The Ubiquitous Screen, the Swelling of the Imaginary and 21st Century Suffering

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  As our experience is being increasingly shaped by the technological changes of the 21st century, the specular images of the digital screen are now becoming ubiquitous, continuously distracting, and nearly inescapable. Our constant engagement with computer monitors, smart phones and high definition televisions is strangely becoming essential to our daily lives. As we find ourselves staring and swiping, typing and texting, we become further invested in our relationships with this dimension of images.

  While Lacan closely aligned the Imaginary register with the realm of meaning, he also designated the Imaginary as the realm of the image, of identification, and of narcissism. Our contemporary preoccupation with the realm of the Imaginary draws us away from our engagement in the aspects of our experience more deeply involved in the registers of the Symbolic and the Real. As we become further invested in images and their identifications, comparisons, spectacles and the culture of 'liking' on social media, we begin to disengage from the dynamic processes involved in symbolization, metaphorical play and lose touch with our desires. By increasingly seeking the quick shiny pleasures of consumer culture and by becoming further involved in the disembodying experience of virtual realities, we are losing touch with the subtle energies of our sensuous embodiment, the eros of our drives, and their orientation to the dimension of the Real.

  I will examine how this overinvestment in the digital screen, the realm of the Imaginary, is involved in the neurotic symptoms of the 21st century. Using Lacan's diagnostic schema based on the subject's relation to the Other, rather than a collection of symptoms, I will demonstrate how this overinvestment in the Imaginary manifests itself in the hysteric and obsessional symptoms which distinguish our times. I will also turn our attention towards some of the problems that psychoanalysis as a practice has struggled to face in addressing neurotic suffering in the face of the surging demands for consumer satisfaction, instant gratification, and narcissistic validation. Finally, I will make an argument as to how psychoanalysis can better address the 21st century's neuroses of the Imaginary, through an interpretive approach which encourages a process of symbolization and a reorientation with the sensuous embodiment of our human experience.

Screens, the Image and the Imaginary Register

> *Investment in the specular image is a fundamental phase of the imaginary relation. It's fundamental inasmuch as there's a limit. Not all of the libidinal investment passes by way of the specular image. There's a remainder.* (Lacan, 2014, p. 38)

The predominance of the digital screen and its panoply of enticing images is driving an overinvestment in the image and the dimension of the Imaginary. As we find ourselves inclined to check our texts and social media applications on our iPhones, we are increasingly lured into the realm of the Imaginary, into the lure of identification, and into a vain pursuit of our ideal egos, the idealized specular images which we identify and aspire to become.

As conceived in Lacan's mirror stage, the ideal ego arises through the infant's initial identification with the image in the mirror, through which it experiences itself as being whole—a *Gestalt*—for the first time. "Prior to that it experiences itself as a series of shifting states, sensations, and perceptions with no obvious core or center. This *Gestalt* is, in a sense, the first anchor for all of these fleeting experiences, giving the child some sense of unity" (Fink, 2016, p. 69). However, as this two-dimensional image in the mirror, reversed and distorted "does not *accurately* reflect the infant's body or or state of being at that time," the mirror image is a distortion or an illusion (p. 69). Thus, this anchoring point for the ego, the ideal ego, through this illusion of unity and coordination forms the basis of the ego which "assists the child in becoming coordinated and powerful" (p. 71). This process catalyzes a cascading series of identifications as the primordial ego develops, and continues throughout life as the ego incorporates images of all types, which of course, include the digital images of the screen.

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram in many ways demand very little of us; their lightning-quick speed of digital dissemination spares us the physical investment involved in interacting in person, with the necessary moving of our flesh and blood through time and space. As we gaze at pictures (often images of flesh and blood) with little text or greater symbolic content, we aren't involved in any semblance of careful reading, metaphorical play, or conceptual interpretation. Much of our interaction with social media seems to be about 'getting it' (or not). Social media's orientation toward the Imaginary relieves us of engaging the challenges of the Real and the Symbolic and orients us towards a culture of 'liking' and a feedback loop of narcissistic identification.

