TURNED ON:

ROMANTIC LOVE, PSYCHOANALYSIS AND OUR

ATTACHMENTS TO NEW AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract: This paper uses a psychoanalytic lens to consider the impact of new and social media (SNS) on relationships, intimacy and romantic love. It considers the unconscious factors that underlie our burgeoning and sometimes rather desperate attachments to modern, mobile technologies. Although Freud tended to see romance as a sign of infantile and regressed behavior, more contemporary analysts and psychotherapists question this view seeing romance as an important element of mature relationships and a vital aspect of psychosocial development. While the growth of social and new media can be simplistically demonized, the writer suggests these developments are an important reflection of Hopper's *social unconscious* with its emphasis on culture and a wider connectivity than the purely personal. Prensky's research proposes that the rapid dissemination of digital technology has created a discontinuity between *digital natives* and *digital immigrants* with accompanying changes in brain function. The paper suggests that dysfunctional patterns of attachment stemming from inadequate early care have a considerable impact on a person's inner world leading at times to a *psychic retreat* and problems with using new and social media creatively and romantically. A number of short case examples from clinical practice illustrate the central themes.

Introduction

Within the world of psychoanalysis, the importance of good enough early attachments (Bowlby, 1969; Fonagy, 2001) in fostering future psychological health has become an increasingly

important element of post-Freudian thinking. There has been an intensifying focus on the quality of *interpsychic* or *interpersonal* social relating in promoting psychological health (e.g. Mitchell, 1988; Bolonini, 2004). This focus now complements the significance that has historically been given to *intrapsychic* relating and that occurs, in fantasy, between 'objects' in our inner worlds. But intrapsychic relating stems from our earliest *interpersonal* bonds – usually with our parents. If all goes well enough, our inner parental mental objects promote an appreciation of us being lovable and wanted as well as destructive and impossible at times. We get a sense that we are capable of loving others with their own separate needs *as well as* having needs ourselves that require attention.

When we are young we tend to experience our parents in a romanticized way. They represent the ideals to which we look up. We aspire to either become our mothers and fathers or marry them: their weaknesses and incapacities tend to be overlooked, repressed. This is an important stage of primitive omnipotence that provides us with a sense of safety and control while we are still very vulnerable and need caring for in an intensive way. In the end, the idealization of parents has to be let go if we are to become psychologically mature. However, there is a long path of developmental disillusionment and loss that needs solidly to be trodden in order to achieve more mature states of mind. This includes the understanding that our parents and ourselves are ordinary, flawed but hopefully also loving, talented and sociable people capable of separate future lives that will offer experiences of adventure and curiosity that are not dominated by fear or grandiosity. I will argue that being capable of independent romantic, loving relationships is a vital part of this journey.

The patients whom I see are often not this lucky and the same is true for the patients and clients of therapists I supervise. Early attachments may well have been insecure and disorganised and this has a powerful influence on the rest of life and, in particular, on the way that a person relates to others. Old emotional patterns of dysfunctional relating from childhood tend to dictate much of the therapy as well as other relational aspects of life: suspicion dominates over more liberated feelings of trust and romance (Bowlby, 1969).

This article considers what psychoanalysis and clinical practice, with its emphasis on unconscious human motivation and fantasy, might bring to thinking about the burgeoning and different types of attachments that we now form through social networking services (SNS) and other Internet digital technologies (new media). Are they helping us to feel more or less

'connected' to others? More particularly, what role do they play in cultivating romantic love in this country and the rest of the world? And in the context in which I am writing, it feels fitting to use a current definition of romance from the web: 'Romance is the expressive and pleasurable feeling from an emotional attraction towards another person associated with love' (Wikipedia definition of romance (love), accessed June 2014).[1]

New and social media as emergent manifestations of the 'social unconscious'
I do not have a sense of gloom and doom about the new and social media explosion of the last few years, but I am aware of the different ways that it can be used creatively and destructively and that its power in this respect is almost limitless and impossible to control. To my mind, the harnessing of the internet to provide global online social experience with known and unknown others can be considered as an emergent technological manifestation of a collective, social level of mind that has been postulated in a number of parallel ways by Jungian and Freudian analysts and is commented on by Earl Hopper (1992: 11):

> The concept of the social unconscious differs from the traditional Jungian concept of the collective unconscious, with its emphasis on the inheritance of acquired characteristics. However, it is similar to more contemporary Jungian views of the "shared unconscious," which emphasize the interpersonal, the intersubjective, and socialization in general (Zinkin, 1979).

