

# **The Dionysiac in the network and Intrapsychic Experiences with pre-adolescent psychoanalytic groups**

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## **Abstract**

The work deals with the issue of the relationship between experiences, which take shape in the psychic experience of pre-adolescent groups, conducted according to a psychoanalytic model that is inspired by Bionian conceptualizations and subsequent formulations by Corrao and, as regards age psychoanalysis evolutionary, by Anna Baruzzi, and their relationship with the stresses that come from the current social reality. The resonances in the group of contemporary mythologies related to sexual behaviors that fall within the dimension of the Dionysian are deepened and relationships are put to the different declinations of the Oedipal configurations and the corresponding primary scenes.

**Key words:** groups with pre-adolescents, Dionysian, primary scene, Oedipal configurations

## **Prologue**

*This work is born from my exploration of themes relating to the rapport between the intrapsychic and the internet with regards to psychoanalytic work with groups, and from the collaborations of Dr. Veronica Palmieri and Dr. Raffaella Rusciano who participated, not only by making the clinical material available, but also with valuable suggestions for the theoretical-clinical study and for the editing of the work. I thank them very much for their generosity and their brilliant contributions.*

I would like to open with a quote:

"I was with the Lebanese / When they shot him outside his home / What violence passes on the internet / Yet better on the net than inside the house / Brothers, I was working in an office / I swear I was going mad / I was barely paying the rent / In Italy dick works... / Let's drink to nothing working here / We are like bulls in Pamplona / Pa - Pamplona! / We are like bulls in Pamplona! " (Fabri Fibra – Pamplona)

This is the text of a song that came up during a group session of prepubescent children being held at a health facility and proposed as a shared listening on a mobile phone. It expresses very well the sense of disorientation and rage that through the group work came forth with respect to the perception of living in a society where parents, as they scream at times, 'are all dead'. The sensation is that of being like the bulls of Pamplona, that is, animals destined for ritual sacrifice by a mass-group.

In reality it seems to be, in the group process, a first 'sketchy' attempt to ritualize a mythology of 'sacrifice' and to give a form, still very 'formless' and provisional, to feelings that the psychoanalytic psychotherapeutic group allows to be put in the expanded psychic field and in the experience of 'koinonia' (Corrao F., 1995).

In another group, also made up of pre-adolescents, in a problematic neighbourhood of Rome, the members stage a game: they are all grandchildren of a sixty-eight year old grandmother, who uses drugs and forces her children and grandchildren to take drugs and sell drugs. The mother figure is completely subordinated by this 'grandmother', who takes on a 'mythical' function and expresses the group's propensity to absorb the messages that come through the network and music videos which, in the rap or trap style, are an expression of a culture of violence which arises from the sense of fragmentation and the absence of parenting functions of containment. Sex becomes an element of indifferentiation in which marriages are polymorphic, gay, straight and so on', but, above all, it is intertwined with violent behaviour and outside of any possible relationship. A member says: 'I am Spada!' (known through the news as belonging to a clan). A violent mythology is staged to cope with the absence of reference points which leads to the search for forms of relationship and basic assumptions (BION W.R., 1961) characterized by a toxic dependence.

These clinical experiences, which I will take up again later, relate to a working model for children, pre-adolescents and adolescents which, inspired by the Bionian tradition, the formulations of Francesco Corrao as regards group function (1981), Anna Baruzzi (1981) and subsequent developments (Lombardozi, 2012), allows us to witness how much the world of the 'subjects' who experience complex growth processes is characterized by intrapsychic factors strongly correlated to particularly significant and pervasive social dimensions. The small analytical function group is also an elective intermediate place to focus on the dynamic interaction between the experience of the 'internal world' in group terms and the social and cultural terrain from which it takes shape and 'nourishment'.

## **Sociability**

The initial quotations introduce us to the theme of the work which is centered on the mythical elements of a Dionysian character which emerge in groups in their interaction with contemporary social myths and in the type of relationships that are experienced in the group field through sharing and ritualization of 'sexual scenes' which can be read as an extended and polymorphic form of the primary scene conceived in terms of classical psychoanalysis.

In this regard, I would make reference to the considerations that Francesco Corrao made in the early 1990s which, in his book *Psychoanalytic Models. Modelli psicoanalitici. Mito Passione Memoria* (Corrao F., 1992), had sensed and anticipated

some trends that manifested themselves in that period of full postmodernism. In the myth of Dionysus and, consequently, in the Dionysian dimension, he identified an ideational system most corresponding to the 'passion' elements that characterized group functions, at both the macro and micro social levels, which operated at various levels of functioning. The Oedipal dimension, and the psychic configurations correlated to it, became, in this sense, obviously not absent but less exhaustive than the psychic movements on a widespread social level.

