

## Playing with unreality: Transference and computer<sup>1</sup>

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*In this paper I describe the impact of cyberspace on the analytical relationship. My reflections will move from two clinical histories. In the first history, I describe the case of Melania, a patient who, at a certain moment of her analysis, started sending me e-mails, almost building a ‘parallel setting’. I describe the relational dynamics linked to the irruption of the electronic mail into the boundaries of our psychoanalytic relationship. The second case is Louis, a 25 year-old young man with a schizoid personality who uses cyberspace as a psychic retreat. Over the years Louis told me, initially from a sidereal distance, of his necessity to create dissociative moments. The entrance to these retreats procures for Louis an immobile pacification, which may assume the characteristics of a trance: life comes to a halt in a state of ‘suspended animation’. We can see the use that Louis makes of the computer as an attempt to live into a non-human object and to protect himself from relational anguish, but also to warm up a mechanical mother. Melania used technology to communicate with me, albeit in a roundabout way; for Louis, virtual space was a ‘dissociative retreat’ located on the border between sleeping and waking, which for years went untouched by our analytical discourse. For both patients, the computer was a tool for emotional regulation, and the analytical relationship aimed to give this tool some relational meaning, facilitating the shift from compulsive usage to a transformative use of the object.*

**Keywords:** analytical relationship, cyberspace, e-mail, transference

I don’t hope to have a future as a cyborg. But we can all see that the new technologies are now inextricable from ourselves. Our personal computers have come to contain some of our functions and many of our memories (letters, photographs, writing); moreover, they often organize our moods or fill our solitary moments. And just think about the sense of loss when our high-tech partner gets lost or ‘crashes’ with all its data. It’s even worse if our computer gets stolen. These are really little tragedies of deprivation – a theft of mental objects that we’ve shifted to the machine, traumatic rupturings of the private spaces of the self that evoke the anguish associated with early losses or narcissistic mutilations.

I would like to talk about the impact of cyberspace on the analytic relationship, and I’ll refer to two clinical histories. The first is the story of Melania, a borderline patient who, at a certain point in her analysis, practically built a ‘parallel setting’ with her e-mails to me. The second is about Louis, a young man aged 25 with an internet dependency and a schizoid personality as defined by Ogden (1989). The analysis with Melania is now concluded. I have been seeing her for six years,

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initially vis-à-vis (twice a week) and on the couch in the last five years (three times a week). Louis has been in therapy for five years, three times a week, on the couch.

### Melania

O window ...  
 You who separate and attract ...  
 example of liberty endangered  
 by the presence of fate,  
 a frame that brings down the scale  
 of an outdoors that's too great.

(Rilke, 1927, *Les Fenêtres*)

One day in late July, I got an e-mail from Melania, a young woman in analysis who had been widowed a few months before. Of course she was in a life-threatening situation, but about two years before she had asked for analysis for depressive problems in a borderline personality organization with separation anxieties and difficulties in regulating emotions and relationships. A few days earlier we had had our last session before a summer vacation break.

I cut my hair today and I think I look very pretty. I even said to myself: 'Too bad my sweetheart can't see me ...'. I'm sure he would have liked this cut; without saying anything, he would have smiled that embarrassed smile of his that meant, 'you're so pretty, I'm proud to be with you'. My sweetheart is Rocco. It's the first time I've cut my hair since he died. But who knows ... maybe he can see me anyway (I don't believe that, though). Next week I'm going on vacation too: a week at my aunt's house in the country. THAT will be a real blast. But I'm happy about it. I'll get to see old friends, I'll relax, I'll read and go to the beach. I send you a huge huge kiss and I wish you a happy vacation too. Affectionately as usual – or not quite as usual.

What kind of an analytical object *is* an e-mail, anyway? Why did Melania send me an e-mail? How should I reply? *Should* I reply? 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. Clinicians have changed their views on some fundamental rules for the analyst's behaviour, such as neutrality, abstinence and anonymity, and have reconsidered their own attitude towards the patient's and the analyst's actions during analysis. 'Banishing action' is sometimes impossible, Greenberg (2001) notes, and in certain cases it can actually be damaging. Actions can have interpretative implications, and interpretations can themselves be actions. "Thought and action", writes Mitchell (1997, p. 182), "are aspects of experience, simultaneous and always interlinked".

At that time, I had never before got an e-mail from a patient in analysis, and I confess that my first reaction was a sense that I'd been 'tracked down' and ambushed in my own private place: Melania walked out of the door of my office but then she figured out how to climb in through the 'window' of my computer! But I also thought she needed to feel she was in my mind for a moment while she was mourning both the death of her husband and the separation from the analyst.

Then, naturally, I had a slew of other thoughts – defensive, theoretical or prosaic – about setting, transference and countertransference. This unexpected e-mail

seemed exotic, erotic and hazardous. A phone call from a patient is different: it's more urgent, and there's usually a question involved. The patient is physically there, with the tone of his real voice. But an e-mail pops onto your screen, flashing there amid the other thousand things in your life: the lecture you're preparing for your class, the article you've just downloaded, your vacation photos, a love letter you're having trouble writing. And the e-mail might also be a 'se-duction', a term whose very etymology is connected with the idea of deviating or distracting. By sending an e-mail message, the patient can act on the desire to drag the analyst away from the rules of the setting, which she/he experiences, unconsciously or not, as a restriction on unconditional love and availability.

