Psychoanalysis and cyberspace

Shifting frames and floating bodies

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Psychoanalysis has undergone continuous changes both in theory and practice since the very beginning. This is true for what concerns its founder's methods and procedures, but also for the following contributions given by his most influential successors.

We feel it's important to underline this characteristic in order to stress how 'shifting frames' and 'floating bodies' were always a part of psychoanalytical clinic and research. In fact, we could say they are true trademarks of this profession which can only be understood by approaching our work according to Freud's own teachings, that is by having the courage to look at things, including our failures, and to 'blind ourselves' in order to be able to see deep inside the darkest corners (Freud, 1992). To do this, even within the confines of this brief contribution of ours, we ourselves need to recover some theoretical references to guide us along the way we're undertaking. Let's start by giving a closer look at the distinction made by the analysts of the Association Psychoanalitique de France regarding the two terms of psychoanalytic 'doctrine' and 'theory'.

> For 'doctrine' we mean the whole set of radical experiences, and elaborations thereof, that we all need to go through to become and to be called psychoanalysts … This includes, therefore, the unconscious experience … the possibility of treading along ancient paths again, but also the experience of the limits opposing this. Not just our own resistances, but also those limitations that can typically be perceived with matters such as those tied to bisexuality; to the adventures we encounter from the moment object relationships are born, to the feeling of seduction (active and passive) and of trauma, up to their culmination into the Oedipal issue and into its resolution … Theory

instead, is at the opposite end, it is the field where the discussion takes place and includes all possible theoretical constructs. As much as doctrine – after the initial radical separation between who has the 'knowledge' and who doesn't – unites those who share the experience, so does theory divide, separate, complicate, ultimately identify.

(Semi, 1988, pp. 476–477, author's translation)

These clarifications allow us to better evaluate without prejudice what is happening in the current psychoanalytical reality. Much has already been said and written on how certain rules characterizing the patient–analyst encounter have changed during the years, but we feel that there is more. We believe another important distinction must be addressed and that is what it means to stay true to a certain cultural legacy. As in the Parable of the Talents, one may think that burying the Talents is the right thing to do to faithfully preserve what was consigned to him, and another will instead believe that using the Talents is the right way, with all the related risks that may come with either hypothesis. As for us, we believe, and in this we are comforted by the parable's moral, that the right way to be faithful lies within the variable of 'creativity' and that this variable should be investigated and pursued. What we mean by this is trying to be true to a kind of implicit intentionality present in Freud, the intentionality to explore and study, with every available tool, the comprehension of the deepest aspects of human nature. This applies to the psychoanalytic frame as well with all the new variations brought upon it by today's cultural changes especially in the communications field. You can think that being 'faithful' to the frame means freezing it, or you can believe that these variations are the expression of an initial creative urge and that, save for that share of experiences that we defined as 'doctrine', we can embrace them with the same open mind and dialogue that any theory deserves. We find this to be useful in considering other variables of the analytic relationship as well. For example it gives us a way to observe what has been called since the beginning of the history of psychoanalysis the 'setting'. As Di Chiara (1971, p. 49) observes, "the setting is what allows the patient to actualize a range of experiences related to his/her unconscious, childhood, personal conflicts, and where actualizing certain experiences means experiencing transference".

This definition helps us understand that the setting is not defined (only) by other, just as important, moments of the therapeutic relationship such as: preliminary meetings, the analytic contract (in all its possible

variations), schedule and frequency of sessions and puts the setting much closer to the psychoanalytic process itself; the setting thus becomes a valid environment in which this process can take place. Following this way of thinking, the above-mentioned concept can also be compared to what Bion defines as 'Container–Contained Interaction' (Bion, 1959). Now the setting becomes the 'container' in which, through the analytic relationship, the process can evolve. Looking at Bion's concept side by side with that of setting, according to Di Chiara's (1971) definition of the latter, the actual architectural location where it takes place is not very relevant anymore. This opens to the possibility that even methods apparently very distant from the relationship of patient–therapist, like those that make use of technological means of communication such as smartphones, texting, chat and video chat, become more acceptable or at least are perceived as representative of a reality within the context of the analytic relationship. This applies not only to the new communications techniques, but also to the possibility of using clinical material deriving from these as an integral part of the analytic work. Today, in fact, it is not uncommon for patients to show us things like images or text messages during a session. Clearly we realize the differences and the risk of falling into some form of dangerous eclecticism, but we also know that in our profession, something Freud taught us from the very start, the object of the research is one and the same with the tool used for such research. Therefore, if on one hand we believe in the importance of being faithful to a certain method of analytic work, on the other we must consider how our 'container' must necessarily adapt to the profound cultural changes that are taking place today.