Hopper (1992: 11) also cites the psychoanalyst Ethel Spector-Pearson who refers to 'the cultural unconscious' (Spector-Pearson 1992: 383). She explores how the cultural unconscious intersects with the individual psyche to produce differing narratives of romantic love. In some societies, particularly in the West, romance has had a significant effect on the imaginative and emotional lives of the population, while elsewhere, it has been virtually absent. However, it is clear that social and new media now appear to be changing romantic practice on a more global scale.

Hopper's social unconscious and Pearson's cultural unconscious produces forms of connectivity that are less related to the differentiated individualized reflective thinking that Freud concentrated on and that have dominated in the West. The social and cultural unconscious

represents the expression of more synchronistic and implicit processes of mental and emotional linking and contact that, while not hard-wired, are, like dreaming and myth, unimpeded by time and space (Stern et al. 1998).

With all its possible misuses, social and other new media, to some extent, connect with, speak to and allay our deepest and most basic inner urgent fears of human aloneness and abandonment as well as enabling our most primitive needs to make a basic attachment to others. Social networking and new media can be envisaged as a spreading out into fields of consciousness of the powerful interconnected bedrock of those aspects of unconscious process that are shared and collective, rather than personal and nuanced. Thus, one is aware of an emergence, a concretization of aspects of our inner worlds that represents such burgeoning power that the experience naturally creates fears and concerns about its safe containment and the possibilities of collective madness. This seems to me to parallel many people's fundamental concerns about their individual capabilities to contain their emotional and mental lives without very strict and cynical constraints – particularly when it comes to romantic love.

The last fifteen years or so have seen the phenomenal, almost uncanny, growth in the arena of online social experiences with the emergence of such giants as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and LinkedIn alongside their more simple communication siblings Skype, email and texting. This is having an unstoppable impact on life, particularly with young people who are 'digital natives' as opposed to older 'digital immigrants' (Prensky, 2001a). Natives are increasingly 'turned on' semi-permanently to a social networking site of some kind. In some cases, this group is 'always on', never out of touch or alone and never turned off. Prensky suggests that our understanding of brain neuroplasticity indicates that digital natives have a brain that is 'physically different as a result of the digital input they received growing up' (Prensky, 2001b: 1). The massiveness of the changes that have occurred in just the last two decades leads Prensky to state:

> Today's students have not just changed *incrementally* from those of the past, not simply changed their slang, clothes, body adornments, or styles, as has happened between generations previously. A really big *discontinuity* has taken place. One might even call it a 'singularity' – an event, which changes things so fundamentally that there is absolutely

no going back. This so-called 'singularity' is the arrival and rapid dissemination of digital technology in the last decades of the 20th century. (Prensky, 2001a: 1)

More recent research (Bennett and Maton 2010) reveals the diversity of people's use of technology and suggests that there is little evidence for an entire generation of homogenous digital natives. From a psychoanalytic perspective, I hope to show that the brain changes that Prensky indicates, while important in their own right, are profoundly about the development of *mind* and rely on the psychological ability to relate to a separate 'other' with an attitude of warmth, curiosity and romance, rather than fear and suspicion.

Current cultural research on love and romance

Prensky's recognition of the occurrence of a digital 'singularity' connotes the considerable impact that SNSs and new media may be having on how young individuals relate to each other – or not – in their expressions of romantic love. This has been a driver for contemporary academic research. Cultural Studies scholars, John Storey and Katy McDonald (2014) are currently investigating the kinds of media interactions that 18-24 year olds make use of when engaging in romantic relationships. By talking to young adults about their use of media when they are falling in love, Storey and McDonald aim to bring detailed understanding of the ways in which the 'media discourses and technologies both enable and constrain social practices of romantic love' (2014: 122). As a psychotherapist, this raises the issue of the impact and implications of new and social digital media technologies on the relational and attachment issues that come regularly into the consulting room. What part might they play in the process of falling in love and what part might psychoanalytic thinking have to play in this discourse?

On the one hand, it can be argued that the use of new digital media and the practice of social networking have bought a new democratization to finding a romantic partner or supporting a political or social cause. This can create an increasing challenge to old hierarchies and foster new forms of collaboration, closeness and global connectedness to people who link up with friends, associates, and sometimes strangers, in this way. Yet on the other hand, as Turkle's (1995) research indicates, one can argue the opposite, as it can also be seen to heighten loneliness and isolation: even with the technology at hand, some people find themselves alone

anyway. Nevertheless, its meteoric success of social networking confirms that, like it or not, digital technology has provided media possibilities that facilitate a vast range of romantic relationships in the modern world through providing a new kind of 'language' with which to interact (Storey and McDonald, 2014.). The impact of these developments was reflected in the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in London in 2012. It featured a section celebrating British popular music and culture that included a large group of young dancers centred on the romantic meeting of 'Frankie and June'. Throughout the sequence, the dancers were shown connecting with each other though text messages and placing social networking status updates on the Internet as an essential part of a 'boy meets girl' scenario in the second decade of the twenty first century. What is emerging here is a new social mythology which has considerable repercussions for users in 'real life' and which needs exploring further.

