

How the Narcissistic and Demonic Power of the Media can be  
countered by Jungian Arts-based Research

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### Social media versus art...

This paper explores the relationship between the long history of art and the short eruption of social media. In particular I suggest that social media, like art, is shaped by and in turn conditions, those innate psychic energies that C. G. Jung called archetypes. However, whereas art involves tradition and craft designed to individuate those energies, social media so far lacks sufficient mitigating and creative factors. Here individuation signifies Jung's notion of a lifelong process of personal artistry, working with the independent energies of patterning archetypes to enliven being. Given the lack of ways to socially-individuate the psychic seas of social media, it is vulnerable to manipulation for political, commercial or criminal ends. Social media can become a vehicle for psychic contamination through conspiracy theories that breed incitements to hate and violence.

I go further to suggest that art can reveal what is harder to excavate in social media technology, just how the distortion of facts or 'fake news' can amount to psychic possession. For example, Shakespeare's Scottish play *Macbeth* follows the psychic manipulation of a successful warrior into becoming a murderer without any psychic resources whatsoever. Life ends for Macbeth in what he literally is, "a poor player that struts his hour upon the stage... signifying nothing (Act V, sc. V, l. 26-32). Here Macbeth models the follower of social media who becomes more and more polluted by the distortion of truth, what Shakespeare calls here: "the equivocation of the fiend that lies like truth." (Act V, sc. V, l. 44-5).

To begin, it is worth turning to Jung's suggestive evocation of art as socially potent.

Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking. (Jung, CW 15, para. 130, p. 82)

The word ‘conjuring’ indicates a psychic power beyond rational argument; one that might even be concealed from reasoning strategies. It indicates a profound challenge to that dangerous habit of Western modernity, the splitting between reason and the irrational. Such splitting happens at levels that undo one version of the split, that between self and world. For the inner split takes the form of consciousness fashioned by suppressing what is less conscious, making it unconscious. It then becomes the split between persons, between culture and nature, between cultures, religions etc. Such a radical severing is fragile. It is vulnerable to eruptions from the unknown because the unconscious or ‘other’ is repressed into unknowability. Regarding the unconscious as harboring the foreign makes the foreign fearful. It also makes it magical in a bad way.

The subject/object split that begins in the psyche makes the other into an ‘object,’ one that can be manipulated and abused. Arguably, one of the more perilous and ingrained manifestations of the subject/object split is that between human and technology. As Lee Bailey points out in his seminal *The Enchantments of Technology* (2005), before the advent of social media, the absorption of technology into the scientific paradigm of the subject/object split itself has a enchanting effect on the psyche. Here enchantment is not the individuating numinous but rather a de-individuating paralysis. The illusion that we are securely separate from technology such as guns, rockets, and the internet makes us wholly vulnerable to the seductive fantasies and myths they materialize.

Art, as Jung says, may conjure from its long archetypal practice of working with psyches of artist and audience. Art even now does not propagate the illusion that it does not affect us or move us with e-motion. By contrast the patterns in the complexity of algorithms in social media are unleashed without the accompanying social rituals, and structures of understanding. Put another way, art and the practices surrounding it have their own modes of individuation. For example, watching a play in a theater is a social event with ingrained expectations. These do not include actors actually getting murdered on stage, nor actors suddenly breaking the ritual boundary and drawing in the audience to the drama as *real*. Yet there is no such expectations surround social media.

Technology originates from the Greek *techne*, art or craft, so technology is a discourse, logos or practice of art or craft. Severing technology from the arts as modernity does, numbs to unconsciousness the fantasies that propagate it. In turn, as Lee Bailey shows, the use of technology under the illusion of the subject/object split, that guns or social media are just neutral *objects*, renders persons more unconscious and more subject to psychic pollution from the fantasies materialized in technology. Social media is thus very dangerously not theater, where the fantasies and myths are presented as fantasy. Rather social media is an unindividuated domain of limitless images in words and other forms.

To return to *Macbeth*, is to see the play offering a form of exploration of such psychic pollution. Watching the play is not equivalent to being immersed in social media. However, seeing Macbeth in the toils of the witches is comparable. In particular, I suggest that Macbeth being seduced by the witches as psychic shadow is similar to the 2016 Presidential Campaign in the United States in that both Donald Trump and much of his voters are mesmerized and enchanted. In both cases, Fake News is psychically

contaminating and destructive. So just how do the witches seduce Macbeth from being the great hero of his society to its utter destruction? Jungian psychology offers a way of plotting the psychic dis-integration of Macbeth and of some of the electorate. Ultimately the play can be understood as a pioneering work of Jungian arts-based research.



*Image 1 Macbeth Consulting the Witches by Eugène Delacroix. France, 1825. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/336603>*

The problem is narcissism as Macbeth's very first encounter with the witches shows. The witches are Macbeth's dynamic and dramatic psychic mirror, his feminine other in demonic form.

Witches: Fair is foul, and foul is fair:

Hover through the fog and filthy air. *Macbeth*, Act 1, sc.1 l. 11-12.

Macbeth: So foul and fair a day I have not seen. Act 1, sc.3 l. 38.

