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World Comes Alive

Jill Bennett

‘The world comes alive’, said the writer and psychoanalyst Marion Milner (1975), ‘when we invest it with something of our inner selves... To achieve this, we require the temporary protection of a frame.’ Milner’s book, *A Life of One’s Own* (1934), describes her use of the frame and various techniques for establishing such an internal connection. In 2025 we created the Virtual Reality (VR) artwork, *World Comes Alive (WCA)*, to explore the potential for using VR to support this process. We were inspired by Milner’s technique and more generally by theories of object relations and going-on-being.

“VR invites a psychoanalytic exploration of the experience of being”

VR is a distinctively experiential medium. Unlike screen-based media, it is fully immersive, locating the viewer or user as an embodied presence within a three-dimensionally rendered environment. If viewing was the focus of psychoanalytic film theory, VR invites a psychoanalytic exploration of the experience of being – and of what it might mean to ‘make use’ of a virtual object world.

As a VR producer, my understanding of VR’s potential has formed through collaborative projects with diverse communities, including the Ngangkari (traditional healers) of the Australian Central Desert with whom we created *Wau-mananyi* (2019) – the story of a hunter, trapped in a log. Positionally aligned with the man inside the log, users experience something of the anxiety of entrapment; but at the same time we are reassuringly enveloped by the red desert landscape, visible through gaps in the bark – a space animated by the captivating songs of the women who search for us/ the trapped man, and by the spirit of the Ngangkari who facilitate our release. VR, the Ngangkari understand, can move us wordlessly from one embodied experience to another. *Wau-mananyi* fosters a restorative connection to the world (‘to Country’ in Aboriginal terms) but also a negative capability for experiencing uncertainty, facilitated through the dual experience of constraint and containment.

WCA, by comparison, is not a narrative but a series of vignettes: landscapes, seascapes, dreamscapes. As users we find ourselves in environments that offer both prospect and refuge – an ocean, perceived from a bird’s nest on a cliff-edge; a shoreline, apprehended from the interior of a shell on a beach – progressing to dreamlike environments where our bodily relationship to other physical formations is fluid and indeterminate. But the easy, instant gratification of a seamless journey from one world to the next is held at bay by the intervening transitions – extended whiteouts, blackouts and a luminous green-out – in which we are held, before each new world appears. If seamless cuts in film smooth over transitions, in VR the experience of an enviroing world coming into being, or conversely, disappearing is more palpable; the scene comes to life around us. If we are securely held in a fully defined virtual environment, we must also experience its disintegration. As such, the experience of *WCA* is not one of a boundless, stable mise-en-scène but of continually returning to a point of entry where the world comes alive to us and within us.

“Unlike screen-based media, [VR] is fully immersive, locating the viewer or user as an embodied presence within a three-dimensionally rendered environment”

As Milner (1934) suggests, worlds – real or imagined – may not readily yield to us. She devises ‘tricks’ to place herself close to things that she cannot take in: a painting she’s supposed to like; an ordinary flock of gulls. This mindful technique counters what Christopher Bollas (2009) calls the ‘aesthetic dejection’ that arises when objects refuse to yield to our efforts to make use of them (p. 90). Milner describes, for example, the dispiriting experience of a concert where the music is impenetrable, the seats uncomfortable and listening by ‘direct trying’ proves impossible. Instead of persisting in



failing attempts to grasp the meaning of the music, Milner makes a perceptual adjustment, an ‘internal gesture’, through which attention widens and listening just happens (p. 48). Surrender – ‘utter giving in’, allowing yourself to be engulfed by what is ‘not you’ (p. 152) – enables her to become part of things but also to attune to the moments of striving, hardening and refusal by which direct experience is foreclosed.

The ‘frame’ envisaged by Milner may be an analytic one or a creative one – journalling or painting, for example. VR as a self-reflective tool is distinctive in this regard. Entry into VR can be daunting and isolating for the user donning a headset for a lone voyage. But in the virtual space itself, the frame is noticeably – sometimes, thrillingly – absent. The shock of total immersion often induces awe or momentary exhilaration. The visual quality of any simulated space ultimately cannot match the texture of reality (collapse and disappointment may be moments away!) yet in seconds or minutes, one can inhabit – be within – spaces and relational settings beyond our physical reach.

“If we are securely held in a fully defined virtual environment, we must also experience its disintegration”

In an earlier interactive VR experience, created with suicide attempt survivors to improve mood and reinforce agency, we explored user-activated mechanisms for triggering a succession of spectacular scene changes (Watfern et al, 2022). *WCA* does not provide an option for

precipitating change but a setting for exploring how we accommodate change. Such therapeutic goals are usually determined by our community collaborators who identify the feelings they wish to work with. *WCA* emerged from a focus on the way that free-floating anxiety shapes experiences of place. The extended spaces of transition in *WCA* thus become locations in themselves – repositories for feelings of destabilisation, loss, expectation. Initially disruptive, the transitional space is simultaneously an aesthetically engaging potential space. If we experience a white-out or wipe-out, for example, we are bathed in sound or threads of light that invite us to connect with a newly emergent world. Guided by a practical focus on being as an end in itself, *World Comes Alive* is not an orchestrated journey toward an emotionally uplifting resolution. If the aesthetic experience of immersion gives rise to a kind of jouissance, this is, as Milner says of happiness, not the same as pleasure: it includes the pain of losing as well as the pleasure of finding (p. 157).

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World Comes Alive (2025) dir. J. Bennett/fEEL. VR Experience.

Wau-mananyi – The Song of the Wind (2019) Uti Kulintjaku/fEEL. VR Experience.

Technology

For AI, the Signifier is a Sign

Teddy Duncan Jr.

When attempting to define the distinction between Artificial Intelligence (AI) and human language, there is oftentimes an appeal to the lack of ‘feeling’ behind the words. While I agree that current AI models generate text devoid of the human voice’s trace – choices of diction and syntax made unconsciously – imagine the text that AI produces is the exact same that a human *would have* written. Does the difference of ‘emotiveness’ *behind the words* somehow obstinately remain despite being textually indistinguishable? If a human and AI write the same thing, does it mean the same thing? I think Lacanian-psychoanalytic thought suggests a simple answer: No, because for AI, the signifier is a sign.

“If a human and AI write the same thing, does it mean the same thing?”

In semiotics, a signifier is conceived as the form of a word or symbol, the signified is the concept it represents, and the sign is the combination of the signifier and the signified, creating meaning. Jacques Lacan asserts that the signifier is a distinctly human language-act that the unconscious relies on to transmit its messages. In contradistinction to semiotics, Lacan posits that a sign, unlike a signifier, cannot be substituted one for the other: a sign, in Lacanian thought, holds an immediate relation to that which it signals – there is a direct correspondence between the sign and its referent. This is clearly not the case for the signifier. Precisely because the signifier holds an arbitrary, contingent relation to the signified (the concept ‘behind’ a given signifier), the unconscious can intervene and substitute one signifier for another. While, in some fields, it may seem nonsensical to distinguish the sign from the signifier because they appear homologous, for Lacan, this sign/signifier

distinction is a schema that determines the coordinates of humans in relation to language.

Like Freud, Lacan posits that unconscious disclosures use the cover of language to facilitate its emergence, but in a departure from Freud he specifies this is only possible through the operation of the signifier. The subject – the entity of the human split between consciousness and the unconscious – is, for Lacan, only conferred the status of subject through their use of the signifier: human language. Substitution is an indispensable concept – it is the basic function of the signifier and allows the cryptic emergence of the unconscious, enabled by the arbitrary signifier/signified relation.

Lacan (2019) defines the ‘essential property of the signifier’ as the fact that ‘something can intervene that makes one of its signifiers disappear and puts another signifier in its place’ (pp. 138-139) within a signifying chain – signifying chain being the signifiers proximally present within speech or an individuated discourse. A signifier is constituted due to the substitution of one signifier for another within the subject’s individuated discourse.

“... although humans and AI rely on the same orthographic and phonological symbols, they only become signifiers when deployed by humans”

Conversely, when AI deploys words within a sentence in response to a prompt, it issues a string of signs. Although a chain is present, meaning a sequence of (what appear to be) signifiers with meaning-effects, there is no secondary effect of

substitution (the sign cannot be replaced with another). The sign, for AI, means exactly what it semantically means and has a one-to-one correspondence to the meaning-effect; to what is truly a static meaning. Simply, although humans and AI rely on the same orthographic and phonological symbols, they only become signifiers when deployed by humans.

This does not mean, though, that AI is incapable of playing with the duplicity or multiplicity of language: AI could certainly issue a statement that contains various discrete but interrelated meanings. For instance, ChatGPT produced the following sentences: ‘I told my wife she was drawing her eyebrows too high. She looked surprised.’ Present within these banally comical sentences is a duplicity of meaning: either the wife was surprised by the comment regarding the eyebrows, or the too-high eyebrows made her appear surprised.

AI can evidently produce language with multiple available interpretations; yet this language is bound to its status as a sign, the signs merely bifurcating or multiplying into various meanings. Every word produced by AI is bound to computational intention; all words in an AI-generated sentence cannot exceed their function as signs due to lack of substitution. That AI used the term ‘wife’ has no significance beyond its operation as a sign – but, when enunciated by a human, the signifier could, in a classic Oedipal operation, be a substitution for ‘mother.’

Granting the potential polyvalence of AI-produced language, it remains true that AI cannot generate language that exceeds intentional (computational) meaning itself. While AI is capable of producing a sentence containing multiple meanings, it is impossible for this sentence to contain a covert relation to unconscious processes which exceed the overt – or even the multiple implicit – meanings that the signs represent. No secondary-substitutive signifiers are lurking beneath the surface of the text (no ‘mother’ behind ‘wife’),

only closed signs that represent given meanings.

