The function of vacuum in a Photolangage group

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Abstract
This short paper was a small part of an interesting research work during the academic year 98-99 at Lumiere University in Lion, in collaboration with Prof. Claudine Vacheret and Prof.Bernard Duez.
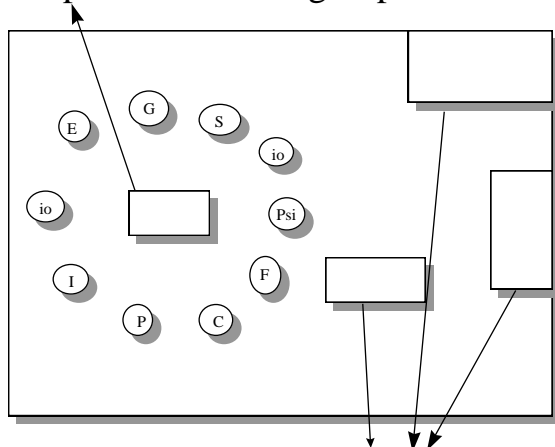
My interest in this topic was due to my participation (as trainee) in a group through the Photolanguage method. It took place inside CE.S.A.P (*Centre de Soin et d'Accueil Psychothèrapeutique*). This centre is a C.A.T.T.P; that is a part time therapeutic reception Centre; its purpose is to promote the rehabilitation of suffered subjects from mental disorders and their reintegration in a social context through their participation in therapeutic groups.

It was a group made up of six women (they were five in January only, because Florence left the group) between thirty and fifty years old animated by a psychologist, a psychotic nurse and me. The session took place from October to July, on a certain day, once a week, and an hour and half stay.
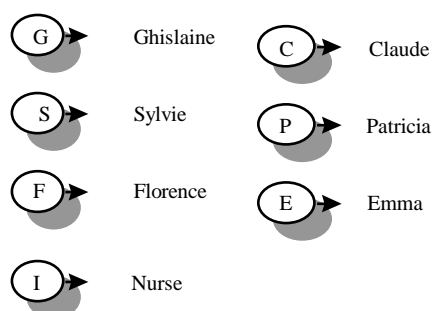
Key Words: Photolangage, vacuum, group, welcome theraphy, social tissue.

Picture 1. Topology in the hall ,the instruments and the group.

Desk where photos are left after they are presented to the group.

Desks where photos are left to be chosen.

G → Ghislaine
S → Sylvie
F → Florence
I → Nurse
C → Claude
P → Patricia
E → Emma

The violence of countertransference experience drove me to focus my attention on the discovery of individual and group dynamics able to determine that atmosphere which was hard to understand for me for long. The central issues are made up of three different aspects penetrating one into another: vacuum, the group and Photolangage (Pic. 2).
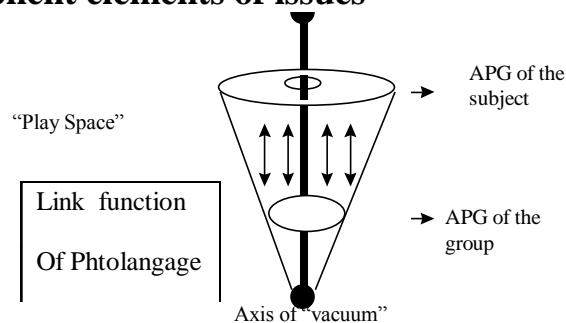
The fist axis is made up of a series of questions that directed my attention towards what I define "the suffering of being". After wondering about the possible traumatic origins due to this sort of malaise connected with clinically negative disorders, such as primary traumatisms, the split of the Ego, I was interested then in the way how symptomatology and psychotic structure worked inside the group.

The second axis of issues is introduced here. How vacuum appears, works, organises and might change inside a group space.

The third axis is made up of the *Photolangage* method, which has to exercise a function of link between the first two. How a photo, besides, promoting communication in the group, can photos permit to the subject to start the symbolization of this space that before Photolangage isn't symbolized?

