

Articles

Fast Food Art, Talk Show Therapy: The Impact of Mass Media on Adolescent Art Therapy

Jordan S. Potash, Hong Kong

Abstract

Electronic media provides rapid delivery and unlimited access to pictures, sounds, and information. The ubiquitous presence of techno-digital culture in the lives of today's adolescents may influence or contaminate the art therapy process. This article presents two case studies that illustrate how cyberspace entered into art therapy sessions and also how the process of art therapy empowered adolescent clients to transform pop culture images into personally meaningful ones.

Introduction

In early March 2007, I had a dream. In it I met Madonna after one of her concerts. We talked like old friends who hadn't seen each other in a long time. We caught up on our lives, we talked about her family, and in the end I went back to her place to say hello to her husband. When I woke up, I barely remembered the dream, but gradually it crept back into my mind. Madonna? Why had Madonna been in my dream? Why such a close connection with a pop star? I thought about the dream as I walked to the subway station. Along the way, I passed a one story high billboard of Madonna, several Madonna advertisements in the subway tunnel, and large television screens in the subway station and on the street—all featuring Madonna, a ubiquitous pop culture presence, like so many other images that infiltrate our daily living.

Many studies have examined the influence of popular culture and electronic media on adolescents with respect to violent behavior (Gentile, 2003; Iacoboni, 2008; Smith, Nathanson, & Wilson, 2002), sexual attitudes (Ward, 2002; Werner-Wilson, Fitzharris, & Morrissey, 2004), substance abuse (Kean & Albada, 2003), and eating disorders

(Field, Camargo, Taylor, Berkey, & Colditz, 1999). If the mass media can have behavioral effects on adolescents in these areas, it likely can influence their cognitive and emotional well-being as well (Arnett, 1995; Wilson, 1988).

Pop culture is often defined as the images and sounds of mainstream culture, and modes of transmission (Reed, 1997/2007) such as movies, television, fashion, advertising, and entertainment. The mass media, which includes electronic and popular forms, are part of a techno-digital culture that has been criticized for blurring people's perceptions of what is lived experience and what is experience that is merely presented to us (Fuery & Fuery, 2003). A wide variety of stimuli rival for attention in adolescent interpersonal communication. The effects of popular culture and electronic media on adolescent development, imagination, and spontaneous art making are not yet well understood. In my art therapy practice, I have seen adolescent clients use images from pop culture as metaphors for their current struggles. They may use them to defend against painful thoughts and feelings, as preferred substitutes for their own rudimentary images or stand-ins when internal imagery is absent. Other times copying may simply provide a sense of mastery. Beyond the specific content or messages conveyed by mass media, I have also observed that for some adolescents instantaneous delivery promotes an expectation that all aspects of life should be accessed, retrieved, or resolved with the same lightening speed.

Given the power of images, art therapists may be in a unique position to examine the impact of pop culture on adolescents and explore ways to mitigate it, if necessary. In this article, I will discuss how electronic media may influence or contaminate the art therapy process using two case studies to illustrate these effects.

Creativity, Imagination, and Art Making

Some theorists have argued that creativity represents the highest aptitude of humankind. The ability to achieve self-actualization, to find meaning in the world, and to discover one's purpose in life derives from meaningful creative interaction and active imagination (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Creativity, as a human capacity, has been linked with resiliency, adaptive coping, and mature problem solv-

Editor's note: Jordan S. Potash, MA, ATR-BC, LCAT, is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong, and Lecturer in Graduate Art Therapy at George Washington University, Washington, DC. The author would like to thank the many colleagues, students, and clients who helped develop the article's concepts since its inception in 2003. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to the author at Jordan@jordanpotash.com

ing (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993). In addition, creative and imaginative thinkers tend to experience less boredom in life, are less intimidated by obstacles, and can better tolerate the anxiety of ambiguous or stressful situations (Dacey & Lennon, 1998).

Bringing something new into the world through acts of creation that explore emotional content is thought to be an integrative mind-body experience, one that can illuminate meaning and give shape to the unknown (McNiff, 1992; Steinhardt, 1995). Buber (1923/1970) wrote that art made with intention and viewed by a willing observer may foster a meaningful, I-Thou relationship. Art making not only connects individuals to their own experiences but also joins individuals to each other.

