Transformation and continuity in analytical practice in the era of the Internet

The title of the Congress, with its explicit reference to the relationship between origins, innovations and controversies, led me to reflect on the pair of opposites represented by the terms "transformation" and "continuity" 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, several months earlier, had begun her course of therapy, on the occasion of a break in the sessions due to the forthcoming 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 erotised transference which had until that moment been carefully scotomised from the relationship in the strict 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 on the part of 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 analysis 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 perhaps more accurately, orthodoxly speaking, sending a letter to one's analyst is 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 sent by various patients. Mostly 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 a 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 A.R.P.A., 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, by avoiding the use of cars, there would no longer be car accidents and by closing 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: to paraphrase Jung, a dialogical structure is always preferable to one-sidedness of thought.

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 in itself." (Ortoleva, 2011, p.9)

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 ask ourselves as to the source of a certain conservative and rather snobbish attitude on the part of various Jungian analysts towards the cultural products of the time.

The first possible aetiology of the phenomenon is that offered by the German philosopher Bloch, who defined Jung as he who "(...) reduced the libido and its unconscious contents entirely to the primaeval. According to him, exclusively phylogenetic primaeval memories or primaeval 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 colourful that consciousness pales beside it; as a spurner of the light, he devalues consciousness." (Bloch, 1959, p.67)

This is certainly a harsh comment; Bloch's 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, 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.

Bloch's contribution is 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 made, in my opinion, by various colleagues who are reluctant to recognise such a complementary matrix. Jung's position on the "spirit of the age" would likely encourage a position of diffidence in relation to the *Zeitgeist*, corroborating such a hypothesis: 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, par.652, p.340)

From a similar epistemological perspective, Trevi develops a valid critique of this alleged metapsychological lacuna in Jung's work. 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 Saussure and his well-known distinction within language between *langue* (i.e. language: an 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.

Trevi proposes using 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 shows the reciprocal relationship between individual and culture, and provides an unequivocally efficient image of the horizontal nature of individuation.

This culture, in the hyperbole of Lyotard, has lost religious beliefs, political ideologies, utopias

and ethics, as the progression of knowledge has increasingly become hybridised with Information Technology and less conditioned by the great metaphysical narratives. He states that, with the standardisation and miniaturisation of electronic devices, "procedures for acquiring, classifying, making available and using knowledge have become modified. It is reasonable to think that the growth in the number of machines for processing information is impacting, and will continue to do so, on the circulation of knowledge, as occurred first with the development of the means for the movement of people (transport) and then with those for sound and images (media)." (Lyotard, 1979, p.11)

A culture, such as today's, increasingly characterised by digitalisation, the evolution of electrification, which 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 attention on that particular synthesis which comes close to what could be defined as an "absolute instrument", as it were: in other words, on the coming together of the smartphone and the World Wide Web.

Among those reflections useful to understand the particular ontology of this "absolute instrument", of note is that of the philosopher Ferraris who, in describing the onto-phenomenological properties of the medium, goes so far as to re-interpret Heidegger's "Being and Time" with the tool itself in mind, using a play on words in the original Italian to rename the work "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, its usability and again *Befindlichkeit*, the emotional dimension, are intrinsic characteristics of the tool, given its ease of use, its intimate personalisation and the cathexis of the libido which it enjoys.

But above all, its portability, representing an extension of, apart from one's mental possibilities, also one's hand – and here can be mentioned the linguistic extension of the tool into the various languages which recall this relationship, above all, 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, all concur to make it a powerful, epoch-making phenomenon which must be approached critically.

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 via social networks, 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 phenomenon feels the effects of the positivist-influenced propensity to create taxonomies. One finds oneself asking questions as to what, and to what extent, must or can be done. Lingiardi, mentioned earlier, asks: "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, but rather must be seen in relation to the theme of the enactment. The psychoanalyst is aware of the

seductive aspects of the email and hypothesises that the decision to resort to this system of communication has been made by the patient due to an ill-concealed wish to break the rules of the setting, based on her/his unconscious experience of love and unconditioned availability projected onto the analyst, a heightened fear of losing the object, the anger associated with frustrations deriving from the transference, and as a protective dimension of the relationship in consideration of emotions which are still too undigested 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 additional "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 media would seem to characterise this approach by Manfrida, who provides the reader with a sort of reference guide to working 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 and Jungian philosopher Barone, who 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 confusion originates from the reduction 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, altogether, 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 confusion, of any polar opposition." (Ibid., p.142)

Thus there are two possible subjectivities, dot-like, diverse in their genesis but alike in their deadly effect on the symbol.