The fact is, we're going through a moment of transition that I would describe as a real anthropologic mutation, in which not only our thoughts or our way of thinking are apparently being transformed, perhaps even our 'neuronal' system is being rewired. I believe that the subject of how 'inner' and 'external' scenarios in psychoanalysis are changing cannot be approached without first examining in which way or ways we actually access knowledge and information.

We are in a period of changes so radical that it reminds us of another moment of profound transformation of the ancient past, described by Plato in his *Phaedrus* when he speaks about the passage from oral communication to writing. In Plato's *Phaedrus* (274d–275c) we find the Egyptian King Thamus worried about the change that is being presented to him and it's easy to draw a parallel with our current concerns about the use of new

and different media. When the inventor of writing claims to the king that this will soon become a great aid for individuals and society alike, the sovereign expresses words of caution on the matter, as recalled here in an interesting interview by Stefano Moriggi:

> when writing will be spread among the population, our way of remembering will not be the same as before: instead of recalling/ retrieving memories from the inside, we will do it from the outside … for Moriggi this observation is not as simple as it appears, especially considering how important memory dynamics are in the processing of concepts, and not only in the realm of Platonic Gnoseology. Externalizing knowledge, therefore, means changing our way of thinking forever, and our way of living and interacting with others in space and time.
>
> <div align="right">(Moriggi, 2014, p. 184)</div>

But isn't this externalization process exactly what characterizes on a massive scale today's methods of acquiring and sharing knowledge through the so-called new technologies? We believe that our considerations may contribute to the debate on the problem of 'cyberspace'. We also feel that this kind of procedure/approach will help us avoid simplistic enthusiasm and/or hasty judgments and condemnations. For us the subject of memory and the different ways of using it are very fascinating, particularly from a psychoanalytical viewpoint. Regarding this aspect, we find it useful to mention a basic method used in analysis, commonly known as the 'rule' of free association. This is an actual technique that uses memory in a specific way. In this case we are talking about the associative memory, which, as opposed to the 'written' trace/code follows a fabric of links/threads that are an inherent part of the analysand's psychic apparatus and that intertwine with those of the analyst in the here and now of the analytic session. It is a form of knowledge that derives from within and is brought out through the association technique. But things aren't always as simple as they appear, that's why Plato, in his reflections on the 'new technology' of his time, introduces the suggestive term '*pharmakon*'. We know how this term paradoxically contains the two opposite and contrasting meanings of 'remedy/cure' and at the same time 'poison'. Ambiguous meanings that bring us back to our days in which it is difficult to live this intense moment of transition without feeling the need to remain

kind of suspended above the complexity of what we try to embrace. The question now is: can psychoanalysis with its theoretical-experiential 'corpus'/body be of help with this (transition)?

Marzi writes:

> Virtuality, in all its different meanings, revamps and complicates certain controversial themes of the psychoanalytic world of these last decades. The fact that it's not an actual space in a physical and material sense, which cannot be seen or concretely perceived in any way and is therefore impossible for humans to detect with any of their physiological senses, makes the virtual space strikingly similar to the Kant-Bion concept for which it is impossible to know the thing in itself, meaning that it is something that can be conceived but not perceived.
>
> (Marzi, 2013, p. 164)

Can the analytic instrument, which inevitably also inhabits our 'changing world', become a critical observer of the changes it is part of itself? We believe this challenge can be accepted. With this, we don't mean to over simplify the possibility, but rather, we wish to maintain ourselves within that margin of paradox, ambiguity and indefiniteness that always characterizes the work with the unconscious.

What's certain is that we're going through an irreversible process and, as with the passage from speech to writing in the past, today, our means of learning and communicating will have to necessarily deal with the new tools that come with it. As Moriggi says quoting Heidegger:

> the way we 'inhabit the world', that is, how we relate to others and how we perceive our own body in space and time, as well as our 'body' of knowledge and learning, is necessarily dependent on the equipment with which we inter-act and connect every day.
>
> (Moriggi, 2014, p. 197)

In these last observations, we are indirectly introduced to the concept of '*corpus*', or body, in its broader meaning. A body can be 'theoretical', 'technological', 'experiential', of 'text' and the body finds itself at center stage in all its possible diverse expressions. As psychoanalysts, we're well aware of the importance of this concept from the very beginning of

psychoanalysis. But what (exactly) is this body that we're dealing with? We're not talking about the anatomical-biological body, but rather a body clad with pulsions, a 'driving body' where the word 'Trieb' is used to describe that leap from the 'body' to 'mind-body'. The leap that made Freud (1937) describe that irreducible aspect he calls 'biological bedrock', '*Gewachsener Fels*'. Where, in between the paradox of these two terms, one belonging to the organic world and the other to the inorganic, we find once again, something set on the border between a dialectical proposal and a state of impossibility. Is all this somehow related to the analytic request? Is this, in a way, the actual limit of analysis and even more so in today's context? Obviously these questions cannot but remain open-ended and, precisely because they are undetermined, they become an integral part of that thought apparatus that can help us better comprehend what is happening around us in general and in our analytic work in particular.

