

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND COVIDIAN LIFE

Common Distress,
Individual Experience

Edited by

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and Ana de Staal***

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“The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.”

—H. P. Lovecraft¹

“If there is anything which is certain it is that certainty is wrong.”

—W. R. Bion²

¹Lovecraft, H. P. (1927, 1933–1935). *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. <http://www.yankeeclassic.com/miskatonic/library/stacks/literature/lovecraft/essays/supernat/supern01.htm> (last accessed January 19, 2021).

²Bion, W. R. (1977). *Bion in New York and Sao Paulo*. F. Bion (Ed.). London: Roland Harris Trust/Clunie, 1980, p. 98.

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Ana de Staal and Howard Levine

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Editors' note

“We like to think that our ideas are our property, but unless we can make our contribution available to the rest of the group there is no chance of mobilising the *collective wisdom* of the group which could lead to further progress and development”

—W. R. Bion, *Bion in New York and São Paulo*, p. 26.

The idea, not to say the necessity, of organising a book on the effects of the pandemic on psychoanalytical practice appeared to us around April 2020. We were still in full lockdown, stunned by what was happening.

For many of us, the rapid and quasi-imposed passage from the couch to the screen had raised legitimate questions about the impact of these unprecedented events on our practice. Not that the question of remote psychoanalysis was a new subject. Some of us were already practising it occasionally, during supervisions for example, or in order to continue working with an expatriate patient. For the past ten years or so, a number of books had been published on the subject, regularly and from a wide variety of angles.¹

¹For instance: Jill Savage Scharff (2013–2018), *Psychoanalysis Online, Mental Health, Teletherapy and Training*, vols. 1–4, New York & Abingdon, Routledge; Alessandra

With the pandemic, however, we found ourselves in a very new situation, not only because of its compelling and universal nature (we were all more or less obliged to close our consulting rooms and rearrange our sessions, or even stop them), but also because it seemed to have the potential to influence our practice more radically. Indeed, to what extent could the setting, this container of psychic reality without which the psychoanalytical process has no frame within which to take place,² bear the weight of such a brutal, untimely, and traumatic reality? It seemed obvious that it would not be impervious to it, and perhaps it was better that it should not be. But then ...?

When we first began to gather some authors around this reflection, we addressed to them an initial argument:

With the closure of our practices due to the pandemic, many of us have been “transposing” on screen not only the classical analytical setting but also specific psychotherapeutic ones (psychosomatic consultation, for example). This experience, both trying and fascinating, seems to provide us today with enough elements for a first reflection on the resilience of the analytical framework, which has been subjected to various types of extensions and loads since the middle of the 20th century. To what extent is psychoanalysis dependent on its concrete setting? Are the foundations of the framework truly non-negotiable, non-adaptable? On the contrary, is this system susceptible to transposition? But at what price? What happens in the analytical situation when the field of vision is framed by the eye of a camera? What about the analyst’s journey to the consulting room (the daydream on the way, considered by some as an integral part of the session)? What happens to the “atmosphere” of the treatment, dear to Theodor Reik? How to situate the body, the presence/absence in telephone and video sessions? ...

Lemma (2017), *The Digital Age on the Couch: Psychoanalytic Practice and New Media*, New York & Abingdon, Routledge; Frédéric Tordo et Elisabeth Darchis (Ed.) (2017), *La cure analytique à distance, Le skype sur le divan*, préfacé par Serge Tisseron, Paris, Harmattan.

²Bleger, J. (1967). Psycho-analysis of the psycho-analytic frame, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 48(4): 511–519.

As the reader will see, the responses to this argument have been very diverse, often going beyond the initial problem of the frame. Some wanted to think more broadly (and psychoanalytically) about the political and social context of the event, others about its theoretical or institutional implications, and still others chose to account for the specificity of remote clinical experience.

At the time we embarked on this project, our desire was to take a first look at the question, and, faced with the pandemic that was assaulting bodies and minds everywhere at once, we wanted to break down language barriers and differences between schools, by calling on analysts from all over the world and with the most diverse sensibilities: from Freudians to Lacanians, from Ferenczians to Bionians to Kleinians. We welcomed all inspirations, not in the name of an obligatory and probably infertile eclecticism, but in the spirit of the *collective wisdom* that Bion talked about.

Also, this internationalist and decompartmentalised will, so to speak, was obviously at the antipodes of a desire for exhaustiveness or doctrinairism. We wanted neither a manual of technical attitudes to follow, nor a pseudo-consensual (and therefore necessarily pretentious) discourse on what should become the standard of practice in Covidian life. Our intention was above all to signify that psychoanalysis lives and thinks within its times—certainly, taking the time to elaborate its profound modifications, but always in full accord with what constitutes its very essence and purpose: the development of our capacity to think about life and death without negotiating away our debt to our humanity. And precisely, by accepting everyone's contributions with the greatest openness of mind, we have simply tried to photograph at a moment “t”—between August and December 2020—the way in which each of us was trying to confront the death brought about by the pandemic by reflecting on its more immediate impact on our patients, our practice, and ourselves. For it is not possible to get to the heart of the traumatic event itself when we are synchronically living it; therefore, this book is only one step in a long reflection that has just begun.

At the time this project was launched, we were certain that things would “get back to normal” a few months later, perhaps by the fall of 2020, and that our customary routines would start again. As the months went by, we realised the obvious—nothing could be less certain ... At the time of this writing, hospitals are still not letting up, the second wave is

officially declared everywhere, a third wave is expected, general fatigue is growing, and even the strongest among us are starting to feel the pinch. We realise that, from the highest levels of government decision-making to the most modest levels of intervention, responses are being developed, not to say tinkered with, day after day, without anyone being able to imagine with any certainty a kind of future. There is something of a “figuration deficit” that starts to contaminate people, at the same time as the coronavirus.

The relentless work of biologists in search of vaccines could be a metaphor for our own situation today: we too are in the midst of a research, and it will take time also for us, to better observe and then theorise about the damage caused by the pandemic on our patients, on our practice, on our way of working through and understanding psychoanalysis. The pandemic has made death too visible, too obvious, at the same time as it has buried everything that has always helped us to “live” with the death—our family and social ties, our celebrations, our funeral rites, our artistic and cultural production, our parks and our travels ...; it has placed us, dumbfounded, before the bluish light of the screens, making evident our need for meaning, for sublimation, for an inhabited internal world, and for an external world open to connections and possible futures.

We hope that these contributions may give the reader, as it has given to us, some food for thought and consolation.

Ana de Staal and Howard Levine