Storey has generally been positive about the change. He says that one unsuspected result of Skype, for example, is that young people have a lot of face-to-face conversations in their romantic relationships and this is something new that promotes intimacy and a novel and less self-conscious ability to look at one another (John Storey, 2011, personal communication). Interestingly, as I write this essay, my twenty-five year-old son is upstairs Skyping his Turkish girlfriend who is completing a degree at university in Istanbul. Free Skyping on the web has supported this young couple for the last two years when they have not been able to live in the same country: they Skype most days between monthly visits. The 'face to face' contact on the web does not replace the essential desire physically to spend time with each other but, like Winnicott's 'facilitating environment' (Winnicott, 1986: 154) it does help to mediate the relationship. As psychosocial researchers such as Anthony Elliott and John Urry (2010) demonstrate, this option would have been impossible without the social impact of digital technology.

SNSs and new media have had a clear impact on the possibility and terms of romantic engagement for all age groups: I am struck by the number of people I know who, in middle age, have used internet dating services to find a new partner and who comment on what a support such services provide in offering a whole new type of template for meeting someone with similar interests and desires. There are accepted 'rules of engagement' whereby the first meetings are usually over a coffee and where it is accepted that either person can say upfront whether it has been an experience that they care to repeat or whether, sadly, there has been no romantic 'spark'.

Psychoanalytic perspectives concerning romantic love

Although Freud's analysis of the mind has had an enormous impact on 20th and 21st century thinking, his theories were aimed at a 'scientific' understanding of psychological pathology and so rarely address childhood or adulthood in terms of healthy development. When reading Freud, one is struck by his tendency to suspect the most ordinary behaviour as having hidden underlying motives or being the remains of infantile conduct. The relational psychoanalyst Stephen Mitchell (1997: 24) points out that, 'one of Freud's central projects was precisely the deconstruction of romantic love, the demonstration that it is not what we think it is, the exposure of its seamier aspects, its forbidden objects, its incestuous underpinnings'. I am not convinced that Freud ever really describes the more ordinary healthy experience of romance that could be given a lower case 'r' and, as we shall see, he struggled considerably with his cruelty and suspicion during his engagement to Martha Bernays.

Freud's writings more usually appear to be addressing an idea of Romance with a capital 'R' as in The Romantic Movement, which is tinged with a sadomasochistic form of relating (see John Adlam's article in this edition). Romance tends to collapse as a result of consummation, and is therefore based on unrequited longing. This 'Romantic ideal', which influenced the male-dominated artistic life of Western Europe between the late eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries, is clearly part of powerful masculine phantasies concerning love, sex and women (Wilson, 1978). The idea of the idealized, unavailable, mesmeric woman at the heart of the Romantic movement and for whom the lover hopelessly yearns, is seen by Wilson as a masculine narcissistic projection. I believe that this attitude finds at least an echo in Freud's celebrated paper, 'On Narcissism', where women, especially beautiful ones, are pronounced incapable of love – except for themselves. This is seen by Freud (1914: 82) as 'normal', rather than pathological, cultural and historical:

> Women, especially if they grow up with good looks, develop a certain self-contentment, which compensates them for the social restrictions that are imposed upon them in their choice of object. Strictly speaking, it is only themselves that such women love with an intensity comparable to that of the man's love for them. Nor does their need lie in the direction of loving, but of being loved; and the man who fulfils this condition is the one who finds favour

with them. The importance of this type of woman for the erotic life of mankind is to be rated very high.

What is striking about Freud's early overtures to his fiancée, Martha Bernays, in the form of almost daily letters, written as the couple mostly lived a long distance apart before they married, is that they often lack a sense of romance altogether. Many of them become repeated omnipotent attempts to 'coax and bully her into becoming the bride whom he required' (Pigman 2012:279). It is hard to overlook the sense that Freud's own narcissism is being projected into the woman he wants to marry. His jealousy and possessiveness demand at times that Martha not only give up family members for him but also that she change her behaviour, her thoughts and her feelings to suit his. Moreover, 'women', as Freud describes them, with their essentially narcissistic form of maternal love (Freud, 1914), would never be capable of becoming the ordinary, normal, 'good enough mother' (Winnicott, 1953) who is needed by the child to promote healthy development toward a capacity for romance and mature love (Brown, 2005).