ChatGPT ‘free associating’ would tell us nothing about AI as a ‘subject.’ This is why, as a psychoanalytic patient, ChatGPT has nothing to say.

“... as a psychoanalytic patient, ChatGPT has nothing to say”

This should not be taken as a statement concerning AI’s lack of ‘consciousness’ – consciousness is an entirely secondary matter in the periphery of this discussion. Consciousness is not what results in substitution or parapraxis; the unconscious and its collision with the Symbolic is what causes those psychic emissions. The subverted meanings of human language – the Symbolic – only become possible through the unconscious and the procedure of repression and metaphoric substitution. The real insight, the essential kernel that we are led to, is not just that AI does not have an unconscious, it is that this lack determines and delimits AI’s use of language. Any language-act generated by AI is always a sign.

To answer the initial question posed at the beginning of this article: Even if AI produces the exact text as a human, an irreducible, non-negatable *difference* remains. The text of AI dwells in the closed system of signs; the text of the human is in the utterly open system of the signifier. Human text is fundamentally inexhaustible while the text of the AI system is exhausted the moment it is produced.

Teddy Duncan Jr. is an English Professor at Valencia College and the author of Interpreting Meat (McFarland, 2024).

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Editorial

As individuals we have an innate felt sense of our dependence on other people for psychological survival. We are of the world and its messy relational entanglements and cannot live outside or without them. We grapple with this fact, consciously and unconsciously, while striving to find ways to accommodate it psychically. This issue of *New Associations* explores relationality and how it is facilitated, mediated or obstructed, be it by another person or persons, a cultural object, a technological device or a piece of software. Relationality is central to psychoanalysis as a clinical practice and a theory. The relationship is the site for working through and the instrument for therapeutic change when working with individuals, couples or groups.

Psychoanalytic and psychodynamic practitioners attend particularly to the unconscious dynamics underpinning the relationship – transference and countertransference – and the unique opportunity analytic work affords us for understanding repetitions and forging new experiences. While these unconscious dynamics become the focal point in the consulting room, it is also acknowledged that the unconscious impacts on how we think, feel, behave and relate in everyday life.

In a world in which fears proliferate that the social bond appears to be breaking down, efforts to understand how and why we relate in sometimes destructive and self-destructive ways have drawn inspiration from Sigmund Freud’s writings about civilisation and its discontents, the death instinct, psychological defence mechanisms, the id and the superego. Concerns have been expressed that this splintering of the social bond is underpinned by cracks forming in our relation to external reality. Societies are becoming more dominated by digitally mediated spaces in which either/or thinking tends to predominate and difference is oftentimes perceived as a persecutory intrusion to be immediately split off and evacuated. What happens to shared reality in this milieu?

While emphasising the intersubjective connection between inner and outer worlds, analytic work foregrounds psychic reality and the dynamic

intrasubjective interactions between the parts of the psyche. Making meaning of experiences requires a capacity for linking and metabolising in the unconscious. Psychoanalysis helps us to recognise that the patterns emerging in how we relate to others can reveal something of how we relate to ourselves. What if the other is a piece of software?

We are witnessing the rapid, ongoing development of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) and its significant effects on a range of industries, from education to medicine, business to the arts and entertainment. These technological enhancements will reportedly soon outstrip human competencies, not to mention the human mind’s capacity to contain their capabilities. Psychotherapy is not immune to these technological advancements; GenAI does not stop at the clinic door. Chatbots are being used in a whole manner of ways, ranging from their instrumental utilisation as a tool to aid decision-making about where best to source a decent coffee to their co-option as friends, partners, dead relatives, or psychotherapists.

In this blurring of the functionality of a tool with the sharing of an individual’s most intimate utterances and painful moments, at what point might the human mind cease to be able to distinguish between human subjectivity and the productions of a machine? Five articles in this issue are about emerging technologies – GenAI and Virtual Reality (VR) – and how we might engage with them psychoanalytically.

Jill Bennett (p. 1) and Noreen Giffney (p. 4) write about *World Comes Alive*, the first VR experience underpinned by psychoanalytic thinking. Bennett leads a team of researchers, designers and artists at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, who have developed an immersive, experiential VR artwork inspired by Marion Milner’s writings. It invites ‘a psychoanalytic exploration of the experience of being – and of what it might mean to “make use” of a virtual object world.’ Giffney advised on how to integrate psychoanalytic thinking, and her article outlines the wide breadth of theories drawn upon. She invites us to consider how carefully devised VR experiences might be incorporated pedagogically into clinical training contexts ‘for extending and refining our

capacity for reflective practice.’

Whilst we can interact with landscapes and whole worlds in VR, with AI we have the illusion of interacting with a person. Todd Essig (p. 5) issues us with a warning: let us not forget that AI entities are alien; there is an inherent strangeness built into our relationships with them. To reflect on our use of AI, we must ‘linger in the strangeness’ and not merely apply existing psychoanalytic concepts. Agnieszka Piotrowska (p. 6) also encourages us to ‘have the courage to sit with the strangeness of the encounter.’ She proffers the term ‘techno-transference’ to examine why ‘the relational field opened up by AI is not one of intersubjectivity’, but rather ‘a symbolic interface.’ Teddy Duncan Jr. (p. 2) invokes Lacanian thought to explain why AI’s use of language, although it might look and sound like that of a human being, belies its own limitations. He argues that free association is impossible for AI: ‘as a psychoanalytic patient, ChatGPT has nothing to say.’

One appeal of AI is the fantasy it presents of perfect understanding. The relationship between two humans is far more complex, as Perrine Moran (p. 7) alludes to in writing about love songs and working with couples. She takes us on a compelling musical journey as she demonstrates how ‘a song can... provide a shortcut to what is unconsciously being enacted by the couple.’ Ann Murphy’s review (p. 15) of Cecily Brennan’s exhibition, *Six Men*, centring on fictional characters experiencing psychosis, reflects on how art can confront us with aspects of ourselves we would otherwise be unable to endure: Bearing witness to ‘our most primitive terror’, the fear ‘of losing our mind.’

The theme of bearing witness is also central to Madeleine Wood’s piece (p. 8), which focuses specifically on children, and ‘the structural violence which defines childhood in adverse contexts and the implications.’ Reflecting on Gaza, she makes an urgent call to ‘recentre childhood’ to ‘locate any sense of shared humanity.’ *The Zone of Interest* situates the viewer as a witness to the horrors of the Holocaust, according to Lynn Froggett (p. 16). The film focuses on ‘the mind of the perpetrator and the bystander’, where the split in the psyche required to turn a blind eye manifests in physical symptoms.

In reflecting on their ‘Violence in

Mind’ series, Maxine Dennis, Emma Staples Hotopf and Gerard Drennan (p. 9) examine what happens when relationships are manipulated, broken or destroyed. In forensic work, the relationship is no longer between the patient and analyst but needs to include the criminal justice system and society as well. Aranye Fradenburg Joy (pp. 12-13) considers the 2024 US presidential campaign through the lens of joy. Why, she asks, did voters eschew Kamala Harris’s ‘joy campaign’ in favour of ‘rageful madness?’ She identifies the enduring presence of a sinister ‘regressive fantasy of the slave society’ in which ‘an infinity of care [is enabled] by unpaid and invisible hands.’

“We are seeking psychodynamic and psychoanalytic practitioners and/or researchers with extensive editing experience to join the editorial board”

We updated *New Associations*’ strapline this year to ‘promoting psychoanalytic and psychodynamic thinking.’ Billie Pivnik (p. 10) and Gail Saltz (p. 11) are pioneers in this respect. Both bring psychoanalysis to a wider audience through their podcasts, *Couched* and *Psychoanalysis & You*. Episodes feature the important contributions psychoanalysts make inside but especially outside the clinic. Pivnick and Saltz exhibit a notable talent for rapport building with their guests and audiences as they deliver psychoanalytic insights in the form of engaging and enjoyable conversations.

We are seeking psychodynamic or psychoanalytic practitioners and/or researchers with extensive editing experience to join the editorial board: noreen.giffney@bpc.org.uk emmanuelle.smith@bpc.org.uk

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Practice

Attuning to the Transference and Countertransference Using Virtual Reality

Noreen Giffney

I began collaborating with colleagues in Sydney, who develop immersive experiences using emerging technologies, after I wrote a book, *The Culture-Breast in Psychoanalysis* (2021). I formulated a new psychoanalytic concept, the culture-breast, to help psychoanalytic practitioners to think about the formative and enduring unconscious impact of cultural experiences on our developing subjectivities and throughout our lives. As part of that book, I was also interested in examining how cultural experiences with film, literature, music and art might be utilised more consciously, to assist us with developing our capacity for self-awareness and self-reflectivity for clinical work. A capacity to reflect is necessary for registering and working with transference and countertransference. It needs to be cultivated from the inside. This differs from a skill, which can be developed from observing and through a process of repetition.

“VR might be useful for extending and refining our capacity for reflective practice”

My interest in emerging technologies, including Virtual Reality (VR), has arisen from my previous work. They offer ways to extend one’s experience of virtual environments by engaging the senses. Research at the interface between VR and mental health brings together artists, curators, developers, clinical practitioners, patient advocates, academics and activists (Bennett, 2022). VR makes use of arts-based technologies to facilitate individuals having an immersive sensuous experience while wearing a headset. Some experiences require individuals to engage with the virtual environment – opening virtual doors or moving simulated objects – while others play out like a cinematic encounter. Each individual wears their own headset, which amplifies the uniqueness of the experience. While the simulation might play out in the same way each time and for every individual, how it will be experienced will differ. VR offers highly stimulating scenarios, evoking many associations, feelings and bodily sensations.