In this feedback loop, we tend to "like" things with which we identify and identify with things we like in a precipitous fashion, and in doing so, our identity becomes increasingly shaped by the images with which we identify— a psychic infinity mirror. Liking an image asks nothing of us, except for us to identify that it is an image that we like, and that we wish to identify with some aspect of the image or its presenter. This functions purely at the dimension of the imaginary ego as we integrate these images into our idea or who we are or imagine we would like to be, our imagined identities—our egos. The action of simply liking or not liking forecloses more complex levels of metaphoric play, extended dialogue or other interpretive contexts in which something else might emerge. Not only does the binary dynamic of liking or not liking foreclose on other creative dimensions of interaction, it draws us into a preoccupation with identification and an investment not only to like or be liked, but to be like the image or its presenter. This lends itself towards a categorical splitting of images into those identifications which we accept and those we reject, those we like and don't, the good and the bad, us or them.

This economy of identification, which is an essential part of Facebook and at the very heart of Instagram, tempts us with the illusion that if we could only accumulate enough 'likes' we could stave off the threatening otherness of the Other by encapsulating our imaginary egos in a fortress of likeness with a blindness to difference and its strange incongruity to our ideal egos (Fink, 2014, p. 10). This motivates a consumer economy in which consuming a steady diet of ego-affirming identifications maintains the illusion that we can attain a wholeness of our variable and fragmented phenomenological experience and achieve an idealized self, galvanized by the imaginary perfection of our ideal egos.

The vortex of the Imaginary dimension pulls us towards this dangerous feedback loop of identification which recalls the myth of Narcissus in which the beautiful young man is lured to a pool where he sees his own reflection. He does not realize it is only an image and falls in love with this image, frozen in trance by its beauty. He eventually realizes that his love can not be reciprocated and commits suicide. The fate of Narcissus presages much of the technology-driven suffering of our era: as we are hypnotized by the sparkle of the images with which we identify in hopes of illuminating a beautiful reflection of ourselves, we lose a feel for living. As we drift deeper into this trance of the Imaginary, we lose touch with the dynamic process of becoming, rather than just being; we lose touch with how to live and instead find ourselves suffering and desperately seeking some form of escape.

By aligning digital media so closely with the narcissism, the image, and the Imaginary, I do not mean to deny the symbolic potential of digital media. Right now, I am composing this piece of writing on the digital screen of my laptop for this online publication. This process, which involves many levels of symbolization, is made possible largely through my interaction with the digital screen and its inextricable relation to the Imaginary. Digital media clearly allows us an overwhelmingly vast resource to symbolic content, and provides us with new opportunities for creative, evocative, intimate, critical, serious or playful engagements. Digital media is not inherently narcissistic. What I wish to explore here is this: how is it that with digital media's vast potential for creative activity and symbolic play, do these seem to be largely marginalized in favor of the quick and easy gratifications involved in Snapchats, Instagram obsessions, trending memes and iPhone addictions? And if this shift towards towards an increasing use of digital media for shallow and primarily narcissistic activity is really the case, how could it be working its way into neurotic symptomologies?

The Swelling of the Imaginary and its Consequences

If we conceive of this suffering using Lacan's illustration of the Borromean rings representing the interlocking dimensions of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary, I visualize this overinvestment, this preoccupation with the realm of the spectral image, as a tumultuous swelling of the Imaginary ring. As the Imaginary swells, it crowds out the space for the other rings, upsetting the balance of dimensions, and denaturing the rings' subtle interlocking

interdependence and their vital, ephemeral, unity.   I do not intend for this image of the Borromean rings to collapse the conceptualization of Lacan's model into merely a spatial model, a visual image itself located at the register of the Imaginary level. Rather, I intend the image as a spatial metaphor relating the expanding size of the Imaginary ring to a general shift in psychic orientation, investment, or cathexis towards the Imaginary register. While my image depicts a spatial crowding out of the other rings, I intend for the metaphor to relate Freud's economic principle involving considerations of psychic equilibrium to the balance of the rings. Along the same lines of economic considerations, I would like to explore the possibility of there being a kind of zero-sum relationship, or an inverse correlation, between the three registers that relates to Freud's principle in terms of psychic investment or libido. Would a greater investment in the Imaginary necessarily withdraw, distract, or disorient psychic investment from the dimensions of the Symbolic and the Real even though they exist as different registers of human experience?

