

Cybernetic Rituals and Rituability in the community of Digital Brothers: clinical and theoretical reflections

Angelo Bonaminio, Domenico Scaringi, Giusy Daniela Spagna

Abstract

The present paper focuses on the theme of ritual in adolescence. Firstly, the function of ritual in adolescence and related pubertal transformation are discussed. The crisis of rituals in post-modern societies is mentioned and possible subsequent outcomes of that, in terms of youngsters' developmental path, discussed. Particular attention is given to possible ritual-like functions offered by cyberspace and videogames. Specifically, an attempt is made to distinguish those phenomena that serve as a ritual the youth's development from those frankly solipsistic and sand stemming from narcissistic fragilities. Clinical vignettes are presented in order to support discussion and, finally, a psychodynamically-oriented, technology-mediated, group intervention is described.

Key words: ritual, rituality, adolescence, technologies mediated workshops, videogames

Since Ancient Times rituals have had a social function aimed at preserving the unity of the group and strengthening community ties; they exist both to underpin the subjectivity of individuals and, at the same time, integrate them into society by facilitating a sense of belonging to the group. Rituals are characterised by the iteration of behavioural models which are culturally determined and arbitrary in kind, but which are imposed as though they were natural. These behavioural models constitute the method adopted by a particular culture of responding to and dealing with the contradictory and paradoxical aspects of reality and are a symbolic way of handling relational problems between individuals of different generations (Roheim, 1945). Moreover, they come into play when the individual or the group is under threat and, especially, in transitional phases when the body and sexuality are centre stage, or, as De Martino (1995) maintains in the face of what are defined as "crises of presence" (p. 116).

From this perspective one can see how puberty and adolescence understood as a social response to the physiological phenomenon of puberty, constitute a real and extremely powerful threat both to the individual and to the group. More than ever, at this time of development, ritual can demonstrate its usefulness by allowing individuals to regain possession of their social dimension while, at the same time, providing an opportunity to strengthen their identity by redefining it (Jeammet, 1992; 2010). Let us consider the so-called rites of passage typical of traditional societies: the successful completion of the ordeals the adolescent had to face up to, on the one hand provided reassurance of his/her capabilities while

also strongly establishing limitations including physical ones and furthermore confirmed their integration into the adult world through initiation into its secrets.

The collective dimension of the common ordeal would allow the adolescents to see that their self-image is upheld and reinforced by belonging to the group. It is precisely because of its social matrix that ritual confers importance and power on others and this, in the context of adolescence, obliges younger individuals to confront the requirements of others and can result in them feeling their own autonomy to be under threat. In fact, the growing awareness among adolescents of their own limitations, deficiencies and failings brings to the fore in a brutal manner – as Jeammet points out (1997) – the problematic issues of dependency/independency and passivity/activity. This reveals in a forceful manner the contradiction between experiencing adult requirements as a menace for one's own autonomy, and the wish to obtain from them the support and reinforcement vital for subjectification. This conflict could pose a risk for adolescents, to the extent that it could provoke potentially destructive defensive responses aimed at experiencing themselves as active in reaction to the likely feelings of anxiety resulting from passivization. In such a dynamic, ritual can assume a mitigating and protective function (for the individual and for the group to which he/she belongs), by enabling a creative experience in which the subject is the protagonist and the paradox of being oneself through the contribution of the other, and achieving one's own independence by being dependent on the other, can really be achieved.

Thus, ritual in adolescence, with its ambiguity, must satisfy the paradoxical dimension of allowing the subject to feel that he/she is the one who is demanding what other people are imposing. Naturally, in order for the ritual aspect to appeal to adolescents, it is essential that the adult generation proposes it in a coherent manner placing their trust in its significance and usefulness (Jeammet, 1992; 2010). We are therefore in the ambit of the created/discovered object in which the adult (previous generations and society) must present adolescents with what it can permit under the guise of the false impression that they themselves are the inventors of what they are being offered.

Social change and ritual in crisis?

What has so far been discussed regarding the social dimension of ritual, which involves the inter-generational relationship and the its possible creative or destructive outcomes according to how adolescents respond, is founded on social and psychological premises which apparently have now been called into question. In fact, psychoanalysts now find themselves reflecting on how certain changes in society can cause profound changes in the intrapsychic and relational organisation of the individual. Taking Touraine's considerations (1997) as a starting point, Kaës (2005) highlights a profound crisis in aspects of traditional society such as the family and educational, political and religious institutions,

roles and hierarchies, which are held to be the veritable “guarantors” of the functioning of society; signs of weakness or readjustments in them would lead to a significant change in the “guarantors” of psychic functioning. In the absence of *metasocial guarantors* (Touraine, 1965), which assured identity processes and generational exchange, and without the family ties which governed relational processes, what happens is what Kaës (2005) defines as *the loss of the psychic guarantors*.

