

## **Technological transformation and the Zeitgeist: a critical reflection of the implications for psychoanalysis**

The inspiration for this critical reflection was provided by the dialectical game between the pair of opposites represented by the terms “continuity” and “transformation” within analytical practice, and their fortunes as influenced by the “spirit of the age”.

I will enter into the merits of the question by means of two personal anecdotes. In the first, which dates back to the beginning of my professional activity as analyst, a patient who had begun her course of therapy several months earlier, on the occasion of a break in the sessions due to the Christmas festivities, sent me a letter with some considerations of a personal nature on our professional relationship. It was a letter in which she revealed, with great embarrassment, the presence of an eroticised transference which had until that moment been carefully scotomised from the relationship in the strictest sense, or rather, from what was taking place within the setting. I was particularly struck by the medium chosen for the message, even though the historical propensity for epistolary correspondence with patients by Freud and Jung was well-known to me, not only as I habitually deal with every form of communication impacting on the two participants in the context of the analytical process, but also because this was the first time that I had received material connected with the analytical process outside the “dedicated space”. Therefore, when the therapy sessions resumed, much time was dedicated to the letter, and what had been split was gradually integrated.

Technically, or rather, to be more accurate, orthodoxly speaking, sending a letter to one’s analyst would be considered to represent a case of acting-out, a violation of the analytical boundaries, an expulsion of non-analysed material from the relational pattern of the therapy. As the psychoanalyst Lingiardi mentions in an article published in 2008 by the International Journal of Psychoanalysis, “Clinical psychoanalysis has always seen acting as a black-sheep kind of behaviour, signalling the presence of strong resistances, an absence of mental processing and an incapacity for symbolization” (Lingiardi, 2008, p.112).

The second episode took place a few years later. With the advent of the mobile phone, I began to receive text messages and emails from various patients. Sometimes it was a question of simple requests to change appointment times, but often specific issues were raised, even ones which were completely unprecedented for the analytical dyad: comments or addenda to the previous session, criticisms, frames of mind being communicated, reassurance sought. Having become aware of this new behaviour, I decided to bring the matter up at the monthly meeting of the Association to which I belong, with a view to exchanging opinions with my colleagues. However, an elderly analyst told me rather superciliously that, to resolve the problem, it was merely a matter of not giving one's mobile phone number to patients. Of course, I thought, slightly irritated, by avoiding the use of cars, there would no longer be road accidents (which involved cars) and by closing down factories there would be less pollution. Or one could imitate Manzoni's erudite character Don Ferrante, "*who impeccably demonstrated that contagion with plague, which could be neither substance nor mishap, did not exist; accordingly, he took no precaution, became ill and died*" (Romano, 2006, p.226).

Ignoring the problem did not seem to me to be the right solution.

The rapid expansion of digital technologies on a global scale also concerns, therefore, the intimate and private space of the analyst/patient relationship, making any debate of such transformation imperative.

The media historian Ortoleva reminds us that, as McLuhan had prophetically foreseen, "*(...) the media deliver, transmit and together transform. And they transform everything they touch: the message (...) but also human realities, whether individual or collective. They translate not merely this or that language, but experience as such*" (Ortoleva, 2011, p.9).

Psychotherapy is no exception to this rule.

Let us now take a step backwards. Given that digital technology and clinical practice are now in contact – and while it is not my intention to present again in a psychoanalytical key the celebrated "*Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*", which saw the former affirm the need to refer exclusively to the wisdom of the Ancients and the latter dedicated to emancipating themselves from it by embracing modernity – I

consider it essential to take a clear position and ask myself as to the source of a certain conservative and rather snobbish attitude on the part of various Jungian psychoanalyst colleagues towards the cultural products of the time; the purpose of such a choice lies in the desire to contrast, and therefore compensate for, insidious endogamic tendencies, commonplace for that matter in many psychoanalytical associations, bearing in mind also the attention dedicated to writings and material of historic interest. Take, for example, the prestigious opening speech of a philological nature on the *Aurora consurgens* manuscript given at the 2013 IAAP Congress in Copenhagen by the professor of medieval studies Prof. Haaning, hailed as a “gift” by the chairman, the opening speech of the last JAP International Conference by Giovanni Sorge on the *Jung Berlin Seminar* or the approval shown in our associations to new projects referring again to material of undeniable historiographical interest, but of limited relevance in terms of clinical innovation and topicality. I can mention, for example, a new Italian language edition of the seminar held by Jung in 1943 concerning Opicino De Canistris, currently being prepared for publication.