Borromean Rings with the expanding Imaginary
(Insert Image 1: drawing of swelled I in knot)

The Symbolic

The swelling of the Imaginary encroaches on the Symbolic dimension and disrupts our capacity to use language for creative play. The swelling also interferes with our ability to engage difference and to reach outside and beyond our sense of self. In his *Dynamics of Faith*, Paul Tillich states that symbols "point beyond themselves to something else" (1957, p. 41). Further, "a symbol participates in that to which it points" (p. 41). The dimension of the Symbolic dynamically points to things outside of itself in ways that metonymically link new signifiers along an associated chain of meanings and metaphorically play with the relationship between differing relationships between metonymic pairing of terms. "It opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us. All arts create symbols for a level of reality that cannot be reached any other way" (p. 42). Imbued with these features, the dimension of the Symbolic enables a creative process in which pictures and words can both consciously and unconsciously point to new things beyond themselves and beyond ourselves. As Lacan tells us in Seminar IV (p. 378) metaphor involves "a substitution that simultaneously maintains what it takes the place of" (As cited in Fink, 2004, p. 101). "Metaphoric structure, indicating that it is in the substitution of signifier for signifier that a significant effect is produced that is poetic or creative, in other words, that brings the signification in question into existence," that is, resulting in new signification (Lacan, 2006, p. 515). Symbolization involves a process of reaching towards something new through the process of time. While the process of identification focuses on being, the process of symbolization involves the dynamics of becoming, existing through the flow of time. The engagement in the process of analytic free associative discourse in the Symbolic dimension is a creative process that can affect the symbolic registries of the unconscious.

In an associative process, there is a progression and hierarchy of different types of verbal relations that moves from simple towards more complex symbolic syntheses. This progression towards more complexity can clinically offer a path that creatively transcends the reflective stasis of identification and can carry us beyond the signifying chain of metonymy, thus potentially affecting a symptom as it serves as a metaphor:

> metaphor's two-stage mechanism is the very mechanism by which symptoms, in the analytic sense, are determined. Between the enigmatic signifier of sexual trauma and the term it comes to replace in a current signifying chain, a spark flies that fixes in a symptom— a metaphor in which flesh or function is taken as a signifying element— the signification, that is inaccessible to the conscious subject, by which the symptom may be dissolved. (Lacan, 2006, p. 518)

If the unconscious is indeed structured like a language, creative symbolic discourse by way of new metaphoric construction can affect the unconscious at the level of the symptom, as the symptom itself is formed and resides in the realm of metaphor.

In identification, one identifies two things as being the same: I am you and you are me. Again, there is always a degree of illusion or fallacy in identification as two separate things can never be exactly the same. At the next level of complexity, metonymy involves a symbolic shift as it suggests that two different things are associated or alike and that one can stand in for the other: a crown is associated with royalty and can stand in for the status or function of royalty. Metonymy is more involved in symbolization than identification because it implies a differentiation between the two things (the crown *stands for,* or *is closely associated*, rather than *is* the queen), and further, in metonymic substitution one thing dynamically symbolizes the other and "participates in that to which it points." Through metonymy, the symbol of the crown represents royalty in a way that is more dynamic, visual and polyvalent than the word "royalty" itself. On a higher level, the creation of a metaphor yields an even more complex symbolic synthesis in that it metonymically relates two different relationships as being similar: the relationship of the crown to a king is similar to the relationship between a badge to the law. This process can yield a higher degree of symbolic complexity as it involves the dynamic *relationship between two symbolic relationships* to open "levels of reality that otherwise are closed to us." Metaphorical symbolic creations in a psychoanalytic discourse can open up new fields of meaning which expand beyond the static investment in sameness or equation involved in identification. These metaphoric creations can engage and affect the symptom, "a metaphor in which flesh or function is taken as a signifying element" (Lacan, 2006, p. 518). A sustained analytic discourse generating new levels of meaning through a synthetic symbolic flow can result in profound, enlivening shifts in our psychic economies.

