The Disintermediation of Desire
From 3D(esire) to 2D(esire)

Alessandra Lemma

Every technological revolution coincides with changes in what it means to be a human being, in the kinds of psychological borders that divide the inner life from the world outside. The changes in the way we relate to ourselves and to others do not correspond exactly to the changes in technology: many aspects of today’s digital world were already taking shape before the age of the personal computer and the Smartphone. But the rapid growth in development, accessibility and use of mobile phones and the Internet suddenly increased the rate and scale of change in all our lives.

Some of these changes can stir disquiet. Perhaps there was similar angst at the birth of the printing press. I was among those who wanted to believe the Internet represented a shift in scale or form, rather than in kind: emails would be the same as letters, only quicker. But increasingly, it seems, that was to underestimate the nature of these developments. The changes we are witnessing now reach further into every corner of our humanness. Once it looked like hype but the Internet really has changed the world completely – and we need to understand how it is changing us along with it. In the face of our proliferating representations and reproductions, we need take a second look at ourselves and at how we practice as clinicians.

Today I want to focus specifically on how the Internet is changing our relationship to desire and sexual development. There is now unprecedented access to sexual images wherever one is, whenever one wants. The electronic dimension appears to have led to a transfiguration of intimacy, of sexual identity and most importantly, I will be arguing today, it fundamentally interferes with the ‘work of desire’.
The inertia of speed

When I looked up, not long ago, a cooking recipe on the Internet, I scrolled down the ingredients list. I was ready to reach out for my pen and paper to make a note of what I needed to buy only to discover that this action was now redundant. The recipe site was linked to several of the online supermarket stores that deliver to your door. Through just one click of a button all the recipe ingredients found their way into my ‘shopping basket’ at the online supermarket I regularly use to be delivered the next day.

As I reflected on my shopping experience I recalled the encumbrance of the physicality of actual shopping. The fluid ‘placelessness’ of the digital contrasts with the cumbersome concreteness of the physical. The shortcut that the Internet now provides, effectively disintermediating the so-called ‘middle man’ - in this instance my body (as in the use of my hand to write down the list of ingredients, let alone the use of my whole body if I had to go out to buy these items) - is wondrous if time and/energy are not on one’s side. This experience of immediacy without mediation resonates deeply with the earliest relationship between mother and baby: it is momentarily like being back feeding at an ever present breast that keeps the milk flowing and does not even require us to use the neck muscle or sucking action to get the milk into the mouth.

Many psychoanalysts have written about the ‘work of desire’ (e.g. Aisenstein, 2015; Moss, 2015; Verhaeghe, 2011). Desire is a directing force of the psychical apparatus. It is through desire, and in the deepening relationship to the ‘other’ that is set up consequent to the pressure to satisfy desire, that human subjectivity becomes constituted. Desire is the projection of the drive onto an object – typically another person - that holds out the promise that our desire will be met, such that the object comes to symbolize the gratification of the underlying need.

Desire is measured in terms of time: it is about anticipation and the delay of gratification. As a Digital Immigrant I grew up in what I now think of as a
3D(esire) world where life exposed me, on a reliably regular basis, to the following sequence of experience: ‘Desire’ was followed by ‘Delay’ and finally ‘Delivery’ of what I wanted. By contrast the digital generation is growing up in a world that is very different in one key respect: it is a 2D(esire) world where the very experience of the cycle of desire has been disintermediated: ‘Desire’ can now result in immediate ‘Delivery’ whether it is shopping on Amazon, accessing free porn or finding your next partner thereby bypassing the experience of ‘Delay’. But without the intermediary of ‘Delay’ there is no movement necessary towards otherness.

In order to think about the ‘work of desire’ in contemporary culture we need to consider how time and space are experienced through new technologies. The interpenetration between human and the digital is central to the unbalancing of the poles of space and time.

The French cultural theorist, Paul Virilio, suggests that the increase of speed and its correlated rise in inertia is a feature integral to technocratic societies. With each increase in speed, bodily movement is reduced to a perfunctory action. He views the use of the computer/tablet screen itself as a device to fuse inertia and speed. Virilio proposes that when we are concerned with relative speeds we can think in terms of acceleration or deceleration. Here we are in the realm of mobility and emancipation. But when absolute speed, that is the speed of light, is put to work, Virilio argues that one hits a wall, a barrier, which is the barrier of light. From that moment onwards, it is no longer necessary to make any journey: one has already arrived. It is no longer necessary to go towards the world, to journey, to stand up, to depart, to go to things. Everything is already there. The world, then, remains ‘at home’. Yet the work of representation, which we know to be so important to psychic development, requires movement.