In line with this, it appears that contemporary culture is revealing new psychopathological configurations characterised by difficulty in the processes of identification, subjectification and symbolisation and which may be understood by recognising psychic functional models which consider the mind to be exposed to a metasocial dimension capable of organizing it (Kaës, 2016). These are manifestations of a “narcissistic malaise” inscribed within a “narcissistic culture” characterised by a melancholic dimension and a proliferation of obsessiveness and megalomania.

It can be surmised that in a social context which attributes great value to individualistic-hedonistic aspects, adolescents feel the need to regain a broader dimension of sociability and that cyberspace and virtual reality may be seen, in particular by younger people in difficulty, as an alternative solution to the search for the ritual dimension of creating/discovering that enables them to achieve subjectification. However, it should be noted that virtual communities are fundamentally different from traditional communities based on the nuclear family model, as they reveal the functioning typical of fraternities (Freud, 1992, 1934-38, Forest, 2009): these are communities extending horizontally, whose members are all on an equal footing and in which identity is fluid; recourse to an outsider is deemed to be fraught with difficulty if not superfluous and so the adult/parent is banished from their mental horizons.

What one may be witnessing is the development of a “Fraternity Complex” (Kaës, 2009) connoted by the unconscious fantasy of an undistinguishable and symbiotic syncretic group among whom differences have been eliminated. These communities are founded on relational regulation rather than on moral imperatives; the regulation is based on forms of blocking communication and access such as banning (prohibiting a user from communicating with or accessing a site, etc.), and these seem to be the only sanctions or rules. The undefined circulation of messages would seem to offer an antidote to the anguish of solitude and disconnection: just as the spoken word can reassure a child in the dark enabling contact to be maintained by offering evidence of the other’s existence, irrespective of physical presence or the content of the message. The danger, however, is that of a kind of convivial solitude: the individual in front of the screen exists with the others but is alone with the computer.

It would be ingenuous, however, not to take into consideration the other side of the coin: “digital brotherhoods” may also be distinguished by a symbolic

dimension and take the form of a fraternal Oedipal group in which the single subjects are differentiated and their individuality and gender identity are recognised. Therefore, as well as any potential inherent risk associated with the use of the new technologies, they also offer younger people support and propulsive potential for achieving subjectification (Bonaminio, Scaringi Spagna, 2016). In this way, virtual communities and the new technologies may provide a place where new rituals are created and, therefore, they may assume diverse characteristics according to whether their repercussions are creative or destructive, whether or not they promote subjectification, whether they facilitate the transmission of knowledge across the generations or whether, on the contrary, they bring about a rupture between them. With regard to this, Pommier (2010), claims that rituals in adolescence have lost nothing of their worth by being multiplied, enriched and transformed by the use of new media. Nevertheless, it would seem that, in this context, adolescent rituals may serve the purpose of sanctioning the inclusion of young people in peer groups rather than in that of adults. Moreover, the modern world and digital technologies would appear to offer extremely broad possibilities of value options precisely because there is a dearth of ritualised group responses. This leads to the proliferation of “intimate” (Pommier, 2010) rituals, that is to say, individual pathways unguided by social institutions or a broader set of social relations. With regard to this, Jeammet (2010) points out that in modern societies each person is in part independent of group values and can make individual choices about ‘personal rituals’ which, however, given their detachment from the social consensus, may lead to the risk of committing foolish acts, or to interminable and monotonous reiteration.

Therefore, these new rituals may certainly be an expression of the desire to experiment, typical of adolescence, but they may be interpreted as solipsistic and self-limiting and thus may give rise to more or less problematic forms of functioning. For the purpose of differentiating between the creative and destructive repercussions of certain types of behaviour on the part of individuals or groups, Pommier (2010) and Rohaim (1945) suggest using the different terms “ritual” and “rituality” in order to connote these two divergent phenomena.