The relentless lure of the digital screen not only diverts us from participating in creative processes involving symbolization: the overwhelming pull of the Imaginary maelstrom can drown us in the depths of identification in which we completely lose touch with the play of

symbols, the intrigue of exploring difference, and the capacity to delight in the surprise and spontaneity that springs from creative processes. More and more often, I find my patients asking me to look at images of their love interests on their phones seeking reassurance that I can see something that they see in their partners, and that somehow by my identifying with their perspective that their sense of self will be validated and fortified in our likeness of perception, meaning or general experience (Fink, 2014, p. 44). For instance, when I ask for them to tell me about what their partners are like, what seems specific, special or incomprehensible about them, or what vivid, unexpected associations they have about them, my patients often seem to react as if this process is unnecessary or redundant. If I would only see their images and reassure them that what they see is true and consistent with my perception, then they might be spared the trouble of articulating what they see, think, and feel. They could somehow cast away the potential otherness of my experience and consolidate a reassuring identification of sameness. Living in an entirely digital world would spare us the role of much symbolization in communication. To some of these patients, life would seem to be so much easier to live in a world where a steady intake of validating images would ensure a 'happy' and 'successful' existence. And a clinical experience might be more comforting if their happy and successful identities of existence were simply validated, corroborated and reflected back to them with affirmations of their truths and virtues. However, this kind of overinvestment in the economy of the Imaginary does not recognize the value of the process of symbolization and its ability to open up "levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us" and its ability to reach outside of ourselves and creatively engage the Other in a way which enriches us—that is, to symbolically engage our desires (Tillich, 1957, p. 42). Furthermore, when we dismiss the process of symbolization, we lose touch with the Otherness of our own minds, our conflicting thoughts and feelings, our sometimes unsavory fantasies— the elements of our unconscious that are dystonic and discordant with our ideal egos.

The Real

The Imaginary realm of the digital screen is illusory, weightless, and two-dimensional. In many ways it is distinct from the dimension of the Real and its immanent presence in our physical sensations, the energic impulses of our drives and the ubiquitous traces of sexuality in our sensuous embodiment. Lacan spoke about the real in many ways, some of which related to the body and our drives, but also in some which related the Real to a limit to representationality. The Real is the very thing that defies symbolization and resists representation in image. It resides in the ineffable and unimaginable realities of which we can feel but can not grasp. The Real also relates to the body and the drives' relationship to the erogenous zones. As Bruce Fink articulates:

> Lacan asserts that the body, in neurosis, is essentially dead. It is written with signifiers; in other words, it has been overwritten or codified by the symbolic. The body as a biological organism is what Lacan calls the "real," and it is

progressively socialized or "domesticated" to such an extent that libido retreats from all but a very few zones: the erogenous zones. Only in these zones is the body still alive, in some sense, or real. Here libido (or jouissance) is channeled and contained. (Fink, 1997, p. 97)

Thus, neurosis involves a certain amount of bodily deadness and an estrangement from the animality of our sensuous embodiment. We are fleshy, corporeal beings who are constantly experiencing a flow of subtle (and at times intense) physical sensations to which our automatic, conscious, preconscious and unconscious mental faculties are continually adjusting and responding. And many of these sensations feel strange and at odds with our identities, our egos and their identifications. As Freud so boldly laid out in his *Three Essays on Infantile Sexuality* (1905), every bit of the surface of our skins can function as an erotic membrane, including our digestive systems, from the tips of our tongues to the rims of our anuses. Further, Freud consistently and persuasively argued that epistemologically, evolutionally, and ontologically, somatic function precedes cognitive and representative ideation: psychically, there is a primacy of body over representative or conceptual thinking, feeling over thinking, and compulsion over ideation (Barratt, 2013, p. 65-87).

The digital screen seduces us away from being in touch with these aspects of our sensuous embodiment; it lures us into believing that our physical sensations are secondary to our identities—in other words, our thoughts and feelings which shape who we like to think we are and what we wish to represent. Screen life continuously asks us: wouldn't it be nice to surrender the dissonant vicissitudes of our sensuous, embodied experience to a blissful state of ataraxia while relishing in a glorious narcissistic fantasy life derived from things we like, extrapolated from our Instagram feeds, our Netflix queues, and our pictures of hot bodies?