Virilio’s ideas are not rooted in psychoanalytic thinking and yet they powerfully resonate with what we observe in the consulting room in those individuals who have retreated defensively into virtual worlds, for example, where the psychic
The economy is characterised by a stultifying stasis in the midst of what might on the surface appear to the patient’s mania and excitement. This internal state is aptly captured by Virilio’s turn of phrase ‘the inertia of speed’. The effect of speed, where time and space collapse and extend into the infinite instant is compelling for some individuals. The cost, however, is that it keeps them ‘at home’ in a psychic retreat (Steiner, 1993) that impedes development. Psychic movement is replaced instead by psychic stasis. The online world can operate ‘one-dimensionally’, to borrow Meltzer’s (1975) developmental frame, in which the world has ‘… a fixed centre in the self’ and where ‘… gratification and fusion with the object would be undifferentiated’ (1975: 224).

The imperative of twenty-first century consumption is to work towards smooth 2D surfaces that conceal the signs of labour, time, personal responsibility, or indeed of an unconscious mind at work in shaping who we are. The cost is that experience is flattened out and can become concrete: a flattened surface/screen on which the drive is discharged. Without exposure to the experience of delay or frustration desire loses its 3D shape that would allow for the various dimensions of the experience of desire to be represented in the mind. The intermediary of ‘delay’ - of time that we have to accept as given - is what makes the representation of experience, of desire, in the mind possible. Without this intermediary the work of desire cannot take place. If we never have to face the possibility of not getting what we think we want, we cannot find out why we want it or if it is what we want. If we never have to worry about not having what we want, then we never have to know the nature of our desire. When delay is replaced by speed, space for reflection is foreclosed. We need only consider the speed with which significant events in the news become ‘old news’ to notice how speed has deprived us of the time to process experiences, both public and private.

An emphasis on the impact of speed on the mind refocuses us back onto the central role of the body in psychic development. Specifically the body is central to understanding an individual’s subjective experience of time. The body’s rhythms are the foundation for the earliest experience of time. Several authors
have rightly emphasised how primitive temporality is linked to biological rhythms punctuated by cycles of frustration and satisfaction (e.g. Hartacollis, 1974; Barale and Minazzi, 2008). We must now add the part played by technology. The body’s rhythms are most likely being shaped by new technologies, notably by the speed with which we can now access what we want to fulfill our desires. Because our relationship to time is a pivotal feature of our capacity to manage reality, when this relationship is disturbed many aspects of functioning are affected.

The manipulation of the body and of the experience of embodiment that can be exercised in cyberspace inevitably entails a manipulation of the subjective experience of time. Bergson (1988) argued that the body introduces a space of delay between two movements: between action and reaction. He calls this the ‘originary delay of the body’:

The body is a place of passage of the movement received and thrown back, a hyphen, a connecting link between the things that act upon us and the things upon which I act. A link that is also a pause which gives the body time to select, organise and realign its re-actions (1988: 151).

Bergson’s notion of the body-as-hyphen, which I take the liberty of elaborating here, powerfully captures the way in which technologies that collapse space into time and that make the body more or less redundant may interfere with one of the body’s fundamental functions: that of viscerally anchoring the experience of a pause, of waiting. When this space is foreclosed, the pause that otherwise pushes us towards the mental representation of experience is also lost.

The pause allows for ‘links’ to be made, for the body’s actions and reactions to acquire meaning in the mind. A hyphen after all is the sign used to join words to indicate that they have a combined meaning: it signals a connection. A hyphen, however, also introduces a gap, highlighting the body as a passage tracing a trajectory between places. Potentially the emphasis on speed as a medium of transmission in the spatial and temporal realms has consequences
for the real space of the body as instantaneity and ubiquity ultimately abolish space along with the interval.

So far I have been suggesting that the experience of immediacy without mediation and the linked disintermediation of the body are central features of ‘online’ experience of some consequence for the work of desire. Aisenstein (2015) has noted the masochistic structure at the core of desire, that is the way in which we learn to find pleasure in being thwarted in our search for immediate gratification. We learn to find pleasure in waiting and this too requires psychic work. If this is how we might envision so-called normal development, I want to suggest that contemporary technological advances support a rather different process that bypasses any investment in delay. If the body is the original seat of the experience of delay, as Bergson proposed, then the speed of the Internet, coupled with the relative redundancy of the body in order to access the object of desire, creates the conditions for a new internal scenario: pleasure in delay is replaced by pleasure in triumph over desire itself. A triumphalist state of mind ensues that sustains an omnipotent and regressed psychic state principally operating in the psychic equivalence and pretend modes of experience (Fonagy and Target, 1996; 2006).

**The Black Mirror: the adolescent’s ‘second look’**

I now want to focus more specifically on the impact of Internet pornography on the development of sexuality during adolescence, by way of an example, to further our exploration of the disintermediation of desire.

