"I Wish To Speak to the Despisers Of The Body": The Internet, Physicality, and Psychoanalysis

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I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no blood, nor any senses. (Descartes 48)

The "real world"—an idea no longer of any use, not even a duty any longer—an idea grown useless, superfluous, consequently a refuted idea; let us abolish it! . . . . We have abolished the real world: what world is left? the apparent world perhaps? . . . . But no! With the real world we have also abolished the apparent world! (Nietzsche 40–41)

There is a human body when, between the seeing and the seen, between touching and the touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand, a blending of some sort takes place. (Merleau-Ponty 284–285)

There is, undoubtedly, a political economy of virtuality and cyberspace to do with the globalization of capitalism and its efficient running. However, this paper is concerned with the psychodynamics of what is best called computer-mediated communication (CMC), which includes e-mails, textmessaging, and the internet; in particular, it looks at some of the implications of the lack of physical presence in CMC for how we feel about CMC and for morality and ethics.

It is customary to give some account of how this issue became significant for the author. In my case, the stimuli were several: a puzzlement about the use of mobile phones, for example, on leaving a train station someone uses their mobile phone to tell a friend they are just leaving the station; a fear that I, myself, am addicted to System Shock 2 (a computer game which is fiendishly difficult) and cannot cope with not being able to finish it; astonishment at the numbers of people walking around with a mobile phone permanently at their ears! This led me to think of CMC (a generic term for all computer-mediated communication in cyberspace) from a psycho-social perspective, in particular the role that the lack of physical presence plays in CMCs.

What part does physical presence play in our being social? Can object relations flourish in conditions where social relationships do not involve some form of physical co-presence? What happens to our relationships, one with another, when they are in cyberspace? Is there a psycho-social approach to cyberspace?

While not attempting to answer any of these questions directly, I am concerned with what those of a psycho-persuasion make of the expansion of the internet, mobile phones, textmessaging, e-mails, and other aspects of virtual relating. What is going on when the Japanese writer Hisao Ishii argues that young people who use mobile phones suffer from mobile phone neurosis when they do not receive enough calls and textmessages?

I will start with a debt to Bob Young, who has written extensively on the Internet from the point of view of a psychoanalytically informed—particularly Kleinian—perspective. Many of the ideas in this paper are developments of his ideas.

THEMES

The Nature and Appeal of Cyberspace

It is probably pointless to note that cyberspace is popular; the majority of young people in the UK have a mobile phone; several million mobile phone calls happen every day, putting people in contact with anyone, anywhere; on the internet, we have instantaneous contact across time and space borders. It is almost limitless. Textmessaging is everywhere. Place, space, and time no longer seem to mean the same in cyberspace that they do the rest of the time. Is Nietzsche correct in seeing the abolition of the real world and of the apparent world as occurring hand-in-hand?

Notice that the language doesn't keep up with the reality. People are in contact on the web, but what is

the nature of that contact? It is not like the face-to-face contacts that dominate the rest of our lives and our lives as children. It is not even clear whether most of it is communication, if that means more than simply the exchange of information. You may, when communicating with an e-group, see it in terms of saying and hearing, but you do not say or hear. This may be why George Myerson contrasts real communication with what goes on most of the time in cyberspace in the following terms: "More and more of our lives will be lived in a systems space, where efficient and minimal messaging will replace the slow and messy business of dialogue" (Myerson 66).

This has lead Oelsner to argue that CMC provides only information in that it lacks the capacity to provide an emotional link between two persons, which is, as Bion has argued, the basis for learning from experience. Also, we should question—when considering whether txt messaging is using a new language—whether txt language is language at all. Is it not, rather, a sign system in which the signifier/signified relationships of everyday language are not present?

Pessimists vs. Optimists

Meyerson is on the pessimistic wing of those debating cyberspace. It is noticeable that there seems to be no halfway house with debates about virtuality; you are either for it—the latest technological miracle that will solve all our problems—or you are against it—the latest in a long line of ever more efficient panopticons. Ambivalence is almost prohibited, at least as far as the advertisements from Orange and Vodaphone are concerned. Zizek is probably right that these two alternatives—what he calls the paranoid and the grandiose—are part of the problem rather than the solution. "That's why I distrust not only the paranoiac versions of cyberspace but also the liberating version: 'we play with multiple identities' and so forth".