Ritual in adolescence, contained within a social organisation or a myth, is intended to achieve the goal and produce the effect of involving the subject without the need of attempting to analyse its sense and meaning. It unfolds as part of the libidinal tying and implies the integration of bodily changes in the course of puberty which entail mourning for the loss of the infant body, infantile omnipotence, psychic bisexuality, the acceptance of a sexualized body and of the existence of different genders and generations and, consequently, acceptance of the passage of time (Chabert, 2004). In contrast, “rituality” is on the side of preservation and repetition and therefore of the libidinal un-tying typical of cases of obsession and of self-calming and self-sensory processes. Rituality, is

based on a fixed viewpoint and organised in an extreme way denying and halting the passing of time and creating the illusion of immortality.

Reflecting on the creative or destructive trajectory that a particular phenomenon may take in the functioning of an individual, Jeammet (1991; 1997), calls attention to the fact that human beings are limited in their creative abilities, while their destructive capabilities, including a propensity for risk-taking and rejection of others, are always within reach. Destructiveness derives its strength from the misguided perception it offers of not being dependent on other people and of not being subject to limitations: everything is possible and grandiose, contradictions do not exist nor does dialectic thought. Unless one succeeds in finding collective rituals, destructiveness can become a bond, inhibiting the expression of narcissistic or symbolic wounds (Bettelehim, 1986).

Ritual: journey, relating and putting oneself to the test

“I found myself in the forest, it was the first time I had left the village, it was a great honour, something very important, I had been charged with a task, I had to go to the city and hand over a precious sword. The head of the village had told me that by doing so I would become a warrior and would have demonstrated my worth. I knew that I would encounter dangers and confront adversaries. I only had a wooden sword and my horse, Epona; I still didn’t know how to control it properly, whereas my brother was an expert at controlling it, I remember, I always watched him, and he was also an excellent fighter when he was my age. I will become as good as he is, I’ve watched him playing so many times.”

Francesco, a thirteen-year-old boy in therapy for problems of socialisation and inhibition, tells how his brother, 8 years his senior, gave him permission to play ‘The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess’. From a very young age he had wanted to be allowed to play the game, which had been his brother’s favourite when he was the same age, by himself, and try out the various trials and challenges that Link, the protagonist of the game, had to confront, but he had not been old enough and the console wasn’t his. Whereas, now, on the threshold of puberty he is ready to play and set out on “his journey” through the scenario of the video game. He explains that he can’t wait for the new chapter of Zelda, “Breath of the Wild” to come out for that will be “his Zelda”. While undergoing therapy, the boy will be amazed to discover that his father, as a teenager, had played the first game in the saga which came out in 1987 and he will be surprised to find himself, with his own specific subjectivity, occupying a place in a continuity that has a past and a future.

As Virole (2012) points out, for young people today the dream of a journey, of distancing oneself from the family, the yearning for adventure are no longer possible, as they once were, in a world in which elsewhere is already here; so the motion of separation, the spirit of discovery, the quest for the unknown can be experienced precisely in the virtual worlds. These worlds provide a

privileged setting and space in which initiation rituals can take place. Many adolescents, like Francesco, engage in games which involve initiation, rivalry, measuring oneself against the other and putting to the test one's own abilities either alone or in groups.

Video games can offer the means of testing one's resources and limitations by successfully overcoming specific trials (the quests in the video games), since you are required to solve puzzles and riddles, carry out missions and confront a variety of adversaries. In order to "live" and "survive" in a video game you must find your way around in an environment, make choices, evaluate the consequences, work through failures, discover and adapt strategies. Aggressiveness is in the forefront of these games. Similar to the initiated youth of traditional societies, who had to bring aggressiveness into play by means of rites of passage, the teenage digital native who aspires to adulthood has to measure his strengths, abilities and courage against the other members of the group. Especially in early teenage years, games featuring football or combat enable youngsters, by their participation in peer challenges, to transfer onto a symbolic level the concrete experience of engaging in "wanking competitions" or fights, by being able to play them in the guise of football games or virtual combat spontaneously, enjoyably and with increasing competence.

Like the traditional rites of passage, "cybernetic rituals" have the merit of protecting the psychic space from intrusive awareness of one's own driving forces. They allow subjects to express and release the affects underlying their libidinous and aggressive drives and satisfy their desires without the necessity of undue contact. Intrinsically and physiologically lacking in the processes for symbolisation, representation and sublimation, early adolescents, the still pubertary child (Gutton, 1991), can, by using video games, make a first attempt at the psychic preresentation (C. and S. Botella, 2001) of those aspects of their own psychic and corporeal functioning experienced with wonder and surprise, or with anxiety, preoccupation and bewilderment (Bonaminio, A., 2014; 2016).