Freud emphasised that the child’s sexual fantasies are intense and experienced as powerfully exciting and potentially frightening. He detailed the long, erotically stimulating, sensual period of infancy and childhood in which the child absorbs and contains endless sensual moments of physical contact, without the cognitive resources to make sense of these experiences. Then followed an ‘incubation period’ - the so-called latency stage - a cooling down
period for drive related activities (Freud, 1930) prefacing the upheaval of puberty.

However when we consider sexual development in the digital age we need to ask how valid is the notion of a latency stage? We are now seeing children who are at the latency stage but seem to be less and less ‘latent’. Instead of latency there is what I call blatancy: the latency age child remains as excitable as the Oedipal child and “infantile modes of sexuality remain continuously manifest from the oedipal stage onwards characterised by an unrestrained arousal of infantile genitality” (Guignard, 2014: ).

Along with other analysts I no longer think that it makes sense to conceptualise sexual development with respect to a latency stage. However I still consider that sexual development takes on a specific transformation with the advent of puberty. The psychic process of adolescence typically sets in motion an unsettling review of personal identity that is rooted in the body.

The delicate and intricate processes that support the establishment of a secure sense of self confidently rooted in the body, and the capacity to reflect on experience rather than enact it on and through the body, may be further undermined by the relentless emphasis on transformation, change, and triumph over the body now made possible by new technologies. These external trends do not cause new forms of psychopathology per se, in my view, but rather they may have an adverse impact on the young person’s capacity to integrate the reality of the sexual body into the self-representation. Some young people will be more vulnerable to this than others.

Any consideration of how the pubertal body is likely to be managed by the young person requires us to consider the role of the earliest mirror.

Throughout life mirrors - actual and symbolic ones - remain important. The Lacanian baby looks to the mirror to bring coherence to his fragmented embodied experience. The Winnicottian baby turns to the other-as-mirror, we
might say, in order for his embodied experience to be mentalised. Irrespective of whether we understand this mirror in Lacanian or Winnicottian terms the search is for a reflection that is restitutive of a coherent, boundaried ‘I’ rooted in the body. Marked and contingent mirroring of the self’s bodily experience is most likely, for us all, a vitally important feature of the development of a coherent sense of self firmly rooted in the body (Lemma, 2015).

If good-enough mothering can be said to depend on the mother’s capacity to mirror back the child’s experience, several authors have suggested that even the good enough mother reliably shows a marked failure of mirroring in one respect: that of the child’s sexuality (Fonagy, 2008; Target, 2015). Sexuality stands alone in that it is the only intense, emotionally charged experience that the mother does not attempt to make sense of for the child. Yet such early arousal experiences become incorporated into elaborate systems of early sexual fantasy.

How does a child (and later the adolescent) make sense of their sexual urges and the fantasies that become organized around these early arousal experiences? Due to the ‘appropriate’ early parental mirroring failure when it comes to sexuality, we have here, I want to suggest, the seeds of a split at the very core of the experience of embodiment: some aspects of our embodied experience are accurately mirrored, but not so when the body is perceived by the other as the site for the infant’s nascent sexual self. This inscribes a sense of incongruence at the heart of psychosexuality, of a “misreading” in relation to the experience of the self (Fonagy, 2008; Stein, 1998 a&b ; Target, 2015). Importantly, however, I want to underline that this incongruence structures the child’s embodied experience such that the body image, even when all goes well in early development, is predicated on a split between the sexual and non-sexual body, which forcefully presses for integration at puberty. When this fails, we can observe developmental breakdown typically expressed in the language of the body.

A crucial difference between the more or less successful attempts at
integration of the sexual and non-sexual body depends on the quality of
the original parental misreading with respect to sexuality: where the misreading
takes on a more pernicious quality such that the parental figures are more
actively intrusive in their projections into the child’s perceived sexual body, or
where the child’s body generally may be undercathected, then the subjective
experience of the ‘sexual body’ is more severely compromised. In such
instances, during adolescence and beyond, it may prove hard to even seek out
a sexual partner or the seeking out takes on a perverse turn.

But where, or to whom, does the adolescent turn to transform this so-called
incongruence into something that can be mentally represented in order to then
integrate the sexual and non-sexual body into a coherent representation of the
body in the mind? I want to suggest that at puberty the adolescent needs a
mirror to take a ‘second look’ at a body whose pre-pubescent integrity is
shattered by the genital uprising. This recasts the young person in the original
position of the infant whose subjective experience of his body ‘in bits-and-
pieces’ (Lacan, 1977) pushed the then infant to look into the mirror for the
integration that the infant’s mind could yet perform for itself. At puberty,
however, the body is an explicitly sexual one for all to see: even harder to
ignore but still difficult to mirror its now poignant, now unruly and for some
parents now disturbing, undeniable sexuality. Just as the mother of infancy
turns away from reflecting back the baby’s sexuality, parents appropriately turn
away a second time round at puberty, even of this turning away, in the best of
circumstances, is more nuanced. Some parents manage to strike a helpful
balance between providing some validation of the young person’s sexuality
and an appropriate ‘turning away’ from it.