Click – I open the message. Read it. How did she get my address? Well, it's easy to find it on the web. A phrase of Owen Renik's (1995) pops to mind, bringing back my composure: as psychoanalysts "we can put our hands over our eyes, if we want, but we will not disappear" (p. 468). Why is she writing to me about this stuff? She's taking off on vacation and leaving me this message: what's she trying to tell me? It takes me a while to get back to thinking clearly, and then ... I *move on to action!* A simple action: I reply that I got her e-mail and I also send her my affection and wish her a happy vacation. Click.

After the vacation, I ask her to talk about this electronic exchange and we re-read her e-mail as a message about separation and loss (the haircut, Rocco's death, the interruption of the sessions), but also about 'a new hairstyle'. We also discussed the double level of her e-mail communication to me: when she writes "too bad my sweetheart can't see me", probably the sweetheart she is feeling about is not just Rocco, the dead young husband. And when she writes: "I'm sure he would have liked this cut; without saying anything, he would have smiled that embarrassed smile of his that meant, 'you're so pretty, I'm proud to be with you'", the proud partner can be easily thought as the analytic one: myself.

The analysis started up again, and she went on sending me the occasional e-mail.

Melania was an affectionate, intelligent, and very unstable woman. About herself she could write, "I'm a flag at half-mast, flapping around in the gusts of my sobs, an ant crawling on a world map, a little tin soldier who won't ever go to war ..."; but also, "with you I like to play at being the tricky borderline patient ....".

Her early family environment was marked by bitter parental strife and neglect. Her parents divorced when she was eight. After the divorce, she lived alone with her mother, who showed little concern for Melania's welfare. Periods of neglect alternated with episodes of invasive attention, a pattern that continued into adulthood.

Melania's first e-mails were useful in helping us confront her issues of separation and loss. We found a name for her e-mails: 'pebbles'. Pebbles marking the path between one session and the next, marking the way home like the kid in the fairy-tale did. Pebbles to fill a void and lay out a path. Like the beads on a prayer rosary, they were a pastime and a link. Pebbles – an anchor to cling to. Rocco was dead, so now the analyst had to see the new hairdo or the new clothes. Even when he was away. An excruciating transference burden.

My feelings toward Melania were mixed and intense, and I have to say that her unconscious strategy of 'e-mail displacement' helped me to see from a clarifying distance some difficult aspects of my countertransference (see Sonnenberg, 1993,

1995). The space of e-mails could be at the same time that of a calm, postponed elaboration and that of an embarrassed displacement of unspeakable emotions – and probably for a while I displaced on that external screen my own countertransference and the effect on me of her projective identifications. Implicitly Melania was asking me to be many things, and everyone of her needs or desires evoked in me, time by time, feelings and positions of omnipotence, inadequacy, anger. I felt sorry, thinking she deserved more from life. I felt scared, thinking of me as the one who had the task to give her, after a dismissing father and an idealized dead husband, a positive imagery of ‘the masculine other’. I felt assaulted by the power of her idealization of me. I felt threatened by the unpredictability of her suicidal thoughts.

At the same time I felt Melania was also using emails in order to protect me and the analytic setting from the intensity of her requests. For a period of time we accepted, without defining it technically, the use of e-mails as a safer place for uncomfortable feelings, learning time by time to recognize, mentalize and verbalize them. E-mails became ‘another piece of analytic process’, a transitional object between Melania and me. Moreover, reading and commenting on them, I became myself a transitional object between Melania’s past and future, between grief and desire.

Maintaining clear sexual boundaries and overcoming the traps of binarism (hetero/homo, loving/unloving, available/unavailable), I looked for a third position for myself, trying at the same time to give to Melania what Samuels (1993, 2001) calls an ‘erotic playback’, that is, a relational image of herself comprehensive of both erotic vitality and self-containment.

“When the word ‘love’ loses its quotation marks,” Melania once said, “how can the analysis go ahead? How is it possible to love analysis without loving the analyst?” I responded:

I think that when the word ‘love’ loses its quotation marks, what we have to do is to look for them again and to fix them back on, without being too scared by this exposition. I think that this love without quotation marks has to do with your need and your fear to love again, after Rocco. Maybe bringing love into the analysis allows you to feel in love without betraying him, but I’m afraid that has also something in common with a position you know very well and once described with the phrase: ‘for me, love is basically charged with frustration, and my task is always to work alone for two’.<sup>2</sup>

I learned to contain Melania’s pain, standing guard over her special objects, keeping them away from her rapacious mother. My mind had to learn to act like ‘recovered file’ on a computer, or a safety deposit box, for the periods when she was unable to feel and to modulate her terrifying anxiety of being nothing to her mother. Melania needed both to be loved as an idealized object and to idealize the objects she loved (her father, Rocco, me): this stance gave her some hope of feeling protected from the experience of an absent/hostile mother.

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<sup>2</sup>At the same time, my associations went in the direction of thinking about the analytic relationship, as a whole, as something inside quotation marks; the analytic room itself is inside quotation marks. I thought that this is the condition that allows us to work with analysand’s feelings knowing that *there is not* a true experience and a false experience (the one in quotation marks), but two experiences that are both true: one of them, the therapeutic one, is based on understanding and respect of inner experience, including the one of desiring and fearing the same thing at the same moment.

I wondered if, during our separation, I risked becoming such a mother in Melania's mind. Seeking e-mail contact with me: was it a way for her to test whether I was this kind of object? Or whether I was able to take care of her and keep her in my mind?

I dreamed that my box holding Rocco's things (photos, sunglasses, a birthday card, a printed fortune from a fortune cookie, a change purse, a pre-paid phone card, a home pregnancy test I did) was empty. My mother had emptied it without telling me. She had thrown everything away. I was devastated and I felt like Rocco had died all over again. I had nothing left of him.

