

CLAIRE BETH STEINBERGER.

“Cyberspace: The Nodal Self in the Wide Wide World – Adolescents Signing On”

In December 2005, the New York Times ran a startling article about a lonely thirteen year-old boy who had turned to the Internet to find friends. His personal journey and its unexpected consequences opened up a surreal world of relational possibility. (Eichenwald, K., “Through His Webcam, A Boy Joins a Sordid Online World”). That compelling story triggered this research.

This presentation illuminates a postmodern, turn-of-the century “intrapsychicinterpersonal- cultural” connection. Object relations theory and clinical description (e.g., Balint’s “Thrills and Regressions”, Lidz, Turkle, Gabbard) offer understanding, highlighting how developmental conflict can enfold in “bizarre” techno-cultural interactions. In an uncanny way, Internet usage becomes a ready medium for creative aims, fantasy and unconscious conflict (both in and out of the treatment session). In this way, cyber exchange – set free of formal identification – can lay bare unconscious motives and ego functioning. A “Rorschach-like” source for associative connections, it revels in affect, drives and thought – and the interrelationship among these processes.

Clinical material explores the family context and treatment of a severely borderline young woman who communicates her longings in cyberspace connection. The patient’s Internet relationships as well as her “actual” post-Internet encounters reveal the psyche’s unwieldy capacity to balance intense needs, overwhelming rage and dread of narcissistic dissolution. Her primitively painful struggles in peer and intimate relationships appear most salient in the unguarded affectively-driven “internet games”.

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