But all adolescents are propelled to look for a mirror beyond the parental
figures to elaborate and consolidate a sexual identity. Pre-Internet this mirror
was primarily provided by peers and media such as TV, cinema, music, books
and top shelf pornography magazines. The most readily available and deployed
mirror in the twenty-first century that has supplanted all others is the Black
Mirror. This is the one you will find on virtually every desk, in every home, and in the palm of every hand: the cold, shiny screen of a monitor, tablet or phone.

Mobile and online technologies have brought enormous opportunities for pleasure and communication, knowledge seeking and exchange. The Internet, like earlier print pornography and communal experiences amongst peers regarding masturbation, provides a focus for normalization of adolescents' sexual feelings (Shapiro, 2008; Galatzer-Levy, 2012). But these new technologies also bring as yet unexamined risks for young people.

In order to understand the nature of the risks we have to understand the nature of this so-called ‘mirror’. The Black Mirror not only differs from previous media in terms of the unprecedented range of the sexual content it screens, but also in the very distinctive way that it operates. This mirror does not reflect back; rather it intrusively projects into the viewer. It ‘pushes’ (think of the ‘push notification’ function on your smartphones) images and sensations into the body and mind even when you have not asked for them. Instead, as the young person looks at the computer screen, an orgy of possibility hits them: a sexuality à la Carte is served up with myriad configurations of bodies (e.g. men with fully grown breasts and a penis). The Internet fosters a childlike state of sexual curiosity (Wood, 2011), an ‘open at all hours’ sexual policy where the parental bedroom is never shut and the primal scene can be watched over and over from the safety of the child’s bedroom.

A further important implication for the articulation of sexual identity is the fact that Internet pornography can now be accessed easily and rapidly, that is there is, as I mentioned earlier, immediacy without mediation. There is no tension, no conflict, no waiting with respect to the satisfaction of sexual desire whatever its psychic function.

The combination of immediacy without mediation and the ‘blatancy’ of online pornographic images leaves no room for the stillness and slowness that makes the work of representation necessary and possible. Instead a kind of scoping
looting is encouraged online: hundreds of sexual images intoxicate the mind, inviting a ‘smash and grab’ approach to sexual fantasy and desire. Importantly the images/fantasies that are seized in this manner are ultimately not felt to be one’s own (Galatzer-Levy, 2012).

The Black Mirror can seduce the young person struggling to make sense of their disruptive sexual body by supplying concrete images and sexual scenarios that provide a close Technicolor match to the central masturbation fantasy (Laufer, 1968), now socially sanctioned through the medium of technology. This, in turn, offers some validation for something that feels disturbing within, but since the Black Mirror supplies the ready made sexual scenarios these need not be owned as belonging to the self thereby undermining the establishment of an integrated sexual identity. I hope to now illustrate some of these themes through my work with Celina.

‘I know who I am’: the case of Celina
Celina was a few months away from her 17th birthday when she first came to see me. A once weekly arrangement soon increased to three times weekly sessions on the couch.

Celina was one of two children. Her father committed suicide when Celina was about 7. He was suffering from bipolar disorder. Her mother eventually remarried when Celina was 14 at which point Celina’s state of mind became a worry to her mother. She felt that Celina, who up until then had seemingly been functioning relatively well all things considered, became withdrawn, spending long periods of time shut off in her room on the Internet. She lost interest in her studies, which she was very good at, and although she sometimes went out with friends her mother felt that she was only superficially connected with her peer group.

The trigger for seeking help was the discovery by her stepfather that Celina was downloading hardcore pornography on her computer. The parents had been deeply disturbed by its content, which pointed to Celina’s fascination with
sado-masochistic practices. It later transpired in our work that Celina was devoting on average 4 hours per day on the Internet after school (more at weekends) and much of this time was spent looking at pornography and frequently masturbating to this.

Celina was angry with her stepfather for ‘grassing on me’ and yet I detected some relief that she had been found out as she was herself very worried that, like her own father, she was losing her mind and would end up with no option but to kill herself. She had expressed suicidal ideation after she was found out.