Symptoms of the Swelling

In the following section, I will introduce some common manifestations of 21st century neurotic symptoms related to the ubiquity of the digital screen and the swelling of the Imaginary, focusing on the two primary orientations of neurosis: obsessionality and hysteria. One significant departure in Lacanian theory from other models of psychoanalytic theories such as ego psychology or object relations is that in a Lacanian framework diagnosis is primarily considered in terms of a subject's relation to the Other rather than in relation to a set of symptoms or defenses. Using this theoretical approach, neurotic patients are generally considered to be either obsessively or hysterically oriented. To be clear, the symptomatologies that arise from the ubiquity of the digital screen very much involve narcissism; an investment in the Imaginary realm is at the heart of narcissism. However, my focus in this disquisition is to distinguish just how these narcissistic symptoms manifest themselves differently in obsessive and hysteric neurotic orientations, rather than to position narcissism as its own diagnostic category. Further, I would like to examine how contemporary symptomatologies, often

involving narcissistic features and digital screen addictions, are not altogether structurally new formations; I conceive of them largely as obsessive and hysteric manifestations of neuroses in which the symptoms have adapted to our contemporary cultures heavily invested in digital mediation and a consumer mentality.

Obsessive Suffering

Obsessive patients seek to somehow make themselves complete or not lacking, to neutralize the desire of the Other, and to use their thought to tame the unpredictable and ineffable predicaments which the vicissitudes of time create. Obsessives find themselves struggling to maintain a sense of order to their digital lives and online personas which they find incomplete or lacking in their embodied experience—their 'real' lives. Not only do obsessive neurotics feel a compulsion to constantly check their emails, texts and social media platforms to maintain a sense of order and control; they also use their digital interfaces and their spectral realities as defenses against the unpredictable flow of time and the Otherness that might emerge in spontaneous interactions, such as free associative discourse. These obsessive individuals often experience anxiety around the extemporaneous flow of free speech in a clinical setting. In the face of this anxiety, they seek something from the digital realm, from the security of their virtual existences to restore a sense of order, completeness and an illusory sense having of control of time.

Mr. R spent much of his time in his analytic sessions expressing and explaining how he experienced many of his involvements his life as a burden. He had disliked the jobs in marketing he had previously worked and had been laid off several times for his lack of enthusiasm. He had resented the performance demands which his supervisors had placed on him and did not want to be bothered by having to go into an office to work. As we explored what kind of job he might prefer, he said that he wanted a job in which he could work from home and be paid a high income for the smallest amount of work possible. He viewed work primarily as a trading away of some of his valuable time to someone who was trying to get him to do something he didn't want to do, for monetary compensation. When I pressed Mr. R to say more about what he would want to do with the valuable time he was exchanging, what he seemed most invested in was not a particular ambition he felt excited about or drawn toward; instead, he seemed primarily focused on finding a way of organizing his time in a particular way which would allow him to get away from all of the things that he experienced as being burdensome: working his job, being intimate with his girlfriend, putting up with his family members, and defending himself from hostile pedestrians threatening him on the streets of New York. It seemed he also experienced aspects of our clinical meetings as being burdensome: Mr. R often seemed annoyed by my encouraging him to talk more about what specific things he might desire and by my urging him to try to free associate and say whatever came to mind, especially if it seemed unimportant or irrelevant to help him deal with all of the things that were burdening him. He often seemed to experience my questions aimed at learning more about the specifics of his situation as either irrelevant tasks he

was being asked to complete, or at times, judgments against things that I must think were wrong about him.

Early in our work together, our sessions would frequently be interrupted by R's phone beeping with a banner or a text. R would quickly pick up his phone, check his notification, and then, in a few moments, resume our conversation as if there had been no interruption. Mr. R also would sometimes begin our session by reading a list of things he had planned to talk about off his phone or offer to show me images of people he talked about. During these sessions, we were often not able to achieve any kind of associative flow or deepening of affective content in our talks. When I eventually asked R to put away his phone during our analytic hour, he protested: he thought my request was strict and unfair. Furthermore, if he had to put away his iPhone for our sessions, how could he maximize the value of the use of his time? I stated that this kind of commodification of time interrupted the spontaneous flow of our work which was important for the process: free association without regard to the clock time allowed new thoughts and feelings to emerge and could enable a kind of psychic change that might help him. Mr. R hesitantly agreed to turn his phone to silent for our sessions but insisted that he at least be able to occasionally check the time on my clock on the bookshelf behind him. He said that he wanted to manage his time to at least make sure he was able to talk about each of the pressing issues he had on his mind, as if the issues that were most pressing would be unlikely to naturally emerge by themselves. After exploring these issues around R's attempts to manage and commodify time, I told R that he could turn around and check the clock when he wanted. Going forward, Mr. R would occasionally check the clock during our sessions, each time wincing and twisting his neck, letting me know that this was this was yet another burden he would like to be spared.