Since then, new relational modalities have developed through new media and, above all, there has been a large and widespread developing of the network and the internet which confronts us with the need to review some modalities of clinical work at all generational levels but it is most particularly significant in the adolescent and childhood worlds.

In the second half of the 2000s, in the *Psyche Magazine*, in a reflection on these issues (Lombardozi, 2007) I had addressed these issues from a broader perspective. Starting from the basic concepts of the 'historical' work of Umberto Eco, *Apocalyptic and Integrated* (1963), I proposed taking into consideration the 'positive' and 'negative' aspects which implied the evaluation, both psychically and socially, of the different influences of media technologies on our lives and relationships. The limits of the literature on the aforementioned processes, which were excessively enthusiastic or, on the contrary, inexorably catastrophic, referring both to experiences on the psychoanalytic clinic level and to a deepening of cultural and anthropological analysis, was evidenced

The intention in this work was to grasp the complexity of those phenomena that cannot be reduced to univocal or unilateral explanations. It is my conviction, even with the benefit of hindsight and taking into account the most recent developments that have accentuated the weight of those communicative dimensions, that current media forms, while on the one hand may facilitate sharing and relatedness, creating ample spaces of identity recognition, can, on the other hand, lead to forms of alienation and masking which determine improper attitudes and uses characterized by dependence and inauthenticity.

We believe it is very important, and also useful, to assume a binocular or rather poly-ocular point of view. If we refer to a socio-anthropological perspective, we can evaluate the methods of social communication and the forms of culture they represent. Some studies of considerable interest in this field underline how the current media communication technologies in the network do not in fact determine new ways of thinking in and of themselves free from the contexts of use, as much as they constitute cultural contexts of construction, in a shared social sense, which incorporate values and lifestyles into those new communicative containers

(D'Agostino G., Matera V., 2018). These are cultural landscapes of the mind group which also constitute many different communicative and relational opportunities.

I believe that this attention to new cultural forms, related to the functionality of online communities, is very useful in order to better understand some aspects of 'sharing' on the net by groups, even very large ones, of teenagers or pre-teens which otherwise risk being seen only or mainly as forms of 'non-communication' or 'isolated niches'.

From another point of view, supported by clinical experience, we daily find, on the other hand, some problematic ways of communicating on the internet, through social media, in chats and through the sharing of video games played in community by large groups of teenagers. Many of these realities bring to light how much this type of communication context facilitates and induces forms of serious dependence and social withdrawal in so called 'weaker' subjects who find their legitimacy in the false dimensions of relationality. These situations broadly involve the world of adolescence but they are more and more becoming 'lifestyles' which pertain to everyday life even in adulthood; not only for our patients but for each of us.

### **The Dionysian**

I would now like to focus on some considerations starting from the impact of the internet and the network on the imagination related to the deeper experiences which pertain to the sexual sphere regarding the formation of sexual or gender identity as well as the relational ways that it implies at the deepest levels. For this reason, I have chosen to follow a train of thought that, in my opinion, is well represented by the expansion of a behavioural model well described by the Dionysian dimension. Dionysus, or Bacchus in the Latin version, as an original myth refers to a historical-cultural dimension of agrarian cults specific to archaic societies, denoted by the use of rituals, which put to the fore chaos and confusion and a condition of sexual and alimental liberty. They are rituals that are based on excess, inebriation but also on forms of cruelty and 'rawness', such as that of tearing up 'raw' and uncooked game. We are therefore in a condition in which Satyrs, Menadi and, in myth, the same god Dionysus, let themselves go to behaviours that interrupt the cultural order to create, even if temporarily and 'ritually', a space for chaos.

Dionysus in turn, as a mythical figure, has very special characteristics. For example, that of being born in two stages; as the mother Selene dies, Jupiter saves the embryo and sews it into his thigh, letting it grow inside him until it becomes ready to be born. Another element which comes to mind is the distraction that the Titans use on the child Dionysus, showing him a mirror where he narcissistically discovers his image and they then take advantage of the moment to shred it and tear it to pieces. A situation that does not cause his definitive death, but that, subsequently, will entail a

form of re-aggregation and rebirth, as is narrated in the version of the myth of Dionysus in the orphic mysteries (Kerényi, 1976).