Do Freud and Jung reveal an equally belittling attitude towards the *Zeitgeist* and the technological-cultural output of their day?

In the case of the former, since his interests lay in the mind, the workings of the unconscious and the treatment of psychic suffering, it is difficult to find direct declarations as to his stance regarding the question of the cultural products of the day and the few references known are depreciatory. In “Civilisation and its Discontents” (1930), for example, Freud expressed his conviction that the culture of his time imposed limitations on the life of the individual as far as sex life and the aggression drive were concerned. The consequence of the individual-drive and civilisation-constriction relationship can only lead to unhappiness and therefore suffering, which derives from the internalisation and impositions of civilisation itself.

Furthermore, the historian of psychoanalysis Roudinesco (1994) reminds us how Freud did not like to read the works of his contemporary philosophers, preferring to produce new concepts in support of the nascent theorisations which would revolutionise twentieth century culture.

The same argument holds for the first President of the IPA. In fact,<sup>1</sup> apart from the endorsement given by Jung in “The Analysis of Dreams” (1928), in his dispute with Pirandello over the latter’s novel “*Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*” (1925), in which films and the cinema were credited with the ability to produce astonishing symbols in order to reveal the collective unconscious to his contemporaries by means of an injection of new life into ancient myths, there emerges a position, critical to say the least, towards the spirit and cultural products of the time.

In a letter to Prof. Oftinger in 1957, Jung decried the noise of the “technological gadgetry” gramophone and radio, as well as the “blight of television”, since such devices abhor “all inwardness”, going so far as to describe them as deeply-rooted in their harmfulness, in that they impede the perception of inner instinctual feeling. He confirmed his critical view of technology in *Aion* (1950), writing of the diabolic development of science and technology. Jung also expressed his hostility towards science in the Red Book (2009): when explaining how science had paralysed the god Izdubar with its “awful magic”, he has the god himself ask how it is possible for Jung to be still alive “even though he drinks from this poison every day” (Jung, 2009, p.279).

Jung’s position on the “spirit of the age” would likely encourage a position of diffidence in relation to the *Zeitgeist*: For him, the spirit of the age “is a religion or, better, a creed which has absolutely no connection with reason, but whose significance lies in the unpleasant fact that it is taken as the absolute measure of all truth and is supposed always to have common sense on its side.” (Jung, 1931, para.652, p.340) “The spirit of the age cannot be fitted into the categories of human reason. It is more a bias, an emotional tendency that works upon weaker minds, through the unconscious, with an overwhelming force of suggestion that carries them along with it.” (Ibid. para. 653, p.340)

Among the first intellectuals to provide a possible aetiology of this attitude was the German philosopher Bloch, who defined Jung as he who

“(…) reduced the libido and its unconscious contents entirely to the primeval. According to him,

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks go to my colleague Laner Cassar for accurately pinpointing the passages in which Jung expresses his opinion on the technological products of his age.

exclusively phylogenetic primeval memories or primeval fantasies exist in the unconscious (...) designated 'archetypes'; and all wishful images also go back into this night, and only suggest prehistory. Jung even considers the night to be so colorful that consciousness pales beside it; as a spurner of the light, he devalues consciousness" (Bloch, 1959, p.67).

This is certainly a harsh comment; probably Bloch's ideological bias in his approach to Jung's works led to misinterpretations and hurried judgements. However, his critique does not appear to be completely groundless and has the merit of highlighting how, from a Jungian perspective, certainly the emphasis is more markedly on the "innate" rather than on the "learned", assisted by the contribution of Kant's theoretical framework which was well-known to Jung and by which he had been influenced. Furthermore, Jung held that individual consciousness was affected by presentification and massification and was therefore too far removed from the collective unconscious, his favoured area of investigation.

Bloch's contribution was also that of having pointed out the risk which derives from considering individuation and its powerful development over time, starting exclusively or prevalently from the archetypal framework, a reading which would relativise the cultural dimension of individuation itself: a similar clinical underestimation would be reached, in my opinion, by various colleagues who are reluctant to recognise such a complementary matrix.

More recently, similar arguments have been put forward authoritatively by Jean Knox (2003), who in her "Archetype, Attachment, Analysis", condensing the wide-ranging survey of studies referred to, states that complex symbolic meanings cannot be innate, but derive from a metaphoric extension and re-elaboration of the mental structures built up at a very early stage of development, and therefore learnt by the relational and cultural component.

From a different epistemological perspective, Trevi (1987) develops, although without arriving at Bloch's harshness of tone and provocation, a valid critique of this alleged lacuna in Jung's work and proposes a process of integration.