My questions will be, therefore, the following: how can vacuum be an *unconscious structural organizer?* (Kaës, 1994)of group psychotic reality and have a function in the group itself? How does it happen that the photos proposed by the Photolangage method can be regarded as *intermediate* moments (Kaës, 1994) between the group psychic apparatus of the subject and the group in itself and permit to enable subjects *to feel the vacuum which has already been experienced earlier but not felt yet* (Winnicott, 1975)?

Picture 2 - Component elements of issues

"Play Space"

Link function
Of Phtolangage

APG of the subject

APG of the group

Axis of "vacuum"

The hypotheses would be, therefore, the following:

-The phantom of vacuum of the subject in a group might become the unconscious structural matrix of phantoms organising the group psychic apparatus.

- *The image proposed by the photo would permit to the subject to imagine his/her vacuum, proposing a figuration first and opening the way towards the process of the symbolization.*

Presentation of the Photolangage device in this modified group

The session takes place in two moments: a time for a personal choice of one or more photos, and a time for exchanging inside the group.

When each of the members takes his/her seat in the circle made up of the chairs, the psychologist remembers the rules defining the *setting[1]*? she writes the question on the black -board and announces whether the animators choose the photos or not (I will not deal with this peculiarity here). The psychologist, the nurse and me place the photos on the desks around the hall, while the patients are thinking over the question. In this moment the first stage (personal choice) is starting which takes place in total silence in order to respect the other members reflections. The choice is done following the photos with their eyes to leave all the photos at disposal of the others and there is no time limit. When every one has chosen, the psychologist invites the members to hold their photos in their hands, if some one has chosen the same photo as another member, he/she doesn't have to change it since he/she will find it again in the group.

The second stage starts when all the patients are sitting in circle with their photos in their hands and the psychologist remembers the time when the session is over, stating that this time is to be divided making up groups.

Up to now, the method used in this group is totally respectful of the rules proposed by its founders (A. Baptiste, C. Belisle, C. Vacheret).

Some aspects have been modified by the psychologist:

- Photo material: the psychologist added some more photos regarding the pre existing photo dossiers as inadequate, poor and boring. She cut them from newspapers and books. Real professional photographers had taken them
- Animators' participation in the choices of photos during the session: the animators choose the photo/s in accordance with the questions asked by their patients. If the question implies a personal involvement it cannot be chosen (ex: What does intimacy represent for you? When the question is asked in general terms it can be chosen (ex. keeping up with the pace, getting into his/her stride)
  - a desk in the middle of the circle made up of the group, the photos are placed on it after they had been presented to the group.
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[1] **Setting:** in French *cadre* .J. Bleger. Proposes to define "psycho- analytical situation" all the phenomena working in the relationship between an analyst and a patient .This situation encloses on one side the process, object of analysis and interpretation and on the other side the setting , that is no process. It represents the cohesion of constants to the whole inside which the process takes place (ex. the room ,the contract, time, money, etc.)

Some clinical elements: the founding session (picture3)
The question is: **every one has her realizable or unattainable dreams. Choose more than a photo to speak about them.** The animators don't choose the photos and Ghislane is absent.
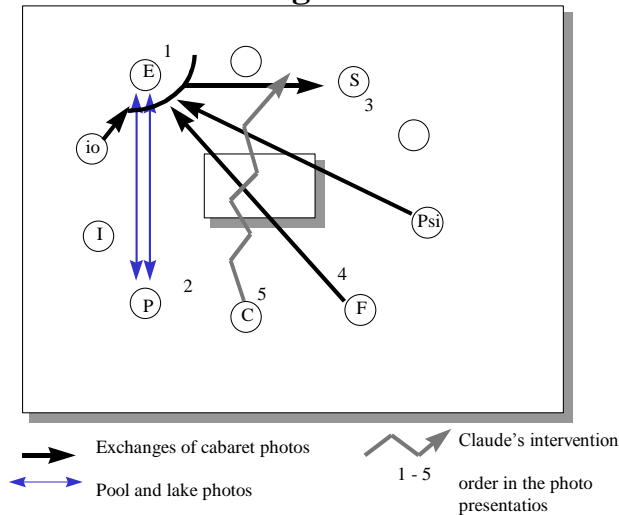
After some moments of silence, Emma opens the session, presenting the photo of a pool taken under water. One can see the se a bed, a man going up after diving and the wake he has left behind him self. She says: "I am cured, it's my husband who is ill now. I love him but to be able to be well in with him he must change. I realize that it isn't my role to help him…Now it's his turn to dive" The second photo represents the surface of a lake where one can see three ducks while they are going to fly: "I would like to go with my husband and my children to the same direction. I don't want to be alone". The word passes to Patricia who has just chosen the same photos as Emma's. She limits to take her photos in her hands and, like for automatism, she repeats the same ideas as Emma. she expresses her terrible anxiety about her destroyed family, her helplessness in front of her wish of reconciliation and her hatred for her husband who never spends his time with her.

