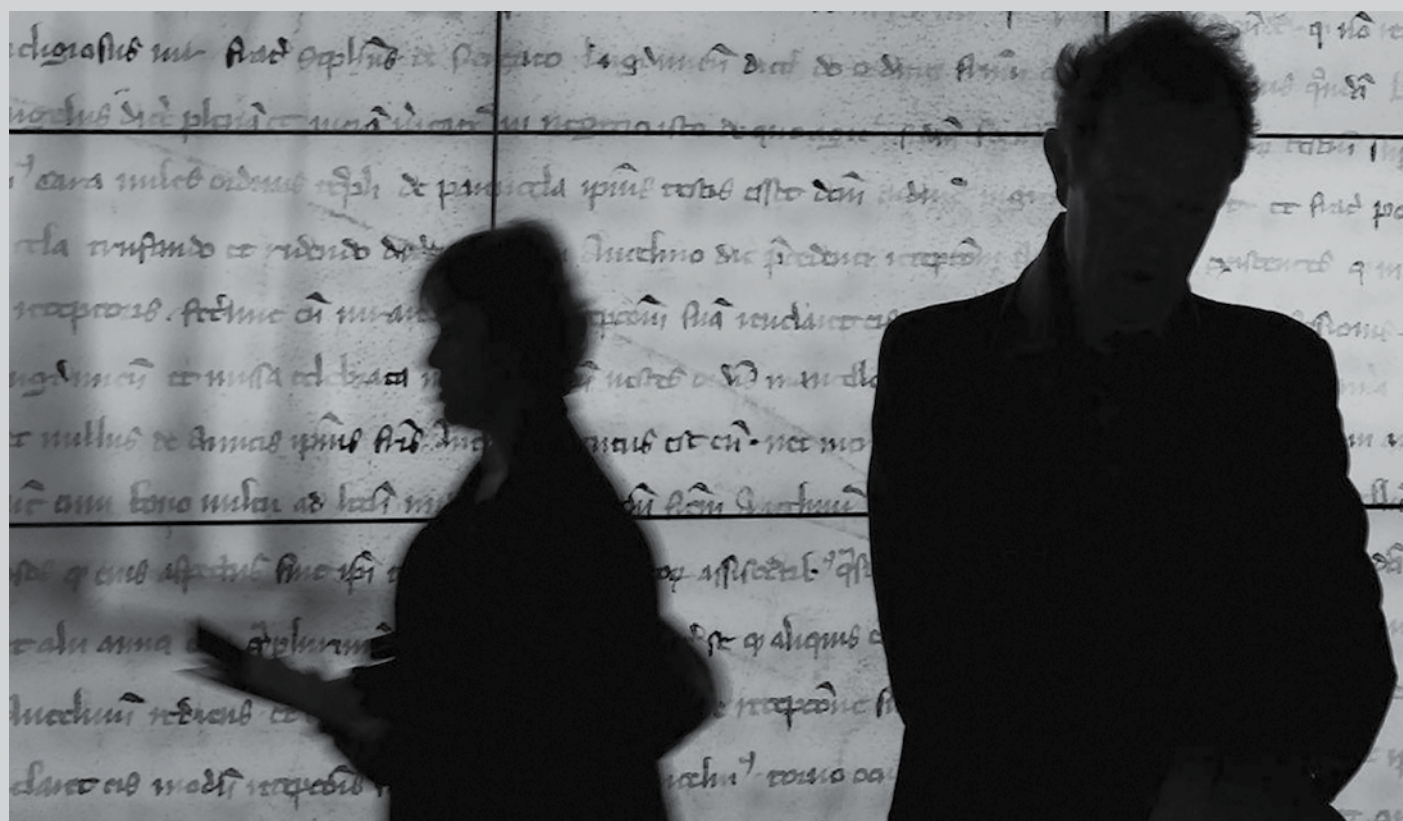


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Theo's Cavern: Where Do We Live Today?¹

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ABSTRACT
Technical progress changes space and human relationships. Modern physics and psychoanalysis have emphasized the relational basis of the spaces we live in. While our day to day sensible experience places us in front of a double space, the one outside and the one inside each of us, the articulation between the two has taken a new dimension with Winnicott's and Green's work. Using the analysis of Theo, who experienced the analytic setting as a dangerous cavern, and the myth of Perseus, as read by Pasche, the importance of a personal shield is discussed. The mediation offered by digital technology is compared to a Perseus' shield of a different order. Its impact is questioned at the light of developmental research and of clinical experience with adolescents.