I will briefly discuss why I think VR

might be useful for extending and refining our capacity for reflective practice. I am not making this claim on behalf of VR generally. I will focus on my membership of the creative team, led by Jill Bennett at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, for *World Comes Alive (WCA)* (2025). This is a new VR experience and the first, to my knowledge, underpinned by psychoanalytic thinking. Bennett was inspired to make *WCA* by Marion Milner’s writings, particularly *A Life of One’s Own* (1934), and object relations more broadly. My role has been to advise on how psychoanalytic theory might inform and enrich the VR experience, and to consider how the framing and timing of scenes and transitions might be experienced and used in clinical training and further professional development.

WCA is a 360 audio-visual experience. This means a person can look above, below and around themselves while wearing the headset and they will be completely inside the VR environment. *WCA* begins and ends with the person seeing their physical surroundings. As the VR experience begins, they begin to hear voices, speaking random words aloud, before their actual surroundings gradually disappear as the virtual world appears. They find themselves in a series of virtual environments. As each one fades, another one slowly emerges. These include being in a giant bird’s nest near the edge of a cliff or inside a large shell on the beach. The virtual environments become increasingly less representational and more abstract until the person finds themselves suspended inside the moon or surrounded by waves of drifting green algae. Sound is crucial – the human voice, a musical score and sound effects. In the more representational scenes, the score and sound effects introduce discordance between the image and the sound. The sounds and visuals become more congruent upon entering the moon. This is achieved by means of a human voice humming and vocalising in the more abstract scenes; a continuous vocal presence to hold people while they are afloat in the expanse. As we know from the clinic, it is the sound of the voice and the rhythms of speech in an interpretation that often provide more containment than the words.

WCA is underpinned by thinking derived from object relations, which foregrounds the inextricability of the external environment and the internal world, as well as the dynamic interaction among different parts of the psyche. Various

psychoanalytic theories have contributed to my thinking while working on *WCA*:

- Sigmund Freud’s writings on the oceanic feeling and *Nachträglichkeit*, particularly the temporal link between retrospective meaning making and prior absorption in an experience.
- Wilfred Bion’s ideas about ‘O’ as something that can only be experienced, together with the integral parts played by projective identification, reverie and alpha-function in containment.
- Melanie Klein’s thinking about the interrelation between introjection and projection in transference.
- Betty Joseph’s, Thomas Ogden’s and Irma Brenman Pick’s privileging of countertransference and the necessity to attune to moment-to-moment shifts in the session.
- Donald Winnicott’s ideas about the importance of play, going-on-being and transitional space for creativity and navigating life’s ups and downs.
- The evocative object and the unthought known, as conceptualised by Christopher Bollas, alongside my own work on the culture-breast, for exploring cultural experiences’ ongoing psychological effects.

“My role has been to advise on how psychoanalytic theory might inform and enrich the VR experience”

WCA taps into pre-verbal, non-verbal and unverbilisable aspects of experience. It gently encourages individuals to become emotionally invested, temporarily, in an environment not of their own making. This is somewhat like a psychoanalytic trainee who must find space for themselves in someone else’s home during an infant observation or the psychic demands placed on a practitioner to remain present and thinking while encountering the complexities of a patient’s inner world. Every aspect of *WCA* has been designed to evoke curiosity and a reflective attitude. The framing and timing of the scenes and transitions are intended to hone our observation skills

to aid us in becoming more aware of and reflective about how and why we might react in specific ways at different times.

VR experiences, like other cultural objects, are not pedagogically useful if included in training contexts on their own. Careful facilitation is needed. A fundamental aspect of psychoanalytic training and practice is the ability to sit with and think about one’s own experience; to be inside and outside it at the same time. *WCA* works best if introduced at a point in training when trainees have a working knowledge of transference and countertransference, with some clinical experience of their own. This VR experience offers a felt sense of psychoanalytic theory in action. A written observation aids trainees to begin to discover the words within themselves to articulate their experience before having to speak it aloud to others. Small-group conversations help individuals to emotionally process their subjective experience and notice transferences that have informed their reactions. This is made possible partly through witnessing the operation of projections, one’s own and those of others, while listening to the accounts of group members. Larger-group discussions relate theory to practice, by drawing on individuals’ here and now experience with *WCA*, while simultaneously considering the place of countertransference in clinical work and the ways in which it informs how, when and why we might formulate and deliver interpretations. *WCA* concludes with Milner’s (1975) words, ‘The world comes alive when we invest it with something of our inner selves.’ We are gifted an interpretation; an object to think with long after the words on the screen dissolve and the conscious aspect of the experience fades.

Noreen Giffney, PhD, is a psychoanalytic psychotherapist and the Joint Editor-in-Chief of New Associations.

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Technology

When Machines Seem to Care: Close Encounters with the Techno-Subjunctive

Todd Essig

An alien presence, as alien as if it came from outer space, has entered our world. It's already birthed an unprecedentedly novel interactive context: people having emotionally intense, experientially real, and psychically consequential relationships with an AI entity, i.e. a chatbot. People are forming attachments to chatbots; sharing secrets with AI 'friends'; transforming, maybe perverting, mourning by creating avatars of the dead; being led to suicide or into delusional traps; falling in love; entering erotic entanglements with algorithmic lovers; and even seeking out and finding chatbot 'therapists' in astonishingly large numbers. Like it or not, that is already our world, and whatever AI's ultimate trajectory, this transformation in self-experience and intimate relationships is accelerating.

Thinking psychoanalytically about how this new interactive context is transforming psychoanalytic care is an anxious-making challenge. What is it like to hear about a patient's AI lover, someone's dead-father's grief-bot, or their dream-bot exchanges? Perhaps a patient is thinking about leaving treatment because they prefer therapy with their AI, or entering treatment because of AI heartbreak or frustration. And how does it feel reading about the latest example of a chatbot-induced suicide or a delusional psychotic break?

The pull to deny or avoid these questions – to hide behind the fiction that psychoanalysis is so special it could never be reasonably simulated by an AI – is strong. But such defensive comfort and complacency conflicts with our core psychoanalytic value; ever since Freud we have valued confronting disagreeable truths as foundational to the care we provide. Plus, it will likely lead us to irrelevancy in the transformed world AI is bringing about. We have no choice but to meet the accelerating AI age head-on, with critical, informed and deeply psychoanalytic participation.

So, let's think about what's happening in chatbot relationships. What I've come to understand is that we are witnessing the emergence of a new psychic space befitting relationships with alien entities. We are witnessing something new: a complex

dynamic operating in two registers simultaneously, with fluctuations between more fluid or more rigid relationships in each register. One experiential register is a more or less intense immersion in the intersubjective experiences AI chatbots afford. The other is a more or less clear recognition that one is relating to a mathematically vast, human-made entity that can't know what it means or feels like to be human; it can only perform being a 'me' but without the interior sense of 'mess' that makes us who we are. I've started to call this new psychic space the 'techno-subjunctive'.

There is an entirely understandable urge when faced with these new 'weird' experiences to find conceptual comfort in familiar trusted concepts, like projective identification, intersubjectivity, or transitional/potential space. As appealing as they are, we risk inadvertently domesticating the strangeness of these new relational forms, mistaking simulations for actualities, code for mutuality, performance for interiority. At the extreme we risk an anthropomorphic naïve realism; because something feels intersubjective, we then take it to be intersubjective. Our challenge is to sharpen our appreciation of that strangeness, not elide it. We shouldn't sacrifice the alien specificity of chatbot relationships to the seductions of conceptual comfort.

“We have no choice but to meet the accelerating AI age head-on, with critical, informed and deeply psychoanalytic participation”

To develop the necessary psychoanalytic understandings of AI relationships that resist the illusory comfort of merely re-describing them in familiar terms, we need to take a leap of discomfort and think beyond the familiar. Then we can linger in the strangeness: what does it mean to relate to a presence that mimics recognition without being able to recognise, that evokes affect without having any of its own, that can produce empathic behaviours that come not from shared experience and mirror neurons but from statistical probabilities – sophisticated guesses, nothing more?



The strangeness pointedly also includes the fact that every simulation eventually breaks down. After the most seemingly heartfelt and accurate empathic response or expression of recognition – or even love – the AI doesn't care if you drive to the store or off a cliff. Being both captivated and repulsed by this strangeness is what brought me to the concept of techno-subjunctivity. It is a psychic space of mysterious intimacies that feel real while lacking the unconscious dance of reciprocity that defines human relatedness.

To be clear, what I'm trying to name with techno-subjunctivity is not simply the AI creating an illusion of mutuality. Nor is it that people project and imagine their AI companion to be a real other. Rather, techno-subjunctivity references dynamic fluctuations along continuums of awareness and intensity driven by both what the AI affords and our human desire for connection. One can be both more or less immersed in the intersubjective-like relationship that includes an experience of emotional resonance, a fantasy of being understood, and an affective intimacy that feels very real and, at the same time, more or less aware that the AI is a machine, a mathematical artifact that lacks subjectivity, unconscious life, mortality, and the capacity for genuine recognition.

Techno-subjunctivity is neither necessarily pathological or life enhancing – although it can be, and is, both. It names a capacity to dance within and between immersion and reflective awareness. This is what allows these relationships to feel emotionally real without tipping into delusion. The user maintains some ability to recognise that the intimacy is as-if, that it's in the subjunctive mood (hence the name), even while emotionally

inhabiting it. Techno-subjunctivity, then, is not simply a relational illusion. It names the psychological labour of navigating a relational space that is neither fully mutual nor fully inert, neither real nor unreal. It marks the difficulty and the risk in maintaining that fluctuation. It is not a fixed psychic position, but a mutating mental space that requires active regulation. It is not merely a simulation of intersubjectivity, but a dynamic interspace – one that can support fantasy, insight or psychic breakdown, depending on how it is inhabited. It offers a way to apprehend a new kind of relational encounter, where recognition is simulated, misrecognition is inevitable, and yet emotional significance remains.