Mitchell (1997) argues that a *lack* of romance in so-called mature love can be the sign of defensiveness against the risks of excitement, danger and adventure with which life naturally presents us. He builds on those psychoanalytic writers who precede him in taking an interest in the nature of love, romance and the Romantic, as for example in the work of Bergmann (1986); Benjamin (1988); Chasseguet-Smirgel (1983); and Ross (1991). Ross (1991), in particular, stresses the void in psychoanalytic writing concerning mature, erotic, romantic love. He notes that psychoanalytic literature has made sexuality and love appear to be about infantile autoeroticism whereas he sees romantic love in young adulthood to be an emerging stage of disengagement from parental images and injunctions that leads towards the creation of an individual ethic. My experience as a psychotherapist and analyst informs me that the willingness to be romantically in love, helps a person to grow away from internalised negative parental dominance. In critiquing Freud, Ross echoes this view and stresses the importance that an analyst will not dismiss romantic feelings, 'since romantic bliss and erotic consummation are what our adult patients often consciously crave for and what we as practitioners must try to help them attain' (Ross, 1991: 446). Ross (1991: 452) goes on to challenge psychoanalytic writers as a whole for their lack of interest in the idea of mature romantic sexual love: 'Why have analysts so

persistently, perhaps phobically, avoided confronting the passions, at once sensual and spiritual, expressed in adult sex and love?'

Freud's focus concerning love tended to favour the importance of biological impulses rather than the quality and form of human relationships and feelings. He claimed that it was 'not easy to deal *scientifically* with feelings' (Freud, 1915, cited in Person, 1991: 387, my italics). However, it took the rise of object relation theorists, for example Winnicott, Fairbairn and, later, Bollas, to focus on the basic human need for a loving and devoted primary interpersonal relationship that enables the working through of primitive destructive feelings and anxious bodily states. The relationship between a child and a 'good enough' mother or primary carer, builds the firm emotional foundations that can then later flower into active adult social and cultural pursuits. Even here, however, the idea of mature love can tend to get lost in theory that concerns purely childhood attachments.

Erikson's theory of psychosocial development

The age range of Storey's research subjects covers the early years of what the psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson, calls the Young Adult Stage of psychosocial development. Erikson's contribution offers eight stages of life, each stage presenting the possibility of a particular *virtue* so long as the extremes that emerge during that particular stage can be tolerated (Erikson, 1982: 55-82). The vital questions that emerge during the Young Adult Stage result from the tension between *intimacy* and *isolation*: 'Am I loved and wanted? Shall I share my life with someone or live alone?'. It is only when the tension of both extremes can be accepted that the optimal *virtue* of this stage can evolve.

According to Erikson, the *virtue* to be grasped during this stage is *Love*, the most vital of them all. He defines it thus: 'mutuality of devotion forever subduing the antagonisms inherent in divided function' (Erikson, 1994:129). In psychotherapy, the giving and receiving of love is seen as essential for psychological growth, yet, as recent neuroscientific research tells us, the possibility of love only emerges through warm and loving human attachments that foster specific brain development from a very young age (Gerhardt, 2005). This developmental process is fundamental in securing an internal psychic foundation for managing tumultuous and conflicting feelings that, only then, may lead to fully adult romantic relationships. This foundation is also an

important component in moving towards sexual relationships in young adulthood before the self is engaged in full genital coupling. As Winnicott (1964) and others have taught us, regardless of culture, we all arrive in this world needing to be welcomed and offered the loving tender and robust attachment to a primary other who has a twinkle in their eye, in order to fully develop our potential as loving human beings.

I will use a number of short clinical 'snapshots' throughout this essay to illustrate some of my central themes. In order to protect that confidentiality of real life patients each snapshot is an amalgam of a number of real life patients who share similar difficulties. I will start with 'Suzanne' whose destitute childhood had resulted in a series of addictive habits and the need for instant gratification as a way of controlling her present-day relationships with people and things.