She did not have any emotionally intimate relationships with either boys or girls, but she had been sexually active with both boys and girls albeit in a rather limited fashion. Upon meeting me the first time Celina announced that she was ‘trans’ and insisted rather forcefully that ‘I know who I am’ and did not need help with her sexuality or gender. When I asked her about why she was being so insistent about her sexuality given that I had not questioned either, Celina replied that her parents thought it was ‘perverse’ to fancy girls and boys and to look more masculine, as she did, and she was sure that I would think so too. She reassured me that many of her friends were ‘bi’ or ‘trans’, that times had moved on since her mother, or I, had been a teenager. She felt that her mother in particular was ‘repulsed’ by her sexuality.

The only thing that worried her was that she could not focus at school any longer. She admitted to downloading pornography in the past but refused for some time to discuss this with me saying that she had stopped doing this. However several months into the therapy, in the sessions I will now share, she eventually told me, feeling very ashamed, that she had continued to access Internet pornography.

I will now give you two brief excerpts from 2 consecutive sessions taken from the seventh month of our work together to illustrate first, the compelling nature of the Black Mirror for Celina and second, how the Internet pornography that she masturbated to interfered with the elaboration of her own involvement in
the perverse fantasy that was gripping her and thus prevented the establishment of a stable sexual identity.

Celina arrived 35mn late for her first session of the week. She was often late. Over time we understood the fantasy behind the lateness that was exciting to her: I was kept waiting, like her ‘slave’ was in the sexual fantasy she masturbated to, not knowing if she would come or if she was still alive. She was entirely in control. If I interpreted this I punctured the fantasy because then I was no longer enslaved to my worry and longing for her, which was defensively sexualised in her erotic scenario. I then had a mind of my own that she could not script. But her lateness, though embedded in this early sexualised transference dynamic, had taken a turn for the worse for a few weeks prior to the sessions here reported as she was feeling increasingly desperate about her anticipated exam failure and became very disorganised around all her commitments.

Celina lay on the couch and rather threateningly sighed and said:

C: Don’t say anything. I know I am late. (Her tone was very prescriptive and domineering).

This was followed by a long silence that she eventually broke.

I hate coming here. It’s a waste of my time. If my mother’s really worried about me her money would be better invested in getting me some tutors because I’m going to fail my exams. I don’t understand ANYTHING about maths and I have exams soon. I just can’t get my head round what any of it means… I don’t care about it… Who fucking cares about numbers! Like that’s going to change the world!

I said that arriving late was a way of making me long to see her walk through that door and be relieved that she was still alive [this was a shared understanding between us by this stage]. But when she turned the analysis
into her favoured sexual script, as she had done again today by arriving so late, it did turn it into ‘wasted time’. And yet she was also letting me know that she felt increasingly out of control of her own mind and hopeless about the possibility of change.

Celina said that she didn’t care about what I thought or about anything really. Her characteristic ‘rant’ continued but as she spoke her pace gradually slowed. The mania that normally punctuated her speech delivery gave way to more fragmented speech, starting and stopping sentences as if in the absence of rage, of mania, of sexual intoxication, she was inexorably dragged to a place in her mind where her thoughts fragmented and she was utterly hopeless. She did, however, manage one final expletive about how ‘I have now wasted today’s fucking session and you’re bound to call time now’.

I observed that today she had not managed to entirely persuade herself or me that she did not care, that she was actually quite worried about her state of mind and worried about how she was depriving herself of my help by arriving late.

The next day she arrived ‘only’ 15mn late. She was restless on the couch, pulling her legs up to her chest as if she wanted to roll up into a ball, to cover her body and conceal it from my gaze.

I simply observed that today she was feeling anxious, maybe about what I might see.

The silence that ensued was very tense as she writhed on the couch. She eventually said that she was glad that she did not have to look at me, that I must think her repulsive and she wished analysis involved me lying on another couch, at the other end, coterminous with hers, where my head would be head-to-head with hers, so that neither she nor I could look at each other.
I said that this couch arrangement would mean that I could not look at her, but I would be even closer than we are now, that our two heads/minds could be close, as she revealed to me something that felt shameful and disturbing inside her mind.

The homosexual transference is in evidence here, but in this particular moment this did not feel as pressing as responding to both the activation of shame (the wish to not be seen) and Celina’s need to feel that I could still bear to be close to her, which is why I decided to not interpret the transference more directly, but took up instead her barely disguised wish for closeness and acceptance at the point when she felt so ashamed.

She said yes, that she needed me to know something but she did not want me to look at her.

I asked her what she feared I might see.

She said that I would be disappointed and disgusted. She hated looking into my eyes when she walked into the room at the start of sessions and she wished she could also stop me from looking at her. She added that she hated her body because she looked disgusting. She hated the way her skin looked.

I said that perhaps she did not want either of us to look at something inside her that disgusted her, that was now experienced by her as being written all over her skin, but that this was something that also worried her and that she rather urgently needed my help with it.