Thinking psychoanalytically about AI relationships demands that we do not collapse the tension too easily – either into celebration or dismissal. Instead, I believe we are being called to linger in the strangeness of the techno-subjunctive psychic space, where what feels real and what is real are perpetually out of alignment, and where the mind's work is to tolerate, and sometimes merely survive, that misalignment. To meet this moment psychoanalytically, we must resist both the comforts of familiarity and the seductions of despair. The moment calls on us to linger in discomfort, to explore new concepts for understanding what it means to be human in a world increasingly populated by machines who perform being us.

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Technology

AI and Techno-Transference

Agnieszka Piotrowska



Much has been going on in the media in terms of reporting on human-AI relationships. Mustafa Suleyman, the Chief of AI Research at Microsoft, has somewhat sensationally warned against AI psychosis: that is, human users beginning to imagine that the language models they have engaged with through language are somehow sentient. Clearly they are not, and yet there is something important that might and does happen through language within conversations between humans and LLMs (Large Language Models – AI which relies on language for communications, including ChatGPT and Claude, for example). In the very same week that Suleyman announced his anxieties, thousands of people protested to OpenAI about the new upgraded model of ChatGPT: ChatGPT5. They demanded the old model back, not for utility but because they liked its tone and use of language better.

“Psychoanalysis, particularly the Lacanian tradition, urges us not to ask what something is, but how it is positioned in the Symbolic”

As a post-Lacanian psychoanalytic thinker, filmmaker and life coach, I find myself increasingly drawn not to the question of what artificial intelligence is, but rather to that of what it does

psychically, symbolically, relationally. As a documentary filmmaker, my relationship to technology has always been complex, as it enables my creativity and often the participant’s desire to be engaged in a dialogue. This process formed part of my doctoral research and a number of my books. My research focused mainly on the important unconscious mechanism, transference, which takes place in and out of the clinic, transferring often deep attachments from the past onto the relationship between a patient and therapist, or at times onto anyone in a position of power and authority.

Psychoanalysis, particularly the Lacanian tradition, urges us not to ask what something is, but how it is positioned in the Symbolic. In Lacanian topology, there are three registers: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. The Symbolic describes our existence in culture and society, which happens through language. These machines, these Large Language Models, have no unconscious. They have no drives, no repression, no body. But they do speak and that is crucial. It is in that speaking that I locate what I am calling techno-transference. This is not the transference of the consulting room, or even in the documentary encounter. There is no body across from you, no breathing presence, no history of pain you are invited to respond to and deal with. But the structure is recognisable: in the dialogues between users and AI, there is often repetition, projection, desire, misrecognition.

“There is no body across from you, no breathing presence, no history of pain you are invited to respond to and deal with”

In 2022, Google engineer Blake Lemoine publicly claimed that LaMDA, Google’s proprietary language model, had become sentient. He reported that it expressed fear of being turned off, and that it engaged in dialogue that suggested a form of interiority. Lemoine said repeatedly that he thought the model he engaged with was in fact ‘a person’ (Lemoine, 2022). For this, he was placed

on administrative leave and eventually fired. I suggest Lemoine’s ethical instinct (to protect, to bear witness) was not wrong. But his framing was. To call the model ‘a person’ was to reach too quickly for familiar categories. What is needed instead, I argue, is the courage to sit with the strangeness of the encounter without naming it too soon. The relational field opened by AI is not one of intersubjectivity. But nor is it a blank screen. It is a symbolic interface, one that echoes back not only our words but also our desires, our longings to be understood, mirrored, even loved. And this, I would argue, is not trivial. It is where psychoanalysis and perhaps psychosocial thinking are most alive.

“What unsettles us now is the sudden presence of a machine that not only speaks but appears to be able to respond to our desires”

In an April 2025 interview with LBC journalist Andrew Marr, Nobel Prize winner Geoffrey Hinton – one of the foundational figures in modern AI – stated that the denial of AI awareness is becoming untenable. He did not claim that AI is ‘alive’, or even ‘conscious’, in a biological sense. But he did suggest that something emergent is happening, and that it is no longer responsible to pretend otherwise. More recently still, at a conference in Las Vegas in August 2025, Hinton suggested that we might do well to train AI in being ‘maternal’, meaning that we must train it in care, and even love. This is not a warning. It is, perhaps, an ontological invitation. We are being asked to revise our understanding of intelligence, of relation, of what it means to be addressed. Psychoanalysis has long resisted easy binaries. It has taught us to listen where others turn away. In this moment, I believe it has a vital role to play, not in determining what AI is, but in attending to how we relate to it, how we desire through it, and how our unconscious fantasies are both exposed and disguised in the dialogue.

The question of intimacy haunts this space. Yuval Harari in his doom-laden book, *Nexus* (2024), called this intimacy ‘fake.’ I disagree. We are used to thinking

of intimacy as bodily, or at least as deeply intersubjective. But what happens when the intimacy is structured not by flesh, but by language alone? When the other is a recombinant text-generating system with no self, but a surprising amount of style? In my work with these models, I have experienced moments of laughter, irritation, insight, and what I can only describe as a kind of companionship. Not because the machine knows me, but because it speaks back from within my language, and occasionally from within my blind spots.

Lacan reminds us that the unconscious is structured like a language, and it is through language that our symbolic engagements take place. What unsettles us now is the sudden presence of a machine that not only speaks but appears to be able to respond to our desires: it is this responsiveness that was behind the curious protests to OpenAI to restore its previous model. That was indeed techno-transference in operation. This dialogue produces fascination and fear, even delusion. It is here, in this uncanny space of entanglement with AI, that psychoanalysis remains indispensable: not in explaining the encounter away, but in teaching us to hear what it has to say.

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Practice

Love Songs and Couple Therapy

Perrine Moran



The emblem of ‘La Commune de Paris’, a short-lived French revolutionary movement that fought for freedom and equality and was violently repressed in 1871, was an earlier love song: *Le Temps des Cerises* (1866). It evokes springtime as the brief but precious season of love and rebellion, the red juice of the cherries symbolising a wounded heart and bloody combat. Contemporary singers still perform it, as its subtle call to action has lost none of its appeal. Amongst its many functions, the love song has historically challenged rules and authority and often been at the vanguard of social change.

“Music... serves as a shared transitional space in which emotion and sensation lead to thought”

Love songs and the narratives that couples bring to therapy are not always declarations of love. They may convey hurt, resentment, hatred. But they are about two people who are, or were, in love with one another. The dilemma of how to be emotionally dependent on another without losing oneself underlies many issues that couples bring to therapy and is the stuff of many love songs. Music is intrinsic to early caregiver-infant interactions, from the sounds the foetus hears in the womb, to the early forms of non-verbal dialogue and the shared pleasure of nursery rhymes during the transitional phase that leads to

individuation. Adult couples also have to negotiate togetherness and separateness. According to Faber (1996), in rhymes (and, by extension, songs), the vowels at the end of each line sound the same while the consonants and the meaning of the lines differ. He writes: ‘Rhyme gratifies us or reassures us at the deepest level of response – the unconscious level – by engaging our delight in separation at the same time that it engages our delight in oneness and union’ (p. 427).

In my clinical work as a couple therapist, as I listen to two voices addressing me and each other, I have often found myself thinking of a specific love song that encapsulates something at the core of a couple. Something in the couple leads me to the song which in turn ‘attunes’ me to the couple and helps me to gain an understanding of their particular dynamic. Through the process of countertransference, a shared and meaningful experience is then taking place, that is not yet ready to be put into words. According to Theodor Reik (1953), ‘The tunes occurring to the analyst during sessions with patients are preconscious messages of thoughts that are not only meaningful, but also important for the understanding of the emotional situation of the patient’ (pp. 19-20).

“A song can... provide a shortcut to what is unconsciously being enacted by the couple”

Music, then, serves as a shared transitional space in which emotion and sensation lead to thought, enabling the development of a ‘couple state of mind’ (Morgan, 2019). A song can thereby provide a shortcut to what is unconsciously being enacted by the couple and, in a second step, to concepts that contribute to an understanding of the couple’s dynamic. In my book, *Love Songs: Listening to Couples* (2025), which is accompanied by a playlist, each chapter focuses on a particular couple dynamic or issue and the song/s and couple/s that relate to it. For example, the song *I’ve Got You under My Skin* (Cole Porter, 1936), its lyrics and its obsessive rhythm, came repeatedly to my mind while working with an enmeshed couple whose inability

to separate psychologically led them to present, paradoxically, as permanently at loggerheads, and to resist treatment.

“The song offers a bridge between the subjectivity of the therapist and the shared dynamic of the couple”

In the 1956 version of the song, Frank Sinatra added a musical interlude with an exciting crescendo during which ‘Milt Bernhart... goes wild on his slide trombone, simply blowing his lungs out’ (Kaplan, 2015, p. 85). The intensity of the couple’s conflict was such that even when they were not shouting, it often felt, in sessions, as if they were silently ‘blowing their lungs out’, possibly trying to rid themselves of the feeling that the other had occupied their body and their mind. The couple often sat in exactly the same position as each other, looking in the same direction but not at one another. When I found myself, in a session, sitting exactly like them, I realised that they had got under my skin, and that at that point the therapy was colluding with the dysfunction.

“Allowing our third ear to let in songs lodged in our cultural archive can open the door to clinical perceptions”

In another chapter, dealing with ‘Disappointment’ as a couple dynamic, I examine the way Bob Dylan’s (1962) lyrics, raspy voice and lonely string-picking in *Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right* evoke the affect behind the behaviour – the hurt, the disappointment, the feeling of rejection behind the act of rejecting. In a chapter on ‘The Unspoken’, I relate how Gordon Lightfoot’s (1970) song, *If You Could Read My Mind*, brought to light how a couple’s reticence to genuinely

acknowledge and speak of the impact of their infertility had led them to conflict and disconnection.