KEYWORDS
Internal space
Virtual space
Transitional space
Digital technology

In Portugal, as elsewhere in Europe, the passage from sickle to scythe was not simply a technical progress; it constituted a small social revolution and it provoked many resistances before becoming generalized. Demanding more force, the scythe disqualified women, until then very present at the harvest. It also made it possible to cut the stems lower and it thus violated an old right of use, the right of stubble, the stubble being the remaining stalks the poorest could harvest after the first cut. The better yield of the scythe finally reduced the labor requirements and the time needed for the harvest, creating unemployment and dissatisfaction among the seasonal workers. The scythe thus transformed the societies that adopted it. It did not only change the way of working; it altered relations with the territory and social relations. From sickle to scythe and eventually to machines, technical progress changes space and human relationships. Our digital age is advancing in this wake and raises several questions.

Modern physics and psychoanalysis have emphasized the relational basis of the spaces we live in. Our day to day sensible experience places us in front of a double space, the one outside and the one inside each of us (Winnicott added a third

space, less obvious at first sight, which we will come to later). At each of the two poles, space presents itself as an expanse in which objects move within fuzzy limits; the borders are not clear. The relations between the poles are also ambiguous: is it the inside that contains the outside or the outside that contains the inside? And what is the boundary postulated between inside and outside, how does it come about? In which space do we live, especially nowadays with our digital technology and its impact on our experience of space?

We will start this exploration within a space familiar to psychoanalysts, the psychoanalytic setting. Psychoanalysis offers a particular theatre to illuminate phenomena that largely operate in the shadows. It is a peculiar window on the space within us and on the conditions that allow its appropriation. It is through the experience of another space, the physical space of the office as well as that of the analyst and analysand meeting, that the architect-analysand can inhabit more and more of his own personal space. For many, this is how they discover an internal architect and give themselves the right to fully inhabit the different spaces. This was the case for Theo.

THEO'S CAVERN: A STORY

To talk about my engagement with Theo, I can only tell a story. I know it will say more than I realize, hence the promise of the exchange with the reader: to enrich and deepen the story, to pursue it. This opportunity allows me to make more explicit the importance of the spatial dimension in my encounter with this patient and in my way of thinking about it. And if the theme reminded me particularly of Theo's analysis, each of my patients has a way of living in the space of our meetings and the space of their life. Each one bears the story of a more or less successful conquest of space.

When Theo came to consult me, one space of his life was parasitic on all the others: the space of public toilets. Since the beginning of adulthood, it had been impossible for him to urinate in the presence of other people; he lost both the urge and the ability. Gradually, his whole life coalesced around the anguish aroused by the thought of needing to urinate in an inconvenient place. Various therapies had given a scientific name to his phobia — a paruresis — but little relief. Well into his forties, he wanted to engage in psychoanalysis, a «last chance» venture. He had been thinking about it for a number of years; a recent altercation at work was the last trigger but in what space was he going to end up?

As concrete and localized as a public toilet may be, you can guess that it was a metaphorical place representing something that had effects far beyond. Theo's withdrawal characterized his whole life. He lived alone and centred his days around his poorly valued work in a charitable enterprise. He had a long-standing relationship with a woman but it had been without sexual intimacy for a long time. He faithfully supported his aging parents who counted on him. Two personal places had a particular cast: his library, where a staggering number of books were stacked in disorder, bought with avid interest but rarely read beyond a few pages; and the painting studio where he dared not go beyond the copy of masterpieces. On the whole, he scrupulously followed a reassuring routine within which our analytic sessions quickly found their place.