During another of our separations, Melania confided her anguish to me electronically. Here below is our exchange, which helped us to banish the threat to our relationship:

Hi, doctor. Sorry to disturb you on vacation. I've been thinking about this for a while. I'd like to drop the analysis. I'm tired of thinking. Maybe I've reached a limit, my own limit, and I don't want to go beyond it. The whole period of the analysis coincided with my story with Rocco. The analysis is all tied up with Rocco. Rocco is all tied up with finality. And the analysis is too. So maybe it's better to make it happen instead of waiting for it to happen on its own. Better to sweep away everything I care about instead of losing it along the way. M.

Melania was unable to grasp that I could hold her in my mind when I was away. Without seeing or hearing me, she felt that in my mind there was no room for her: dropping the analysis was her way of preserving at least a sense of agency.

Dear Melania, Not everything gets lost along the way. Some things remain, and some things get rediscovered after being lost. I hope that we'll 'rediscover' each other in January. I know how lonely and tough this Christmas is for you. Please write to me if you feel like it. VL.

Melania's e-mails were also pebbles tossed up against her analyst's closed window, clattering against the glass to wake him (and probably his erotic interest, a defence against the void of depression she feared to fall into). Some of them did work, because they surprised me – they hit home. So that's why I had the feeling that she 'went out of my door and came back in through my window'! It was exactly what Melania wanted to do: she heard my door closing behind her but she still needed to be with me, at that time and place. Thus her e-mails weren't just pebbles tossed on the ground to help find her path in analysis; they were also 'pebbles thrown *against* the window of the analysis room', in order to keep me alive and awake), even when I was away: awake and watching over her attempt to bring parts of her self to life (Stolorow and Atwood, 1992). They were pebbles meant to ensure that I, too, didn't lose sight of the path of the analysis and of herself.

### Louis

So hold me, Mom, in your long arms.  
 In your automatic arms. Your electronic arms.  
 In your arms.  
 So hold me, Mom, in your long arms.  
 Your petrochemical arms. Your military arms.  
 In your electronic arms.

(Laurie Anderson, 1982, 'O Superman (for Massenet)')

During the course of analysis with Louis, a very chilly character, I understood that he used the cyberspace as a 'psychic retreat' (Steiner, 1993). The most famous metaphor to describe the schizoid condition is Fairbairn's: 'seeing the world through a glass pane': how does then Louis see me, I wondered, and how does he see the world, through the screen of his computer? When Louis started his analysis he was scarcely motivated and not at all in touch with his psychological and relational pain. "My parents", he remarked casually, "say I live my life at the computer".

In the first sessions I realized that, ever since he was a boy, Louis had constructed parallel realities. He was the kind of boy who would fall under a spell – the intelligent daydreamer – but his teachers noted that he was always distracted. His family was emotionally sterilized; his mother suffered major depression, his father was a severe obsessive-compulsive. Cyberspace was one of Louis's three dissociative mental retreats; the others were gay cruising and atonal music. Stepping into these retreats, Louis stepped into peace and immobility, as if in a trance: life came to a halt, in a state of 'suspended animation'.<sup>3</sup> As I will also say in my conclusions, these three dissociative ways of retreating share the idea of the retreat as a place out of the common reality, in which omnipotent fantasies can flow without control, and the containment of the self is 'entrusted' to substitute objects (mental places, but also repetitive behaviours or personal rites), compensating for the inaccessibility or the lack of the primary object. In this way, thanks to moments of estrangement, anonymity and secretiveness<sup>4</sup> ('being in a nowhere land where nobody can reach you'), Louis could activate a sort of 'dissociative adaptation', producing or creating states of suspension and detachment that enabled him to stay away from the pain of reality, loss and dependence.

Behind a schizoid-like personality there are always relationships stripped of emotion with a de-personalized child-object, who soon begins to feel different from the rest, and so was for Louis. The entire schizoid-state repertoire appeared in his dreams: an icy crust for a skin, a scenic view painted on glass window panes, an ivory tower, a fortress, a deserted island, a room within a room, a prison, etc.

Over the years, Louis told me (initially with complete detachment) of his need to *seek* or *create* dissociative moments in order to survive.<sup>5</sup> Masud Khan (1966, p. 70), who sees the schizoid's whole life as shaped by a series of dissociations, calls them "organised states of absorption with oneself". I thought of Louis's cybernetic suspended states as a signpost saying '*noli me tangere*' ('don't touch me!').

The Greek term *narké* (torpor) suggests elements of continuity between schizoid states and some narcissistic conditions, and I think that this is true for Louis. Such a continuum is also identified by Ogden (1989, p. 84) to refer to that aspect of

<sup>3</sup>It is not surprising that, in atonal music, quantitative and mathematic matches between different notes prevail over the emotional content expressed by the music.

<sup>4</sup>The theme of hiding is very commonplace in the evolutive narrative of boys who will become gay adults. Louis's need to hide and his dissociative activities were probably reinforced by worries over gender nonconformity and by the fear of being discovered.