By this process, I mean the establishment of a differentiated psychic space. Indeed I underline that a sort of 'caesura' or 'limit' comes to be between what we could call the intra-psychic and the inter-subjective. Such a limit becomes a privileged place for processing, thus, a limit that has its own 'thickness' within the boundary of the analytic work. It becomes a limit and a container at the same time, because it has a space inside that is established in the patient–analyst dyad and it finds in the setting, in particular meant as the analyst's internal setting, the champion of the process itself. The concept of internal setting becomes particularly important when talking about virtual reality and new technologies. With this, I don't mean to diminish the value of the acquired set of rules that constitutes the physical framework of the setting as we know it now, but only to underline how we have to confront ourselves with a changing reality and with a process of progressive 'dematerialization' of relationships. But exactly how is all this evolving? And how can we identify the limits/boundaries of it all? We know that knowledge has become more and more fragmentized, both in regard to the information and to the means to retrieve it. Through cyberspace we can access an incredible variety of information, on any subject, and we can interrupt the flow rapidly shifting at any moment, from web pages to videos and all sorts of social networks. So the question now is, is this procedure changing our analytic scenario as well and if so, in which way or ways? The world that we are getting a glimpse of and seeing in our analysis rooms today is spinning fast. Everything is accelerated and, as we

will further examine, the 'objects' that have become part of our session are becoming more and more tangible.

We already mentioned, for instance, the intrusion of technological objects (patients may occasionally take out their phone to show us a text or something or they'll have background sounds of ringtones and beeps and blinking lights coming from their devices) creates a constant over-stimulation of the senses that doesn't necessarily help symbolization, in fact, it often inhibits it. This should definitely make us reflect on how 'connection' is not the same thing as 'contact', and of how, as analysts, it is fundamental to maintain our listening ability integrated within the space and time of the session.

As Bjòrklind writes:

> The idea of the ego as being first and foremost a bodily ego (Freud, 1923), a theory of the emergence of the mind as being a necessary consequence of our existing within in a body, could be described as the main foundation for psychoanalysis as a whole. How we represent, fantasize, and structure our experience of living from within a body, will largely determine the workings of our inner lives, as well as our existence in external reality.
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> (Bjòrklind, 2014, p. 5)

And furthermore:

> A fundamental question for our discussion today, is whether these new technologies can be thought of as interfering with and possibly changing the structural relation between the human body and the human mind, and this in a qualitatively different way than all earlier tools. If we conclude that all psychoanalytic discourse is deeply rooted in this relation between body and mind, then the main issue is whether recent technological development is changing the world and the human mind in such a way that psychoanalysis is losing its relevance. Or less polemically, how can psychoanalysis evolve to still be of relevance to future generations.
>
> (Bjòrklind, 2014, p. 5)

But the 'web' can also become an observation point through which to observe a situation and rethink it through new, different filters. After all,

as psychoanalysts we are used to working with a 'psychic reality' brought to us by our patients that we know can hardly ever be reduced to or match with the objective reality.

In fact, we know from the history of psychoanalysis, how provocatively important and bemusing Freud's statement was, when he defined the 'ego' as "not being master in his own home" and what a true anthropologic revolution this was as a consequence of the shifting of 'vertex' it brought about.

The psychoanalytic thought is permeated from the (very) start by an 'estranging/-unsettling' function ('*Unheimliche*'!). Even further attempts to 'map' mental processes, through the 'first and second topics', left us somewhere difficult to locate/in an undefined location. This fundamental aspect of the psychoanalytic thought can be further radicalized within a theoretic model that expects "for the unconscious to always come to the surface in conversation as well as behavior. Conscious and unconscious experiences are constantly tossing and turning one inside the other" (Civitarese, 2013, p. 147).