Rituality: vagabondage, withdrawal and omnipotence

Fourteen-year-old Pasquale, describes how in the course of his daily life time must be rigidly and ritually marked out, as though the repetitive sequence of his actions (having breakfast, going to the bathroom, going to school, having lunch, watching TV) guaranteed him a sense of continuity and definiteness. Pasquale, who doesn't have any friends, tends to stay at home when he finds "to his horror" that he is confronted by the void of free time; time is eliminated because it is unbearable and space is substituted for it. Pasquale takes refuge in his bedroom which he keeps in darkness as though he wants to minimise any light stimulus which might make him aware of the passing of time. He often snuggles down in bed under the covers creating a hiding-place by pulling the bedclothes right up over his head, - an exaggerated form of the hood we see on so many adolescents who under the pretext of fashion, are protecting themselves against

the bombardment of stimuli from reality, as though they were looking out on the world through a protective “space suit”, a kind of anti-stimulus shield. Holed up in his refuge, in a timeless place, Pasquale is completely absorbed by images of his *hentai* (Japanese cartoons with an erotic and sexual backdrop) or by his portable play-station which immerse him in virtual spaces where the confines of time are eliminated and in which the boy attempts to control his pubertal anxiety regarding bodily changes and the irruption of sexual and aggressive drives. This self-protecting behaviour of creating a narcissistic refuge is comparable to the literal experience of losing oneself in space-time as, for example, in the case of boarding a bus to go somewhere and gradually being unable to recognise any landmarks; once far away from the appointed destination, it is as though he suddenly comes to himself with a sense of alienation, until, slowly and with great difficulty, he manages to put together shreds of time and space which allow him to find his way around again. Besides this, Pasquale is engaging in a kind of cybernetic vagabondage, both surfing aimlessly on the web and exploring the scenarios of a number of video games, either without completing any of them or, vice versa, repeatedly playing the same game while losing sight of the plot and the objective.

The aimless wanderings of teenagers, whether in real places in the external world, or in virtual worlds, could be interpreted from the perspective of initiation. Pasquale’s experience of vagabondage – in line with the studies by Benslama and Richard- resembles more closely a simulacrum of an initiation rite since it has no value as a separation or liberation from the primary objects; rather, it tends to favour a narcissistic withdrawal into oneself and avoidance of putting oneself to the test. What is in the forefront are fantasies of omnipotence, self-generation and denial of dependency. The dimension of putting oneself to the test is lacking so as to avoid having to confront his sense of incompleteness, deficiency and impotence. From this point of view, the dysfunctional use of digital technologies as exemplified in Pasquale’s case, may be considered an empty and impoverished rituality, since it is employed in a private, idiosyncratic and non-socialised manner.

The excessive use made by other teenagers of technological devices – which is pervaded by defensive strategies of “anchorage” with regard to anxiety about their psycho-physical integrity – and defined not so much as “use” but rather “misuse”, is illustrative of the unsuccessful attempts made at this stage of development to discover types of experience which can take the form of some kind of rite of passage: methods which promote change and growth and offer reassurance in the face of the difficulties and risks of “being in the world” and “becoming”. For some young people it is precisely those aspects of everyday ritual, the most common and frequently repeated actions in daily life, eating, sleeping, playing and going to school, which have marked out the rhythm of childhood experience from the very beginning and which continue to offer the only guarantee of permanence for their sense of identity.

In contemporary society, with its virtual experience and the pervasive use of the new digital technologies, it would appear that ritual is becoming centred once again on perceptive and sensorial dimensions, exactly as it was in primitive societies. At one and the same time, it seems that a progressive distancing is underway with regard to the verbal and metaphorical modalities characteristic of the acquisitions made by modern societies. Furthermore, the theme of presence and absence is now disappearing or rather is revealing itself in terms which are substantially diverse from previous times. In cyberspace everything is potentially always present and available. At the same time, everything is absent in its concrete, corporeal forms and is tied to image and virtuality. These characteristics of the new media may encourage phenomena in which the illusion of being in control of the object evolves, but may also enable investigation of an object which is omnipresent and controlling.