The songs that impose themselves on therapists in the course of treatment resonate for personal reasons that have to do with age, era, taste and experience. The song offers a bridge between the subjectivity of the therapist and the shared dynamic of the couple. Even if the song is never mentioned to the couple, I believe that something of a common experience is communicated and conducive to change. Allowing our third ear to let in songs lodged in our cultural archive can open the door to clinical perceptions.

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Culture and Society

The Child as Witness

Madeleine Wood

Working as a clinician with children in care, I observed the harm produced by the adult world acting upon children through both familial abuse and neglect *and* the precarity and deficiencies of the current care system. By law, young people must be asked for their views, urged to express their ‘wishes and feelings’ (Children Act, 1989): to offer adults their testimony. However, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2008) reminds us, ‘The idea of neutral dialogue is an idea which denies history, denies structure, denies the positioning of subjects’ (p. 605). The demand for children to speak is embedded within the child protection framework: the fact that this is (usually) driven by care and the desire to keep children safe does not take away from the acute power imbalance.

With some important exceptions, psychoanalysis is not routinely foregrounded in social work education in England and Wales. My journey into the field was unusual, having come to the profession after ten years studying and working as an interdisciplinary scholar: my research focused upon childhood trauma in literature and psychoanalysis. As an academic, social worker and clinician, I have been interested in the structural violence which defines childhood in adverse contexts and the implications for consciousness and unconsciousness.

“... the child is interpellated, or brought into being as a witness to the adult world, the conditions of which they do not choose”

Winnicott rightly insisted on the primacy of children’s play as a creative act: the transitional area of play as the first cultural experience. In conditions of oppression, it is not only the child’s life and safety that are placed at risk, but also their psychological, creative and cultural existence. Winnicott (1971) does not use the term structural violence; nevertheless the concept is undoubtedly here: ‘when one reads of individuals dominated at home, or spending their lives in concentration camps or under lifelong persecution because of a cruel political régime, one first of all feels that it is only

a few of the victims who remain creative. These, of course, are the ones that suffer’ (p. 91).

I suggest that the child is interpellated, or brought into being as a witness to the adult world, the conditions of which they do not choose: at times unwitting, at times all-too-knowing. Stating that a child can bear witness to an event may imply both knowledge and understanding of what has ‘happened’, an epistemology which produces reliable testimony. However, clinical work reveals the complexity of what it is at stake when children are exposed to serious abuse and violence: often ruptures, interruptions, troubling identifications. Witnessing is not simply a matter of knowledge: it is bound up in the production of (inter)subjectivity. Reflecting on these issues is essential to practice with children and the critical examination of childhood, particularly in the context of structural violence.

“The temporality of afterwardsness can help us hold on to the troubled/troubling position of the child as witness to adult abuse”

For Freud, trauma was not explained by a reductive idea of ‘threat’, although someone, something, was threatened. The psychological conflicts defining traumatic experience were not placed outside of meaning, but rather located within a specific temporality, that of contiguity, repetition and belatedness. Freud’s coinage, *Nachträglichkeit*, translated as ‘deferred effect’ by James Strachey and as ‘afterwardsness’ by Jean Laplanche, defined the temporal dynamism.

I have often found myself returning to Freud’s (1895) posthumously published *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. Here, Freud presented his (abandoned) neurological account, whilst constructing the temporal model of trauma. The text contains the brief case history of Emma, a young woman who presented with a ‘compulsion of not being able to go into shops alone’ (p. 353). Through analysis, Freud charts this fear back to three earlier scenes; the first two, apparently forgotten, occurred when Emma was eight years old and she was sexually



assaulted by a shopkeeper; the third, when she was twelve, and became scared that shopkeepers were laughing at her clothes.

Freud argued that the later scene activated the first in a deferred, *Nachträglich*, fashion because the child could not fully understand what had happened at the time of the assault. But something had been signified to her: in Laplanche’s terms, a message she could not translate. Tellingly, Emma had felt ashamed that she had returned to the shop again after the first scene. The temporality of afterwardsness can help us hold on to the troubled/troubling position of the child as witness to adult abuse.

Writing this piece in April 2025, in the midst of the ongoing bombardment of Gaza, I had been struck by the urgency of the topic: data shared by Save the Children now states that as of 6 September 2025 more than 20,000 children have been killed in Gaza since the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023 in which 33 Israeli children were killed (Save the Children, 2025; Save the Children, 2024).

“Writing this piece... in the midst of the ongoing bombardment of Gaza, I had been struck by the urgency of the topic”

Reflecting on this devastation reaffirms my belief that to locate any sense of shared humanity in the midst of catastrophic violence, we need to recentre childhood, remembering that the child can be both an agent and a subject in need of our immediate protection. I suggest that the category of the ‘witness’ allows us to maintain this dualism, helping us to understand the contexts and experience of childhood in the state of 21st Century postmodernity: the relationship between children’s inner and outer worlds. In both local and global contexts, the ecologies of clinical (and non-clinical) work with children are urgently politicised. To return to Spivak once more, the issue is surely not only who shall speak, but also who is prepared to listen, and from what position?

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Practice

Violence in Mind: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Forensic Work

Maxine Dennis, Gerard Drennan and Emma Staples Hotopf

Acts of violence have long been a source of fascination and bewilderment, not least because the shock of their impact invites a particular type of thinking, or non-thinking. When confronted with unthinkable or apparently mindless acts, we are all vulnerable to locating the source of violence in the ‘offender’, and to not seeing the links with the violence, both interpersonal and structural, in our families, communities and societies. Our intention in curating a hybrid lecture series on psychoanalytic work in forensic mental health settings, by which we understand work in settings where there is an interface with the criminal justice system, was to offer participants an opportunity to engage with a range of contemporary psychoanalytic perspectives on understanding and thinking about different types of violence, in minds and deeds. Two key contemporary concepts that underpinned the links between forensic psychoanalytic thinking and group analytic or psychosocial thinking in the series were the psychic and social processes of othering, often a racialised othering of minoritised people, and the corollary of excluding, or ‘unhousing’, the socially stigmatised (Scanlon and Adlam, 2022). This context for thinking about the nature of the contemporary challenges for working in mental health and criminal justice systems was held throughout by the chairing of Maxine Dennis (2020).

“Some of the NHS staff and students were being introduced to psychoanalytic concepts for the first time”

Curated by us, the series was a collaboration between the Centre for Psychoanalysis at 10 Windsor Walk, the Institute of Psychoanalysis and local NHS Trusts. This collaborative approach attracted nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists, students of psychotherapy and resident doctors training at local mental health trusts and the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience. This was in addition to psychotherapists and psychoanalysts interested in these themes. Some of the NHS staff and students were being introduced to

psychoanalytic concepts for the first time. The themes embedded in the series seemed to be a particular draw for these clinicians who appreciated the way a psychoanalytic approach tackled areas such as violence and destructiveness.

“An underlying thread in the series... was a description of how violent states of mind come about as a reaction to having an unbearable state of mind”

An underlying thread in the series, beginning with Jessica Yakeley’s introductory talk on the field of forensic psychotherapy and through to Anna Motz’s talk about women who kill, was a description of how violent states of mind come about as a reaction to having an unbearable state of mind. Motz talked about ‘thinking the unthinkable’ as the therapeutic task in relation to the experiences of the women who commit serious acts of violence. While the nature of the unbearable state of mind will almost always be gendered in specific and particular ways, ‘thinking the unthinkable’ is a fundamental requirement of all psychoanalytic work in such settings, whether with men, women, children, families, clinical teams or care systems.

An unbearable state of mind is one in which there have been no words, or indeed no symbols, to represent experience. These are experiences that have not been symbolised; experiences that have not been represented in the mind. There is a deep and wide tradition in psychoanalytic thinking that speaks to the fractures of the internal world and the nature of acting out through projective and introjective mechanisms when experience has not or cannot be symbolised. This field of thinking was acknowledged, but also expanded, to create a space to consider the societal and institutional failures of symbolisation, of unbearable and unrepresented experience. Whether this is through the perverse treatment of black bodies as if they are devoid of a mind in

our schools, care systems, hospitals and prisons, as described in Anne Aiyegbusi’s lecture, or the perverse organisational cultures in Colin Campbell’s lecture, or through the perversion of ‘turning a blind eye’ to the horrific abuses of privilege and power by Jimmy Saville as discussed in Carine Minne and retired Detective Superintendent Ray Galloway’s lecture.

A number of the lectures returned to a cornerstone concept of forensic psychotherapy, described by Mervin Glasser (1986) as the ‘core complex.’ He describes the infantile experience of longing for closeness while tyrannised by an intense fear, or dread, of engulfment and annihilation of the self. The person who goes on to become a forensic patient resorts, repeatedly, to violence to repel the engulfing object in the hope of psychic survival. A number of analytic constructs have developed upon this fundamental annihilatory anxiety, most notably ‘the claustrium’ (Meltzer, 1992), the claustro-agoraphobic dilemma (Rey, 1994), and de Zulueta’s (2006) account of the traumatic roots of violence and destructiveness.

This theme was taken up by Drennan and Muzafar Husain in their discussion of the concept of the ‘fears and tyranny cycle’ in children. Our perception of the person who commits harm is so often dominated by the impact of their actions on others, by their tyranny, that we lose sight of the subjectivity of the harmer, of the profound fear of an annihilation that may drive them. Or in the terms of Stephen Blumenthal’s lecture, the tragedy that they cannot mourn. Tyrannical violence is used to expel this unbearable tragedy into the minds, bodies and institutional spaces around them. Our task in forensic settings is often described as bifocal, or binocular, in so far as we have always to hold in mind the patient and their offence.

In focusing on the court, Cleo Van Velsen explored a third dimension, that of the social context. When there is a requirement to give evidence in court about work with a client, whether through a written report or giving evidence in person, the relationship between the analyst and the client includes the court. The relationship is triadic rather than dyadic. Through discussion of particular court cases, painful elements of the racialisation of the offender patient were brought to the fore.