Obviously this is not the place to explore philological and historical-religious aspects related to the myth of Dionysus but to refer, through a metaphorical or analogical model, to a type of psychic reality articulated to the social which the figure of Dionysus inspires and to which it refers. One wonders what is the psychic configuration that emerges from what we could today call 'Dionysian on the net'. What type of sexual dimension does it represent or what form of mating or 'primary scene' is established? what kind of primary relationship originates in the individual, or in larger groups, through the network?

It seems that we are dealing with a very composite and confused 'primary scene' which is produced in a game of mirrors, full of hyperbolic characteristics, diffused in alternation between full expansive spaces and empty and unsaturated indefiniteness. It is an alternation of identity constructions that implement 'leopard spot' recognition processes alternating with dislocation processes. This implies that identities, and in the case of sexuality, the articulations of the multiplicity of forms of identification that enter the definition of a gender identity in continual progress, are exposed to decomposition and re-composition in an oscillation / alternation between the search for a continuum in the network or, conversely, permanence in a diffused dimension of fluidity, as Bauman proposes (2002), present in the organization of the network itself. In this sense, continuous trans-generational leaps are possible in the network but it is mainly a trans-generational one that does not move with the direction of time, implying the succession of generations, even if it is not excluded that it can happen, but, above all and primarily, in the dimension of space which instead involves the contemporaneity of generations. This is precisely one of the elements that characterize the Dionysian and that has to do, in certain aspects, with a present time; even if the 'classic' ritual dimension allows the oscillation between mythical time and historical time.

In the clinic, this situation leads to verifying the trend, when the use of the network becomes functional to psycho-pathological aspects, in search of 'defensive' exit strategies with respect to suffering which, although similar to other forms of elaboration of passionate movements, which they are presented during the development of human history and society (religion, theater, art, storytelling, cinema), have the characteristic that they do not necessarily have to be sought through some complex and elaborate form of mental work, but are already there and available. Like Alice, it is enough go just beyond the mirror and infinite possibilities open up that make finding the path back difficult, or force you to cling to network nodes which become true existential niches. When then the social and group component exerts its pressure online in a reciprocal way, behaviours or thoughts may

occur en masse (Gaburri E., Ambrosiano L., 2003) or in communities of thought and strengthened ties of a 'creative' type and not of rigid uniqueness.

In this regard, work with groups of children shows how well these aspects can evolve, through sharing in the ritual dimensions of play, from the words and the versatility of the group's experience into possibilities of elaborating and mobilizing mythical aspects, or 'mythologems' which otherwise **would** manifest themselves as rigid and non-transformable emotional thought elements. According to Corrao, mythologems are "building blocks of any mythical structure or field, and these elements can lend themselves to a revitalization and re-signification similar to that which occurs individually or in a group in the analysis room," (Corrao F., 1991, p. 236).

### **Groups and Mimesis**

As I anticipated at the beginning of the work in an initial group of children made up of members who had important physical and even behavioral pathologies, an excitatory dimension is put in place which can also correspond to a moment in the group that brings out the sense of vulnerability toward a defect in the formation of both individual and group subjectivity owing to the group 'phantom'. They refer to a story, which can also be seen as an original myth of the group, which concerns a little girl named Azzurrina; an albino girl whose parents dyed her blue hair to hide her 'defect'. Azzurrina disappears or, perhaps, dies and in the house-castle where the events take place the echo of her ghost remains. The group members propose a basic theme connected to a parental couple who deny vulnerability instead of welcoming it and produce a feeling of resentment that acquires a disturbing character. This seems to be the emotional basis that operates, as a sort of filter but also as an attractor, for all those situations that come as stimuli from the web and that tend to produce feelings of fragmentation in the group, but also forms of aggregation, with gestures that act out a form of violence. The 'Dionysian' force of the signal of the drive change of puberty and the reconfiguration of the identity it implies has an accentuated resonance in the dynamics of the group which set in motion fragmentation anxieties through shared play which express the **attack / run** dimension, but that find cohesive pre-symbolic spaces in the form of images and stories. The members of the group, accompanied by the active presence of the therapist leader, share music and texts online on a mobile phone which are sometimes derisive of the adult world or dedicated to coarse language and obscenity. The doll, which represents the infantile condition of a group that must be fed and cared for in order to grow, is raped and torn to pieces. These forms of expression, reminiscent of the Dionysian climate of 'carnival' drunkenness, refer to a foundational scene related to the eruption of sexuality in the second half of pre-adolescence which is a confused and widespread primary scene that 'is fed' in the web dimension. In the group, however, continuous PS-D oscillations occur (Bion W.R., 1963), which forms a self-constructive and

reparative tension. For example, the crucifix in the room happens to get broken and, at the same time, a member of the group, who expresses the most deficient and ill part of the group, initiates a game of recycling by bringing together and stacking the scattered pieces.

