

The Gains and Losses of Screen Relations: Clinical Considerations

Class 414: William Alanson White Institute (2020)

Todd Essig, Ph.D.

tessig@me.com

Technologically-mediated simulations of physically co-present relationship experience, aka, “screen relations,” are everywhere, including psychoanalysis. One can no longer reasonably question whether screen relations will be part of your practice. They will. The simple fact is that we live in an emerging techno-culture of increasingly taken for granted simulations and enhancements, so much so we often do not even think they require reflective attention. But they do. This course will try to move from taken for granted procedural knowledge to a reflective awareness of how screen relations work.

Through readings, discussion, and clinical examples we will ask a series of “how” questions: How do screen relations actually work? How to help patients who get into trouble with screen relations? How to use, or not use, screen relations to conduct a session, or even an entire treatment? How to integrate screen relations into one’s developing psychoanalytic identity and practice? Over the course of this 5-week class we will consider these questions from a perspective built on the basic reality that people are people and that all technologies have promise and peril, gains and losses.

For each class we will review the “required” and “additional” readings and then use those readings to consider both practical clinical issues and theoretical consequences. I know it’s the third trimester of your 4th year (aka, the winter of your discontent). But I really hope you’ll still do the required readings. I’ve kept them pretty light. If you can also get to the additional readings that would be a bonus and well worth the time. Each week also includes “background” readings that can be explored some other time if interested. All the readings marked with an asterisk are available in the online reserve library.

Please be sure to have the first week’s readings done before the class starts. During our 5 weeks together we will be reading and discussing most of the chapters in the following book, although not in the chapter order intended by the author. Everyone should get a copy.

Russell, Gillian Isaacs (2015). *Screen relations: The limits of computer-mediated psychoanalysis and psychotherapy*. Karnac Books.

In addition to the readings I’d like you to get in the spirit by watching the following episodes from the *Black Mirror*, a show currently streaming on *Netflix*. It’s replete with genius dramatizations of how our emerging culture is changing how we experience ourselves and how we relate to each other.

Season 1 Episode 3: "The Entire History of You"

Season 2 Episode 1: "Be Right Back"

Season 3 Episode 1 "Nosedive"

Week One

From Procedural Knowledge to Reflective Engagement: Affordance, telepresence, and simulation entrapment/avoidance

Topic

How is it even possible that we are able to connect with other people over distance and generate feelings of genuine intimacy? How is the experience and representation of such screen relations the same as what happens when we are bodies together, and what are the differences? Why and how do screen relations work, at least some of the time and for some purposes? We will explore the key concepts of affordance, telepresence and presence, and simulation entrapment/avoidance. We will also discuss the history of communication over a distance which documents how easy it is for machines to capture the human heart.

Required Reading

* Essig T. & Russell, G. I. (2017) A Note From the Guest Editors, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, 14:2, 131-137, DOI: 10.1080/1551806X.2017.1304111

Russell, G. I. (2015). Chapter 2, "Exploring the speculative non-fiction digital frontier" (pages 11-42). *Screen relations: The limits of computer-mediated psychoanalysis and psychotherapy*. Karnac Books.

Russell, G. I. (2015). Chapter 8, "The Problem of Presence" (pages 134-149). *Screen relations: The limits of computer-mediated psychoanalysis and psychotherapy*. Karnac Books.

Additional Reading

Russell, G. I. (2015). Chapter 3, "Mapping the Digital Frontier" (pages 43-66). *Screen relations: The limits of computer-mediated psychoanalysis and psychotherapy*. Karnac Books.

Background Reading

Abelson, H., Ledeen, K., & Lewis, H. (2008). *Blown to bits: your life, liberty, and happiness after the digital explosion*. Addison-Wesley Professional.

Gertner, J. (2013). *The idea factory: Bell Labs and the great age of American innovation*. Penguin.

Hayles, N. K. (2008). *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. University of Chicago Press.

Kittler, F. A. (1999). *Gramophone, film, typewriter*. Stanford University Press.

*Lemma, A. (2015). Psychoanalysis in Times of Technoculture: Some Reflections on the Fate of the Body in Virtual Space. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 96:569-582.