In his obsessively-oriented psychic economy, Mr. R's concrete quantification of time and compulsion to access the digital world on his phone functioned as a resistance against engaging in the spontaneous, creative process of symbolism in the analytic discourse as well as a defense against the otherness of my subjectivity in my role as the analyst. By seeking continuous access to the digital realm and by maintaining the illusion that he could grasp control of time and maximize every minute, Mr. R sought a sense of unity and control over his fragmentary phenomenological experience and its ineffable flow of time. However, these narcissistic investments disrupted any kind of creative flow inside and outside the analytic space and contributed to his experiencing many of his activities in life as being burdensome and barren of meaning. It seemed like this preoccupation with the economics of time and his phone did symbolize a good deal of meaning relating to the value of time, mortality and his notions of freedom and oppression. But with his particular obsessional orientation, Mr. R's very preoccupations within these economics seemed to marginalize any interest in exploring how these aspects of the economics might be symbolized or what they might mean in themselves.

Hysteric patients seek to be the object cause of the Other's desire: they want to be 'liked' but not possessed. They wish to be tantalizingly elusive while identifying themselves with the Other's desire. They often develop an addictive attraction to the culture of liking, demanding a

steady diet of narcissistic validation to maintain a sense of wholeness or personal worth. Rather than obsessing over time and striving to order the screen like the obsessive, hysterical neurotics often become heavily invested in the imaginary realm of the digital screen aiming to satisfy their egos' perpetual demands to be liked or desired. This hysterical overinvestment in the Imaginary contributes to a myopia in which these patients only wish to see the surface or appearance of things and lose touch with a feel for both symbolic play and the flow of process-based physical activities. Their symbolic and imaginary processes are usually focused on a dynamic progression involving being hungry or being disgusted, taking in or spitting out, liking or rejecting, identifying or disidentifying. This preoccupation with internalization and externalization manifests itself in the hysteric's relationship to her body as well her relationships with images of other people with whom she wants to either take in or cast away. Hysterics focus on fantasies of being either rejected or liked by the Other and find many ways in which to place themselves within these fantasies and their fugal variations.

In the realm of the Imaginary, the hysteric individual is oriented towards this dynamic of movement: the inside versus outside relates to the swipe-left-or-right platform of most dating applications. The draw of the hysteric to this dynamic in Tinder keeps her in the game, which induces the obsessive to give chase to her (or her image) as the Imaginary object of his desire. Concordant with the trending towards the predominance of the Imaginary, dating sites and applications have moved from text and algorithm-based interfaces towards image-based profiles bearing little text or symbolic content. Consider the progression of dating platforms from text-based personal newspaper listings, to Eharmony and Match, which rely on questionnaires, matching algorithms and personal statements, to more recently, Tinder, which is focused singularly on the image.

Mrs. C really wanted to know if I liked her. She frequently demanded that I reassure that I liked her when she was concerned that maybe I had heard enough of her talking. She would persistently ask me if I really liked her, or if I thought she was a terrible person, if I really thought she was pretty, or if I did not. She would pay careful attention to my response and let me know how she interpreted the sincerity of the tone of my voice and the words with which I chose to respond. At each turn of our work, Mrs. C pushed to involve the digital screen into her analysis: she showed me pictures of her new puppy and her Tribeca penthouse apartment on her phone, she sought to charge her device on my power cord whenever she could, and she reported things that she had found about me online and tried to provoke me with critiques and seductive comments. She suggested showing me an image of herself wearing only a towel by saying "I probably shouldn't show you this…" Mrs. C told me that her previous therapist had given her support and demonstrated unconditional love for her, especially when Mrs. C had felt she was unloveable. This therapist would offer her a steady stream of nice and encouraging comments. She would even give C a gentle hug when she felt she really needed it. C said that she wanted the same treatment from me even though I had been clear from the start that this was not the way I worked.