In *Communicating and Not Communicating* (1963), Winnicott opposes, on the one hand, the prospect of never succeeding in expressing what really matters and the risk of remaining isolated and ignored, and on the other hand, the healthy protest against «the agonizing fantasy of being exploited to infinity», which is tantamount, Winnicott says, to being eaten or swallowed. The more elaborate form of the conflict can be organized as a game of hide-and-seek in which «hiding is a pleasure, but not being found is a catastrophe». Each of the poles of this conflict was important to Theo, who gave the impression of tasting the freedom of speech that was offered to him, but who advanced with great caution. The injunction to do good guided each of his steps.

I felt I had to be discreet, but it took me some time to recognize the ogre I was for Theo. I was slow to grasp the full extent of the deep vigilance which at first gave a touch of intensity to our meetings. A form of docility prevailed, in a climate that nevertheless seemed to be that of a positive investment of analysis and of the analyst. The sequel would show how dangerous the encounter between us was. Signs suggested it from the beginning but it was more in their tenacious rigidity that their scale was revealed. The spatial position on the couch was a first clue: Theo was struggling to fully occupy his space without looking to me, without checking my own position. He finished the sessions diagonally, eyes on me. The envelope of laughter and self-mockery that adorned his remarks and quickly swept away the other emotional expressions was another clue. Theo surrendered very little in the analytic space offered.

Over time, it appeared that this analytical space had taken the form of a dangerous cavern where reigned the terror of being eaten. When we were able to give verbal forms to it, at the beginning of more play between us, Theo evoked the meeting of Ulysses and the Cyclops. What to do when the return to his personal Ithaca, to oneself, involves the confrontation with the Cyclops? How to manage if not by cunning, that is, by disguising himself as a harmless sheep and pretending to be *oûtis* / nobody? The fight of «nobody» against the ogre: the images of Homer opened a play that terror closed. And if I speak now of play, like that of hide-and-seek, we were for a long time in places where there was no question of being discovered.

«You will not get me», Theo told me in so many ways. In his secret grandiosity, he joined primitive maternal figures, his mother and the mother of his mother, who foretold a destiny out of the ordinary compared to that of the other men in the family. He would not and could not be like the others! Captured and captive, unable to openly disappoint or denounce the invasion he was the object of, he had sought help from his father. But both the father and his representatives had appeared cruel or unavailable, as voracious as the maternal figures. In this deprived world where losses remained gaping, the only relational space that seemed to be open was one where Theo could feel special as long as he offered himself entirely as support to the object. But a fierce retreat prevailed in parallel which eked out a small potential personal space. The primal scene, in all its variations, was terrible.

In the analytic cavern, Theo remained thus withdrawn. If he ventured out of his shelter, he existed for me only as the «object of (your) desire» and risked being swallowed; or he himself became the ogre and I disappeared. In addition to those of devouring, the scenarios of anal or castrating attacks remained for a long time marked by a radical terror

which made impossible the meeting of two subjects each having their own space. Any dependency was intolerable and quickly reversed, with Theo becoming the guardian of the cavern, responsible for averting threats.

Without detailing the relational history that Theo and I unfolded over several years, you will have deduced that trauma was present, including a homosexual seduction by an admired teacher at the beginning of adulthood, following which the paruresis started. The analysand's associations repetitively returned to a small number of intrusive scenes, more or less recognized as such, going back to early childhood. Each of these was at first inscribed as an isolated event, without conscious resonance with the other scenes, and without Theo being able to link them into the chapters of a personal narrative. Each represented an attempt by an intruding figure to gain a hold over him. In the face of danger (although long coloured with idealization in early childhood scenes), left to himself, Theo was each time a solitary hero, masking his distress to show an air of triumph. He was the chosen one, at the price of an essential dispossession, with no other solution than that of being an *ouïtis* /nobody, yet all the while hiding his subterfuge.