Powers, W. (2010). *Hamlet's blackberry*. HarperCollins.

Standage, T. (1998). *The Victorian Internet: The remarkable story of the telegraph and the nineteenth century's online pioneers*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Week Two

Failed Solutions: Helping Patients Who Get Into Trouble Online

Topic

How to help patients suffering online? Maybe it's just gotten too much, or it interferes with offline life. It could be gaming, social media, commercial or consensual cybersex, pornography, or just too great an attachment to a phone. Maybe someone sees a partner, spouse, lover or family member exhibiting problematic internet use. Some researchers describe a syndrome of "Internet Addiction" characterized by craving, development of tolerance, loss of control and negative consequences. Some clinicians think in terms of trying to treat an addictive disorder. But others question the at best shaky research foundation for this approach and highlight the questionable clinical utility of thinking in terms of an addiction. We will consider a psychoanalytic approach to excessive internet use that views the problematic behavior in context of each individual's unique relationship history, experiences and psychological organization.

Required Readings

*Cebulko, S. (2013). Internet pornography as a source of marital distress. In Scharff, J. S. (2013). *Psychoanalysis online: Mental health, teletherapy, and training*. Pages 37-47. Karnac Books.

*Essig, T. (2015). The gains and losses of screen relations: A clinical approach to simulation entrapment and simulation avoidance in a case of excessive internet pornography use. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 51(4), 680-703.

*Essig, T. (2012). The addiction concept and technology: Diagnosis, metaphor, or something else? A psychodynamic point of view. *Journal of clinical psychology*, 68(11), 1175-1184.

Additional Readings

*Billieux, J., Philippot, P., Schmid, C., Maurage, P., De Mol, J., & Van der Linden, M. (2015). Is dysfunctional use of the mobile phone a behavioural addiction? Confronting symptom-based versus process-based approaches. *Clinical psychology & psychotherapy*, 22(5), 460-468.

Background Readings

*Billieux, J., Thorens, G., Khazaal, Y., Zullino, D., Achab, S., & Van der Linden, M. (2015). Problematic involvement in online games: A cluster analytic approach. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 43, 242-250.

*Cheever, N. A., Rosen, L. D., Carrier, L. M., & Chavez, A. (2014). Out of sight is not out of mind: The impact of restricting wireless mobile device use on anxiety levels among low, moderate and high users. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 37, 290-297.

*Clayton, R. B., Leshner, G., & Almond, A. (2015). The extended iSelf: the impact of iPhone separation on cognition, emotion, and physiology *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 20(2), 119-135.

Cundy, L. (Ed.). (2014). *Love in the Age of the Internet: Attachment in the Digital Era*. Karnac Books.

*Gilmore, K. (2017). Development in the Digital Age: An Introduction to the Section. *Psychoanal. St. Child*, 70:82-90.

Ley, D. J. (2012). *The myth of sex addiction*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Levy, D. (2009). *Love and sex with robots: The evolution of human-robot relationships*. New York.

McGonigal, J. (2011). *Reality is broken: Why games make us better and how they can change the world*. Penguin.

*Schimmenti, A., & Caretti, V. (2010). Psychic retreats or psychic pits?: Unbearable states of mind and technological addiction. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 27(2), 115.

Week Three

Starting with Screen Relations Based Treatments (SRBTs): Better than nothing, good-enough, or functionally equivalent

Topic

Technologically-mediated psychoanalytic sessions and treatments promise both an expansion of one's psychoanalytic practice to any location with the requisite technology and a continuity of practice despite the inevitable dislocations and disruptions inherent in today's (and tomorrow's) globalized economy. But there are also the twin perils of providing substandard care and undermining the unique value of being bodies together by assuming the better than nothing is either good enough or functionally equivalent. So, should one treat remotely or not? Unfortunately, both camps, the "should" and "should not," make their arguments without fully considering what makes a SRBT (either video or audio) different from physically co-present treatment and then tracing those differences through explicit and implicit psychoanalytic processes. Articulating those differences will be our topic for the next two weeks so you can make a reasoned decision about whether and how to treat at a distance, or not, given your developing and unique psychoanalytic identity.

