gregory was supposedly out of the house at that time, the only logical conclusion that would fit the narrative is that the maid turned it up somewhere in the house, yet the maid insists it wasn’t her. This gap in understanding leaves Paula even more unsettled, which is also expressed in her response, “I thought it went down in here as if you had [turned it up somewhere else].” (00:36:05,038 – 00:36:08,250). She says, “I thought” instead of just saying more affirmatively, “It went down.” Paula seeks an explanation: “Well, perhaps Elizabeth lit another jet in the kitchen.” (00:36:13,839 – 00:36:16,425). However, Nancy says that Elizabeth, the cook, had been in bed for some time already. When Nancy leaves, Paula starts hearing footsteps above her – in the attic that is sealed and is supposed to be completely empty.

In the meantime, the detective couldn’t let go of his unease about seeing Paula. Because he is not directly interacting with Gregory, there is no one to fill in the gaps in the narrative with lies, so he starts investigating the situation from an outsider’s perspective. Even though his boss is discouraging him, the detective can’t let it go. He asks one of the patrol officers to switch locations to the street where Paula and Gregory’s house is located. We, as viewers, do not learn anything beyond that for the time being.