The counterpart was Theo's great craving that narcissistic grandiosity did not feed. In so many ways he was holding back and losing contact with himself. He was waiting for the paternal present promised by his passive submission. He wanted so much for me to see him, his eyes turned towards me wanted such support, but at what risk? Going beyond his maternal identification propelled him into a sadistic scenario where he feared for a long time my reprisals and my abandonment. Or else, he laboured under the guilt of destroying the world towards which he owed so much and for which he was responsible. More than ever, he saw himself living curled up, always afraid, clinging so as not to fall. He observed himself in his manner of sticking and escaping («I am always the fly that will stick to the ribbon»). Only slowly, to the reliable rhythm of our encounters and the working-through of his conflicts in our relationship, was Theo able to build a space where we could meet without damaging each other, where everyone could have his own psychic space and his own power, creative and relative. The different intimacies, like the toilets, lost their absolute charge, murderous and castrating. Losses and disappointments took shape. Theo compared his work of mourning and construction to getting off the tree where he had made his shelter to live in a house with others where there was a door he could rely on. At the end of his analysis, he also proposed this image: «I was like an unoccupied chair on the stage of a theatre».

MEDUSA AND THE NEED FOR A SHIELD

In the myth of Medusa which Freud (1922) studied, Perseus sliced the head of the Gorgon without crossing her petrifying gaze thanks to the polished shield that Athena had given him. He thus avoided being transformed into stone. For Freud, Medusa represents the female genitals and the threat of castration that their sight arouses. In his later reading, Francis Pasche (1971) emphasized a more primitive aspect which will interest us particularly. He notes that it was by depriving Medusa of the third dimension, that of depth, that Perseus would defeat her. Reduced to her virtual image, Medusa lost her terrible power. The Gorgon was lying flat in the mirror despite the illusion of perspective. Reduced to two dimensions on the impenetrable reflective surface, Medusa was no longer terrifying. Perseus' shield gave him a margin of freedom.

Pasche notes the absence of this freedom in the psychotic patient who has not established a protective shield between the outside and the inside. Everything invades, swallows and persecutes him. Freud, who proposes a symbolic interpretation of the myth, assumes a symbolization which is already acquired and which allows for a treatment of anxiety on a more advanced level, that of castration anxiety. The psychotic, or each of us in our primitive foundations, does not have the protective limit that the acquisition of symbolization provides. At the more primitive level, we are struck frontally, without protected personal space. Such a patient once said to me: «I am only a surface that everything attacks; the words have lost their water and there remains only a precipitate that hits me». For Pasche, without a shield, there is an *en bloc* incorporation of reality, experienced as an invasion by this reality without being able to reduce it to a perception and a representation. Without a shield, space is unlimited, infinite.

Theo was not psychotic and he could erect, as best he could, a rampart between himself and me. But he did not have an efficient shield as the intrusions had been too important in his journey. A concrete distance or withdrawal was always necessary to avoid a direct contact that could only lead to the worst. He was thus divided and immobilized between his smallness and his grandiosity, between his impotence and his devastating power. He was folded back, besieged, in danger of subjugating or being subjugated. Mobilization involved better constituting his shield, his personal limit differentiating outside and inside, allowing play between his own space and mine.

This Perseus shield whose importance Pasche emphasized finds an extension in the preoccupation of different psychoanalytic authors for a third topical model of the mind, which is concerned above all with the limit between inside and outside, and with mental *functionings* “in externality” (*fonctionne-*

ments en externalité) (Brusset, B., 2006; Gauthier, M., 2006; Reid, W., 2006). These types of processes operate from a psychic apparatus that has not reached the status of an autonomous unit, with a fully constituted shield.

This shield is what « articulates » perception and representation, by which I mean that which acts as a transformational joint or juncture/connection between perception and representation. From his early days, Freud struggled with this articulation and it led to his various developments regarding reality testing (Leclaire, M. & Scarfone, D., 2000). With Winnicott (1953, 1971), an important step was achieved in our conceptualization of spaces: in health, the articulation was revealed to be paradoxical, opening a third space, potential or transitional, crucial for the development of the other two and their interrelationship. Green (1982, 1993) added another characteristic by highlighting the correlative duality of the boundary (*la double limite*), one processual leaflet - the intersubjective side - forming a boundary between inside and outside and the other processual leaflet - the intrapsychic - formed by repression.