Required Readings

Russell, G. I. (2015). Chapter 4, "What Happens in the Consulting Room" (pages 43-66). *Screen relations: The limits of computer-mediated psychoanalysis and psychotherapy*. Karnac Books.

*Russell, G. I. & Essig T. (2019). "Bodies And Screen Relations: Moving Treatment From Wishful Thinking to Informed Decision-Making." In *The Most Innovative Ideas in Psychoanalysis Today* edited by Aner Govrin & Jon Mills.

*Wallwork, E. (2015). Thinking ethically about beginning online work. Scharff, J. S. (Ed.) *Psychoanalysis Online 2: Impact of Technology on Development, Training, and Therapy*. Karnac Books., 83.

Additional Readings

*Bayles, M. (2012). Is Physical Proximity Essential to the Psychoanalytic Process? An Exploration Through the Lens of Skype?. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 22(5), 569-585.

Background Readings

*Chavooshi, B., Mohammadkhani, P., & Dolatshahee, B. (2016). Telemedicine vs. in-person delivery of intensive short-term dynamic psychotherapy for patients with medically unexplained pain: A 12-month randomized, controlled trial. *Journal of telemedicine and telecare*, 1357633X15627382.

*Essig, T. (2016). "Online Psychoanalytic Training: A Most Dangerous Experiment." Paper presented the 36th Annual Division 39 (APA) Spring Meeting Atlanta, GA: April 06-09.

Fonagy, P., Gergely, G., & Jurist, E. L. (Eds.). (2004). *Affect regulation, mentalization and the development of the self*. Karnac books.

Scharff, J. S. (2013). *Psychoanalysis online: Mental health, teletherapy, and training*. Karnac Books.

Scharff, J. S. (Ed.). (2015). *Psychoanalysis Online 2: Impact of Technology on Development, Training, and Therapy*. Karnac Books.

Sletvold, J. (2014). *The embodied analyst: From Freud and Reich to relationality*. Routledge.

Week 4

Diving Deeper into Difference: Does Descartes get his revenge?

Topic

Screen relations afford different experiences than those afforded by being bodies together, in treatment and elsewhere in life. Understanding those differences is key. Only by appreciating how and why screen relations based treatments are not functionally equivalent replacements for physical co-presence can reasonable case-by-case judgments be made as to whether or not one should work remotely and, if so, with what kinds of modifications. During this week we will look more closely at what is and is not possible when we strive to squeeze clinically viable relationships through the comparatively narrow channel of even the best technological mediation.

Required Readings

*Dettbarn, I. (2013). Skype as the uncanny third. Scharff, J. S. (Ed.) *Psychoanalysis online: Mental health, teletherapy, and training*. Karnac Books., 15.

Russell, G. I. (2015). Chapter 5, "From the First Laboratory: Neuroscience connections" (pages 79-99). *Screen relations: The limits of computer-mediated psychoanalysis and psychotherapy*. Karnac Books.

Russell, G. I. (2015). Chapter 6, "From the Second Laboratory: Technologically mediated Communication" (pages 100-120). *Screen relations: The limits of computer-mediated psychoanalysis and psychotherapy*. Karnac Books.

Russell, G. I. (2015). Chapter 7, "The Mediating Device" (pages 121-133). *Screen relations: The limits of computer-mediated psychoanalysis and psychotherapy*. Karnac Books.

Additional Readings

*Brahnam, S. (2017) Comparison of In-Person and Screen- Based Analysis Using Communication Models: A First Step Toward the Psychoanalysis of Telecommunications and Its Noise, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, 14:2, 138-158, DOI: 10.1080/1551806X.2017.1304112

*Brahnam, S. (2014). "Therapeutic Presence in Mediated Psychotherapy: the Uncanny Stranger in the Room." In Riva, G., Waterworth, J., & Murray, D. (Eds.). *Interacting with Presence: HCI and the Sense of Presence in Computer-mediated Environments*. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.

*Lemma, A. (2020). The Aesthetic Link: The Patient's Use of the Analyst's Body and the Body of the Consulting Room. *Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, 17(1), 57-73.