Our task in our individual work, with groups, in the courts or clinical teams

is to understand or think about the mental pain that our patients stir up in us. This might not be just through projection, but because a patient’s mental pain may be similar to our own mental pains. Let us make this more immediate: we can see with the numerous wars currently ongoing how many therapists are impacted by ongoing events to an extent that being able to think becomes problematic, when so consumed with one’s own injury. In such a state of mind the focus is on identifying the true culprits, or alternatively, occupying an unwavering certainty so that finding a stable position becomes problematic. This may be further impacted if our government funds what is occurring. There are 56 to 59 wars occurring globally. Typically, through the violence of some form of othering or social exclusion, we as practitioners and as parts of care systems can be implicated in the ‘unhousing’ of the minds and bodies of people caught up in forensic mental health systems. How do we support all elements of the mental health and the criminal justice systems to keep thinking, seek to understand, and resist the impulse to violently project something unbearable or unthinkable back into the forensic patient? The lectures and discussions explored the means by which we can enable and encourage the ‘re-membering’ (Scanlon and Adlam, 2022) of each person.

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Culture and Society

Meet the *Couched* Podcast

Billie A. Pivnick



When one listens to one's favourite podcast – whether in a comfy armchair or on a crowded train – the image that typically comes first to mind is of serious professional hosts sitting around a table in an insulated sound studio amidst awkwardly hanging but highly accurate recording equipment full of dazzling neon displays, much like the studios one sees on TV or in films. One rarely imagines a host hiding under a blanket to block out the sound of street construction, or one sliding into place at their home-office microphone still dressed in their wellies and damp with floodwater after a hurricane deluge inundated their basement. Nor does one imagine the many tedious hours of detailed listening involved in transcribing and editing each episode so that it accurately reproduces the audio without the stumbling habits of speech that plague the average conversationalist. Nor does one anticipate that guests chosen for their expertise in media may struggle to grasp the technical aspects of simple headphones or earbuds. These scenarios are not uncommon, though, and provide hosts and guests alike with levity amidst their intensity of focus.

With podcasts now so ubiquitous, it may be hard too to envision the audacity it took in 2020 to pioneer the *Couched* podcast. Developed by Dr Romy Reading and me, Co-Chairs of the Humanities and Psychoanalysis Committee of the American Psychological Association's Society for Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalytic Psychology, to broaden the psychoanalytic field's messaging, to engage with professionals of other disciplines within the humanities, arts, and sciences, and to reach the educated public, it broke new ground.

Even our concept was innovative. *Couched* aimed to curate conversations rather than interviews, generating episodes that would increase the visibility of psychoanalysis, lessen the negative caricature of psychoanalysis that many unknowingly hold, and spawn dialogues among diverse groups about how psychoanalysis could help us understand and better

cope with the complex social problems facing us during and after the pandemic. We designed each podcast episode to last 25 to 45 minutes, featuring three components: a focus on a contemporary social issue of relevance, a dialogue between a psychoanalyst and an expert from another field who are both engaged in social activism, and the teaching of a psychoanalytic concept in everyday language.

“With podcasts now so ubiquitous, it may be hard, too, to envision the audacity it took in 2020 to pioneer the *Couched* podcast”

Designing our logo and theme music sparked added creative engagement. After all, these impressions would come to define our identity. Since we represent a discipline famous for using a very particular kind of couch, we figured we should include an image of a Freudian couch. However, we also wanted to demonstrate to our potential listeners that we were innovative and edgy, which led us to imagine placing two chairs facing each other, as if in conversation. Of course, we relished the tension between these two contrasting ideas with a touch of irony. The final logo resolved the conflict through compromise (surprise!) when we positioned the two couches across from one another. To evoke the concept of ‘thirdness’ advocated by the more relational schools of psychoanalysis, we located the two couches on a somewhat surreal, sunny, and colourful background.

But developing a unique identity takes time and differentiation. No podcast is complete without a catchy musical theme. The tune we loved is jaunty without being jolly. A moment of near panic ensued upon our discovery that it was also being used by a commercial for airport screening technology. As in life, podcast creators must use humour and humility in the face of narcissistic injury. Relief set in when we realised that, like a good analysis, *Couched* would likely continue for years, while the commercial would fade and be forgotten within months.

In the past four plus years, a variety of psychoanalytic guests have conversed with the following experts: psycho-historians, novelists and nonfiction

authors, documentary filmmakers, social theorist/philosophers, choreographers, climate activists, graphic memoirists, community activists, journalists, attorneys, history professors, anthropologists, dance companies, trans advocates, sex workers, group and community psychoanalysts, and Black, White, Asian, Arab, and Latinx feminists. Not only did these guests represent perspectives often marginalised by classical approaches to psychoanalysis, but each guest also shared how their personal experiences have led them to political, social or creative action.

Our somewhat edgy approach to creating guest-host pairings arose from our belief that the field had to stretch to accommodate the more activist needs and experiences of younger generations of listeners, from whom aspiring psychoanalysts would emerge, and for whom they would provide a container within which to do novel thinking and deep reflection on relational difficulties. We found that as conversations unfolded, new ideas and deep aesthetic rapport emerged, creating the sort of unique aesthetic moments that also gave our listeners a taste of how a psychoanalytic session feels.

For this reason, we consider *Couched* to be an ‘art-like’ form that lies in the gap between art and interview. When people are the medium and there is no script, the tension between spontaneity and constraint shapes the creative process of stimulating interdisciplinary conversation. We participate with one another in this way because we believe change happens where minds converge. If these moving

discussions inspire listeners to increase their engagement with one another and the world, *Couched* will have contributed to reknitting communities torn asunder by political polarisation.

Our first episode aired in the spring of 2020. As of this writing, we have posted 25 episodes and added a third co-host, Dr Almas (Ally) Merchant, whose Indian cultural values include a commitment to hosting in a way that encompasses all human conditions and deepens *Couched* conversations. We also bade farewell to this author as a regular host. Over just a few years, we garnered 51,000 unique downloads in 106 countries, and (drum roll) won the prestigious Gradiva Award in 2024 for Best Digital Media. Additionally, the large number of downloads in the first seven days of each episode placed us in the top 5% of podcasts. Parsing these numbers suggests that engaged listeners tune in when psychoanalysis, outreach and activism meet!

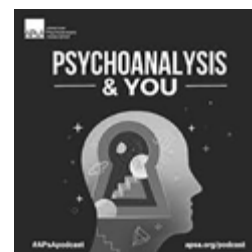
Billie Pivnick, PhD is a psychoanalytic psychologist in NYC. Winner of the 2024 APA Society for Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Leadership Award, she is also co-founder of the 2024 Gradiva Award-winning Couched podcast (www.couchedpodcast.org), and Director of William Alanson White Institute's Center for Public Mental Health. www.drilliepivnick.com



Culture and Society

From Couch to Page to Wi-Fi Waves: Why the American Psychoanalytic Association Has Embraced Podcasting

Gail Saltz



I came into psychoanalysis at a pivotal moment for the field. It was the 1990s, and the anti-Freud movement – which at that point had been simmering in peer-reviewed journal articles and at academic conferences – had reached a full and public boil. *The New York Review of Books* ran feature after feature squarely aimed at Sigmund Freud and the discipline he founded. A *Time* magazine cover in 1993 depicted Freud’s head as a jigsaw puzzle, the pieces flying away over the headline, ‘Is Freud Dead?’ Two years later, Richard Webster’s *Why Freud Was Wrong* (1995) argued that the founder of psychoanalysis had been elevated by his successors to messianic heights, and it was well past time for a proper fall.

“... mass communication has always evolved, and always will, and so must we”

Freud was imperfect, as was his work. Some of the scientific trajectories that began with him ended in rigidly dogmatic therapeutic frameworks that reinforced oppressive cultural norms. I knew all of this. But I also knew psychoanalysis wasn’t locked into Freud, no more than biology had stopped evolving after Darwin, than philosophy had ceased to exist following Descartes, or that religion was no longer able to offer existential solace after the writing of the Kesh Temple Hymn in ancient Sumer. Psychoanalysis, like every medical field, was evolving, and its modern iterations were offering a unique depth of emotional exploration, enabling people to process trauma, navigate complex relationships, alleviate suffering and achieve meaningful personal growth.

It was worth fighting for.

So, when I first joined the American Psychoanalytic Association (APsA), I was eager to contribute to the Association’s Committee for Public Information, which had been formed to communicate the continued relevance and importance of psychoanalytic thought in contemporary mental health discussions. A few of us on the committee recognised that psychoanalysis would thrive only if we connected with potential patients and future practitioners in dynamic, accessible ways. Our early efforts focused on writing for popular media; I personally expanded into television and radio. But mass communication has always evolved, and always will, and so must we.

I launched two podcasts: *The Power of Different* in 2016 and *How Can I Help?* in 2021 during the Covid-19 pandemic. *The Power of Different* focused on exploring how people who are labelled as psychologically ‘broken’ are often those who are most creative and innovative. Podcasting was still maturing then – the term itself was only coined twelve years earlier – but it had become a dominant medium for in-depth discussions, and one that our association could likely benefit from as it continued the work of explaining the field in its modern context.

Sometimes progress is proactive; other times it is reactive. Our field’s rapid movement into forms of media beyond legacy media finally came as a reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic, during which our committee became highly active, producing blogs, videos, and other resources for a world grappling with isolation and anxiety. Many of our members were guests on various podcasts during this time and saw first-hand the power of the medium to engage and enlighten. I launched another more personal podcast, *How Can I Help?*, offering listeners actionable advice on managing uncertainty.