Sylvie presents the photo of a half open door inside a house, with a hand on a handle: "I want to get out of my self to realize what there is outside. I want but I can't. I withdrew into my self when my children were born." She quickly looks at the second photo representing a cabaret stand up. There are four ballet dancers in mini skirts; in the middle of them there is a man. She still makes her wish: In a nostalgically tone she says: " I'd like to be an actress, but this is for me impossible" Emma immediately intervenes and interrupts Sylvie's dream , saying: "a good mother can never do such a job. Can you see that? Actresses are naked. It's easy to strip naked in public!" In front of this a little extreme reaction, the group reacts, a short and intense moment of silence when the members exchange looks. After some expressions of misunderstanding, I feel a real chaos of ideas and emotions, difficult to be understood for the moment.

Sylvie continues: "We must dare in life. They don't look so naked; they do the job they like. Emma goes on " when I was young I used to dance lambada in parties…it was easy..but now I am a mother and have other things to do …" I intervene to say : " she says that it is easy to dance naked in public " ..I think it's difficult " Look at the photos well, these women aren't naked, they are wearing stage costumes, you can see their legs and shoulders only". Emma insists on expressing her own nuisance in front of this image, which seems to involve her a lot. The psychologist tells her that a mother is also a woman with her own desires, interests, passions and once a mother " the woman" she is doesn't disappear . For Emma this is still too difficult to be understood She continues thinking that in order to be a good mother it is necessary to devote one self completely to this role, forgetting everything. Florence shakes her head showing she doesn't understand the strong disapproval Emma expresses in front of these ballet dancers. Claude attacks saying: "Leave those women alone!" Emma will speak no longer. After a moment's silence, Florence continues in her

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presentation of her photos. The first photo represents a completely black sky, on the left one can see the highest point of a mountain, at the top of it there is a young couple: "Before I could climb, I can no longer now" She loses herself in a short silence and continues showing the second photo ; it's the image of a grandfather with some children in a park: "I like children,   I would like to get some …the old man looks rather young. But not now I know I'm not ready yet". Claude finally takes the floor and the session ends. She starts with the photo of an open window taken from the outside surrounded by greenery. "It's the ideal home…the opening". She continues presenting the second photo which is the same as Florence's, a park. Before speaking she stares silently the image for some seconds. She stands still, her legs crossed; her photos in her hands, her shoulders bent her look blank like in a dream " never… I will never be able to live such a moment…I have built nothing in my life.. . I am   all alone." She returns silent and resumes her dream again. Nobody can speak any longer and the session finishes like this.

Pic. 3The founding session

The white circle at the top shows Ghislaine 's absence. the diagram allows to see the three different times of the session. Emma and Patricia become here a mimetic double, permitting them to work well together. The cabaret photo chosen by Sylvie has caused a reaction in Emma, who imagines herself, In a defensive way, like a barrier to protect herself from the reactions of the group in face of her statements. One can finally see the breaking off of the function due to Claude's words who through them has destroyed the discussion by causing silence.

Analysis of the clinic and demonstration of the hypothesis of vacuum regarded as an unconscious structural matrix of phantoms organising in the group a psychic apparatus.

1. Failure to shape a triangulation.

The session starts with Emma's intervention in the photo describing the dive into the pool.This photo can be considered in two different ways: a man who has just dived or a man coming up after diving.