<sup>5</sup>In his essay *Schizoid Factors in the Personality*, Fairbairn (1940) writes: "Contrary to common opinion, schizoid individuals not regressed too much are capable of psychological comprehension to a greater extent than almost any other category of person, normal or abnormal."

personality “that is organised around the unconscious defensive attachment of aspects of the self to internal objects”. I was struck when I heard Louis use words that were very similar to those of a narcissistic patient who, describing herself as an egg, said: “to share feelings would be like provoking an injury to myself that would leave me undefended, the precious yolk would have seeped out and been lost forever” (Modell, 1980, p. 260; 1984). Recognizing the almost ‘physical’ link between the narcissistic core (the ‘precious yolk’) and the autistic shell – Louis’s grandiose, self-nurturing and self-absorbing attitude *and* his intangible but fragile cocoon – was for me a moment of deep clinical insight. Indeed, Louis expressed a feeling of superiority based on an over-evaluation that was both defensive and ‘secretive’ about his inner world, and on a narcissistic inflation of the ego that came from the very secret possession of internal objects with which he identified. He stepped into my office with a bored and yet challenging expression. After a long silence he would say something like: “So what’s the news today?” or “Nice weather today, isn’t it?” Then he withdrew into himself, leaving me with a sense of loneliness and uselessness, leaving me feeling like an unprepared student unable to solve a simple maths problem. Listening to my countertransference I started to think that Louis was building a dissociative, omnipotent retreat – later we called it ‘the Bubble’ or the *‘noli me tangere’* – as an illusion of omnipotent self-sufficiency and a defence against the fear of dependence and emotions.

From the Bubble he could manipulate the dissociative states, sometimes involving me as well. I *had to* collaborate with him, but in a controlled and limited fashion. Louis possessed only fragments of incomplete experiences, ‘frozen’ in operative units, and I felt as if he was asking me to ‘complete his experiences with words’ for him, and to contain his fragmented emotional states. I thought that showing him that I could ‘wear his shoes’ and feel what he was feeling, even in his dissociative or delusional states of mind, could support the integration of his relationship with me and of his thinking and feeling selves. Maybe he needed to hear my words describing his states of mind so that he could also understand that I was both in touch and different from him. However, I was the one who had to feel the anger, the rage, the need, and the desperation inside him – because, as the title of Daniel Dennett’s famous essay says, “you can’t make a computer that feels pain” (Dennett, 1978).

For a long time Louis gave me to understand that his computer ‘was a better psychoanalyst than I was’. I accepted his challenge, but inwardly I had doubts: the computer is incapable of reverie.<sup>6</sup> That is, it cannot transform the projected anguish, work it through, and give it back; it cannot perform the ‘reflective function’, thinking the other’s thoughts (Fonagy and Target, 2000). But it can, for a period, function as a containing ‘skin’, and my hypothesis is that Louis was unconsciously waiting for an environment in which to relinquish the Bubble and find the possibility of developing his ‘human’ skin (Winnicott, 1958).

Louis, who had to ‘learn’ not to lean on his pathological parents, came to the conclusion that it was more useful and less self-destructive to depend only on his

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<sup>6</sup>Bion (1962) uses the term reverie in referring to a psychological state in which the mother [(m)Other] is capable of serving successfully the ‘containing function’ for the projection of unspeakable thoughts and ‘unheard’ feelings in the child/the analysand.

omnipotent self-sufficiency – a ‘solution’ not so rare in people whose parents are unable to understand what their children feel and to help them to mentalize (Fonagy and Target, 1996, 2000). In his solitary psychic development, Louis found himself entrusting the containment of his own self to substitutional–protective places and objects that made up for the lack of maternal empathy and the negative outcome of the development of the processes of idealization. The lack of acceptance reflected in his mother and the missing ‘holding’ factors seemed to be at the root of Louis’s attempt to seek/create intimacy and containment through machines (the computer), sounds (atonal music), or foreign bodies (anonymous sex) – all unconscious replicas of the inaccessible caregiver. The unconscious demand was so potent that Louis nearly succeeded in his paradoxical endeavour: endowing these otherwise non-human bodies with fallacious ‘reverie’ and withdrawing into a world of fallacious fantasies. Could analytic process ease the passage from an autistic condition to a more transitional one?

Living ‘inside’ the computer, Louis induced autistic sensations in his own body. Through bodily sensations or feelings he created a world of sensations that enveloped him and in which he lived full-time: “I sit down in front of my computer, put my hands on the keyboard and feel a flux unifying me and my computer. It’s something like Escher’s *Drawing Hands*: I draw it, it draws me”. According to David Rosenfeld (2001), we could describe this condition as “a primitive survival system and a way of achieving an equally primitive concept of identity – a way to avoid disappearing”. This kind of encapsulation experience seems to provide Louis’s self with a sense of cohesion, an envelope for the skin.

My hypothesis is that Louis, before and during his analysis, sought to find in retreat-objects – the places, environment-sensations, and shapes that were mechanical or at least estranging, but virtually vital – those functions of containment, soothing, mirroring, and reflection capable of nurturing and transforming the Self. I tried to respect Louis’s withdrawal into his retreats, without being judgemental or pronouncing them pathological, and without becoming depressed myself. At a certain point, as I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Louis made a comment that seemed to be a veiled suggestion: “My computer is a better psychoanalyst than you are”, he said, and I took up the challenge and began to ‘compete’ with his refuges and their apparent perfection, so that Louis could learn to feel joy without a devastating fear of sharing, of warmth, and of the unexpected.

Here is a good example of how I engaged in this competition. Once Louis came to the session very agitated, because his computer had crashed, and at the shop where he had bought it they told him they had to keep it for one month, more or less, for repair.

“I can’t live one month without my PC”, he said to me. It happened that I spontaneously made a joke: “Well, I am in good shape, though ...”. Probably it was my way of making Louis think about his own association between the computer and the analyst, taking advantage in a moment in which my ‘rival’ was recovering in the computer hospital. I know it was a ‘cheap shot’, but Louis, who is very intelligent, answered quite firmly: “Yeah, no difference: soon you will go on vacation ...”. So we started a repartee about trusting the human object who has ‘a private life and goes on vacation’ versus the non-human object which ‘can crash’.