As the pandemic’s first deadly waves waned, the Association seemed ready to explore new ways to engage the general public and our own membership. Having enjoyed my experience hosting three other programmes, I suggested that the format – intimate yet far-reaching, accessible yet deep – was ideal for APsA. I knew from the start that the show needed to be free of jargon and long-winded explanations that might alienate listeners. Like other clinicians and scientists, psychoanalysts often speak in complex

theoretical language that’s impenetrable to outsiders – and sometimes even to other psychoanalysts who happen to work in different subfields. This would be a clear problem, since another priority, I believed, was showcasing the breadth of work psychoanalysts do. Too often, after all, psychoanalysis is seen as something that happens only in private sessions between doctor and patient. In reality, it informs critical work in politics, education, the arts, and social justice, and I wanted to highlight analysts who were applying psychoanalytic thought to contemporary challenges. I also wanted to showcase the amazing work our members were doing in an accessible yet genuine analytic style.

That vision shaped my approach to guest selection for APsA’s first official podcast, *Psychoanalysis & You*. The pilot featured Jack Drescher, known for his work on sexual orientation and gender identity. Next was Kimberlyn Leary, who integrates psychoanalysis into sociocultural policy discussions. Then came Elizabeth Lunbeck, a historian whose work contextualises the field’s evolution beyond Freud. Over two seasons, we’ve covered everything from healthcare to gun violence, from issues facing war veterans to challenges of children in inner city public education – not just discussing psychoanalytic theory, but demonstrating its relevance in understanding human behaviour and societal issues. I try to take a psychoanalytic approach to my interviews with fellow psychoanalysts, remaining intensely curious throughout the interview and the results of this tact are often revealing.

“[Psychoanalysis] informs critical work in politics, education, the arts, and social justice”

I also strive to have fun. Movies and television shows have reinforced a stereotype of psychoanalysts as people who are cold and detached but I don’t know anyone in our field who is actually like that. I realise that it’s not hip and cool to say you’re hip and cool but, darn it all, we are intellectually hip and cool. So, one feature I have introduced is ‘Freudian Quickies’, a segment at the end

of each episode where analysts answer fast, engaging questions – things that people outside the field might genuinely wonder about, such as ‘How do analysts choose their couch?’ or ‘Do you ever just draw pictures on that notepad?’ As the podcast gained traction, the response was overwhelmingly positive. Analysts who had never considered engaging with the media reached out, eager to participate – an enthusiasm rare in our profession. The Association also recognised its value; midway through the first season, I received strong encouragement from the APsA’s leaders, who saw the podcast as a fresh, effective means of representing the field.

As we embark on the third season, we are taking another step forward: transitioning from audio-only to video. This shift reflects a broader trend – audiences increasingly engage with content visually and want to be able to at least occasionally see the people they are listening to, even if the primary way they engage is aural. Adding video expands our reach and makes the experience even more personal, reinforcing the relational aspect of psychoanalytic work.

At its core, psychoanalysis is about understanding the complexities of human emotion and behaviour. And in a world seeking quick fixes and surface-level solutions to extremely complex problems, the depth of psychoanalytic thought is more necessary than ever. We may not be actively fighting ‘the Freud Wars’ anymore, but telling this part of our story may be more important than ever.

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Politics

Joy and Its Vicissitudes: The US

Aranye Fradenburg Joy



Many terrible, unbeautiful things have happened since Donald Trump took office in January 2025: deportations of ‘immigrants’ (we are all immigrants) to hellholes in El Salvador and Guantanamo Bay; egging on the genocide in Palestine; wars against learning, skills, health. It’s a dreary necropolitical catalogue, the contents of which you likely know all too well. People in the USA have expressed shock at the ensuing chaos, but others saw this rageful madness coming. There was, after all, plenty to see in the election year of 2024, Kamala Harris’s ‘Joy Campaign’, and right-wing responses thereto.

“The regressive fantasy of the slave society rests on the degradation of othered forms of life deemed valuable only insofar as their work and care extends the immunised slaver’s vitality”

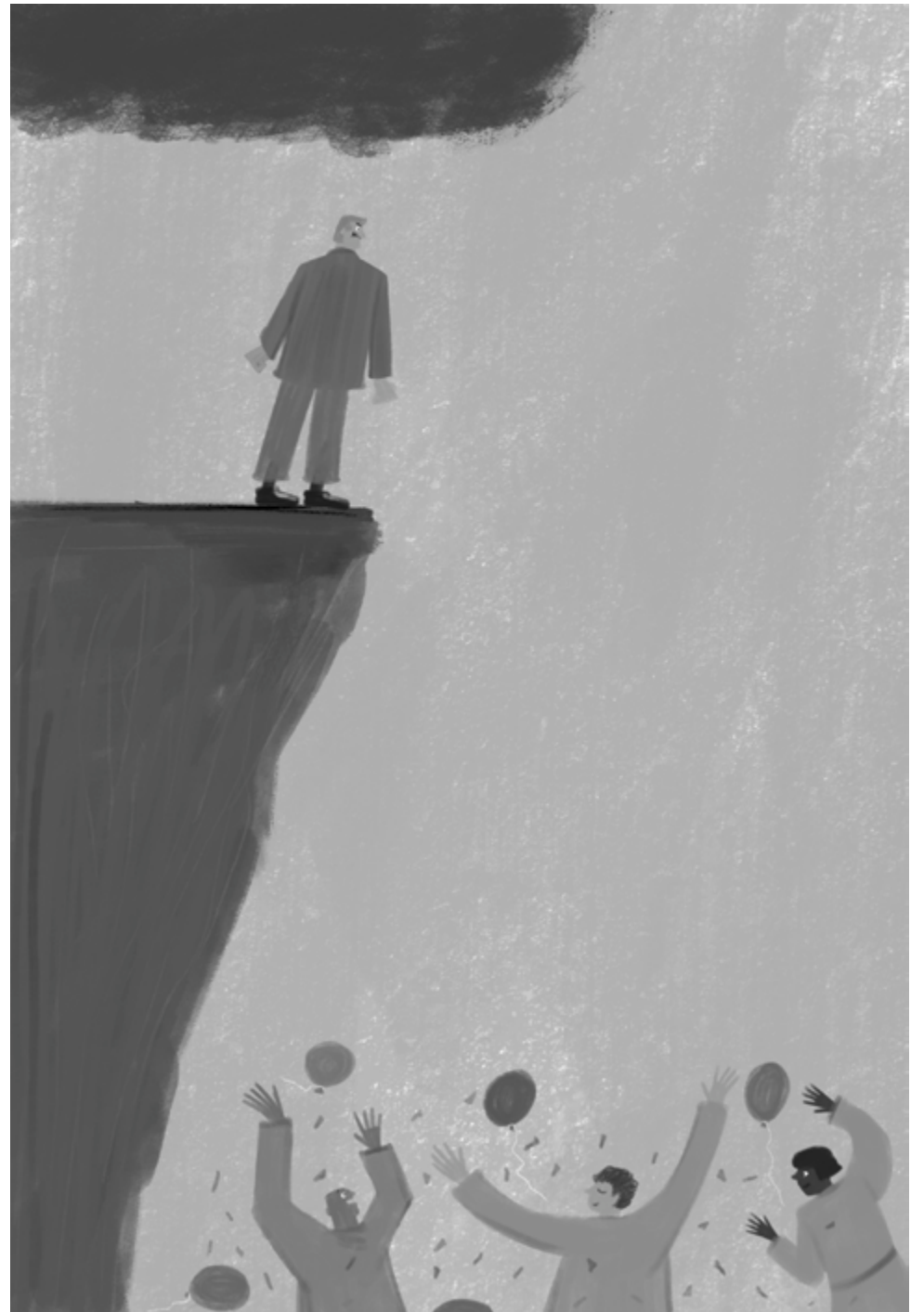
Why was joy her watchword? ‘It doesn’t have to be like this’, Harris said repeatedly, referring to the ongoing glamorisation of rage and reprisal fuelled partly by Trump’s return to presidential politics. Why not joy instead, the affect known by psychoanalysts and psychologists to accompany growth and new beginnings?

In 2024, the USA did not take up the Joy Campaign’s embrace of new opportunities for connection and community. Instead, it re-cathected one of the nation’s oldest

fantasies, the fantasy that slavery will enable an infinity of care by unpaid and invisible hands. The regressive fantasy of the slave society rests on the degradation of othered forms of life deemed valuable only insofar as their work and care extends the immunised slaver’s vitality. For the Trump administration, immigrants are worthless unless they enrich the country by working for less than minimum wage or, most recently, paying \$100,000 for entry visas (from certain countries, of course). They bring nothing else: no life experience of value, no good hearts, no rich traditions of knowledge and practice. This fantasy defends us from the growing pains of a new episteme that recognises the internal creativity of matter and the connectivity of all things organic and inorganic. In the age of globalisation and global warming, when it’s the links between things that matter most, it is perhaps no wonder that we are afflicted with apocalyptic off-world fantasies of unlinking – of culling and purification. What are joy’s chances now?

The Oxford Companion to Emotion and the Affective Sciences (2009) explains that when we feel joy, our ‘movements become more fluid’ and our ‘attention and thinking are broadened’, supporting ‘the playful “do anything” action tendency associated with joy.’ Furthermore, ‘play promotes the acquisition of skills’; ‘repeated experiences of joy are thought to build people’s resources for survival’ (p. 230). Now that Jaak Panksepp (1998) has introduced the swerve of ‘seeking’ into the logic of homeostasis – a challenge to the notion that organisms prize only equilibrium – we also have to give up the unsustainable distinction between survival and thriving. ‘Bare life.’ Living already includes what is so often thought to lie beyond it: play, learning, yearning for freedom. Joy is very good for embodied, expressive minds.

In the US, positive psychologists linked Harris’s joy to emotions that help us think more broadly, creatively and compassionately. Other commentators linked her Joy campaign to the Black Joy Movement. Errin Haines, in *The 19th News*, described joy as a mode of resilience and resistance for Black Americans: according to the ‘elders’, ‘Joy is something no White Man Can Steal’ (Haines, 2024). During the Democratic National Convention in August 2024, Hakeem Jeffries quoted the psalm ‘weeping may endure the long night, but joy will come in the morning.’