Given that adolescents have the capacity for abstract thought and are actively developing their identities, art making may provide an outlet for expression and the opportunity to view situations from a unique perspective (Moon, 1998). The use of metaphors drawn from personal imagery allows a distance and reflective stance to safely explore emotions (Hersch, 1991; Kopp, 1995), which can lead to positive coping and healthy decision-making (Riley, 1999).

Pop Culture, Mass Information and Mass Media

There are some benefits to adolescents relying on metaphors drawn from mass media to understand their own life struggles (Dunn-Snow, 1993). Additionally, many adolescents understand and identify their own emotions through the common language of pop culture (Lacourse, Claes, & Villeneuve, 2001). The impact of popular imagery on children's art expressions is especially evident in one study that examined the popularity of anime comics and found that its influence may be one reason why Japanese children produce art that is more sophisticated and mature than the art of their peers in the United States (Toku, 2002). In a different study, the use of the Internet with an adolescent boy diagnosed with psychosis helped to build a therapeutic relationship and resulted in improvement in the client's overall well-being (Daley et al., 2005).

Others have noted that popular culture may have negative effects on adolescents' abilities to create their own meaningful images and may therefore reduce their capacities for creative thought, imagination, and expression (McLeod, 1995; Williams, Kramer, Henley, & Gerity, 1997). Art therapists have begun advocating for the inclusion of digital art making in art therapy practice, in consideration of the benefits of manipulating images and the comfort that many adolescents have with technological tools (Malchiodi, 2000; Orr, 2005). At the same time, practitioners need to make careful choices in using electronic media in therapy, given research that has found correlations between Internet addiction and addictive or attention-deficit pathologies (Yoo et al., 2004).

Critics of the heavy use of electronic media argue that commercial images convey empty or misleading messages (Barbato, Bailey, Levine, & Introcascio-Davis, 2003; Klosterman, 2003; Lester & Ross, 2003) that are more con-

cerned with turning adolescents into consumers than into actualized citizens (Klein, 2002). Moreover, the expectation of immediacy and the continuous delivery of images prevent much needed silent reflective space that aids in discovering one's own meanings (Gitlin, 2001). Even though the process of art making plays an important role in self-understanding, pop culture may encourage placing more attention on the art product.

Although electronic media is viewed as interactive and engaging by its users, in actuality adolescents may experience life passively through the media instead of actively struggling with life to derive meaning from it (Holbrooke, 1994). For example, adolescents in the United States who had higher levels of engagement with electronic media were found to spend less time engaged in sports and other off-line activities with friends (Flammer & Alsaker, 2000). Kramer (as cited in Williams et al., 1997) believed that electronic media, for all of the attention it receives, does not provide a meaningful sense of engagement or empathic response to its users. She described the relationship with electronic media as unidirectional from user to machine, while the information provided to the user is often unidirectional in the reverse. Today more than ever, adolescents are able to access increasing amounts of information on a variety of topics, including medicine, mental health, and sexuality. The Internet may serve as a great equalizer of information that gives credibility to all sites, but this characteristic may lead some to seek information based on confirmation biases rather than objective research. Unmonitored chat rooms, including those that promote unhealthy practices such as eating disorders or self-harm, may in fact reinforce pathological behaviors and beliefs (Subrahmanyam, Smahel, & Greenfield, 2006; Whitlock, Powers, & Eckenrode, 2006).

Fast Food Art, Talk Show Therapy

New technologies bring increased opportunities for communication and pop culture offers new metaphors for expression. Depending upon the presenting problem and cultural dynamics in play, rapid, time-limited interventions and structured directives may be useful for some clients. However, when clients who would not benefit from these approaches request them, the techno-digital culture can intrude and create a negative impact on art therapy. In my practice working with adolescents, what began as isolated instances became observed patterns I found that supported the concerns identified in the professional literature. I began to see connections between pop culture phenomena and practice in art therapy.

Art made within the context of techno-digital culture may appear to be "fast food art," a term I use to denote art that mimics the speed, rapid access, and expectations of immediacy transmitted by mainstream culture, created with little emotional investment from the client. Fast food art is produced hastily, yields little sustenance, and is viewed as disposable. Some adolescents expect to be able to depict images with accuracy beyond their skill set or patience level, whereas others are dissatisfied with the lack of immediate relief they expect after creating an artwork. It

can be difficult to accept that unlike fast food, art is not always soothing and dependable, but at times is necessarily irritating and chaotic.