Narcissism indicates disturbances in the fundamental coherence of a person. Often discussed as mirroring, the narcissist sees only his reflection in the world just as here Macbeth 'mirrors' the witches in words. Whereas Freud theorized that primary narcissism was a stage in infantile development prior to the capacity to relate to others, secondary narcissism is a pathological "stuckness" in fantasies that ought to have been re-framed if the Oedipus complex had been negotiated successfully (Samuels et al p. 98). The Oedipus complex requires the boy child to break the primal bond with the mother under fear of castration by the father. It is therefore necessary to securing boundaries in a way that offers inner coherence and the ability to relate.

Jung's position on narcissism subtly differed from that of Freud. While agreeing on secondary narcissism as a problem, he also suggested a positive form of mirroring might become a goal of individuation, a mirroring in the greater being of the Self, an archetype that organizes the psyche and is an image of harmonious connection with the cosmos. In Shakespeare's play, Macbeth remains afflicted by secondary narcissism as the *affect* or flood of feeling from the witches and from his wife is to break down his ability to separate himself from his desire, becoming king. After all, Lady Macbeth urges him to kill to get the throne by a grotesque inversion of Oedipal love.

Lady Macbeth: When you durst do it, then you were a man...  
Does unmake you. I have given suck and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:  
I would while it was smiling in my face,  
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,  
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn  
As you have done to this. Act 1, sc.7, l. 49, 54-8.

Such destruction of maternal love effectively cuts away the 'normal' Oedipal path. In these lines we sense a rejection of a potential mirroring of love. Macbeth cannot see himself being mothered safely and lovingly in the person of a baby son. He has to be king and yet he can never be secure as king because he is stuck in a narcissist's world seeing only his incompleteness.

Symptomatically, after committing the murder, primary narcissism overtakes him again. He loses a sense of his own body as whole and bounded.

Macbeth: What hands are here? Ha! The pluck out mine eyes.  
Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood  
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,  
Making the green one red. Act 2, sc. 2, l. 58-62

Hands wanting to destroy eyes show a horrifying sense of bodily dis-integration. Bloody hands that can dye whole seas indicate the psyche trapped in a world without end, without limits to his crime. Transfixed by pre-Oedipal enchantment in the witches reincarnating his primary narcissism, the bond with the mother, Macbeth has struck down his king, his father figure who was the obstacle to his deepest and forbidden

desires. Such a perversion of the Oedipal situation propels him into a secondary narcissism in which his crime traps him in an endless mirroring of his murder.

Hence Macbeth comes to realize that he is in a world in which nature itself is chaos. There is nothing outside his chaotic psyche for him.

Macbeth: I conjure you by that which you profess...  
... though the treasure  
Of nature's germens tumble all together,  
Even till destruction sicken, answer me  
To what I ask you. Act 4, sc. 1 l. 50, 58-61.

Here is a psyche trapped in a medium (social media) where everything is possible for there is no force, no reality, no nature outside it. Perhaps the Trump administration destruction of environmental protection could be seen in this context. The only reality is fragments of psyche energized as appetite for money and power that are synonymous to the narcissist.

Arts-based research is a modern framing of art-making as the generation of new knowledge (Leavy 2005; 2018). The artist-researcher begins in the ontology of the autonomy of art as communicative, transformative and not limited to the being of the artists. Hence arts-based research is a new paradigm. Jungian arts-based research adds to existing ABR the ontology and epistemology of the psychic image while expanding Jung's notion of the autonomy of the archetypal image to see it realized in art-works. These pieces of art, be they music, painting poetry, novels or film etc. are then the final forms of the researching process. They exist separate from the artist and are open to multiple interpretations of their transformative powers, without limit. In this sense,

Jungian arts-based research is doing psychotherapy with the collective. Such research can embark on very diverse topics from those involving social fractures to aesthetic matters to actual arts-activism.

For this paper, I suggest that seeing Shakespeare's play through a Jungian arts-based research frame enables the play to show the horror of psychic pollution through un-collectively individuated media. In my book, *Jungian Arts-Based Research and the Nuclear Enchantment of New Mexico* with Joel Weishaus, it also heralds another new paradigm, that of Transdisciplinarity as theorized by Basarab Nicolescu. Here the various academic disciplines of Western modernity and the indigenous and artistic knowledges they exclude come together on the basis of quantum connectivity.

I type this conclusion to the paper on the day after the American Capitol was attacked by rioting Trump supporters. What was to have been a vital and vitalizing act of theater, the formal counting of State Votes, was disrupted by a boundary violation from those, like Macbeth, bewitched by seductive words. The witches tell him that he is safe until Birnam Wood approaches his castle. Since it is impossible, he feels safe. Then his watchman sees a moving wood because the army has seized branches to disguise their numbers. Nature herself turns against Macbeth, the child (narcissist) killer who is also a child killer. Macbeth misreads the witches because he has not the psychic coherence to read symbols. Jungian arts-based research and Transdisciplinarity can help us to do so.

**Susan Rowland** (U.S./UK) is author of many books on Jung, feminism and the arts, including *The Ecocritical Psyche* (2012) *Remembering Dionysus* (2017) and *Jungian Literary Criticism* (2019) Her latest is with poet Joel Weishaus, *Jungian Arts-Based Research and the Nuclear Enchantment of New Mexico* (Routledge 2020).

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