If, with Winnicott, the mother is the first space for the child, Green postulated its internalization into an internal framework (structure encadrante de la mère) through the mechanism of negative hallucination. This first matrix of psychic self-representation is the seat of the transitional processes that Green calls the tertiary processes, bridging Freud's primary and secondary processes (Urribarri, F., 2005). The French analyst thus summarized: «The psyche is the relation between two bodies of which one is absent». Joining and separating are life-long challenges.

A good shield both joins and separates. It protects, on one side, against the pangs of a petrifying encounter with others and, on the other side, against an unbearable isolation. We recognize the issues Winnicott was addressing in *Communicating and Not Communicating*. Similarly, Theo was struggling with my overbearing presence and my too radical absence. In the myth of Medusa, protection was provided by the passage from a three-dimensional to a virtual two-dimensional encounter. Is the modern hero the one who can face three-dimensionality?

TO CONQUER SPACE

In April 1961, when the first astronaut, the Russian Gagarin, went into space, the French philosopher Michel Serres was asked what he thought of this breakthrough. The latter astonished journalists by answering: «What is new is that he never left!» Serres compared Gagarin to the previous sailors and adventurers who remained for a long time without news, whereas the astronaut never lost contact with those on the ground. Well before the

internet, space was not the same anymore. The philosopher postulated that space had been canceled, which opened, according to him, a new approach to time, space and human relations. Since then, the phenomenon has intensified and communications have never been so numerous and ubiquitous.

Astronaut or not, new technologies have conquered our daily life and transformed its organization. They promote communications and information exchange like never before. They have allowed technical advances that benefit all human fields, scientific, cultural or artistic. In itself, technology is neutral: men and women decide the use they make of it. Digital technology is part of complex social forces where it participates in change but where it cannot be treated in isolation or be held solely responsible for a multi-determined evolution. In this sense, the spatial question that stimulates my remarks has a broad and multi-factorial resonance. It is important not to lose sight of the complexity of the whole when I want to draw attention to a particular modality (Simanowski, R., 2018).

It is somewhat precarious to venture in the social realm from a clinical experience largely gleaned from working with individuals and families. In an earlier attempt (Gauthier, M., 2018), I used a concept sketched by Winnicott, the manic defense of everyday life, to address the importance of entertainment in our current culture. The question of space continues this reflection on our collective issues from another angle. The matter I am trying to sketch here concerns one aspect of the container, a feature of the technical interface that mediates our relationship to others in this digital age. Beyond the content of what is exchanged or the dominant role given to images in today's Western culture, it is a dimension of the virtual image, or rather its lack of a dimension, that I wish to highlight. Brought back to its virtual pole, as rich in content as it can be, reality is translated by technical mediation into a reflected image of itself. The technical interface is a kind of polished shield of a different order than that of Perseus. Embodied interactions — in vivo, in the same shared space — are replaced by communications using images flattened on a screen, without the contribution of other sensory modalities, other than sound. The third dimension, that of depth or thickness, the sagittal one of the field, that of perspective, loses in importance. This shift is subtle but significant as the very quality of the relational experience is different. Joining and separating are not the same with the technological shield. The dimensional reduction that the virtual translation introduces raises questions which the psychoanalyst will want to keep in mind (or in sight!).

In this respect, childhood developmental research brings interesting findings. We learn that different sensory modalities are necessary for the construction of a more complex and

multidimensional reality, which is impossible with visual representations alone. Studies have thus demonstrated the importance of transfers between sensory modalities for the construction of mental representations, while longitudinal research has revealed the progressive acquisitions made by children in their apprehension of material space, up to the stage of formal operations in adolescence (Douriez-Pinol, M., 1974). On the pathological side, the difficulties presented in autism spectrum disorders also highlight the importance of trans-modal transfers. *Dyssensoriality*, the failure of polysensory synchronization, is today a pathophysiological theory of autism that finds significant support both in cognitive research and in psychoanalytic therapy (Golse, B., 2017, Guinot, M. & Golse, B., 2018). Knowing that co-modalization is a central agent of access to intersubjectivity, this deficit sheds light on autistic adhesive and bonding behaviours, signs of relationships that remain uni- or bi-dimensional.