This session became a sort of milestone for our analysis, especially when I agreed in considering how helpful, comforting and animated without being judgemental a computer can be, but also how helpful and protecting a human relationship can be, even if the other is on vacation. I said: "Why not try to get a more balanced life between something that can crash and leave you alone, and someone who can go on vacation but from there can do a lot of things, for example, keeping you in his mind". It was a session about limits and advantages of being human and not human, about trust, about being in and out of control. Again, a 'why you can't make a computer that feels pain' session.

It is always hard to identify when and how a change happens in analysis, in this case a rather desperate attachment to a computer changing to the glimmer of an acceptance of the 'human' analyst. How did Louis consider the possibility of moving from a mechanical, non-human dependency to a relationship in which he could learn how to dream and how to think the thoughts of others? Louis did his navigating (sexual or not) in a state that seems to reflect an infantile need to *warm up* a mother whose coldness and emotional distance renders her almost *mechanical*. The concept of 'intimacy inside a stranger' helps us to understand the particular condition in which human closeness is lived inside the non-human mechanism of the computer or inside the strangeness of the cruised stranger or in some suspended sonority of the atonal music so important to Louis.

My experience of him was characterized by the search for a relational rhythm, a tailored-to-fit timing made of giving (attention, interpretations, words, contact) and waiting (silence, distraction, distance, solitude, isolation). We could call it a technique both of sharing and detachment, always fostering the analytic process, poised between the danger of seduction and the danger of destructive remoteness. This alternation predisposed both of us to a mental functioning characterized by moments of deep reciprocal interest and self-centred solitude. Certainly an important role was played by the progressive, self-evident reduction of the centrality, for Louis, of the 'secret' – a 'secret' that I initially respected and even supported. Another important element was the crash, clinically lucky and well timed, of his computer!

I began writing this piece when I heard that Louis had bought himself a cactus to keep by his computer. "It doesn't need much watering", he told me, "only once a month". Dry and thorny, but it was the first form of life on his table. 'Only once a month' was clearly a warning, but also the recognition of a nourishment experience (from him to the cactus, and from me to him – and we made jokes about him as a cactus) and probably an indirect communication about the ideal frequency of his 'therapeutic diet'.

Then traces of life have finally begun appearing in his dreams. In one dream, *Louis was attending a funeral but during the interment he was anguished to discover a note in his pocket written by the dead man. So he asked himself, "Is he really dead?"*

It was 'a bad dream', Louis concluded – and I felt that it was the idea of being alive causing him a kind of uneasiness.

It is too early to claim the victory of the lively uncertainties of human connectedness against the infallible certainties of non-human ones, although I think we may some day be successful. As Hamlet says (II. ii): "I could be bounded in a

nut-shell, and count myself a king of infinite space ... were it not that I have bad dreams”.

### Discussion

Even if different, the cases of Melania and Louis can help us to think about some issues related to the entrance of cyber-dimension in the analytic relationship. Let us start from Melania’s e-mails. It’s hard to say why a patient sends an e-mail to his analyst. Based on my clinical experience, I can formulate some hypotheses about the moments when a patient is most likely to choose this sort of communication:

- i. when the fear of losing the object grows;
- ii. when the patient wants the analyst to recognize parts of her/his self that are still uncertain or too charged with pain or shame-elements that she/he cannot yet speak about, perhaps, but can already write about;
- iii. when the desires associated with transference are frustrated, leading to anger;
- iv. when an erotic transference arises, with the anxiety that something can ‘happen’ during the session.

A more in-depth discussion of the difference between the use of e-mails and other possible forms of contact with analysts outside sessions (for example, messages on the answering machine, ordinary mail letters, direct phone calls, being around the analyst’s neighbourhood, leaving behind possessions such as keys, etc.) would be interesting, but lies outside the limit of this paper. The great explosion of, and the strong impact of, e-mail communication on our lives is a matter of fact; but in this paper I cannot undermine the sensory relevance of this tool and its characteristics, which I will explain later, discussing the compromises reached, by Melania, in e-mail use, with issues such as the search for intimacy, the fear and control of both erotic/incestuous and aggressive feelings, and also the fear of both loss and engulfment.

Glenn Gabbard (2001) writes about an interesting case. Rachel, a university teacher nearing 40, used e-mail to discuss her desire and sexual fantasies about her analyst, something she wasn’t able to put into words in the analyst’s office. The relational configuration behind Rachel’s e-mails was an attempt to reproduce a childhood scenario in the analytical context, and it was possible to work through it precisely because Gabbard was able *first* to accept and *then* to interpret the e-mail message in the setting.

By the way, it is interesting that spoken dialogue, more than a written exchange, seems to confer ‘reality’ on a phenomenon. Rachel, for example, feared that if she *spoke* about her sexual desire, the analyst would *violate* the boundaries of the setting. An e-mail message, though, as the patient said, “is out there, and it’s already in the past. Therefore, I don’t have to be responsible for it” (Gabbard, 2001, p. 726).

It’s not just the difference in reality level attributed to e-mail messages that differentiates them from free associations. For Rachel and Melania, writing means keeping a better handle on the mixture of images, desires, and traumatic memories, and it also means lingering in the analyst’s mind. This allows them to manage their own narcissistic fragility and their worries about being misheard, revealed and misunderstood: “one thing I like about e-mail is that you *get* every word I say,

unlike verbal communication where you don't really take in everything I speak" (ibid.).

E-mails are ambivalent but they also express an attempt to regulate the tension between the fear of being exposed and violated, on the one hand, and the fear of not being considered and comprehended.

The person sending an e-mail message is alone, but not alone. The apparent privacy allows for freer expression, but the awareness of the other receiving the e-mail allows for passionate attachment and highly emotional expressiveness. The Internet has led to new definitions of privacy as well as of intimacy.