The emphasis in this case lies in the absence in Jung's theoretical elaboration of an adequate definition of "culture" and its nature, especially in the light of his metapsychology which makes anthropology one of its pivotal points.

As a basis for his own critical reflections, Trevi turns to the linguistic theories of Saussure and the well-known distinction within language between *langue* (that is to say, the amalgam of words, grammatical rules, semantic relations, etc.) and *parole* (concrete individual acts of speech).

*Langue* is in a continuous state of transformation, whereas the vitality which sustains it is the exclusive prerogative of *parole*. Saussure puts forward the view that performance is never carried out by the multitude, but always by the individual.

It is also true that *parole* could not express itself without a basis in the structural patterns of *langue* which, since it is culturally transmitted, create the pre-condition without which the individual and creative phenomenon of *parole* could not take place. Roughly speaking, we could therefore assert that the collective dimension of *langue* allows for the individual *parole*, and that this in turn, as an individual phenomenon, conditions and transforms *langue*, which belongs to the collective universe.

Trevi proposes using, therefore, the same Saussurian model, substituting the individual for *parole* and culture for *langue*: consequently, it follows that the individual is a product of culture but, in turn, is also a producer of it. The circularity of the model enables us to see the reciprocal relationship between individual and culture, and provides an unequivocally efficient image of the horizontal nature of individuation.

To quote Trevi:

*“If we want to embrace in all its heuristic fullness the concept of individuation, which constitutes the fulcrum of Jungian thought, we must give up the fictitious guarantee of the givenness of the individual and perceive the latter as newness and risk, openness and setback, the positive possibility of forming itself as the producer of culture and the negative possibility of remaining permanently the product of culture”* (Trevi, 1987, p. 48).

The individual, as already mentioned, is also a product of the culture to which she or he belongs, a culture which, in the hyperbole of Lyotard’s *“La Condition postmoderne”* (1979), has lost religious beliefs, political ideologies, utopias and ethics, while recognising a progression of knowledge which has become increasingly hybridised with Information Technology and increasingly less conditioned by the great metaphysical narratives. He states that “the miniaturization and commercialization of

machines is already changing the way in which learning is acquired, classified, made available and exploited. It is reasonable to suppose that the proliferation of information-processing machines is having, and will continue to have, as much of an effect on the circulation of learning as did advancements in human circulation (transportation systems) and later, in the circulation of sounds and visual images (the media)” (Lyotard, 1984, p.4).

Today’s culture, increasingly characterised by digitalisation – which could be considered as the evolution of electrification, which in 1967 McLuhan was already speaking of in terms of an extension to the central nervous system – is one where “Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act – the way we perceive the world. When these ratios change, men change” (McLuhan, 1967, p.41).

I shall leave to a sociological analysis the description of the mutations in individual and collective day-to-day behaviour dictated by the new technologies, to focus on that particular synthesis which comes close to what could be defined as an “absolute instrument”: in other words, on the coming together of the smartphone and the Internet.

Among those reflections useful in understanding the particular ontology of this “absolute instrument”, of particular note is that of the philosopher Ferraris (2005) who, in describing the onto-phenomenological properties of the medium, goes so far as to re-interpret Heidegger’s “Being and Time” with the instrument itself in mind. With an insightful play on words, the Italian language version of the title becomes “Being and Range”. Some of the key concepts are presented in an original way: *Dasein*, being-there, becomes being-connected, being-ever-connected. When there is no reception, we witness phenomena of ontological isolation, a new form of autism deriving from the absence of signal.

*Jemeinigkeit*, ever-mineness, is turned round as the individuality and exclusive availability of the device. *Zuhandenheit*, readiness-to-hand, now its usability and again *Befindlichkeit*, the emotional dimension, are intrinsic characteristics of the instrument, given its ease of use, its intimate personalisation and the cathexis of the libido which it enjoys.

But above all, its portability, its representing an extension of, in addition to one’s

mental possibilities, also one's hand – and here can be mentioned the linguistic extension of the instrument into the various languages which recall this relationship, in particular, the German use of the English word “Handy” – its metamorphic possibilities, by means of apps and the web, to transform itself into an infinity of other objects/uses, or again its hypnotic predisposition, these all concur to make it a powerful, epoch-making phenomenon which of necessity must be approached critically since, as is noted by Barthes (1957), “an object is the best messenger of a world above that of nature: [*with*] at once a perfection and an absence of origin, (...) a silence which belongs to the realm of fairy-tales” (Barthes, 1972).