Psychoanalysis and Computer Mediated Communication

There are some fairly obvious candidates for a psychoanalytic approach to these issues—flaming; people naming their computers after women (their mothers?); people naming their computers at all; the envy of the person who now has the latest, fastest mobile; the fear

of computers and of the internet, which seems to be far more than simple technophobia. The basis of what follows is some kind of feeling that when physical presence is not a part of social life and of communication, some difficulties arise and some of these resonate with some of the things that psychoanalysts—Kleinian, in this case—say about how we live our lives, lives full of phantasy and the workings of the unconscious.

Before we look at possible psychoanalytic approaches to cyberspace, it is worth noting that sociologists have at least hinted at some problems with late modernity which almost seem to come to fruition with the era of websites, e-groups, and mobile phone technology. Simmel, for example, points to some things that happen to social interactions once we live in complex, urban societies: those interactions become more shallow, more transitory, and more instrumental. While some arenas of rich interaction are possible—in the family, in leisure—these themselves become more rationalized and many seek to avoid such deep and rich interaction, fearing the emotional minefield of the personal. This is the basis for Lofland's typification of urban survival as "a capacity for the surface, fleeting, restricted relationships" (Lofland 17). We might ask immediately if the internet, for example, is the end product of this process, the ultimate prosthetic of a disembodied selfhood.

What is going on from a psychoanalytic and psychosocial perspective when we enter (sic!) cyberspace? Is there more to what is going on than the accounts people give of their conscious motivations and meanings—a means of getting in touch with people far away which is cheaper than the telephone? A way of getting the latest paper by Bob Young on this issue? A way of accessing the latest on-line journal or pornography? Obviously, the answer is yes, there is a lot more going on, and those of a psycho-social persuasion can (must) contribute to the debate about virtuality.

Perhaps we should start with feelings about the Internet and associated things, partly because psychoanalysis is mainly about how to take seriously the affective in our lives. As Bob Young suggests in a series of papers, the feelings are symptomatic. People feel, generally, ambivalent: they see the internet as a area of infinite possibilities but worry that the people on the other end may be playing games; they feel safe in the inti-

mate space of themselves, the keyboard, and the screen, but are not entirely sure about the others at the other end of the process; they send messages which, inadvertently, contain capitals and are accused of flaming and are expelled from e-discussion groups; they confess their most intimate thoughts and have a vague feeling that these are going everywhere; they treat their computers as human—giving them names—and treat humans as more like machines, needing and expecting automatic and instant replies as if from a machine. As Curtis puts it in a psycho-social reading of the Internet:

> Many people feel they will be taken over, overwhelmed, invaded, flooded or imploded. They experience the email mailbox in their computer [if that is, indeed, where it is] as a kind of salt-mill grinding perpetually in the depths of their unconscious, endlessly producing and overflowing. The fear is that it is in their home, in their private space, utterly invasive. (Curtis 10)

What comes to mind here? Well, what comes to my mind is splitting, part-object relating, projective identification, problems of containment, basic assumption states, phantasy; and that is without moving into a Lacanian account of the internet. Let's follow this through in a little more detail and see how much of the psychopathology of everyday cyberlife is associated with the lack of physicality, with the lack of frowns, smiles, nods, pauses, rolled eyes, and hesitations in CMC.

I would like to take this in three directions, hinted at in Young's work.

1. E-MAIL, FLAMING AND THE PARANOID-SCHIZOID POSITION

Flaming has long been recognized as a problem in e-mail communications, and is one of the three "Fs" which Holland sees as examples of Internet regression—flaming, flirting, and favoring. Flaming where the accidental capital letter may be seen as an attack which is matched by a retaliatory capital with bolds added; flirting, where there are crude invitations to sexual contact; favoring, where there are extraordinary acts of generosity and grandiloquence. There seems to be a problem with the lack of physical cues which makes all these typical features of CMC.