Background Readings

De Zengotita, T. (2006). *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Our World and the Way We Live in It*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

Week 5

Integrating Screen Relations in One's Practice: "You are how you mediate"

Topic

During our fifth and final week we will discuss how to integrate screen relations into one's practice. But there will be no easy answers; one size does not fit all. What for one person is a reasonable technological accommodation to exigent clinical circumstance is for someone else an egregious example of simulation entrapment. Similarly, someone else's appropriate caution can be seen as a simulation avoidance undermining clinical possibility. No sweeping guidelines are currently possible, in part because technology is changing so fast. But also because psychoanalysts differ in their values and in how they conceptualize what makes a psychoanalytic process the rich, transformative experience it can be: Are words enough? Is something more needed? Is better than nothing good enough? And over it all is the question of

what kind of a psychoanalyst do you want to be? What are your hopes for your professional life? The best we can do is do our best to understand our personal and professional histories while actively studying that which technology affords, trying all the while to magnify promise while steering clear of peril. And while the current location of my personal and professional journey is a belief that the future for psychoanalysis best resides in being practitioners of “local therapy,” I also know others with equal commitment see psychoanalysis only surviving as one of many mediated offerings in an expanding tele(mental)health marketplace.

Required Readings

Essig, T., Turkle, S., and Russell, G. I. (2018). “Sleepwalking Towards Artificial Intimacy: How Psychotherapy Is Failing The Future”. Available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/toddesig/2018/06/07/sleepwalking-towards-artificial-intimacy-how-psychotherapy-is-failing-the-future>

(note: It is 4 chapters but only 30 pages!)

Russell, G. I. (2015). Chapter 9, “Sometimes it works ...” (pages 153-161). *Screen relations: The limits of computer-mediated psychoanalysis and psychotherapy*. Karnac Books.

Russell, G. I. (2015). Chapter 10, “The elephant in the room” (pages 162-168). *Screen relations: The limits of computer-mediated psychoanalysis and psychotherapy*. Karnac Books.

Russell, G. I. (2015). Chapter 11, “The toothpaste and the tube” (pages 169-176). *Screen relations: The limits of computer-mediated psychoanalysis and psychotherapy*. Karnac Books.

Russell, G. I. (2015). Chapter 12, “To be in the presence of someone” (pages 177-183). *Screen relations: The limits of computer-mediated psychoanalysis and psychotherapy*. Karnac Books.

Additional Readings

*Essig, T. (2012). Psychoanalysis lost—and found—in our culture of simulation and enhancement. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 32(5), 438-453.

*Turkle, S., Essig, T., & Russell, G.I. (2017) Afterword: Reclaiming Psychoanalysis: Sherry Turkle in Conversation With the Editors, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, 14:2, 237-248, DOI: 10.1080/1551806X.2017.1304122

Background Readings

*Essig, T. (2012). “Actually Connect: A reply to Bonnie Litowitz’s “Only Connect”. Off the Couch: An Ezine of Psychoanalysis and Culture, vol 2. #1, pages 10-17. Retrieved 12/27/16 <http://internationalpsychoanalysis.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/OffTheCouchV2N1.pdf>

*Hartman, S. (2017) The Poetic Timestamp of Digital Erotic Objects, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, 14:2, 159-174, DOI: 10.1080/1551806X.2017.1304113

Ogden, T. H. (2005). Chapter 2, “What I would not part with.” *This Art of Psychoanalysis: Dreaming Undreamt Dreams and Interrupted Cries*. Routledge.

Pinker, S. (2014). *The village effect: Why face-to-face contact matters*. Atlantic Books Ltd.

*Rosegrant, J. (2012). Technologically altered reality inside the therapist's office. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 29(2), 226.

Sax, D. (2016), *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter*. PublicAffairs

Trub, Leora (2016). A Portrait of the Self in the Digital Age: Attachment, Splitting, and Self-Concealment in Online and Offline Self-Presentation. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, Oct 24 , 2016.

*Trub L. & Magaldi, D. (2017) Left to Our Own Devices, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, 14:2, 219-236, DOI: 10.1080/1551806X.2017.1304118

Turkle, S. (2015). *Reclaiming conversation: The power of talk in a digital age*. Penguin Press HC.