(Gabbard, 2001, p. 734)

The analytical task is to make sure that e-mails to the analyst don't become part of an alternate reality, separate from the analytic one. During the sessions, the content or even just the emotional atmosphere of the e-mail should be taken up as another approach to the type of interaction that is essential to the development of the ability to *mentalize*: a child playing with an adult or with an older child who not only plays the game but comments on it.

The question of whether the analyst should reply, via e-mail, to a patient's e-mail is the wrong question; it's a question that cannot be manualized. The answer must be found within the context of the relationship and must be informed by the broader debate of *enactment*, by which we mean a "reciprocally induced relational episode that is revealed through behaviour" (Filippini and Ponsi, 1993).<sup>7</sup>

At a certain point in the analysis, Rachel developed an intense erotic transference, but she couldn't speak to Gabbard about her desire and her sexual fantasies. The analysis was on the verge of imploding when the patient discovered that it was easier for her to talk about her sexuality via e-mail. This relational configuration was a repeat of an event from her childhood: Rachel had had sexual relations with her brother, but she couldn't talk about it with anyone, especially not with her mother, a sadistic and unpredictable woman who had taught her, early on, that certain things were not to be mentioned. 'Certain things' were thus unsayable for Rachel. But she did say that sometimes she thought the incest with her brother was the only thing her mother didn't know about her, adding that this was what finally gave her the sense of an identity separate from her mother's. Her e-mails to her analyst reinforced this sense, as well as the sense of having an intimate rapport with an object without losing sight of the boundaries of her self. Rachel's desires and sexual fantasies, Gabbard continues (2001, pp. 724–5), "seemed to increase prior to my absences and especially during my absences", and one of the functions of the e-mail messages was "to maintain a connection in fantasy with me during my absences, as well as between the sessions". Just like Melania's pebbles.

Contemporary psychoanalysis has clarified that fear of losing the object presents both as loss of its sustaining internal image and as loss of one's self in the mind of

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<sup>7</sup>This debate has split practitioners into two camps that I think offer a useful framework for approaching the issue. One side views *enactment* as a fairly unusual event during the course of analysis, where the analyst assumes a behaviour that matches the patient's behaviour, thus collecting clues that will be useful in the analytical process; the other side views *enactments* as perfectly common events, insofar as the analytic process is nothing more than an uninterrupted string of *enactments* performed by both members of the analytic couple (Filippini and Ponsi, 1993; Hirsch, 1998; Jacobs, 1986, 2001; Lingiardi, 2002; Ponsi, 2000; Renik, 1995, 1999a,b).

the other. The object can be lost because it moved off before the subject acquired the ability to preserve its image in evocative memory, or because it was destroyed in fantasy. An e-mail that lands *in* the analyst's computer, where it can stay forever and be read anywhere, many times over, can serve to negate distance, to transform separation, Winnicott would say, into a kind of union.

Communicating with the analyst via e-mail can serve a wide range of relational intentions and executive expressions: being angry or timid, confessional or seductive, venting one's feelings, reviewing and processing the sessions cognitively or affectively, expressing sides of one's self that are dissociated, warped, sexualized, traumatized, or simply frightened, and so on.

Located as it is *halfway* between action and thought – or, actually, containing elements of both categories – e-mail sets itself apart from other forms of communication. It sometimes implies greater reflection than a simple verbal or physical 'outpouring', and it permits the writer to re-read his words. It goes without saying that its position on the thought/action continuum depends largely on the time and situation at the moment of writing (impulsive, aesthetic, reflective ...) and their motivational context. For example, computer-mediated communication with the analyst can also be used to keep alive an erotic transference building up a reality that is dissociated by the analytic room.

An actual *deus in machina*, e-mail brings together the pre-modern epistolary tradition with postmodern digital speed; it unites past and present, individuality and globality. Computer-mediated communication allows the user to 'play' with the value of the reality attributed to what he writes. It can thus contain transitional elements as defined by Winnicott: the transitional object, in fact, lies halfway between Me and Not-Me, between reality and fantasy, between near and far, between that which we create and that which we discover. Serving as a potential space between subject and environment (a space for experimenting with the Self between me and myself, and between me and the other), the on-line experience – which in many cases facilitates and feeds dissociation – can also help us to illuminate the difficult path to survival that lies between separation anxiety and being engulfed by the object. Analytic process has to help the patient to change it in the capacity to shift between intimacy and distance. While Melania used technology to communicate with me, albeit in a diverted way, for Louis virtual space was a 'dissociated retreat' located on the border between sleeping and waking, which for years went untouched by our analytical discourse. Louis's personality, in fact, corresponded more to the description of the schizoid condition put forward by Ogden (1989), in line with Fairbairn, than to the schizoid personality disorder according to DSM-IV (see also Doidge, 2001). His psychological position also presented many points of contact with what Ogden calls a *sensory-dominated contiguous-autistic* position. For Louis, the computer – the keyboard, the constant flow of word-shapes that appear as signs on the screen ("my little ants", said Louis) – was a skin-shape, an epidemic extension, with a precise appeal to his sensorial being. In line with the hypothesis of Esther Bick (1968, 1986), his 'second skin formation' was an attempt to create a substitute for a deteriorated sense of cohesion of the epidemic surfaces. "Often", writes Ogden (1989, p. 71), "the individual attempts to use the sensory

experience of adhering to the surface of the object in order to correct the integrity of his own surface”.