Another phenomenon that I have observed and labeled as “talk show therapy” has its roots in television. Talk show therapy refers to therapeutic interactions categorized by low engagement, expectations of immediate results, and an overreliance on the therapist as expert. The psychology of reality shows that make use of confessional style monologues contributes to the notion that therapy should proceed the same way, with the client assuming the role of a reality show participant and disclosing private, uninterrupted thoughts to spectators watching from home. Likewise, guests on talk shows, although seemingly engaged with the host, talk in the presence of a viewing audience who can do no more than watch. The one-way or detached dynamic of the television confessional does not hold true in the art therapy studio, where self-disclosure is reciprocated by a therapist through questioning, understanding, and relationship-building. A client with a talk show therapy outlook does not anticipate the difficult and often lengthy process of healing because the therapeutic work that takes place between presenting symptoms and relief is rarely visible on television shows.

Art therapists can contribute to an understanding of the effects of digital culture on adolescents by confronting myths found in mass media about the meanings of various formal art elements and symbols. Practitioners also need to question when the inclusion of pop culture imagery should be viewed as a psychological defense. For example, in my training as an art therapist, I was taught that bold outlines around a figure may indicate anxiety over boundaries. However, bold outlines may in fact be a replication of a cartoon style seen in popular culture.

Mass media may also affect how the adolescent approaches art therapy. The ability to access information quickly and to gain immediate gratification from electronic media may limit a client’s interest in the often slower, more reflective nature of self-discovery. To effectively address these challenges, art therapists need to assess for cultural and technological influences on their client’s course of treatment. The case studies below illustrate some of these mass media influences in clinical practice and demonstrate how art therapy was used to mitigate their effects.

Case Studies

Computation Error: Mental Health and Self-Diagnosis

Claire (pseudonym), a 15-year-old female, was referred to me for self-harming behavior, anger management, and strained family relationships. Her parents specifically sought an art therapist because Claire enjoyed making art. Like many adolescents, Claire communicated with her friends online through instant messaging, e-mail, and social networking websites. On her web page, which she allowed her parents to access, she posted messages about her body piercings, who she spent her time with, and her high-risk behav-

iors. After an initial assessment, Claire agreed to meet with me for one hour weekly.

In her art making, Claire strived for perfection and often erased and redrew an image, sometimes to the point of frustration. When she encountered difficulty, instead of working with the image, she frequently resorted to finding something easier to depict. For her first painting, she created a portrait of a relative with a locked mouth. Originally she drew a zipper, but after repeated attempts she announced, “I just give up,” and made a keyhole instead.

Once rapport was established, we started to discuss Claire’s responsibility for her behaviors. She painted a 12" x 18" sheet of paper entirely black, telling me that she and a friend had decided that this was what art made in art therapy should look like. I empathized with what I recognized as frustration, given Claire’s pattern of giving up quickly, and discussed how difficult it can be to create personally meaningful imagery. In response, she chose white and red paint to express her idea of the inside of a person’s body and created the image of a stomach filled with red to indicate aggravation and frustration.

Following a conflict with her friends, Claire reverted to self-harming behaviors that had ceased during treatment. She lamented that nothing could help her and that all therapy and behavior modification were just “airy fairy” and “pointless,” because she didn’t have any “deep feelings.” She listed her previous treatments, which included brief forays into a range of interventions from mainstream cognitive-behavior therapy to spiritually-oriented guided imagery. After saying, “nobody can help me,” she told me that she took an online test that indicated that she was either bipolar or schizophrenic. I tried to talk with her about the limitations of a computer-generated diagnosis. Claire responded by saying, “I hope it is bipolar, because then I’d be right.” I replied, “It’s important to have the right diagnosis because it affects your treatment.” Claire insisted that she would “rather it be bipolar.” When I asked, “You’d rather be right than correctly diagnosed?” she responded with a closed-lipped, confident smile. Her conclusion was that all her behaviors resulted from the disorder and therefore the only intervention was medication; her computer provided the proof. She also indicated that she intended to behave in ways that would prove that the diagnosis was correct. These increasingly dangerous behaviors ultimately led her psychiatrist to diagnose her with bipolar disorder and to treat her heavily with medication. The medication calmed her but did not increase her tolerance for frustration or her ability to cope with difficult situations.