Mrs. C lived in a swipe left, swipe right world. Everything she encountered was to be liked or disliked, taken in or thrown away. She was preoccupied with being liked on Tinder and followed on Instagram and demanded a steady stream of attention to maintain a sense of personal value. When this stream wasn't flowing, C would fall into a self-doubting tailspin, spending much of her time in sessions expressing her grievances while demanding that I tell her that I liked her, asking me for dating advice or seeking explanations as to what was going wrong in her relationships. She only seemed to be able to find some temporary relief in giving herself a material gift, whether it be some gourmet food to eat, an article of clothing, or some other personal accessory that helped her feel liked or better about herself. If her appetite for digital likes was not satisfied, suffering in starvation, she would turn to consumer goods for nourishment.

When I initially moved in to my new office, C seemed excited about the upgrade in the furniture and decor, but quickly began to evaluate all the things in my office and whether she liked them or not. She liked my desk but not my office chair; she liked my bookcase but insisted that I had arranged the books all wrong—the Standard Edition needed to go on the top shelf, not in the middle! As her analysis continued, Mrs. C became further involved with demanding for me to demonstrate that I liked her while trying to provoke me by critiquing the things she liked or didn't like about me or my office, my beard, my socks, or my phone.

At the height of an outburst, when C became angry that I wasn't responding to these demands the way she liked, C pointed to a painting in my office and said, "I hate you, just like I hate this stupid white spot!" One thing she brilliantly pointed to but didn't consciously realize was that I had painted this work which hung in my office; so to some extent the white spot truly was a part or an extension of me. Mrs. C didn't seem to have considered that I could have painted it, despite having discovered, by researching me online, that I had an MFA in painting. Yet by her identifying it as mine, C's words smacked of truth; they hit the Real. But in her viewing of the painting, she was unable to see past its surface in which, through a photorealistic depiction, the white spot represented the reflection of a camera's flash against a window, through which a careful viewer might notice the crepuscular light following the sunset shining through the clouds of a landscape. Of course, one couldn't really expect Mrs. C to notice the subtleties of the painting at a glance, but what stood out in her reaction was how this spot was just another stupid thing, like me, which she hated. Due to C's preoccupation with the surface appearance and whether or not she liked what she saw, she was unable or uninterested to look past the "stupid white spot" or to notice the other visual layers diaphanously rendered in the oil painting. She ignored the possibilities involved in playing verbally with what she saw when she gazed at the painting, and she didn't want to bother talking about just how the white spot was so completely stupid to her. This scotomization served as a metaphor for Mrs. C's inability to see past and through the digital surface of the Imaginary dimension which was clouding her vision and interfering with her capacity for creative play.

C's encounter with the white spot on the canvas touches on Lacan's exploration of the gaze in *Seminar XI*, in which he distinguishes the dynamic ambiguity of the gaze from the static flatness of the screen:

> In what is presented to me as space of light, that which is gaze is always a play of light and opacity. It is always that gleam of light— it lay at the heart of my little story—it is always this which prevents me, at each point, from being a screen, from making the light appear as an iridescence that overflows it. In short, the point of gaze always participates in the ambiguity of the jewel.
> And if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen, which I earlier called the stain, the spot. (Lacan, 1998, pp. 96-7)

Ms. C had found herself fixed at the visual level of the screen— her gaze did not participate in the ambiguity of the jewel. In in the picture, the painting, she located me in the form of the screen—the stain, the stupid white spot. This spot both confirmed the illusion and revealed it as a stain.