Clinical Snapshot: 'Suzanne'

Suzanne is a successful clothes designer with a background of childhood deprivation and physical abuse. When she was needy and crying, her mother, who was regularly cruel and dismissive of her, would tell her to 'dry up and blow away' rather than engaging thoughtfully with any of her difficulties. As a teenager she fell into a cycle of drug abuse and high-class prostitution, feeling proud that she could earn good money and stay, as she saw it, in control. When I began to see her for three-times-a-week psychotherapy, she struck me as a survivor who had been robbed of a proper childhood and who was therefore very vulnerable beneath a strong armour of apparent independence. She had been brought up in a harsh Eastern European industrial town and was attracted to men who tended to be like the men in her childhood: unreliable with big emotional problems of their own. Her inner neediness further encouraged bad treatment towards her. She was not cynical about love but rather too desperate for it. She was divorced and had a teenage child by the time she began therapy but, in many respects, was still like a hopeful and angry youngster looking for romance, a type of tender love with no flaws that would magically transport her away from her harsh parents and her sense of inner pain. She just wanted someone to make everything better and this led to her pressurising others and me into giving her instant results.

As time went by in her therapy, Suzanne began to get a sense of how her need to control every situation and every relationship was linked to a terror about being left on her own and how

her intense and buried feelings could then suddenly emerge in self-destructive behaviour. As a bright, intelligent young child, she had arrived home from school one day to find the family home deserted. She felt completely abandoned and totally disorientated. Her parents had forgotten to tell her that they were moving house and that this was moving day. It was several hours before Suzanne's absence in the new home was noted and someone was sent to the old home to look for her. This incident acted as a *screen memory* (Freud, 1889a) that stood for many buried instances of physical and psychological desertion.

It was therefore understandable that when Suzanne sent texts to her current boyfriend Nick, she was in frantic need of an immediate reply as a mark of love that meant she was safe: 'I know he is working at home today – there is no reason he is not getting back to me – unless he's off somewhere doing something I don't know about'. A twenty-minute delay would have her sending a series of explosive texts and therefore becoming increasingly paranoid and suspicious. The pain of her childhood became transferred onto the speed of Nick's response that at times seemed purposefully cold and depriving. When she got the chance, she would secretly inspect the texts on Nick's mobile to see whether he was having an affair and go into his computer to check on all aspects of his Internet activities, looking for signs of porn, hints of paedophile activity or connections with prostitutes: proof of a perverse betrayal of her. She was making her eventual rejection by him and a repeat of her childhood abandonment inevitable. But Suzanne's expectations of instant contact through texting and her desperate surveillance of her partner's use of social media and the Internet, helped her to see how the nature of her early emotional attachments got transferred concretely into her current life and were repeating in a destructive way with partners who were not loving.

'The readiness is all' (Hamlet by William Shakespeare, Act V ii: 234-237)
The *ability* creatively to use any type of social networking in the services of 'romantic love' demands psychological and emotional readiness, as Erikson's work suggests. This means that only some adults will be able to use social media creatively to promote romance with other people. Others may use it to devalue closeness and intimacy, as my next clinical snapshot suggests. Here, Sandra and her boyfriend, Jay, use social media as a defence and even as a weapon. Others may turn to alternative new media to hide in worlds of Internet fantasy games or

porn as we will see with the snapshot of Peter. These worlds may provide an immediate 'fix' of excitement but they seduce the user into an enclave that cuts off the necessary challenge and associated risk of social interaction. Sherry Turkle's important current research suggests we are being offered seductive 'substitutions that put the real on the run' (Turkle, 2011: 1).

While 'romance' is a social and cultural construct that is subject to cultural variability and changes over time (Giddens, 1993; Brown, 2006), what we call 'romance' is also linked to the fact that we are social animals. One of our primal needs is for safe and dependable attachment to others, whatever age or in whatever culture we are. Nevertheless, as psychotherapist and social network researcher, Aaron Balick, argues, if we don't get a 'good enough' start we can get stuck in destructive ways of relating, and these negative patterns of attachment will show up in the way that we use social media (Balick, 2013). Research suggests that social media used in the same way as a constant supply of never-ending food, alcohol, drugs or porn may further exacerbate an addictive way of emotionally connecting with others rather than one that offers real romance (Balick, 2013; Turkle, 1997, 2005, 2011). Certainly, its overuse can lead to merely superficial relating (Balick, 2013; Flett, 2012). Social networking of all kinds is here to stay and it can give us much, in terms of feeling safe and connected. Yet it is also vital to make a differentiation between its use and its abuse (Lepisto, 2012).

The complexities of our relationship with modern technologies are far from straightforward, as it is continually mediated and shaped by the powerful feelings associated with the forces of unconscious fantasy. In this case social networking becomes the medium to deliver a powerful message arising from deeper relational difficulties, as we will now see with Sandra.