For the 2 months during which Claire adjusted to her medication, sessions were characterized by sleepiness, difficulty articulating herself, and an inability to make art. At the first sign that she could participate again, I invited her to return to using art to express herself by creating a mandala at the start of each session. Although I feared that she would write off the mandala drawings or paintings as meaningless, she completed quite a few in different styles and degrees of difficulty, giving each a title or a story. She used the medium as a springboard for communication and for exploring her self-concept. The qualities of her art

changed as she discovered form, illustrated preplanned ideas, and learned to work spontaneously with the creative process. In this new phase of art therapy, Claire seemed to feel less pressure for perfection and no longer searched for an immediate fix. She started creating metaphors about her behavior, but if I asked too many questions she would remind me that my speculations were at times far too “DAM,” that is, too “deep and meaningful.” She even asked if she could stop being bipolar.

Information Overload: Sex and Race Online

Nathan (pseudonym), a 13-year-old male, was referred to art therapy for oppositional behavior and anger management. He previously had been in counseling but a psychological assessment revealed that he might do better in art therapy due to some difficulties he experienced with verbal processing. Although he was well behaved in school, he could be aggressive and at times abusive to his family.

From the beginning, Nathan was very responsive to art therapy. He enjoyed drawing and would complete a number of drawings in any one session, mostly depicting an interest in violence. The first several months of our work focused on anger management. I met with his parents separately to work on parenting skills and managing his behavior. About a month into therapy, I asked Nathan to draw an autobiographical portrait. He drew several sketches related to his hobbies and interests, and the final image showed him sitting in front of a computer.

One month later, his behaviors improved and Nathan reported feeling happy. I asked him to illustrate that feeling. He created a smiling figure using a sky blue color that he had identified in a previous session as representing calm. As he finished the drawing, he drew a penis on the figure and a smiling girl behind him. From this point forward, almost all of Nathan's drawings included references to sex. In a meeting with his parents, I was told that at home he had been creating his own pornographic magazines.

At this point in our sessions, Nathan spontaneously started to talk about his being hospitalized for self-injurious behaviors 2 years earlier. During this period, there was a marked shift in his art: whereas before he depicted knights in conflict, now he drew figures working together to build a castle. Then, after a difficult week, he drew another sexually explicit scene. Nathan told me that in addition to online games he spent a considerable amount of time looking at pornography online. He said that he only drew different ways of having sex and had not had any actual sexual encounters. As he talked and created, he became overexcited and often had to be redirected.

In addition to online games and Internet pornography, Nathan started talking about his other online activities. One of them involved posting racist remarks on public message boards. He had experienced difficulties with peers of a different racial background and used these websites to vent his frustrations. Although he received many postings in response that denounced his comments, he also received several that championed him for his remarks. When he was angry with me, he drew people with dark colored skin

being tortured. Despite his prejudice, he willingly engaged in conversations with me about stereotypes, imagining what it would be like to be in another's position and creating art about how he felt when people bullied him.

His parents knew about Nathan's online behaviors, but felt powerless to stop him. When they decided to confront him, Nathan responded with abusive language and violent behavior. Eventually, he was able to tell me that pornography helped him feel good. He was afraid that if he no longer had access to it, he would be unable to function sexually. Since then, we have spent some time on general sex education and I have encouraged his parents to have similar conversations with him. Although at first he recreated the sexually explicit images that he saw online, through art therapy he began to transform these images. He began to understand them as an expression of his feelings related to power and inadequacy and as a source of exploration.

Discussion

Both of these cases illustrate how the techno-digital world entered into and affected art therapy with adolescents. The ease with which these teens related to visual images, due to their affinity for art, mirrored their exposure to the vast array of images available through the Internet, television, and advertising. Their interest in art therapy was sustained by more than simply having the opportunity to make art, given the fact that both Claire and Nathan liked to draw on their own outside of sessions. Unlike the various forms of electronic media they were familiar with, art therapy gave them the ability to communicate through the imagery they created and gain feedback from a trusted source. As seen in Claire's sustained creation of mandalas or Nathan's interpretation of pornography, art therapy offered a nonverbal venue for processing, diffusing, and transforming pop culture images and expectations.