Celina went very quiet. After 5 minutes she said very tentatively and anxiously: ‘I’ve been lying to you…. I never stopped looking at pornography…. I just do it in the early hours of the morning now, when I can be sure that my parents are asleep, and then I now make sure I delete all the browsing history as I’m sure my stepdad checks on me...
Then she fell silent again. I sensed that she needed my help to tell me more, that if I stayed too silent, instead of offering her a helpful space for reflection I would become the mother who is repulsed and who wants to look away, and that this would close her down. I considered that given the acuteness of her anxiety she might not able to make use of an interpretation that addressed the object I had become.

...So I only said that she wanted me to know something more... more than that she had never stopped downloading pornography...

After some more silence, during which she kept moving restlessly on the couch, Celina then told me that whereas before she would climax 4 or 5 times per night, and this would send her to sleep, she was worried that she now found it harder to orgasm to pornography. She sometimes rubbed herself so hard and for so long that she was in pain...sometimes she enjoyed this pain and wished she could tear off her clitoris.... This relieved her despite the pain, made her feel like nothing mattered in that moment...She said rather anxiously that the sexual images she found exciting on the Internet were ones that she would never come up with herself: “They’re not in my head until I see them and then I keep going back to them. They’re like wallpaper and then I get bored of it and re-paper the wall.... but now I have to keep changing the wallpaper”.

After another pause she added that the difficulty in climaxing had made her search for more disturbing images and videos on the Internet. She said: 'I cannot stop and.... sometimes.... I wish I could go somewhere, like men go to see a prostitute, and pay someone to do these things to me. One of my friends at school – he’s the year above me - and he went to Soho and paid for sex'. She gave me a lot of detail about her friend’s experience and her speech quickened. I sensed her state of mind changing. I could feel that she was both anxious and starting to get excited as she was psychically on her way to Soho in the session, as if she had shown me too much and she now had to recover some sexual musculature to manage her shame and anxiety.
By this time we were near the end of the session. I said she had managed to allow me to see her, she had opened her mind to me and showed me the wallpaper, and that she needed my help to not go to Soho and instead stay in the session with me. But I observed that there was also now an increasing pressure building between us as the session was coming to an end and Soho started to look more enticing – a place she could go to where she could pay someone other than me to take her pain away.

Celina burst out that she thought she was losing her mind: ‘These images….they’re not mine….do you understand? THIS IS NOT ME!!’

I said that part of the lure of the Internet pornography was that it temporarily allowed her to shut down the part of her mind that felt so confused, so full of anxiety and shame. But she was right: the more she tried to manage that in herself by looking at pornography, the more she was actually in danger of losing her mind, of not knowing what fantasies belonged to her, whether she could contain them, and most of all she was in danger of not knowing who she was.

Celina was quiet but when she resumed talking her tone struck me as more detached and contemptuous again: ‘I guess you must be pleased now that you have got this out of me. I guess that’s what you’re paid to do…. to extract the truth’.

I felt as if she had allowed me to see too much, exposed her terrifying experience of not knowing who she was, and she then converted her anxiety and shame into her arousing sexual scenario, which afforded her a measure of control: I had now become the dominatrix who had painfully extracted the shameful truth and was now about to also call an end to the session and she was turning her pain into pleasure.

I eventually said that she had allowed me to know something today that was so disturbing to her, but now that I was about to call time, that she felt I was
the one in control shutting her out until Thursday (the last session of the week for her), I had become harsh, a kind of torturer who extracted her thoughts and feelings without any real care but that this now did not cause her pain because we were in that familiar script that anesthetised her from feeling pain.

Celina ended the session in silence.

Discussion: From ‘I know who I am’ to ‘This is NOT me’

Celina began her analytic journey stating with insistent certainty: ‘I know who I am’, she said to me as she declared herself ‘trans’. The emotional truth that this statement of identity contained, as I understood it, was not one about her sexual or gender identity, but about her desperate need to find an identity label to lend some coherence to her very disturbing sexual body, its unconscious identifications and the fantasies that she was compelled by.

Internet pornography became Celina’s retreat. Perhaps the most visceral manifestation of her urgent need to find temporary coherence through sexual arousal and pain was the insistent ‘tugging’ at her clitoris, which she fantasised tearing off. Her choice of the word ‘tugging’, which we might think to be more commonly associated with how one handles a penis, conveys the confused relationship in her mind to her actual female genitalia that had become a combined ‘clitoris-penis’ at the level of her body representation with all the attendant unconscious meanings it held for her.

By the time we reached the sessions reported here Celina had travelled to a very difficult, uncertain place where she implored: ‘This is NOT me’. She was now not sure who she was. She felt unmoored in her body and mind and hence without any stable identity. She wanted to distance herself from her sexual fantasies and disown them: they emanated from the Black Mirror and had no connection to her mind. Her plea is deeply evocative of one of the features of the Black Mirror that I outlined earlier, namely how it rapidly ‘pushes’ content into the mind cutting out the psychic work necessary for integrating meaning and assuming ownership of one’s own mind. It also
provides an all too easy way of divorcing oneself from one’s own sexual fantasies: ‘This is NOT me’.