Flaming seems to indicate the importance of physical presence in social relationships. Physical and other cues which involve people communicating with others who are present seem to facilitate those forms of object-relating typical of the depressive position, with the emphasis on whole objects and on empathy and communication. Others not being there make it more likely that unconscious phantasy and splitting will predominate. Klein's description of the relationship to the analyst in the paranoid/schizoid position sounds a lot like many of our "relationships" when communicating using e-mail: "[there is] a kind of detached hostility that pervades the whole relationship" (Klein 18).

Virtuality seems to move us from normal projective identification—where the aim is communication with a balance between the affective and the rational—into pathological projective identification—where the aim is attack and the destruction of social links. This is what Civin suggests when he relates the proliferation of e-mails that we are all familiar with to Bion's idea of beta particles. Civin does this in the discussion of the role of e-mail in a university not unlike my own, where there are many and conflicting demands facing academics—to be more efficient and more effective, to deliver better quality to more students, and so on. Civin notes that e-mail begins to be used in a defensive fashion, with people withdrawing first to small groups and then to their own individual offices, in such a way that anxieties are not contained but become more exaggerated. This is how he puts it:

> At first, the email system reflected the surrounding conflicts in relatively tangential and innocuous ways, providing notice of meetings or reporting the results of faculty votes. . . . However, as the situation grew more pervasive and as the various participants grew more astute in their use of communications tools, the email strings became increasingly long and assaultive. By the time the turmoil reached a fever pitch, to turn on the computer was to be pummeled by a barrage of messages. . . . As the number and fervour of messages increased, and as the desire to escape the invasive attack grew stronger, all sides began to delete the messages without reading them. According to one faculty member's description, "Deleting the mes-

sages was like swatting black flies. I'd spend five minutes getting rid of them and just when I thought they were all gone, more would appear". In this instance the information system ceased to provide information. Instead, the data that emanated from it were like Bion's beta particles: things-in-themselves, inescapable shrapnel-like missile fragments of facts that covered the terrain and ricocheted about so that it grew impossible to conclude if their source was internal or external. In Bion's (1929) words, it was "a situation in which the personality attacked its object with such violence that not only was the object deemed to become minutely fragmented, but the personality likewise" (p. 58). The computer system and its contents came increasingly to symbolize *and* to realize the persecutory experience *in both its externalized and internalized forms.* (Civin 179)

The lesson from Civin is clear: anxieties, paranoid or otherwise, cannot be managed or contained within CMC.

Pathological projective identification and the proliferation of beta elements sounds a lot like some of the more scary elements of cyberspace: feelings of omnipotent control; fusion with the object (the computer, the website, the e-groups moderator); depersonalization, loss of ego, attacks on linking (flaming), denigration (flaming). All-in-all, cyberspace becomes the bad object, holder of our projections and origin of all our problems—internet addiction, the all-seeing eye, the perverter of innocent children. The question becomes whether the forms of whole-object relating characteristic of the depressive position can happen without physical presence, particular when we keep in mind Hinshelwood's view that early, part-object relating involves very little physical presence or reference to physical attributes (Hinshelwood 140). Put another way, people seem to miss the sorts of inefficient, interpersonal interactions CMCs are designed to minimize.

2. E-GROUPS, WORK GROUPS, AND BASIC ASSUMPTION STUFF

The web—let us say that aspect of it devoted to e-groups—can be understood in the terms which Bion and others applied to groups in general. How, then,

might we apply Bion's ideas on work groups and basic assumption valencies to e-groups?

Clearly, all e-groups have some consciously defined and accepted task; as such, they are work groups. However, in all groups there is basic assumption activity going on which compromises these consciously defined and accepted tasks. There are three basic assumption valencies:

1. Dependency: The sole task of the group is to satisfy members' needs, and the leader has the responsibility to protect and sustain members; this means the group avoids its real purposes.
2. Fight/flight: Here the danger is an enemy who is either within or outside the group; the leader's role is to lead against the enemy and the group's task is to follow.
3. Pairing: Pairing and forming links with members or with outsiders is seen as the salvation for the group; salvation is seen as something vague that is in the future, a future where things will get better; the leader must foster this hope in the future. There is, however, no strategy to get to that future.