Realizing the ability to create something meaningful and to be understood by another reinforced each teen's need for taking an active stance in their lives rather than assuming the passive stance that is involved in relating to electronic media. Once these adolescents were able to understand that there were no expectations for creating certain images within particular time frames, the intense unmediated electronic images that they were accustomed to could give way to the creation of meaningful imagery. These self-initiated images, unlike the ones that were influenced by mass media, could be explored on numerous levels of significance and metaphor. As with a computer, art may provide an indirect relationship for exploring emotionally charged material, but it has the added benefit in art therapy of being mediated by a caring adult. Thus, adolescents' thoughts and feelings are not limited to emoticons sent into cyberspace but are more fully realized in art created in the presence of a living, empathetic witness.

Like many people who seek treatment, Claire wanted to feel better quickly. The desire for immediate relief is understandable for someone in pain. She wanted the quick relief offered by “fast food art” or “talk show therapy” instead of investing the effort necessary in therapy. Identifying destruc-

tive thinking patterns, understanding their effect on emotions and behavior, transforming these concepts into art, and making changes can be difficult work. Through art therapy, Claire realized that she could not just plug in, sit back, and enjoy. She realized the limitations of using another's image and the benefits of creating personal imagery.

The Internet offers knowledge at the click of a button and computers are viewed as containers for emotions in the form of blogs and online journals. Perhaps it is confusing that the computer, which accepts all emotions unconditionally and has access to great amounts of information, cannot offer personal advice. Claire deserves credit for taking the initiative to research her mental health state in order to understand it better. The problem was that she underestimated certain factors that contributed to her mood while discounting others that moderated it. What she failed to understand is that mental health professionals are able to take into account subtleties and individual circumstances that websites cannot.

Art therapy gave Nathan a channel for exploring two developmental tasks of adolescence: sexuality and identity. As with Claire, the Internet provided him with a confidential space to test out difficult questions and get answers. Pornography offered him an outlet for exploring his sexual feelings. It even gave him a sense of relationship, but it was a virtual one in which he received stimulation without having to attend to the needs of another person. Online forums provided a space to play with his identity in relation to others, but self-selecting chat rooms reinforced stereotyped beliefs. With little effort, his computer made him feel powerful and masculine. Both forums manipulated his immaturity and his desire for affiliation and belonging.

In contrast to these virtual encounters, Nathan could only gain from art therapy by investing more in his images and in the process of change. The practice of exploring multiple meanings for images with a known and trusted adult challenged him to look at the singular message he received from faceless screen names. When brought into the therapeutic relationship, narrow beliefs could be explored, understood, and dissipated. In asking me about my own experiences with people of different races, for example, Nathan was able to hear and evaluate different perspectives in forming his worldview. By giving him permission to explore what had been secret and providing a space where internal images could be externalized, his conflicts were demystified and his overexcitement gave way to insight.

For Claire and Nathan, art therapy was the first opportunity for a long-term, sustained relationship with an adult in a therapeutic context. These adolescents had minimal informal contact with adults, a reality for many adolescents today. Countless teens have e-mail addresses, screen names, and cell phones, but often little opportunity to speak to any adults related to their circle of peers. When searching for information, many adolescents do not have adults to rely on and are unlikely to encounter people in their environments such as librarians or store clerks. One advantage of art therapy is that it provides needed adult contact by exploring imagery within a therapeutic relationship.

Conclusion

Kushner (1996), in his Pulitzer-prize winning play *Angels in America*, wrote, "We can't just stop. We're not rocks—progress, migration, motion is...modernity. It's *animate*, it's what living things do...Even if we go faster than we should. We can't *wait*. And wait for what?" (p. 130). Although etiquette and behavior may still be behind the advances in technology, there is no way to stop moving forward and no reason why we should. Although pop culture imagery "can alter moods and talk to you," as an infamous rapper once wrote, "can it load a gun up for you and cock it too?" (Eminem, 2002, track 12). Instead of adopting a Luddite position in regards to the effects of electronic media, we can offer the means to understand and temper mass media's messages while working to eradicate those that are most harmful. As a follow up to this article's case illustrations, future research could look at the benefits of art therapy for high-level users of electronic media, as many of mass media's effects may be unconscious and nonverbal. The techno-digital popularity of the visual image, although posing challenges for our profession, is, after all, an advantage. Art therapists may be in a unique position to help adolescents establish their creative potential, integrate their virtual and physical worlds, and reclaim meaningful imagery through the art-making process.

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