The first reading takes into account a fragment of the action only, the second the whole diving process. Emma's story _can be referred to the first reading: the fragment of a process that one cannot see realised. Her belief in her husband's disease permits her to take shelter from any possible sexual intercourse with him. She says: " I would like him to look at me longer, with different eyes…but he can't now. Her desire to stay with her husband is prevented from putting into action the phantom of castration embodied in a "sick man" unable to satisfy her. Patricia's intervention strengthens the setting in shape of the phantom itself. She takes up the same photo as Emma's again in order to say: " my husband is an alcoholic, he never takes care of me and spends all his time in front of television.

It appears to me that Emma and Patricia are coupled by the phantom of castrated or " sick" man in order to protect the group body – mother against any possible penetration.

In this group penetration is experienced only in relation with procreation, therefore, if there is procreation there is separation between the "sisters" and if there is separation the group doesn't exist any longer.

Emma and Patricia are coupled through *primary identification* (Freud, 1921) of the double, to the identical. This primitive way of the construction of the subject one on the model of another enables us to realise the roles of this couple. It is a sort of pairing I dare say homoerotic (Bergeret, 1999) whose function is to prevent a man from entering the group mother-body because a possible sexual intercourse with him might permit the birth of one of "possible babies" thus destroying the group integrity. The presence of the analytic third isn't operational and what happens is the impossibility of setting in shape the triangulation . The presence of the analytic third is conceived as a threat to the undifferentiated relationship between mother group/children group and the image of "the sick man" shows it well. In this way, it's possible to continue staying in her protecting shell which is lethal and at the same time. We will see later the reason why it is lethal.

Here, it's very important to point out the specificity of the phantom of castration at stake. In general we knows that the phantom of castration "gives an answer to the enigma that the anatomical difference between sexes causes in the child (presence or absence of penis.). This difference is attributed to the cutting of penis in the baby girl. In the baby girl the absence of penis is experienced as a severe damage that one tries to deny, balance or repair"(J. Laplanche and J.B.Pontalis).

In our case, a man can enter the mother-group , as not a man only, that is , deprived of his penis The penis-man is reduced to his opposite, in negative, in relation with phallus , that is not a penis man "the sick" man, in such a way that the difference between sexes is denied and cancelled and so a man loses his dimension of intrusion .The setting in action of the cutting on the side of children –group protects the

mother-group which will never forsake her children . The set in action of the cutting neutralises the chance of living castration and recognise herself as a castrated woman. The first organising phantom will be then: mother –children –group castrates the threatening man menacing the mother- children-group.

2. The inability to be born: the retroactive movement of primary phantoms

The word passes on to Sylvie. The photo, with a half open door, permits me to think: at the same time, of curiosity and "No looking at".

The child gets curious when at night he hears some noises coming from his/her parents' room.

Sylvie says: " I wish to go out and see what there is outside. I wish but I can't".

Wish is here present again but in another form. It is a wish to know how she was born or better, how she can do to go out of " the secluded place" where she lives.

She says again: " I alienate after my children's birth."

" just like babies I believed for long that "bebès" were conceived earlier , grouped together inside their mother's womb. More often they were born one after another, one by one. But only when their mother or father wished so strongly the coming to the world of one of them, babies could then leave their brothers and sisters who still stayed in their motherly nest …" (R. Kaës)

How can Sylvie only imagine to go out of the motherly-womb group ?

No one discusses about this photo and no one expresses her ideas about Sylvie's account. Silence prevails over "the announced threat" of a possible separation due to the potential birth of one of them. Sylvie's account and photo give at the same time a form and an image to the phantom in the primitive scene.(" I wish to go out and see what there is outside") to castration ("I wish but I can't") and to the phantom too of intrauterine life("I closed my self after my children's birth") which are all inter - linked in a temporal perfect retroactive succession in order to destroy any wish to go out of the group.

The retroactive movement (wish to go out – not to be able- alienation) immediately brings Sylvie back inside the group space where the law of being identical to others and to the crowd is at work. Going out is here synonymous with abandonment of the mother-group and children-group.