The work by the Laufers has drawn attention to how, during adolescence, Oedipal wishes are experienced within the context of the young person having physically mature genitals and a compromise solution is found between what is wished for and what can be allowed. This compromise solution defines the person’s sexual identity. The sexual fantasies that become the most compelling typically contain the various regressive satisfactions and the main sexual identifications and this is clear in Celina’s case. Given the traumatic loss of her father, and what I eventually understood to have been her mother’s longstanding depression that preceded the father’s suicide and intensified following it, Celina was primed for a difficult adolescence as her body became the active force in sexual and aggressive fantasy and behaviour. Her defensive organization, however, came under extreme stress at age 14 (she had started menstruating late, in fact, only before her 13th birthday) around the time of the mother’s remarriage. The retreat into Internet pornography escalated soon thereafter.

Celina’s most compelling masturbatory fantasy followed a very clear script. The essential elements were that mostly, but not exclusively, the woman was the dominant partner while the men were invariably submissive, kept waiting for her attention. They would eventually be humiliated by being made to clean up different kinds of messes on the floor. As we came to understand it over time the fantasy reflected an alternating identification with both the castrated father who lost control of his mind and body and killed himself in what she fantasised to have been humiliating circumstances (i.e. ‘the slave’), and her identification with the dominant, controlling, manic part of him that had been very exciting for her as a little girl (i.e. ‘the dominatrix’).

Celina not only had to manage the loss of her father but also the emotional fall-out that ensued when her mother remarried. Following the father’s suicide and up until her mother’s re-marriage Celina had enjoyed a much closer
relationship with her. She viewed her mother as kind but weak but after she met the stepfather she had become very angry with her and accused her of her being very ‘conservative and dull’. It seemed that her mother’s renewed sexuality when she met the stepfather had been experienced as threatening to Celina who felt shut out, on her own and very small again in the face of the new parental couple. The stepfather, in external reality, was a very important figure introducing much needed dilution of the intensity of the mother-daughter dyad, but he was also experienced as an intruder whom she wished to dominate and punish.

The dominatrix figure of Celina’s sexual fantasies was a very tough, physically imposing woman with very well developed muscles: a figure with small breasts who looked very masculine. The fantasy accompanying masturbation seemed therefore to reflect an identification of Celina’s body with that of her father as a further defensive measure against the hatred she felt towards her mother. This figure, as we came to understand it, expressed Celina’s wish to triumph over her mother – she was now the phallic woman who could rescue at will the father from his castration and death and punish the stepfather for putting her back in her Oedipal place, as it were.

Over time we understood Celina’s sexual fantasies as defending against catastrophic breakdown if she allowed herself to mourn the traumatic loss of her father, that is if she allowed herself to face the contents of her inner world. Instead the Black Mirror provided an alternative to looking inside. External images and scripted sexual scenarios covered up the all too painful and disturbing internal scenarios, supplying the sexual stimulation that turned the fear and grief she could not yet process into sexual excitement. Despite the phantasy that pain can be done away with, however, such a defensive strategy is costly to the self because the dead and living are now fused in concrete identification dominated by hatred (Freud, 1917; Lemma and Levy, 2004).
The Laufers suggest that the young person’s defensive organization is tested at puberty. The challenge for the adolescent is twofold: she needs to work out which parts of the content of the sexual fantasy, and which regressive wishes in general, are acceptable and which ones have to be repudiated. She may now feel that she has little ability to defend against certain regressive pulls. This is the point of greatest risk for some young people looking into the Black Mirror since one of the qualities of the Internet is that it appears to represent a seductive if ‘corrupt superego’, or to invite a dissolution of the superego, as Wood has suggested (2007; 2011). The Black Mirror removes all external obstacles: nothing has to be overcome in order to access pornography. Moreover the speed of access to pornography diminishes the self’s implication in the desire to look for sexual images. By removing all external obstacles to pornography the Black Mirror exposes the young person to a greater risk in the face of the regressive pull leading to a retreat away from genitality.

The all too ready availability of the Black Mirror may lead to rapid escalation and amplification of an adolescent’s difficulties in integrating the sexual body into their self-representation. A screen that pushes sexual images indiscriminately into the mind interferes with the process of experiencing, reorganising and integrating one’s past psychological development within a new context of physical sexual maturity. The combination of the vast amounts of material available, the illusion of control, and the ability to become dissociated from the material body, fuelled by sexual arousal, encourages a manic state of mind. Let me be clear: I am not arguing against pornography per se; rather I am raising concerns about the form through which it is disseminated nowadays and the wide ranging content of the pornography available at a click of a finger.