If, on the one hand, the experience of presence and absence exposes the person living through it to the pain of separation and vulnerability, the lack of it or insufficient exposure to it could impede certain processes which are fundamental to the psychic and emotional development of the subject. This is just as true if contemporary rituals are limited to dimensions in which the sensorium is unable to find the opportunity of developing a process of symbolisation. What has been defined as 'rituality' in this paper could become a place in which to isolate oneself or engage in imitative behaviours: these subjugate the entire psychic functioning without becoming precursors to more mature identification processes. For this reason it is likely that contemporary psychoanalysis should consider offering spaces in which participants may discover exchanges which provide nourishment for their own latent potentialities, and are sufficiently protected so as not to be experienced as a narcissistic threat.

Proposal for digital technology workshops

As has already been suggested, some of the previously described adolescents often find themselves trapped in solitary, isolated rituality and make excessive use of technology. In general, they are unable to gain access to a peer group or make use of the dual relationship offered by psychotherapy in order to communicate their feelings of distress. Not being able to access the experience of a relationship with the other, and, in particular, with a peer group, constitutes a threat to the process of subjectification for these young people. This is why a form of group therapy which can be set up as a workshop for play and expression based on taking part in shared activities including the use of digital technology, could provide an opportunity to experience being part of a group in a third setting.

If we apply Jeammet's well-known concept (1992) of *expanded psychic space*, to the group dimension, we can say that, in the workshop, an adolescent has the possibility to achieve one of the main developmental tasks of adolescence: that

of realising the diffraction of his/her own emotional investments, up until then principally concentrated in the parental figures, and also try out new relationships in which to project important aspects of his/her self. Such an experience gives adolescents a chance to gain better understanding of themselves through the use of digital technology within a group (Tisseron, 2013), and discover the pleasure of discussing it with other people. All of which encourages shared activities and interaction in the games and activities undertaken, which aims at putting an end to young people's isolation and trying to transform their tendency to fantasticate, which distances them both from external and internal reality.

Video games and the new digital technologies are particularly suited to mediation in adolescence, since the themes they propose are similar to those an adolescent has to confront and, moreover, represent the values and ideals of contemporary culture. It is thanks to the particular use of video games and technological devices that mediation becomes possible. Instead of starting from a distressing void, the subjective use of a virtual device enables the user to discover its given elements and begin the experience from those. Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to have an attractive object such as a video game or a digital device in order to produce a therapeutic effect: the spoken word directed to another person, stimulation and acceptance of the task and thought processes are also required. Thus, beyond the element of play, the initial aim is to achieve an exchange with the subject about their ongoing creation by means of non-verbal creative expression and, at a subsequent time, promote the communication of their psychic dynamics, without causing intrusion into their minds on a conscious or explicit level.

Similarly to rituals, in the proceedings of a psychoanalytically oriented workshop, there is a fixed routine which has symbolic and evocative potential. Despite the spontaneous and unpredictable nature of the affective relationship between participants, the setting offers a constant institutionalised rapport which helps to formulate the rules of the game and the relations between them. From this standpoint, one can see the ritual dimension of the workshop enabling the participants to approach important questions from within a protected affective sphere in which rituals specific to each individual group can take shape. To paraphrase Corrao, we could say that the group workshop emerges as a space in which new rituals can originate.

In conclusion, the activities which take place in the workshop and which are, like the more traditional rituals, based on doing things together, provide an opportunity for experiencing drives without coming into too close a proximity with them. They envisage the presence of a third party through the facilitation of an adult, and the generational exchange it implies, and so give the impression that what is on offer is what one is demanding. In this sense, the functioning of a small workshop group could be interpreted as promoting its own internal group dynamics and facilitating participation in a collective group experience,

in a space where a kind of common culture evolves, a space where people meet each other and learn to know each other through feeling and imagining similar sensations and emotions, not via physical contact, but by means of the symbolic mediation of these virtual objects.

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Angelo Bonaminio

Psychologist, Psychotherapist trained at ARPAd (Roman specialty training in psychoanalytic psychotherapy for adolescents and young adults), Founding member of the charity Nostos where he is responsible for the consultancy service on the use and misuse of digital technologies and social media, and responsible for the home-care treatment at Nostos, in Rome.
angelobonaminio@hotmail.it

Domenico Scaringi

Psychologist, Psychotherapist trained at ARPAd (Roman specialty training in psychoanalytic psychotherapy for adolescents and young adults), Founding member of the charity Nostos where he is the President.
domenico.scaringi@gmail.com

Giusy Daniela Spagna

Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, psychoanalytic psychotherapist, Founding member of the charity Nostos where she is the Clinical Director.
giusispagna@gmail.com