And even today, when cell phones, GPS and an internet connection allow us to know our exact position at any given moment, where we are located in the world, and though we can access a myriad of information, we continue to engage in matters such as the different types of memory and/or different forms of reality. These subjects inevitably bring about questions on concepts such as 'internal reality', 'psychic reality', 'external reality', 'Reality' with a capital 'R', as in Bion's 'O', 'imaginary reality' and consequently lead us to addressing the so called 'virtual reality' as another polysemous aspect of reality. In fact, this is located an intermediate area, a space in between reality and fantasy, which results in a reduced transitional area, that also becomes itself an actual 'transitional cyberspace' that allows us to confront ourselves with several paradoxes and possibilities.

In agreement with Antinucci (2013) we see "the creative virtual space as an oneiric space", stressing Khan's concept (1972 [1974] and following elaborations) that consists in an application of the scribble technique used by Winnicott (1953) in pediatric consultations. "Khan suggests important distinctions between the capacity to dream, the oneiric process and the space in which the dream takes place, as a structured place of the ego's functions capable of accessing and using symbolic discourse" (Antinucci, 2013, p. 142).

This distinction makes the 'virtual space' even more problematic by emphasizing the possibility of evolutionary aspects but also defensive ones within it. Evolutionary aspects will be those that bring this space closer to the transitional space with consequent transformative effects; while defensive aspects will be those in which "this contracted/limited space brings to avoiding the recognition of oneself and the other" (Antinucci, 2013, p. 142).

Another characteristic of cyberspace is the over-accumulation of data. The overload of information is so overflowing that we are literally bombarded by it, making our capability to discern much more difficult. We often hear that: "the web is always on, and it's always there even when we're not". Day and night, twenty-four/seven, the internet is being accessed and all sorts of data and information gets uploaded and down-loaded from the web. If on one hand this phenomenon is very exciting, as it awakens in us a certain feeling of omnipotence, on the other, the risk is that it is saturating the interlocutory and potentially transformative impulse that is implicit in the frustration we experience when we have to wait for satisfaction.

If I may borrow a quote from Blanchot, previously used by Bion as well, "La réponse est le malheur de la question" (the answer is the question's sickness). What Bion draws from Blanchot is a challenging invitation that becomes harder and harder to meet. We live in a time that allows us to get answers to our queries in real-time (virtually!), with search engines, online encyclopedias and other sources at our full disposal competing to make us wait the least time possible for an answer – digital logic characterized by a great big indistinct mass of answers.

This is why, when dealing with the flow of information coming from the web, we need to approach it with the same regard that Freud recommends when talking about Michelangelo's work, suggesting to proceed "not by putting, but rather by taking away/chipping off". It's a form of knowledge that isn't based on adding more and more elements to the construction, but rather on taking parts off, in order to let the most incredibly diverse, unpredictable shapes and forms emerge. But this brings about another dilemma. Who is the creator? Who creates whom? Here we are indeed closely related to the analytic work. Does this mean that we are seeing the birth of a pervasive form of implicit memory, which totally transcends us and whose limits are increasingly fleeting? Are we experiencing a new evolutionary phase that makes us question the notion of subject itself.

Psychoanalysis has always followed and been involved in the historical, cultural and social relationships of its time and now it inevitably questions itself, using everything in its power and all the possible tools available, in the attempt to 'photograph' these passages.

On this subject a good example of such a passage is what happened with the introduction of the analytical technique with children. At the time, the concept of setting had to undergo an important transformation and found a valid solution in the use of 'play'. About this, we like to think of play, not just for its playfulness and associative components, but also as an actual potential 'space in between things' ('a kind of wiggle space' is also one of the meanings of '*gioco*', play in Italian).

And it seems even more relevant to put concepts such as cyberspace at use in our work with adolescents, not only because they represent the actual physical passage and consequently a link between generations as well, but also because: "Adolescents give analysts the chance to see how overwhelming and 'ungraspable' changes are in ways of thinking, of representing inner and external reality … (highlighting) the discontent of contemporary culture" (Bonaminio, 2013, p. 100).

The environment is changing all around us and it's becoming hard to distinguish how this affects the new network of relationships. In fact, things become even more complex when taking into consideration concepts such as Winnicott's 'maternal holding' and Bion's '*reverie*', and more specifically when the latter introduces the theorization of the 'alpha function'.

Ogden reminds us that:

> for Bion, the 'alpha function' (a formerly unknown and perhaps unknowable, new set of mental functions) transforms raw 'sensory impressions tied to the emotional experience' into alpha elements that can be connected (together) to form affect-laden dream-thoughts. A dream-thought presents an emotional problem that the individual needs to cope with (Bion, 1962; Meltzer, 1983), thus providing the stimulus/impetus for the development of the capacity to dream (which is synonymous with the unconscious thinking) … Without an alpha function (either one's own or that provided by another person), an individual/one cannot dream and therefore cannot make use of (do unconscious psychological work with) one's lived emotional experience, past and present. Consequently, a

person unable to dream is trapped in an unchanging and endless world of what is.