3. The return to the primitive bond

The scene opens with Sylvie's intervention: "I would like to play a role in a play" The sexual components of seduction are the partial exhibitionist and voyeuristic drives" (Kaës, 1976)

The phantom which Sylvie gives shape here is the phantom of the "street girl" who she tries to defend from.

The cabaret photo permits her to imagine the phantom and have a relation with him unconsciously in a space of play. She can free herself from fear for one moment, fear caused in her by this phantom because in this moment it's the group defending her.

Through this movement of *displacement* Emma becomes here the symptom bearer. The four words pronounced by Sylvie contain the necessary elements to the mobilization of a true unbearable provocation to Emma , who immediately reacts saying: "A good mother can't have this sort of job"

I perceive in these words all the strength Emma incessantly uses to prevent her own wish and that of the mother-group to emerge. " The good mother" has here a function of a barrier a censure enabling her not to live the guilt that the consummation of her own pleasure might explode, whose consequence might be a possible separation from the mother –group followed by the disintegration of children group.

She continues by saying: " They are naked, it's easy to strip oneself in front of an audience"

Debasement prevails over a simple image of a seductive game the need to debase, pervert, sully, have a function of necessary support to maintain a shift between the female world and the motherly world and, automatically, the female is changed, into a defensive way in partial function reminding of the phantom of prostitution

Sylvie continues: " you need to dare in life" her infantilism permits her to continue her path. Two opposing and complementary forces put into action. Sylvie tries to put in shape the phantom of seduction, which Emma never tries to split thus producing a pseudo castration. This game enables the group to imagine a show, which belongs to the group itself without they are never able to see it while achieving. What prevents the accomplishment of these phantoms?

Sylvie continues: " they aren't so naked", they do the job they love"

This sentence gives Emma a sufficiently reassuring reality which, at this point, can identify herself with ballet dancers, without getting any feeling of being a prostitute; it can evoke a similar experience in her life, she can for a short instant, live or live again her female being buried in her unconscious.

She says : "When I was young I used to dance lambada …It was easy" Her tone becomes less aggressive and the hate she was projecting up to now on ballet dancers seems to cool. The experience of seduction emerges from her conscience, through a distant memory of her youth. It is too difficult for Emma to be able how to manage her own drives, in such a way that soon after the necessary aggressiveness reappears in order to set everything right, that is her identification with the mother group. She continues her speech "I am a mother now and have something else to do"

This movement seems to permit Emma to restore an apparent quietness. The animators continue the discussion just trying to give Emma a less limited and certainly more complex vision than she can see.

Claude suddenly speaks to say "let those women be quiet" These are the only words that Claude has uttered up to this moment of the session. Her curt and decided tone has been able to destroy the group attempt to put in shape their own phantoms. The heaviness, the anguish and the nature itself of conflicts, Sylvie's allusion to seduction, pleasure and desire, the insults towards the women group represented on the photo, present in Emma's speech have all together stimulated in Claude an ever increasing conflict.

What might be the process subjected to this movement?

We have already seen more than once, the tendency of patients to pairing. A couple becomes the matrix of all relationships. It becomes synonymous with quietness, symbiosis, indifference, security and narcissistic comprehensiveness. The subject's partner is the mother-group. The group is a mother "A psychically dead mother in the view of the baby she takes care of" (Green, 1983). A mother who doesn't move, who lets herself go, "who becomes the child's child" (Green, 1983)

The group is the passive mother-body deprived of all her life "the white mourning of a dead mother would be the common body of their departed loves.." (Green, 1983).

She is a mother who limits herself to put together without containing her baby. Her alpha function (W. Bion) isn't existing and the baby can do nothing but he/she can only think of the way not to go out

"If I go out, she will die", "If I go out, I will kill her" without he/she will never realise that she is already dead. The dead-mother group dwells in life, children spend their lives to feed their dead…" (Green, 1983) and feed themselves on death Compulsion is clear: we can't go out, we can't desert her, we must let her live on.