As I have already described, 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 a curt, defensive attitude to a covering of ears and eyes to block out all dangers, as in the case of the elderly colleague mentioned earlier, or an enthusiastic, even uncritical, inflation for new technologies and the corresponding *Stimmung*, as for Manfrida. There also exists another type of attitude, intermediate, 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 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 Lingiardi who, considering that the "Internet and emails are means of communications, and their psychological functions depend on how they are used" (Lingiardi, 2008, p.124), makes the same mistake as General Sarnoff, referred to 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 pointed out by McLuhan – and before him, with a more markedly political connotation, by the theoreticians of the Frankfurt School – such positions reflect the narcisistic style 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 the connective has replaced the collective, writes the science philosopher Serres, and the least culture-conscious individual has more knowledge at her/his disposition 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". And it is right here that we can recognise Jung's mastery with regards to the attitude to adopt in the face of "facts".

He stated that: "I approach psychological matters from a scientific and not from a philosophical standpoint. (…) I restrict myself to the observation of phenomena and I eschew any metaphysical or philosophical considerations." (Jung, 1938, par.2, p.6). His point of view "is exclusively

phenomenological", that is to say, he is interested in cases, events, experiences, in a word, facts. His truth is a fact rather than a judgement. "(…) Psychology deals with ideas and other mental contents as zoology, for instance, deals with the different species of animals. An elephant is true because it exists." (Ibid. par.5, p.6) "I merely state the facts." (Ibid. par.34, p.21)

And facts need taking care of.

Currently I receive emails and texts from a few patients, but hardly ever reply; with others I use technological devices during sessions. 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 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, when, where and whether 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 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.

I shall conclude by dealing with the polarity represented by "continuity". Lyotard 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, from my "knowledgeable" mentor Augusto Romano I have learned that, as I measured myself with the themes present in this paper, "the desire for omnipotence and immortality 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.

Apart from that, the aspect which I find unconvincing 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 and type of disorder (phenomenologically, all of these variables, and others, would be worthy of exploration). Of course, this can all be useful. 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 in the face of 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 that this may be so, but precisely because it *is* in the tragic, with its yearnings and failures, that life reveals its substance." (Romano, 2013)

Bibliography

Barone, P. (2010) *Sparizioni. I due punti della soggettività*, Aut Aut, Vol. 347, *Web 2.0 Un nuovo racconto e i suoi dispositivi*, Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2010

Baudrillard, J. (1995) *Il delitto perfetto. La televisione ha ucciso la realtà?*, Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 1997

Bloch, E. (1959) *The Principle of Hope*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1986

Ferraris, M. (2005) *Dove Sei? Ontologia del telefonino*, Milano: Bompiani, 2011

Jung, C. G. (1931) *Collected works*, vol. VIII, Bollingen Series XX, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969

Jung, C. G. (1938) *Collected works*, vol. XI, Bollingen Series XX, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969

Lévy, P. (1997) *Cyberculture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001

Lingiardi, V. (2008) *Playing with Unreality: Transference and Computer*, The International Journal Of Psychoanalysis, Vol. 89, Num. 1, London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008

Lyotard, J-F., (1979) *La Condizione Postmoderna*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1991

Manfrida, G. (2009) *Gli Sms in Psicoterapia*, Torino: Antigone, 2010

McLuhan, M. (1964) *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man*, Corte Madera, California: Gingko Press Inc., 2003

McLuhan, M. & Fiore, Q. (1967) *The Medium is the Massage*, Corte Madera, California: Gingko Press Inc., 2001

Ortoleva, P. (2011) Introduction to «*Capire i Media. Gli Strumenti del Comunicare»*, Milano: Il Saggiatore, 2011

Romano, A. (2006) *Sacro e profano nell'esperienza archetipica*, in Studi junghiani, Vol. 22, Milano: Franco Angeli, 2006

Romano, A. (2013) Exchange of emails with Favero, D., 16 July 2013

Saussure, F. (1916) *Corso di Linguistica Generale*, Bari: Laterza, 1968

Serres, M. (2009) *Tempo di Crisi*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2010

Trevi, M. (1987) *Per uno Junghismo Critico*, Roma: Fioriti, 2000