Inevitably, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, digitalisation impacts on the way the analytical process operates. Practitioners can be looked up on the Internet and reached at any time by email, text message or other social networking services, whether they wish to be or not; smartphones cross the threshold of the setting's boundaries, communicating within and without the space-time of the analytical process.

Reflections on the matter by colleagues working in this field have also appeared. Among these, in a post-Freudian context, the attempt to make an epistemological reading of the “absolute instrument” feels the effects of the positivist-influenced propensity to create taxonomies, characteristic of the founding father. One finds oneself asking questions as to what, and to what extent, must or can be done. Lingiardi, mentioned earlier, asks himself: “What kind of an analytical object is an email, anyway? Why did Melania (the patient) send me an email? How should I reply? Should I reply?”, (Lingiardi, 2008, p.112) before reaching, subsequently, an awareness that such answers cannot be reduced to text-book responses, if anything seen in relation to the theme of the enactment. He notes the seductive aspects of the email and hypothesises that the decision to resort to this system of communication has been made by the patient because of an ill-concealed wish to break the rules of the setting, based on her or his unconscious experience of love and unconditioned availability projected onto the analyst, because of a heightened fear of losing the object, because of the anger associated with frustrations deriving from the transference, and as a protective dimension of the relationship in consideration of emotions which are not yet



ready to be expressed in the traditional setting.

A different point of view emerges from the work of the systemic-relational psychotherapist Manfrida, who uses texting as a veritable extra “weapon” in his clinical armoury. Recognising the transitional value, as intended by Winnicott, of texts and emails, he goes so far as to hypothesise therapy integrated with messages. One-sidedness and a certain degree of psychic inflation caused by the medium would seem to characterise this approach by Manfrida, who provides the reader with a sort of reference guide to work with texts, now the subject, and no longer the instrument, of therapy.

Among those expressing concern, but who are able to recognise the tension between opposite elements of the “absolute instrument”, broadening its range of meanings, can be heard the voice of the psychoanalyst Barone; he does not try to avoid the debate around the epoch-making significance of this digital transformation, and even moots the existence of a so-called “Mediascape”, in which subjectivity loses its previous co-ordinates. This bewilderment originates from the reduction, or even loss, of the symbolic distance, in turn determined by the circumvention of the limits set by castration, by means of the continuous supply of consumer objects.

Barone reflects on the media phenomenon of Facebook, even if by extension his considerations can be transferred to relationships in the actual analytical process. The relatively easy access to the goods (the analyst) and consumer motivation bring the unattainable within reach,

*“(…) causing nothing less than a collapse in the customary volume of the psychic space: dissolution of transcendence, atrophy of desire, anti-cathexis of language and conceptual work with a parallel explosion of a generalised regime of visibility, fragmentation and homogenisation of experience, weakening of social bonds, removal of the Other, dissolution of the paternal function and, overall, of metaphorical connections in favour of mere, disjointed metonymic juxtapositions” (Barone 2010, p.140).*

With the disappearance of the symbolic and the unconscious, subjectivity would become reduced to a single inconsistent dot.

Barone later adds a second interpretation relating to the emptying-out of subjectivity. In this case, harking back to Baudrillard and his “*Le crime parfait*”, the loss

of symbolic distance is explained by an increase “*in the load to which it has been subjected, and therefore by the frenetic mobilisation of its activity*”. In this way, “*the constant and generalised acceleration of dialectic exchanges causes (...) the drawing closer, and finally the non-distinction and confusion, of any polar opposition*” (Ibid., p. 142).

This subjectivity is at one and the same time both dot-like and more complex, “*residual but residue-free*”, which has in itself everything since it leaves nothing out. According to Barone, there will thus be two forms of subjectivity possible, equally dot-like, diverse in their genesis but alike in their deadly effect on the symbol.

The contact with contemporaneity, as perceived in the form of the Mediascape, to use the terminology of Barone himself, and the “absolute instrument”, evokes in the professional community a kaleidoscope of possible reactions, from the curt, defensive attitude to the covering of ears and eyes to block out all dangers, as in the case of the elderly colleague mentioned earlier, right up to the enthusiastic, even uncritical, inflation for new technologies and the corresponding *Stimmung*, as for Manfrida.

There also exists another type of attitude, one which is insidious, less evident, but not less dangerous, connected with a consideration of the “absolute instrument” as neither negative, nor positive in itself, but rather depending on the use to which it is put.