Since the beginning of the analysis, it was clear how Louis *used* the computer:

- i. to experience cyberspace as a ‘space between’, a place from which to inspect the world, but which nevertheless guarantees protection from relational anguish – a space in which to make the initial steps into a world inhabited by others, but contained in a box that he himself controls;
- ii. to get the big amount of ‘personal isolation’ (Ogden, 1994) demanded by his personality organization, and to seek and create a ‘psychic retreat’ through micro-dissociative forms of pseudo-identity;
- iii. to attempt to activate an emotional relationship, but in a non-human object – to warm up a mechanical mother.

Richard Chefetz (2000) points out that literature on dissociative disturbances has underemphasized the role that fantasy elaboration can play in the creation of complex intrapsychic worlds in certain subjects. Chefetz believes it is useful to think of this ‘interior world’ as a ‘third skin’: a world made of dissociative adaptations, in which subjects with repetitive experiences of humiliation, mortification, ridiculization, and sadistic control can recover themselves.

Dissociation can be considered an adaptive solution whose aim is to preserve the continuity of the self (Bromberg, 1998). Putnam (1989) understood that at the root of infantile dissociation, the idea of subdividing pain into separate compartments (music, computer, anonymous sex) is done to avoid having to confront it all, continuously. From childhood on, frequent dissociative movements accompanied Louis’s experiences. During the analytical process we tried to modulate his dissociative needs from the (macro) level of disintegrative flights from reality to the (micro) level of occasional displacements from the field of relationships.

John Steiner (1993) calls a ‘psychic retreat’ the experience or the place of isolation one withdraws to when wishing to flee from an unbearable reality. It usually means a place in the mind, but it can also be a repetitive behaviour or a personal ritual. It is about choosing objects that already exist in the environment, or objects chosen by the subject. Psychic retreats serve as a medication for the self who feels damaged, when facing bereavement and the psychic pain connected with fear of loss or with the experience of loss itself.

It should be noted that one characteristic of ‘psychic retreats’ is a particular kind of relationship with reality, in which reality is neither fully accepted nor fully repudiated. This ambivalence, and the time spent in a psychic retreat, may even be helpful for the ego; but problems crop up when one stays at length, or even permanently, in the psychic retreat. At that point, retreating may become so regular that it stops being a transitory covering and starts to resemble a way of life where the subject may come to inhabit a fantasy world that he/she prefers to the real world.

The relationships with autistic forms or objects are essentially ‘perfect’ specifically because they lie outside the unpredictability of human relationships and, at the same time, they represent a necessary pause or safe retreat in the process of becoming a human. In their precision and reliability, such autistic-contiguous

relationships can be compared to a machine and therefore may be viewed as a substitute for the human environment: a non-human one (Searles, 1960).

Louis was really emphatically cut off from interpersonal involvement in the external world and tended to generate his own autarchic reality. But calling the world inhabited by Louis ‘lonely’ would be hasty and wrong. Instead one might say that Louis lived in a condition of “undergroundness regarding anything that is outside of his own mind [...] the emptiness of a self that is imaginary because it is disconnected from intersubjective human experience [...]” (Ogden, 1989, p. 86). The ‘phenomenology’ of Louis’s world had to do with a sphere of experience situated between inner object relationships outside time and a condition that is “more primitive and inarticulate: a sensory-based world of autistic shapes and objects” (Ogden, 1989, p. 108). The forms of personal isolation chosen/created by Louis seemed to function by substituting the mother-environment with forms of self-generated sensoriality. It was probably not only a reconstruction of the experience with the caregiver (for reasons of reparation), but also a construction of a psychic covering that was sufficiently controllable and containing.

Internet and e-mails are means of communication, and their psychological functions depend on how they are used. Some people can use them, just as Melania and Louis did, in order to build up a dissociative area of experience where they can escape from, or distort and deny, human relatedness. Melania used the e-mails to protect her idealized relationships from her internal mother and as a defence against the anxiety of not being held in the other’s mind during separations. Louis didn’t know how to deal with his emotions and used the internet as a retreat in a non-human frozen environment, but he couldn’t help trying to warm it up. I considered that my task was to help them to understand how they used these tools as alternatives to the analytic relationship and to carry their non-human unrealities into our relationship, in order to give them a human and ‘real’ meaning, facilitating the shift from compulsive usage to a transformative use of their object.

### Translations of summary

**Mit der Unwirklichkeit spielen: Übertragung und Computer.** In diesem Beitrag beschreibe ich die Beeinflussung der analytischen Beziehung durch den Cyberspace. Meine Überlegungen setzen bei zwei Fallgeschichten an. In der ersten beschreibe ich meine Patientin Melania, die in einer bestimmten Situation der Analyse begann, mir Emails zu senden, und dadurch beinahe ein “Parallelsetting” aufbaute. Ich beschreibe die Beziehungsdynamik, die mit dem Eindringen der Emails in die Grenzen unserer psychoanalytischen Beziehung zusammenhing. Der zweite Fall betrifft Louis, einen 25 jährigen jungen Mann mit einer schizoiden Persönlichkeit, die den Cyberspace als Ort des psychischen Rückzugs benutzte. Im Laufe der Jahre – anfangs aus unendlicher Distanz – erzählte mir Louis von seinem Bedürfnis, dissoziative Momente zu erzeugen. Diese Rückzüge wirken auf Louis immobilisierend und beruhigend und können Eigenschaften einer Trance annehmen: das Leben kommt in einem Zustand “suspendierter Lebendigkeit” zum Stillstand. Erkennbar wird, dass Louis den Computer einerseits benutzt, um zu versuchen, wie ein nicht-menschliches Objekt zu leben und sich vor Beziehungsängsten zu schützen, und andererseits, um eine sich mechanisch verhaltende Mutter zu erwärmen. Melania benutzte die Technik, um mit mir rund um die Uhr zu kommunizieren; für Louis war der virtuelle Raum ein “dissoziativer Rückzug” an der Grenze zwischen Schlafen und Wachen, der jahrelang von unserem analytischen Diskurs unberührt blieb. Beiden Patienten diente der Computer als Möglichkeit der emotionalen Regulierung; die analytische Beziehung verfolgte das Ziel, diesem Instrument eine gewisse relationale Bedeutung zu vermitteln, indem sie die Entwicklung von einem zwanghaften Gebrauch des Objekts zu einem transformierenden Gebrauch unterstützte.