(Ogden, 2009, p. 16)

But fantasies and dreams are also part of (the) virtual reality and ultimately part of that potential space which allows for:

> virtual reality and psychoanalysis to share, metaphorically speaking, the presence within these two dimensions, not of real, definitive and 'final' (or original) objects, that could escape perception and acquisition on behalf of the subject, even if they are both present, but rather those 'narrative derivatives' that theoreticians in the analytic field, following in Bion's and others' steps, have always considered a fundamental/basic presence within the analyst-patient intersubjectivity.
>
> (Marzi, 2013, p. 163)

In the 'virtual' (realm) one can configure infinite possibilities that can have an endless number of representations within the mental space, from highly evolved ones, down to the collapse or the psychopathologic implosion of the 'concrete thought' consequent to the failure of the alpha function.

Ferro says, drawing upon Bion's thought, that the mental (realm):

> derives from the transformation of sensory experiences into alpha elements, in the newborn through the passage of this sensory experience through the mother's alpha function, and then later through the passage of the sensory experience through one's own alpha function, once this has been introjected and is sufficiently functioning.
>
> (Ferro, 2009, p. 9)

First of all, this means that, in order to acquire this function, the passage through another person's mind and the subsequent introjection of the thinking capacity are both necessary. Acknowledging and recognizing the presence of the Other, both in the transitive and intransitive forms, come to be essential experiences.

But how is this changing today and which and how many minds are we talking about?

Civitarese, in his review of the movie *Nightmare Detective* (2006), tells us:

the cyborg is imagined as a being which is self-reproducing and there-fore has no need for the other; it is not born and does not die. Cyborgs therefore do not dream, because to dream – that is, to construct the dream space – it takes two. For this reason, the cyborg becomes a modern symbol of the incapacity to dream, of the non-living areas of the mind and of the falseness of existence.

(Civitarese, 2010, pp. 1012–1013)

We're not dealing with a three-dimensional space here anymore, since the referring coordinates have been shattered and the relationship with the external reality could turn into something dramatically immaterial. But, at the same time, we may ask ourselves if all this could, also, provide, in the same way, endless possibilities of ever-newer forms of symbolization.

Marzi says:

we do not know if the psychic space is actually disappearing, as Kristeva sustained (1993); (but) … we can think of the virtual space, immense and undefined, as something that can be imagined or used as a form of 'acting' by subjects who, not having the possibility to use their own interior mental space, may attempt (playing the card of) exporting to the outside, into virtual reality or simply cyberspace, in order to use it as an extroflexion of oneself and from oneself, but also as an attempt, (to see if it is possible) to try and see one's psychic space in this way, to touch it with one's hand, opening up to possibly disastrous results, or, perhaps embryonically evolutionary/develop-mental ones.

(Marzi, 2013, p. 169)

In conclusion, we feel that as psychoanalysts it is fundamental for us to maintain our critical function. A function that can help define, or at least attempt to do so, what is happening in today's society. Indeed, we believe that in the analytical room, it's not only the complex emotional history of the patient that is actualized, but it's also a good representation of the complexity of the human mind itself and of how this works in general. This last assertion must not deceive however into thinking that the repre-sentation is the same as the object of the representation, but it can be useful as a sort of mapping system of the ongoing changes, including the ones related to the risks that the use of the new technologies entails. Risks

such as the loss of a 'physical' individual encounter, the confusion between internal and external worlds, the addicted relationship with 'separation' that has been eliminated by 'constant connection' etc. However, we cannot help considering all the opportunities that these new 'worlds' offer as well, and also how they are impossible to stop anyway. The best we can do is try to 'contain' them and containing also means exploring and embracing them as any other experience.

We realize that this is only the beginning of a process in which we human beings are deeply immersed and that, at the same time, it is a process that has always belonged to us. Once again we find ourselves proceeding by sight like Odysseus sailing in between Scylla and Charybdis and if, on the one hand, we cannot avoid falling victims of such seductive techniques offering easy cognitive shortcuts, on the other, we must always be aware of how important they are, especially considering their pervasiveness. This must awake our sense of responsibility (Caldironi, 2014), and as Bion (1991, p. ix) says, "we have also to consider the urgency of this commitment and that there are changes which can be picked up only by those who can effort what is needed".

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