In the second group, also composed of pre-adolescents, which I have already mentioned, dynamics are put in place that are in some ways similar to the previous one, even if each group has its own story and its own 'originality'. The group enacts a pre-oedipal war pertaining to a sort of pre-conception of an enlarged group Oedipus, which at the same time that it appears disappears. The narrative scene to which I referred to earlier of the drugged sixties generation grandmother and 'bad teacher' of life, is accompanied by the presence of guns, rhythmically driving music of revolt that underline shared a reality on the net and correspond to real social dimensions of the deterioration of life and 'social' values which take shape in the intra-psychic dynamics of the group. The group experiences chaotic feelings and emotions which too are fragmentary and of the 'Dionysian carnival' type but seem to reproduce the structure of a video game. Shots, hits, and attacks that are answered 'pan per focaccia'; repetitive situations but which also create a widespread and shared sensation of a mock war. We could say that the video game becomes an instrument and function that is deconstructive and reconstructive at the same time. The video-game function passes through the bodies of the group as they move, touch each other, make contact and resonate with the images and sounds shared in the mobile phone which is the means which lets the network and the sharing relationship enter the group's room. The mobile phone then becomes a game, a 'cultural object', along with the other games of the group.

The group also stages a game which is very successful today among large groups of teenagers and pre-teenagers, called Fortnite. It is a video game that in one part stages a war against invasions of alien zombies, while in another section, it pits groups and individual participants in a one against all war with the aim of surviving on an island where they face various challenges meant to push the participants to the limits. It is an enlarged macro-condition in which groups of adolescents share a struggle for psychic survival. The members of the group seem to stage, through 'mimetic' attitudes, related to the functions / structures of the video games, anguished feelings related to psychic survival, which emerge thanks to the dimension of the excess of communicative exchange in the network but which, through the mediation of the dynamic of the small analytical group, is reinterpreted in a reconstructive and, in some respects, also containing sense.

## **Low intensity myths**

Attempting to make a synthesis and resuming the initial discussion of a more general nature, I would say that, safeguarding the socio-anthropological approach together with the psychoanalytic one and the ethnographic dimension that it proposes, a remarkable differentiation of contexts of use, which do not allow the unilateral interpreting of the function of the web in the system of relationships it implies, emerges. It is also true, however, that, as McLuhan (1964) showed, the medium also conditions the type of message and consequently the quality of the relationships between the subjects involved. This leads me to introduce, having proposed the myth of Dionysus, Peppino Ortoleva's idea as representative of the contemporary way of networking with the 'games' of identification that it entails.

In a recent paper, differentiating himself from those contemporary readings which underline the loss of function of the myth in society, Ortoleva instead underlines the fact that myths are already present and have been since the beginnings of modernity as 'low intensity myths' (Ortoleva P., 2019). Unlike the 'classic' myth which has the benefit of narrating the origins and the foundations of groups and societies, low intensity myths have characterized modernity and characterize contemporaneity in as much as they come to life in the productions of the daily imagination which accompany us starting from literature, in particular the novel, from cinema, and from television. All these forms produce 'social' systems of identification, favouring the tendency towards repetition tied to 'forms of habit', which involve cloaking the 'familiar' everyday with 'disturbing' elements of low but continuous intensity. Today, the use of TV series and the use of the internet with their pervasive feature are all the more part of this area. I also believe, however, and Ortoleva has somehow underlined it as regards the narrative forms of the novel and cinema in modernity, that, particularly in the use of the net, the tendency towards acceleration and contemporaneity of the shared experience in macroscopic terms, leads toward the increase of tension in shared myths in everyday life, transforming them in many cases into high intensity myths. This makes them more similar to the classic myths, but not coinciding, in that very often, unlike the classic myths, are separated from the corresponding rites which allow the processing of the emotions that the myth testifies to and produces. Already Bion (1963), who in his day had released the myth of Oedipus from a predominantly sexual connotation, accentuating the function connected to curiosity and knowledge and focusing attention on the Sphinx, underlined the distinction between the public myth, with its generative function, and the private myth which is closer to psychotic organization. Also some of Kohut's reflections in one of his seminars on Oedipus seem interesting to me where he refers not so much to a particular oedipal configuration, related to a corresponding closed primary scene in the family system that includes parents and children, but widens the field of analysis moving the attention to a climate or atmosphere, which is sensed in the setting, and which involves a co-presence of the various primary scenes, involving all the actors present in the social complex (grandparents, uncles and so on) (Kohut H. 1975). That is, it introduces the possibility of articulating intrapsychic