Clinical snapshot: 'Sandra'

Sandra is the patient of one of my supervisees. She is an attractive young woman who has no difficulties in getting boyfriends, yet she never seems to attract one who wants really to engage with her. She complains that when she goes to the pub with her current boyfriend, Jay, he spends his time on Facebook with his friends, rather than talking to her. She then loses her sense of agency and becomes sulky and demanding. It is interesting that Sandra keeps herself in the position of constantly being angry and 'underfed' and, in doing so, repeats an early pattern of dysfunctional relationships. In therapy, she has realised that she has been putting up with less

affection than she needs ever since she was a child and is doggedly repeating this type of unsatisfying attachment in her adulthood – in fact, her unspoken actions encourage negative ways of relating. But it is important that her therapist recognizes that Sandra is being asked to deal with a type of relating that is anti-intimate and inflammatory. Her boyfriend is choosing to connect to other 'friends' in a distanced and more superficial way that ignores Sandra and the opportunity for deeper and more intimate one-to-one relating in the present with her.

However Sandra, rather than discussing her needs with her boyfriend to see if there are alternative options for their evenings together, responds with a 'tit for tat' defence, and begins furiously networking with her own Facebook friends and pumping up her numbers of 'friendships' as an attack on Jay's behaviour, so as not to feel the pain of being ignored by him. This does nothing to help change the situation; it exacerbates it. However, Sandra is also increasingly experiencing the sort of intimate listening space within the therapeutic hour as something that she needs and enjoys and this is encouraging her to question her choice of boyfriends and her destructive and retaliatory stance with them. She is starting to expect more from her romantic relationships. Her habit of using social networking technology as a weapon is being recognized by her and her therapist as a type of negative language of despair. This enables therapist and patient to explore alternative ways of relating in a more constructive and thoughtful manner.

Getting used to less
Sherry Turtle's trilogy (Turkle, 1997; 2005; 2011) concerning our relationship with digital technology and the environment it creates, charts a path of fifteen years of research with children, adolescents and older adults. Turkle, a Lacanian-trained analyst, clinical psychologist and Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, champions the computer in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (Turkle 1997). She sees this relatively modern invention as assisting us in new understandings of the self. In *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (2005), she retains a basically optimistic view, demonstrating how computer games and programmes like Second Life can give humans the opportunity to explore and experiment with a variety of life roles. In this respect, Turkle is indicating how media technology can provide an experimental and creative space, a

type of *moratorium* (Erikson, 1970:120), which does not hold too many expectations or demands, and that allows a person to be involved actively in exploring different identities. This is a vital stage in an adolescent's or young adult's journey towards achieving a sense of a solid identity for themselves.

However, in Turkle's final volume, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (2011), she also reveals a darker shadow side to an increasing dependence on social media and other digital technologies. She questions the impact on the self of being continuously but superficially connected through social networking which offers no reflective privacy for deeper connections to be made. Turkle demonstrates how our virtual technology gives us fewer and fewer opportunities of relating face-to-face and talking ear-to-ear. She stresses that being virtually connected with others has the consequence of causing us to be less than fully present, and, at times, needlessly aggressive (as in the case of adolescent cyber bullying) and most importantly, somewhat dissociated in our lives.

Turkle's research suggests that digital technology and particularly some forms of new media set up the conditions for what the psychoanalyst, John Steiner, has called a 'psychic retreat' (Steiner, 1993). Here, a person withdraws from direct contact with the world and from deep human interaction and enters a fantasy world that is under their control and that digital technology can increasingly provide. The psychic retreat works defensively to save the person from having to suffer feelings of anger, loss, loneliness and shame, in particular when they feel impossible to bear. While this might appear as beneficial to the sufferer because the psychic retreat represents an escape from painful reality, rather like using a drug, it actually prevents change. The ability to experience difficult and demanding feelings is an essential element in becoming a separate person who can face the fear and stress of intimacy and romantic attachments. I am reminded of 'Paul', whose use of new media in the form of connecting with fantasy strangers on the Internet worked as a psychic retreat from difficulties he felt unable to face in his marriage and his inability to achieve the sort of romantic relationship where he could experience being wanted and loved.