The key moment is when the group tries to put in shape their organising phantoms. What they imagine is only the representation of the thing; the representations of words remain suffering and untouched by mind processes

The image of the analytic third? is a danger, because he/she "is responsible of dark moods of his/her mother. (Green, 1983) Why is it possible only to update /to act a phantom? What prevents the achievement from putting in shape the seduction of the primal scene? Claude's intervention becomes an attempt to manage a traumatic situation.

The dead-mother group is embodied again; the researches for a possible birth has known to achieve its failure and the children have found their calm again.

The session ends with the photo with a grandfather and his grandsons chosen by Florence and Claude.

Florence says, "I would like to have some children but it's still too early."and Claude concludes by saying "I will never be able any longer, it's too late.".

These sentences give a shape to the scene preceding them.

Claude the crypt bearer has re established the mortifying immobility in the group. She has been able to restore the silence of death, the silence of despair, no being able to act, the impossible.

The children-group are now calm one can tell them to resign, because they aren't ready for the moment for any attempt to go out.

Florence has been able to state that in a clear way.

d) Conclusions

1. The group and vacuum

I realise that vacuum in a group doesn't come through the absence of words or exchanges between participants. On the contrary, we can assist to a powerful and prolific setting in action of both words and phantoms, both desires and drives.

Through the clinic, which I have just introduced, we have always faced a group organisation constituted around an individual phantom. Claude, the tomb or crypt bearer of the group, has been able to get a privileged function as for vacuum in the topic, economy and group dynamics because they represent vacuum. Her inner characters have become the characters of the group, each of them, in turns, actor and spectator at the same time in his/her performing on the stage.

It is possible to see here a sort of active defence ,*a diffraction*: the characters of the group play the same role as the inner characters in Claude's Ego. .

 The impossibility of *feeling vacuum* (Winnicott, 1975) makes Claude the container of vacuum. Her need to put on the stage her trauma causes the characters of her own Ego to be diffracted on the characters which are already present in the group.

The theory, the observation work and analysis of the clinic have permitted me to bring my earliest

Hypothesis into question in order to give it validity what is to be considered interesting isn't only that I have just found a correspondence between the fundamental idea of my research and the clinic but that I succeeded in finding a continuation.

I reformulate my central hypothesis by giving it a more complex structure. It deals with a central hypothesis and with three sub-hypothesises explaining the main hypothesis.

1. The phantom of subject's vacuum in a group would become the structural unconscious matrix of the phantoms organisers of the group psychic apparatus

a) The presence of vacuum in a group would prevent the setting up of Oedipal triangulation.

b) The presence of vacuum would prevent the differentiation between the members of the group.

a)The presence of vacuum would be responsible for the retroactive movement of original phantoms at stake and it would bring back the subject and the group to their primitive bond with the earliest subject of their love.

The individual phantom of the dead mother and, fist of all, the identification with the hole caused

by the disinvestments from the object of love embodied in the Ego, influence the organisers of primitive phantoms preventing them from creating a structure.

The groupal space is invaded by the phantom of the dead mother, so becoming the imaginary and theorical "central thread" for the understanding of the   group process.

As A. Green said, " the motherly fixation prevents the daughter from investing in the imago of her father because she is afraid of losing her mother's love or, if her love for her father is deeply removed without being able to avoid to transfer to her father's imago an important part of the characteristics projected on her mother….there is a regression to anality. Through anality the subject doesn't regress only behind Oedipus but protects herself from   her anal accomplishment going towards an oral regression in which her dead mother and the metaphoric loss are reflected"

The psychic life of the "subject, bearer of vacuum, works according to the law of the double, the identical, to the exclusion of the third and the absolute splitting. The maternal fixation prevents the subject from investing in the father's imago because this last one is present in the process as he is guilty of the psychic state of the embodied dead mother. The third is identified in the object of mourning for the mother and what we can assist is a trial to get in shape the group failing continually. The conflict and split put the subject through a passive acceptation of the situation falling on him/her any time he/she is confronted with a different couple from his/her own (the subject and his/her mother).