With children and adolescents, clinical experience demonstrates the potential misuse of digital technology by those who are already the most vulnerable. Virtual space then allows a form of relationship that can also be described as uni or bi-dimensional, especially by its adhesive, addictive or controlling quality, protecting the individual against the anxieties aroused by relationships of flesh and bone in three dimensions. The two-dimensional properties of technology can serve as an external shield for those who do not have their own. In more serious cases, the virtual space takes the qualities of an imaginary world under their full control. Some teenagers swallow the world by the mouth of their screen and are swallowed by this screen, to the detriment of any other relationship. Gladly, with proper help, it can remain a regressive step before the adolescent is able to face three-dimensional relationships. Finally, in milder forms, separation anxieties appear to be quickly aroused nowadays when an expected communication is missing or when contact is suddenly impossible, betraying an intolerance of empty space.

Questioning the two-dimensional shield offered by technology involves addressing its impact on the whole experience of joining and separating as neither is the same in this new context. Psychoanalysis has highlighted how we inhabit paradoxical spaces, both inside and outside of ourselves, built by and through the relationships that we establish. The full deployment of internal and external spaces is based on three-dimensional relationships, involving the subjectivity of each person and the shared space. Such relationships are possible as long as everyone has developed his own personal shield, this double transitional boundary dear to Winnicott and Green, deficient in the case of my patient Theo.

The forces favouring the investment of the virtual pole are powerful, the content offered is stimulating: can we apprehend a subtle movement of levelling or flattening that transforms the relationship we have with our inner world and with that of others? If in vivo interactions have a vital role for the development of the personal symbolic space and for intersubjectivity, what influence will the multiplication of mediated interactions have on each person's personal shield, especially when those mediated interactions start as early as infancy? With my references to my patient Theo, and to Perseus and Medusa, I have wanted to begin unfolding this large question.

These ideas give a metapsychological argument to the position adopted by the International Psychoanalytical Association concerning the analysis of a candidate in training. The current regulation reserves remote psychoanalysis for exceptional circumstances and requires a number of in vivo sessions. The principle recognizes that the richness of the flesh-and-blood encounter is unmatched by technology. This does not negate the possibility that fruitful work can take place through the technological tools but it seems important not to deny the differences, especially at the level of the spaces mobilized by the process.

Digital technology allows extraordinary advances, such as making psychoanalytic therapies available to many people for whom such an experience was previously impossible. There may come a time when virtual meetings will be considered preferable everywhere to avoid the pollution to the environment caused by physical transportation or simply because it will appear more efficient economically. Meanwhile let us remain attentive to the surreptitious transformations that technology introduces into space and into our relationships. I have compared our digital tools to a polished shield of another order than Perseus' mythical one, transforming the conditions in which we build our own personal shield. Already scientific data exist on the cerebral impact of the use of digital technology on the abilities of attention and orientation, and on memory (at the level of the hippocampus) (Sparrow, B., Liu, J. & Wegner, D. M., 2011). The psychoanalyst will want to follow its influence on the places where we live. 🏠

RESUMO

O progresso técnico modifica o espaço e os relacionamentos humanos. A física moderna e a psicanálise enfatizaram a base relacional dos espaços em que vivemos. Apesar de a nossa experiência quotidiana nos colocar diante de um espaço duplo, o exterior e o interior de cada um de nós, a articulação entre ambos ganhou uma nova dimensão com os trabalhos de Winnicott e Green. A partir da análise de Theo, que vivenciou o *setting* analítico como uma caverna perigosa, e do mito de Perseus, a partir da leitura de Pasche, é discutida a importância de um escudo pessoal. A mediação proporcionada pela tecnologia digital é comparada ao escudo de Perseus, muito embora de uma ordem diferente. O seu impacto é discutido à luz da investigação do desenvolvimento e da experiência clínica com adolescentes.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: espaço interno, espaço virtual, espaço transicional, tecnologia digital.

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