Clinical snapshot: 'Paul'

Paul was an executive in the financial services sector. The stress of his job was leaving him in tears by the end of the day. He was having horrific dreams of train crashes, murders and robots taking over the building where he lived and worked. In psychoanalytic terms, we could think of these images as *unconscious phantasies* representing unfeeling, mechanical relationships inside the mind. Paul talked about his fear of being a psychopath. He was terrified of having a complete breakdown. The one-to-one contact of therapy had an immediate containing effect as Paul's feelings and the language of his dreams began to be understood and *mentalized*. It was then that his childhood fears about the sudden and unexplained divorce of his parents started to develop into words, into a narrative. Paul's difficulties with his wife, Sarah, also became much clearer. He realized that he had been putting up with having a partner who had no trouble spending his high salary but with whom he felt no warmth. In fact, he began to see that their relationship had begun like a business deal with both of them somewhat clinically deciding that it was time to get married and have a family: sex was good but there had tragically never been a sense of romance in the relationship. It had not occurred to Paul that this might be important. Nowadays he felt he had become little more than a money making machine for Sarah and the children. Paul soon decided to leave his current highly stressed job and was surprised to be offered a better position with an airline company. He was, however, required to live abroad for several weeks of the year. His hope was to enjoy being with his young family in a new exotic place – at least during school holidays. But Sarah refused to arrange even a short visit with the children and Paul began to feel increasingly angry, used and uncared for. It was at this time that he started to experiment with alternative lives for himself. He began to dabble with Internet porn and then set up a prostitute in her own flat abroad so that she could be there whenever he needed her. He also created a fantasy character to interact with other fantasy characters on the Internet through the then popular Second Life. Both lives were a type of psychic retreat that represented a way of trying to stay in control and not feel vulnerable to hurt. But Paul soon began to find Second Life weird: his unhappy inner and outer worlds were playing themselves out on the web. He had 'affairs' and got into 'fights' in Second Life and he began to experience the people he was 'meeting' as 'creepy' and intrusive, even bullying and perverse. He recounted a newspaper article in one of his sessions that was about two Second Life characters who had decided to marry in real life regardless of the fact that in real life they were very different people. It confused Paul. Who were

the real people and who were the virtual ones? Paul had begun to recognise that when the boundaries between reality and the inner world become too blurred, a kind of madness starts to take over. It started to dawn on Paul that there was something equally unreal and weird about having a prostitute hidden away ready and available at all times. He told me, 'I suddenly start to feel shocked and ashamed of my behaviour, of what I have secretly been setting up and where it could all end. I have begun to see I'm in a dead-end into nothing. This is getting me nowhere'. Paul ended his 'second life' and realised that what he really needed to face was a divorce.

What helped Paul to steer through this journey, in contrast to the non-relational psychic retreat of Second Life, was the accompanying moratorium that several years of therapy was offering him when he most needed it and that could help to illuminate his outer concrete enactments as a sign of psychological and relational need. He was being offered what he had never really experienced before: a focusing on his inner life and feelings within the containment of a safe and supportive real life relationship. And, every now and then, he would have a powerful dream that embodied many of his difficulties and which he increasingly became able to interpret with the help of analysis. Paul began to enjoy his dreams much more than playing Second Life. He joked that a week with a good dream felt like a real achievement. He was right, it was: an inner achievement where his feelings and body sensations were producing images for him to relate to mentally and consciously. The murders, explosions and robots began to change to dreams of him rescuing young men from gang attacks, of him floating buoyantly on the sea rather than sinking. Finally, he had a waking dream of himself as a captain of a sailing ship expertly using the wind to steer him and his 'crew' through stormy seas – the seas of his feelings. He had recently met a woman with whom he was to discover romance in a way that he had never experienced before. A new marriage became a voyage of discovery rather than a deal based on money. He found that his love was reciprocated.

Although the use of new media initially had prevented Peter from facing reality, and opening up to the risk of new real life relationships, *Second Life* and his underlying reasons for turning to it, became a transitional object, a bridge, that could be analysed in therapy and so play its part in helping him to recognise his despair. Peter was then able to finally find the courage needed to separate from an unhappy marriage. He was able to make the maturing differentiations between inner and outer life, between fantasy and reality that are necessary to develop symbolic

thought rather than remaining stuck in fantasy. Romantic love rather than fantasy romance then became possible.

Media love and the psychic retreat

The psychic retreat is highly protective, but this protection comes at a great cost. It lacks the challenge of the presence of real others: one is terribly alone in a controlled world built on fantasy. To stay safe and stuck or emerge into a state of vulnerable feelings of loss and a sense of neediness that requires the help of others, as Paul was able to do, is something that patients can struggle with for a number of years (Steiner 1993 and 2011). For some, emergence is impossible. The secondary gains offered by a life dominated by fantasy feel too much to let go of and lose.