**Jugando con la irrealidad: Transferencia y ordenador.** En este trabajo el autor describe el impacto del espacio cibernético sobre la relación analítica. Las reflexiones del autor parten de dos casos clínicos. En la primera historia describe el caso de Melania, una paciente que, en cierto momento de su análisis, empezó a enviar al analista

correos electrónicos, construyendo casi un “encuadre paralelo”. El autor describe la dinámica relacional vinculada a la irrupción del correo electrónico dentro de la relación analítica. El segundo caso es el de Louis, un joven de 25 años con personalidad esquizoide, que emplea el ciberespacio como retiro psíquico. A lo largo de los años Louis pudo evocar, inicialmente desde una distancia sideral, su necesidad de crear momentos disociados. La entrada en este tipo de refugios producía en el paciente un apaciguamiento inmovilizante, que asume sin duda las características de un estado de trance: la vida se detiene en un estado de “animación suspendida”. Podemos considerar que Louis usa su ordenador como un intento de vivir como un objeto no humano y protegerse de la angustia relacional, pero también para infundir calor a una madre mecánica. Melania empleaba la tecnología para comunicarse con su analista, aunque de forma indirecta; para Louis, el espacio virtual era un “retiro disociado” situado en la frontera entre el sueño y la vigilia, durante años excluido del discurso analítico. Para ambos pacientes el ordenador era una herramienta de regulación emocional, y la relación analítica apuntaba a dar a esta herramienta algún significado relacional, de manera que se pudiera realizar una evolución de un uso compulsivo a un uso transformador del objeto.

**Jouer avec l'irréalité: Transfert et ordinateur.** Dans cet article, l'auteur décrit l'impact de l'espace cybernétique sur la relation analytique. Ces réflexions sont issues de deux histoires cliniques. La première est celle de Melania, une patiente qui, à partir d'un certain moment de son analyse, a commencé à envoyer des courriels, construisant ainsi, pourrait-on dire, un « cadre parallèle ». L'auteur décrit les mouvements relationnels liés à l'irruption des courriers électroniques dans le cadre de la relation analytique. La seconde histoire est celle de Louis, jeune homme de 25 ans, de personnalité schizoïde, utilisant l'espace cybernétique comme refuge psychique. Au fil des années, Louis a pu évoquer, d'abord à partir d'un éloignement sidéral, sa nécessité à créer des moments dissociatifs. L'entrée dans ce type de refuge procurait au patient une pacification dans l'immobilité, qui partage sans doute certains points communs avec l'état de transe: la vie devient un arrêt en état d'« animation suspendue ». Nous pouvons comprendre que l'usage que Louis a fait de l'ordinateur était une tentative pour vivre dans un objet non-humain, de se protéger de l'angoisse relationnelle, mais également de réchauffer une mère mécanique. Melania a utilisé la technologie pour communiquer avec l'analyste, quoique de façon indirecte; pour Louis, l'espace virtuel représentait un « refuge dissociatif », situé à la frontière entre le sommeil et l'état de veille qui, pendant des années, est resté inaccessible au discours analytique commun analyste-patient. Pour les deux patients, l'ordinateur a été un instrument de régulation émotionnelle, et la relation analytique a eu pour but de donner à cet outil une signification émotionnelle, facilitant l'évolution d'un usage compulsif à une utilisation transformationnelle de l'objet.

**Gioco e realtà (virtuale): Transfert e computer.** In questo lavoro descrivo l'impatto che lo spazio cibernetico ha sul rapporto analitico. Le mie riflessioni prendono avvio da due casi clinici. Nel primo caso, presento una paziente, Melania, che ad un certo punto della sua analisi ha cominciato a inviarmi mail, costruendo così una specie di 'setting parallelo'. Descrivo le dinamiche relazionali legate all'irruzione della posta elettronica nei confini del rapporto psicoanalitico. Il secondo caso è quello di Louis, un giovane venticinquenne con personalità schizoide che usa lo spazio cibernetico come ritiro psichico. Nel corso degli anni, Louis mi ha fatto sapere, inizialmente da una distanza siderale, del suo bisogno di creare momenti dissociativi. Creare questo isolamento procura a Louis un senso di inamovibile pacatezza, che può assumere le caratteristiche di uno stato di trance: la vita si ferma come in un'immagine fissa. L'uso che Louis fa del computer può essere visto come il tentativo di vivere in un oggetto non-umano e di proteggersi dall'angoscia relazionale, ma anche come il tentativo di riscaldare una madre meccanica. Melania usava invece la tecnologia per comunicare con me, sia pure in modo indiretto; per Louis, lo spazio virtuale era un 'ritiro dissociativo', situato al confine fra il sonno e la veglia, che per anni è rimasto escluso dal discorso analitico. Per entrambi i pazienti, il computer costituiva uno strumento di regolazione degli affetti, e il rapporto analitico ha cercato di dare a questo mezzo un significato relazionale in modo che si realizzasse un passaggio da un uso pulsionale ad uno trasformativo.

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