This position is taken both by the French philosopher Lévy, who states that “A technology is neither good or bad, depending on context, use and point of view, or even neutral” (Levy, 1997, p.8), and by Lingiard. The latter, by considering that the “Internet and emails are means of communications, and their psychological functions depend on how they are used” (Lingiard, 2008, p.124), repeats the mistake of General Sarnoff, as mentioned by McLuhan, when he claimed that “We are too prone to make technological instruments the scapegoats for the sins of those who wield them. The products of modern science are not in themselves good or bad; it is the way they are used that determines their value” (McLuhan, 1964, p.13).

As noted by McLuhan – and before him, with a more markedly political connotation, by the theoreticians of the Frankfurt School – such positions reflect the Narcissus-like sleepwalking of “one hypnotized by the amputation and extension of his

own being in a new technical form.” And again, no “technology could do anything but add itself on to what we already are.” (Ibid. p.14)

The epistemological value of McLuhan’s refrain “the medium is the message” is as vibrant as ever in today’s digitalised society and consulting room.

Today, as the science philosopher Serres (2009) claims, the connective has replaced the collective, and the least culture-conscious individual has more knowledge at her or his disposal with a simple click than the most scholarly scientist of the past, a sort of Promethean payback in relation to Zeus.

Put another way, we are now finding ourselves up against a “fact”. A new technology, globally present and with the *consensus gentium*, in our culture is a “fact”.

The millions of individuals connected on social networks or on MMORPG platforms (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) with their intertwining parallel worlds are a “fact”.

And facts need taking care of.

Currently I receive emails and texts from a few patients but, if the truth be told, hardly ever reply; with others I use technological devices during sessions, particularly with preadolescents, and with others again I use Skype. My patients can easily access the articles I write, or find out about aspects of my private life without my “publicising” them and without my consent, with consequent transformations in the transference-countertransference dynamics and in the relationship. So in the space of a decade I have made concrete modifications to certain aspects of the setting and introduced technical variations in the patients’ therapy management. As I have tried to describe in this paper, since it is not possible to escape from this encounter with the “absolute instrument” in the Mediascape, any rejection of it, with the aim of maintaining a predefined method of clinical operation, is also not possible, and defensive categorisations as to how, if, when and where to use such innovations are not sufficient: it is certainly useful to recognise its transitional value, its hypnotic predisposition, its seductive propensity, bringing back within the analytical relationship each individual variation, without fear of having to confront incremental chaos. Understanding its influence on the individuation process is also essential, both by means of impoverishment as a result of a decrease in the symbolic distance, and the

progressive depletion of the live symbol.

However, the real *sine qua non* of the clinical process concerns the becoming aware of how such an instrument, with its applications, is already changing us, or we risk being enantiodromically ruled by it.

As an aside, the most recent short film by the German director Werner Herzog “From One Second to the Next” (2013), which can be found on the Internet, is to be thoroughly recommended. It tells the stories of four victims of accidents caused by drivers who were texting. The film is notable for the complete lack of awareness displayed by the drivers – now more correctly termed “murderers” – of the risks they create by texting while behind the wheel

I shall conclude by dealing with the polarity represented by “continuity”. Lyotard (1979) expressed his fear that the old principle, by which the acquisition of knowledge is inseparable from the *Bildung* of the spirit and also the personality, might gradually fall into disuse, given the movement away from the “knower” to the exteriorisation of knowing. Well, in an exchange of emails relating to this paper, Augusto Romano – whom I quote – reminded me that “*the torment of omnipotence which in some way is hidden inside the technology of the ‘absolute instrument’ seems to forget that sadly Gilgamesh failed in his search for the herb of immortality and that even Achilles bore in his heel a vulnerable spot*” (Romano, 2013).

He goes on to say:

*“Apart from that, the aspect which has always left me unconvinced among the wonders of technology is that they try to leave less and less room for suffering. In other words, the most modern IT devices can be used, or not, according to context, need, type of relationship, type of disorder (phenomenologically, all of these variables, and others, would be worthy of exploration). Of course, this can all be of use. Provided it is not forgotten that the ‘absolute instrument’ does not have the slightest bearing on the feeling of total impotence which at times assails us when facing certain patients, or because of our afflictions of love or bereavement. Perhaps I will hear it said that I am a lover of the tragic emotions of life. I sincerely believe this is so, but precisely because it is through the tragic, with its yearnings and its failures, that life reveals its substance” (Ibid.).*

“Continuity” and “transformation”, therefore, appear as opposite elements to be held in dialectical tension in clinical practice to forestall any unipolar levelling, to limit

any risk of self-referential tendencies and to foster the integration of the cultural dimension and the “spirit of the age” in the individuation process.

The message I want to leave you with is this: we have an absolute need to take into account digital technologies and the transformations associated with them, avoiding any mindless glorification, but also any autistic rejection.

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