(Insert Image 2, *Mannheim Windowscape*, oil on canvas)

Psychoanalysis Must Respond

> *Those are my principles, and if you don't like them... well, I have others.*
> -Groucho Marx

It seems clear that psychoanalysis has lost favor in the United States from the heydays of ego psychology and its alignment with medical psychiatry. As our cultural zeitgeist imbued with the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism has moved towards information-based technology, pharmacological remedies, and evidence-based treatments to address neurotic suffering, psychoanalytic practice has reacted by moving away from the authoritarian stance of ego psychology and towards treatment modalities that aim to be both more mutual and symmetrical, regarding the clinical frame of treatment and the role of the analyst. There is now a greater emphasis on the 'relationship' (which is not a simply defined term) between therapist and patient (or 'client,' which I am beginning to hear with increasing frequency). There seems to be a trend to avoid diagnostic thinking, which might unnecessarily pathologize, and an emphasis on empathic identification with the patient and his ego. There is also a newfound emphasis on working with the patient on a pre-Oedipal and pre-Symbolic level. While I welcome the distancing of contemporary analysis from the normalizing stance associated with ego psychology, I question the direction of some of these trends, and I am concerned that psychoanalysis in the way that is it being practiced may be compromising some of its core principles to adapt to the ego-driven demands of the patient as consumer.

Psychoanalysis must find a way to stand outside the consumer marketplace. It must distinguish itself as a ritualistic creative activity which can transcend and exist outside the commercial transactions involved in the rest of our days. Through its dialectic method, psychoanalysis can pose an ideological critique of the predominant cultures of 21st century capitalism and offer us a kind of liberation from the normalizations its ideologies impose. Time is not money; time is mysteriously at the essence of existence. Through the free association of analytic discourse, psychoanalysis can dispel this illusion and help us get in better touch with the strange flow of time and its aspects involving pluratemporality and *nachträglichkeit*.

Psychoanalysis is fundamentally an interpretive practice. The patient, in his role is asked to free associate, and the analyst, in her asymmetric role, primarily interprets. Through this process, the analyst challenges and questions the patient's taken-for-granted meanings and ego identifications, which enables a change in the analysand's psychic economy by way of his talking through, thinking about, and feeling things in ways he hadn't imagined possible— by getting to the previously unthinkable thoughts of the unconscious. In other words, analysis sets in motion a process of symbolization which opens "up levels of reality which otherwise are closed for us" (Tillich, p. 42). My emphasis here is that psychoanalysis must fundamentally involve these two related concepts to avoid running the risk of being compromised by an overinvestment with imaginary identification in a clinical setting: 1) interpretation emphasizing difference rather than seeking to recognize sameness or identification, and 2) an emphasis on the process of symbolization (an attention paid to the Symbolic dimension in its synthetically and ecstatically pointing beyond pre-established meanings) rather than the process of empathic identification, with its overinvestment in the imaginary dimension.

With the expanding influence of the digital world on our psychic economies, the swollen dimension of the Imaginary reigns king. The Imaginary is the dimension of identification, the primary dimension of the ego, and a prime driver in our consumer culture whereby we long to identify with those who are healthy, happy, glamorous, and liked. If psychoanalysis validates rather than challenges the patients' consumerist demands, it imperils itself by offering complicity to this culture of narcissistic identification, the socioeconomic norms of late consumer capitalism, and the swelling of the Imaginary.

With its trend towards symmetry in the analytic frame and empathic identification in its focus, psychoanalysis is compromising its fundamental emphasis on interpretation, symbolic creativity, and facing the radical, and sometimes disruptive Otherness of the unconscious, the *unbewusst*—the unknown. As empathy involves a trial identification with the other's perspective, it is essentially an identificatory process emphasizing a false sense of sameness at the level of the ego, rather than otherness or difference. This investment in the realm of the Imaginary runs the risk of contributing to the Imaginary's digital tumescence, which crowds out the transformational potential of the Symbolic and interferes with our feel for the sensuous energies of our embodied experiences involving the Real.

Psychoanalysis must reconsider its identity within the digital world in order to maintain its essentially interpretive approach involving not only the Imaginary but also the registers of the

Symbolic and the Real to enable a creative process that can bring about conscious and unconscious psychic change. Psychoanalysts must find a way to designate our hallowed practice to exist outside and beyond the realm of consumer demand, instant gratification, and the feedback loop of narcissistic identification. In the most general sense, psychoanalysis is a spiritual practice, in that it touches on something outside of ourselves, something beyond our egos (Barratt, p. 178). Now more than ever, we must strive to navigate a world increasingly being flooded by the digital sea—to find a course which restores a vital balance to the Borromean rings and which addresses the suffering brought on by the swelling dimension of the Imaginary.

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