Initially it appeared as if cyber-pornography would be no different from the old variety, the screen merely replacing the pornography magazine. However the latter required not only physical stature in order to reach the ‘top shelf’, but also the overcoming of a degree of embarrassment or shame in order to
physically make it to the newsagent, hold the magazine in one’s hand, pay for it and then have to find physical places in which to hide it away usually from parental figures but not only. The embodied experience of accessing pornography looked and felt very different pre-Internet.

The disintermediation of the body when accessing pornography nowadays sustains the wish to deny one’s involvement in what the self is actually implicated in. Overuse of Internet pornography, as in Celina’s case, discourages working at the representation of the specificity of one’s own desire. Desire is not about crude gratification as its representation, its expression through the imagination. However because Internet pornography floods the mind it leaves little space for the exercise of ‘fantasy as trial action’ (Meltzer, 1975).

Concluding thoughts

Celina allows us to observe the seductive pull of the Internet and its ‘costs’, especially with respect to the work of desire. Her experience illustrates how technology can be used to manage difficult aspects of psychic reality and the demands of intimacy. Easy access to internet pornography and sexualized media images lends itself to short-circuiting the painful psychic work involved in the work of desire.

While much of the early Internet hype forecast that new online technologies would suddenly allow us to cast off the shackles of hegemonic gender, race, class or sexuality and redefine ourselves in any way imaginable, this is not the case. Cyberspace is far from a Utopian site of identity fluidity and play. The Internet as a ‘queer’ space with the potential for negotiating and performing one’s identity has not delivered its promise despite seducing many along the way. Instead of casting off these shackles and becoming free-floating entities in cyberspace, the body and its unconscious identifications as they manifest in
our conscious relationship to our sexuality remains a psychically organising principle even when the body is effectively disintermediated in cyberspace. Virtual bodies are always necessarily embedded in pre-virtual internal and external material relationships.

The Black Mirror projects into the mind, as I have suggested today, and it encourages a state of fusion that is antithetical to reflection. Desire nowadays is set up following the logic of fusion supporting immediate gratification. Anyone who has observed children or young people glued to their screens will have noticed the ‘oneiric consciousness’ (Poster, 2006) that is generated. The accounts of my young patients’ experience of life online suggest that when in this ‘machine-body’ induced psychic state intentionality is suspended. Here body and mind are primed for a state of desiring located in a virtual register that operates outside of the rules of the reality principle.

Technological mediation has truly become a defining condition of contemporary culture. Psychoanalytic theory and practice needs to be articulated within this new context. Unsurprisingly psychoanalytic theory bears the traces of the Victorian culture in which it originally evolved. Freud’s developmental theories reflect the social realities of his time: a child growing up in relation to a small circle of adults who organized the child’s libido in relation to those adults. The emotional universe of the child in Freud’s time consisted primarily of two parents in what we would now regard as a somewhat conventional constellation that has been superseded by varied family configurations, some facilitated by new reproductive technologies, that challenge any simply conception of an Oedipal constellation.

In digital times a child’s body is no longer primarily libidinised through his identifications with parents. The child’s development nowadays unfolds in a context in which not only have childrearing practices altered, but the child’s interface with machines also plays a very significant role in his embodied experience. The Victorian body of childhood, and hence the body of sexuality too, was constituted in a dynamic relation with a few other people within more
clearly defined cultural contexts that limited access to sexual information and sexual stimuli. Nowadays the body of childhood bears the imprint of the technology it is tethered to and the virtual worlds that extend physical and psychic geographies for better and for worse.

Digital sexuality has a more polymorphously perverse quality. A fused machine-body desire solicits the child and prepares the body outside of the classic Oedipal paradigm. The latter operates within a context where what is lost through renunciation of the Oedipal triumph is compensated by what is gained through the process of identification and the separateness this bestows. However through new media the child’s body is inscribed not only by parental projections and the identifications of the Oedipal phase but also by myriad, often part-object, ready-made identifications that operate through a complex and multifaceted cyber experience. What is specific to these so-called virtual identifications is that they require no psychic work – they are, in fact, more appropriately termed ‘incorporations’. Incorporations require no psychic movement – they are the psychic equivalent of ‘staying at home’.

The dominant external culture of immediate gratification, quick fixes, consumerism, normalized voyeurism and the idealization of exposure is antithetical to some of the core tenets of the psychoanalytic enterprise. The latter is concerned with the painful work of desire, with looking inwards, with reflection as opposed to action, with bearing what we can never know – those questions that the mighty oracle Google will never be able to answer because it could not even anticipate them. The unconscious, after all, cannot be reduced to any type of algorithm.