dynamics with the contexts of family cultures that intertwine with the conscious and unconscious underlying configurations, influencing the oedipal modalities in an evolutionary or regressive sense, or of another type, according to the different cases. Bollas as well, in his explorations, highlights how much the Oedipal dimension is related to forms of passage between 'matriarchal' and 'patriarchal organization. In a sense, it historicizes and culturalises the intrapsychic function. It seems important to be able to recover the public function of a mythical thought, correlating it with the intrapsychic configurations in the field of a culture of the Self, making its social terrain emerge, so as to allow a greater balance in the oscillations of intensity of collective myths.

### **Evolution of the myth in a group**

Returning now to the two pre-adolescent groups taken into consideration and articulating the clinical experience to the central theme of this reflection, we find it interesting to note that in the small psychoanalytic group the Dionysian dimension manages to find forms of containment, binding itself to the shared images in the group that trace models of effective narrative thoughts as factors of transformation (Lombardozi, 1990 Neri, 2017, Ruberti, 1996).

In the first example, this process is activated when the group, through one of its members, represents a bird with a broken wing in a drawing, in an original way reworking the image of a deficient development of the infantile Self. The broken and twisted wing, in almost covering the body, seems to have lost its flight function which, on the phylogenetic level, is a sort of ex-aptation (Gould, Vrba, 2008), i.e. the shift from an adaptive original function (feathers as thermoregulators) towards a different function (flying). With respect to this interrupted 'evolutionary adaptation' function, the group puts different mythologies into play to set off a transformation process: a process relative to superheroes, which range from the most 'classic' models (Hulk, Superman, Batman) to the current Avengers, who coexist, through a group member who proposes them, with figures of the popular tradition such as Sant'Antonio Abate and San Rocco. We could say that we are witnessing a group / individual type of oscillation, assimilated to the larger local / global one. This leads to the possibility of 'taming' the Dionysian dimension, through the possibility of 'playing' with the 'mythology', which allows the group to experience a dimension that oscillates, taking up Ortoleva's suggestions, between low and high intensity, adding forms of containment and transformation rituals related to the therapeutic experience of the group.

As for the second group, the elements, which pertain to a confused sexuality and to construction of transitional identities that refer to the Dionysian dimension, find their connection in a myth that is evoked during play which we could describe as

'chaotically generative'. It is the Greek myth of Pandora and the box that is uncovered releasing the evils to the world but which in this way also brings about the recognizing of the painful aspects of humanity that had previously been separated from it. It is the birth of a distinction, or a sense of separateness, perhaps a prerequisite for approaching a dimension in which a group Oedipus is glimpsed, which, however, is an Oedipus oriented towards a broader sense of the relationship that takes shape in the group, or even in the two groups taken into consideration, in that it brings out a function in which deficiencies and superheroes, saints and figures of the contemporary, and sexuality and knowledge coexist dynamically. Furthermore, narrative coherence and Dionysian chaos can coexist in a dynamic context in order to proceed towards a process of group subjectivation, which allows a synthesis between the experience of the external world, in particular the pervasive presence of the network, and the intrapsychic of the group. The context of the psychoanalytic group, as well as other ways of sharing, allows one to engage with those nodes of the internet in a constructive and non-conformistic way which allow you to articulate with relational potentialities that facilitate and, at times, increase, contact with emotional reality of relationships. In a certain sense we see a sort of alternation/oscillation between the 'Apollonian' dimension as the 'organizing' principle of experience and the more passionate Dionysian one, which, as we know, Nietzsche (1872) places in a reciprocal relationship of contiguity/complementarity.

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## Notes

1. I owe the suggestion of identifying this concept of the mobile phone as a cultural object in the context of the psychoanalytic experience in the group of pre-adolescents to an exchange of ideas with Dr. Veronica Palmieri.
2. The theme of the function of the different mythical representations of superheroes in the group was outlined through a discussion with Dr. Raffaella Rusciano and her suggestions.

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