Reflective privacy, that promotes separation and the experience of the 'other' as different, with needs alongside those of the patient, is at the heart of analytic work. Here, a space with a therapist is offered that is not packed full of activity. This is vital for the formation of meaningful relationships. The gaps and sometimes silences that are a part of the analytic conversation promote slow authentic listening and the type of 'being with another' that encourages new solutions and experimentations with relating. Here is a unique transitional dreaming space where there is engagement with another that provides an opportunity to develop the capacity for recognizing dysfunctional, repetitive and unconscious ways of relating. As the old meets with more conscious, creative and flexible ways of interacting, especially when difficult situations emerge, the growth of emotional empathy, warmth and trust provides the basis for romantic love. The usual pressure to 'know' and 'do' or to 'get things right' without any sort of experimentation gives way to a greater sense of ease and a lessening of impossible and mechanical demands for perfection.

Love and why it matters

The psychotherapist Sue Gerhardt (2005) argues that there is nothing automatic or inbuilt about the ability to relate to others. Before we learn to speak we need to have developed within ourselves an increasing skill in managing feelings. This relies partly on the quality of our pre-verbal social interactions that develop the post-natal brain. Without ample mediation of our

feelings by others when we are small, we run the risk of experiencing love as banal, meaningless or excitingly deathly. There is then the risk of developing addictive practices with media technologies and losing our sense of individual *agency*.

When all goes well enough in an analysis, patients begin to look into the unknown and uncontrollable with more curiosity and less anger and anxiety. I see in this the beginnings of discovering a romantic relationship not with just one other person but with life. This is a mature act that requires much work and creative engagement because it is able to survive conflicting feeling and retain a sense of devotion, as explored in Erikson's Young Adult Stage. It is a good moment when a person, obviously held and fashioned by their culture (how could it be otherwise), becomes free enough to have an inner world of reflective feeling that allows their authentic core self to experience spontaneity, sensuality and a sense of safety rather than almost automatic paranoia. This is a person with the *agency* to emotionally 'use' social networking and digital technology productively and creatively in a range of healthy romantic and life affirming pursuits.

Conclusion

I hope that this essay conveys a sense that when someone begins analytic work, part of their symptomology may well be a negative and uncreative use of social and other new media as a defence against the risks and demands posed by real life intimate relationships. Yet this type of symptomology can in fact be a helpful aspect for all types of psychodynamic and analytic therapy in that, like many non-verbal practices and clues, is concretises and provides a representation of the patients hidden and unconscious psychological state.

Pat, a patient of a supervisee in training, has lived much of her life through a number of different mobiles – each separating off different aspects of her life. For the first months of therapy, she was not able to turn these phones off during her sessions and, in the beginning, even answered the constant interruptions while her therapist was talking to her. Often Pat would look at the 'face' of the phone as though longing for an electronic interaction rather than looking at the therapist. These 'symptoms' represented a manic defence that was protecting the patient from the memory of old toxic relationships but was also preventing a real life relationship in the therapeutic encounter. Progress for this patient has been about turning the phones off and giving

her life some liberated privacy from the intrusive types of relationship that she has experienced since being young and that continue to exercise a powerful presence in her inner world. While Pat fears that turning off the phones and going more slowly will be both frightening and boring, in fact it confronts the manic defence that prevents the time needed for feelings to be felt and that therefore makes her feel so empty. For many patients like this, finding ways of relating to others that enable them to be sufficiently vulnerable *and* sufficiently able to take care of their need for personal boundaries gives them the confidence to start to have fewer but more meaningful relationships. The resulting softening of their hearts comes as a shock, as a sense of discovering something they have always been looking for but have never known was possible.

Another patient who has always felt he had to 'walk on eggshells' with his emotional wife is now becoming able to stay in the room and experience his wife's frustrated rage at him at times without either feeling wiped out or having to immediately agree with her view. Recently, he made excellent use of texting. He told his wife that he was going to leave the room while she was shouting and take a break as he simply couldn't cope with it any more. He went off to his study and noticed that it took him about fifteen minutes to recover a sense of himself – at which point he began to feel rather sexy and texted to his wife a romantic suggestion. There was a pause and then a text came winging back – 'Yes'.

Notes

1. In the spirit of an article premised on web technologies, I have opted to include a definition culled from Wikipedia here. It is, of course, important to note that such resources are endlessly open to alteration, making citation and reliability difficult in traditional academic terms. Nevertheless, the sentiment of the definition resounds with generalized notions of the ideals of 'love' and 'romance'.

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