What are the signs of basic assumption activity in e-groups? Well, there are almost too many! Here are some examples, and I am aware of many of these in the e-groups I moderate and ones where I am a mere member. As examples of dependency we could mention loss of critical faculties and an ill-defined mission for the e-group. As examples of fight/flight we could mention trivial matters becoming matters of life-and-death, the desire for quick answers and solutions coupled with an inability to tolerate frustration, a paranoid attitude toward questioning, and the expulsion of members for minor infractions. As examples of pairing we could mention the endlessness of discussion and consequent loss of the sense of time, and the desire to have more and more people involved in the e-group.

The lesson from Bion is that these are features of *all* groups. However, how much does the lack of physical presence make cybercommunication a particularly rich arena for basic assumption stuff? Maybe the attachment to e-groups is greater than to groups which are "real" and involves forms of attachment that are primitive, persecutory, and schizoid on the one hand

or absurdly grandiose and supportive on the other. If we take the example of the expulsion of difficult members, for Bion, difficult members tell us more about the group than about the individual; if the difficult member is expelled, this does not "solve" the problem and, indeed, may exacerbate it.

3. WWW as Mother: Processor Speed and Gratification Speed1

Speed is everything in CMC—faster processors, faster modems, broadband Internet access. Faster access to and processing of information gets us to the point where there is no time to work out if the information is useful, to emotionally process it. Curtis, referring to Hoggett's work, puts it this way:

> The desire to communicate, in realms of time and space other than the physical, has not yet reached a stage where emotional development can provide the equipment to cope with the intense feelings that virtual reality arouses. This desire for rapid, intense, mass communication has led to a phantasy of "an exhausted breast with nothing left to give and, at this deeper level, the abandonment of hope" (Hoggett, 1989: 31). (Curtis 10)

There is, in effect, a relationship between processor and modem speed and what we might call gratification speed. The faster the machine, the faster is our demand for instant information gratification. The Web as mother has an infinity of information which can only be accessed if we have the latest and fastest technology; as with many dealings with the mother as adults, we may regress (refer to Internet regression above). The failure to deliver turns the Web into the bad breast which angers and frustrates. So now we know why people get (a) frustrated when the damn thing doesn't deliver, and (b) often name their computers after women! Unlike the physically present person (and the analyst), the web does not have the capacity for empathy—partly because it is not real and partly because there isn't time for empathy.

Conclusions: Pessimism, Sociality, Morality

Whatever the answers to the many questions that have been posed, the tenor of this paper is, of course, pes-

simistic. Relating to others in the depressive position is made more difficult with virtual communication. There is a case for a note of caution here. There may be those—and we might remember that Bill Gates is said to "have" an autistic spectrum disorder—who thrive without physical presence, in the relative predictable and controllable world of e-mails and text messages.

Is part of what makes us human the embodied presence with others? If so, what of virtuality and, indeed, of post-human entities? Has the prosthetic of the virtual world made us less than human? My conclusion is, despite my being a technophile, a pessimistic one. As Annie Curtis argues in discussing the possibility of cyberpsychotherapy:

> The anarchic nature of the Internet, with its millions of individual users and its thousands of loose associations (listservers, Usenet groups etc.) has made the notion of alliance in general and therapeutic alliance in particular, an impossibility. (Curtis 16)

If this is the case, then not only is sociality going to be problematic in CMC, but so is morality. It is noticeable that both Levinas and Bauman make much of proximity as a condition for morality and that Levinas models his discussion of proximity on an earlier interest in the caress. As Bauman puts it: "The realm of the moral command to be responsible implies proximity between I and the other. . . . Moral behaviour is triggered off by the other as a face"(Bauman 87). Some of the dangers of late modernity lie in the ability to do things at a distance so that the consequences of what is done are invisible. How much more is that the case when what we do at a distance is virtual and when we do not need to go anywhere else to do things at a distance. As Bauman asks—and we might also ask, given the lack of physicality in CMC—how do we achieve "a morality of spatial and temporal distance"? (Bauman 222).

Note

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