This process organises the psychic life of the group. The identification of the dead mother allows to shape, and, at the same time, prevents the accomplishment of primitive phantoms .The group, structured around the phantoms of vacuum, performs the retroactive and circular movement of phantoms themselves, so bringing back the subject and the group to the primitive bond , so re- establishing the narcissistic bliss, determined by the return to the relationship with the earliest object of love. The people belonging to this group are connected one another by a common impossibility and more than once we can observe that it is compulsion structuring the psychic life of the group.

The process below this process can be simplified in the following way: an excitement knocks at the door of conscience, the group permits it to manifest itself, excitement starts passing from one mouth to another through the shy smiles of children who are discovering the new world, but the smiling mouths change into biting mouths, and excitement is rapidly denied, since its presence and its possible development are sources of danger towards a relationship which cannot be broken.

The forces acting in the associative process demonstrate well the conflict living in each patient and the group. A conflict between becoming sexed women and the compulsion to stay children, in order not to betray the sources of all nourishments: the matrix.of the mother- group. A mother who suppresses ,but at the same time, nourishes.

Before such compulsion the law of immobilization is at work. In this case it isn't possible either attack or escape because the connection prevails over everything and all that, we can see, is always a return to the primitive bond.

"We have already realised that it is passivity to be conflicting : passivity or passiveness as primary womanhood ,womanhood which is common to both mother and baby" (Green, 1983).

2. The photo as an outline of vacuum figuration and as a deposit of splitting.

In comparison with the sensations of vacuum, "absence of limits" and "infinite", the picture of the photo determines a *squaring function* of demarcation. The same format for all the photos permits the subjects to relate with a steady object. It represents a "sufficient enough" space that the subject hasn't been able to create inwardly.

The clinic case, which I have just introduced, provides an interesting example to realise how this object is used. The verb *to use* is referred both to the psychic and physic use that the subject does of it, that is, how the object is manipulated.

In a first time, the images represent little pieces of the story of each single individual in the group; they tell how the object is manipulated.

At the beginning of every session the photo is individual, personal, it belongs to the subject who has just chosen it; it is the receptacle of secrets, memories, traumas of each of them, it is the place of forgotten memory, it is the mirror of the subject's real life .

Everybody holds his/her photo in his/her hands rolling it or looking at it carefully. Manipulation expresses how this object/image/representation is experienced by the subject The subject often regards the selected image as dangerous and the fear of saying, what it recalls, is expressed in an initial silence (Sylvie), in tears (Ghislaine) or in aggressiveness (Claude). The photo speaks directly to the pre unconscious and the communication through words isn't always simple, but it is just this permitting to the image to lose its dangerousness   and the subject can say, as if by magic, " Ok that's great "(as Ghislaine can say)

The photo is immediately put on the desk in the middle of the circle and it is just at this precise moment that the second time is starting: a piece of one's story has been stored in the group space. Slowly, the individual stories loosen, little by little they are connected one another and a common story is built. The identifying exchanges interweave with the imaginary exchanges and one can see the importance of the appearance of the double as the first identifying figure registered in the narcissistic primary assumptions .

The photo exchanges qualify the psychic organisation present in the group itself: the differentiation is experienced as a betrayal, the fundamental violence doesn't exist and what we can assist is often the search for a common identity through the identification of the kindred .The otherness can't be experienced, because the group is here a primitive horde, inside it the differentiation means abandon. The photo becomes an object/screen, where it is possible to start symbolising the unrepresentative and not experienced yet, vacuum. An outline of figuration which cannot be intellectualised yet.

The case, of the group here introduced, has shown us it well, the different places of vacuum and splitting, the words, the countertransference experience, the patients' fragmentary speeches and the retroactive and circular movements of organising phantoms. We have to see now, how even the photo can become both screen and receptacle of the archaic defences present in the group.

The impossibility of the subject to connect himself/herself with image, affection and representation causes the splitting over the members of the group and the photos.

In the situation in which this group is, it isn't possible yet for each patient to rebuild a link between these two parts of a single reality. The splitting prevails over the link and every subject needs the other one, because he/she is his/her double, to exist.

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