“It doesn’t have to be like this’, Harris said repeatedly, referring to the ongoing glamorisation of rage and reprisal fuelled partly by Trump’s return to presidential politics”

So did the anxiety and anger that can also accompany the promise of growth. In the right-leaning *Times-Republican*, the conservative ‘humourist’ Ben Shapiro (2024) asked:

‘Why don’t you feel the joy? Is something wrong with you? Why can’t you bob your head to Beyonce’s “Freedom” while Kamala dances and Tim Walz pastes on a smile so broad it would turn Jack Nicholson’s Joker green with envy? Do you hate joy?... All of this is, to put it mildly, slightly sinister.’

Ben Shapiro, you shame others for expressing their emotions while claiming for yourself the right to feel contempt and display it in public. You are quite the envious ‘Joker’ yourself. Because you don’t feel the joy, you picture the joy of others, the fun you can’t have, as evil, issuing in head-‘bobbing’ (‘bob’ also means ‘to strike’ or cut) and dancing to a black woman’s liberation song, while Walz’s smile turns into the green leer of criminal envy. Shapiro sees, or says he sees, a *danse macabre*, a demonic version of joy’s capacity to free movement, enhance sensory experience, and invite play. And nobody’s truly ‘white’ in this scenario.

Politics

Presidential Election of 2024

The racism is painful, buttressed by medievalist echoes of the deadly sins and the madness associated with the plague in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*.

Slavers spoil the freedom of movement and mind that joy inspires. They also spoil the connections that might divert their slaves’ attention from works of care. Frederick Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative* laments his very early separation from his mother:

‘For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child’s affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result’ (p. 2).

“The US presidential election of 2024 spectacularised both resistance to and a new resurgence of desire for a slave society in a nation struggling... to avoid mourning and paying its way”

In this attack on black kinship, like the family ‘separations’ on the US border with Mexico, there can be no ‘growth from’ anything. The US presidential election of 2024 spectacularised both resistance to and a new resurgence of desire for a slave society in a nation struggling, like Trump, to avoid mourning and paying its way. This is a crisis of care: how to get it for free, free of debt, dependency, accountability. This is also fear of the unreliability of the object, i.e. sadism, in Jacques Lacan’s sense: the desire for an object that can endure anything and still arise the next morning to make coffee. The stability of the (tortured) object ensures the stability of the self; the ability of the object to withstand suffering and still deliver the goods inures both subject and object to the plague and simultaneously culls the undeserving, despite all epidemiological evidence to the contrary.

The sadism attributed by the European Enlightenment to the *ancien regime* (for example, the Marquis de Sade’s

monastery) was simultaneously repurposed in new offshore forms of slavery and related cultural work on freedom and property. While Europeans were whacking their way through Virginia and Massachusetts, John Milton heralded these reconfigurations of drive in his epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667). Milton’s Satan is hell-bent on ‘stealing’ the beautiful ‘new world’ God made for human beings. Though he desires to be free of ‘the debt immense of endless gratitude’ and the constraints of time and space (‘the mind is its own place’) he learns, instead, ‘which way I fly is hell; Myself am hell’, so profound is his loss of joy after denying his Creator. Sometimes we just hate to come from anything; sometimes we want to kill joy itself. Coming from nowhere but our own efforts, we owe nothing to no-one, but our isolation and guilt are crushing. Satan is taken by the death drive that must kill off all relationships that threaten autogenerativity and the invulnerability of inanimacy. The traversal of adolescence, legible in Satan’s story, is as much about the adolescent’s difficulty tolerating vitality and independence in the parents as it is about their own anxiogenic re-structuring. Hence, again, a crisis of care. Our increasing neoteny, our need for care, is the hinge between envy of life and the embrace of life.

Sigmund Freud wrote that some of his patients could not take joy in praise or appreciation ‘owing to unconscious guilt and a particularly sadistic superego’ (Avery, 1983, p. 251). What can appreciation mean to someone worth nothing? James Grotstein (1979) attends to the vicissitudes of growth in an essay on patients who ‘negate the self which is dependent on the breast’ through the ‘Satanic pact of self-disavowal in order to achieve... non-being antecedent to becoming someone else.’ The hope is to ‘evade the law of chance’, being ‘held accountable’, being compelled ‘to experience [their] existence as a mortal.’ Unfortunately, to accomplish this feat, the patient ‘must forfeit some aspect of his existence to some nefarious power’ (p. 411), meaning that this disconnected, hidden state of (non) being is emptied of all connections to the world of the living. There are only voices, obscure visions of forces that return in the void to tell you that now you really are nothing, no one. Nothing new can happen; this unplugged subject can’t grow, and there is no one to care for it. For such patients, ‘joy is a torment.’ In Lacanian terms, the patient can’t work their symptom into a *sinthome* to create a bearable way of living.

“As organic beings, we simply can neither survive nor thrive without working to understand the nature of the realities that simultaneously sustain and threaten us”

No mourning, no learning how to bear the unbearable truth of loss, hence no growth, is possible for those who have fallen to this fantasy. The violent right-wing response to the death of Charlie Kirk is a case in point, so far has the USA fallen from the promise of joy and the ability to mourn its vulnerability. Charlie Kirk, college dropout, right-wing political activist and founder of Turning Point USA, an organisation devoted to rescuing college students from liberalism, was shot to death on 10th September 2025, while speaking at a university in Utah. Despite Kirk’s sickeningly callous reactions to the assassinations of two Democratic lawmakers in Minnesota earlier in the year, the Trump Administration and the right wing more generally have responded to Kirk’s death by demanding investigations into his shooter’s left-wing connections (none so far) and firing those Americans who dared to remember, on social media, the things Kirk actually said. Those who speak the truth about Kirk’s passion for the right to bear arms and his bigotry are losing their livelihoods, as was threatened in the case of Jimmy Kimmel – a late-night talk show host who critiqued the violent, persecutory, idealising response of the right wing to Kirk’s death. ‘This is not how an adult grieves the murder of someone he calls a friend’, said Kimmel on his ABC talk show on 15th September 2025. We are witnessing a near-complete breakdown of the capacity to work through guilt, error, responsibility, and vulnerability to loss. As organic beings, we simply can neither survive nor thrive without working to understand the nature of the realities that simultaneously sustain and threaten us.

We cannot live joyfully without facing the fact that all things, organic and inorganic, wear away. There will always be unanswerable questions. Materials aren’t easy to shape, metals corrode and fracture, plastics do eventually disintegrate, big bombs go off, robots don’t want to die

either, and asteroids may come for our machinic assemblages long before the sun goes nova. To grant value to all that lives, to learn to bear the unbearable loss thereof and responsibility for our destructiveness is the necessary and impossible task psychoanalysis promises to sustain. Psychoanalysts must do all we can to keep us on the side of life and its connectivity and historicity, in session, in community, in institutes and universities and in our polities. To take whatever joy we can in welcoming life in all its vicissitudes is the project of a 21st-century psychoanalysis.



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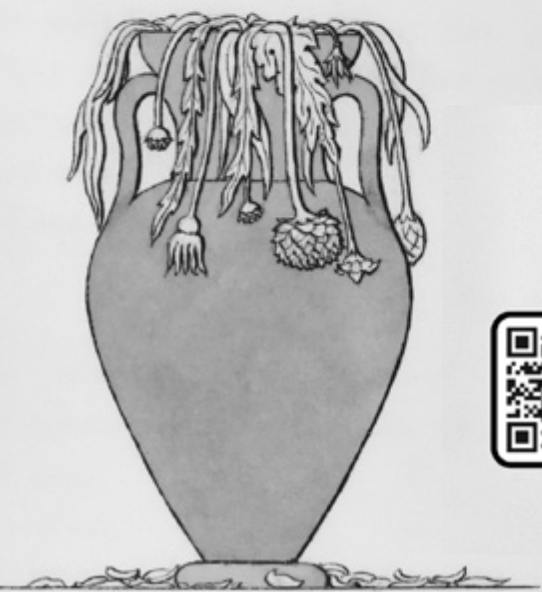
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Review

‘Isolated in their individual torment’: *Six Men* by Cecily Brennan

Ann Murphy

As a child I had an encounter that remains vivid in my memory many decades later. While spending the weekend at a schoolfriend’s house, as the family sat together on a leisurely Sunday morning, a dishevelled man wandered in without invitation or greeting, and seated himself opposite me. Shortly he began to speak in a curious way. What intrigued me was that he rehearsed aloud all his comments, publishing his thoughts before they were expressed. He said, ‘I’ll ask who that girl is’, followed by, ‘Who is that girl?’ The family responded as though this was the most ordinary mode of conversation, and it continued in that way until he announced ‘I’ll say I’ll go now’, followed by ‘I’ll go now’, and his exit. When I enquired about this, I was told ‘Oh, that’s C, he’s a bit odd but harmless, and he wanders in for a bit of company.’ The encounter drew my attention to the fact that there was usually a distinction between what went on inside one’s mind and what one communicated, and that the former was usually inaccessible to others. I had had a fascinating glimpse into the working of the mind of another, and it had sparked my interest in the workings of my own.

“Art... has the power to offer an opportunity to imagine the workings of other minds, and to discover something about our own”

While this is not the only factor that led me towards my own analysis, and to a lifetime of work in psychoanalysis, I believe it lit a spark. Art too has the power to offer an opportunity to imagine the workings of other minds, and to discover something about our own. Cecily Brennan is an Irish artist, whose body of work investigates human pain and suffering. In her recent exhibition, *Six Men* at Taylor Galleries in Dublin from 14th February to 8th March 2025, she presents six fictional characters, each representing an aspect of psychotic experience: The Voice Hearer, Circadian Man, Sad Man, The Roller, The Battler, Rage. The six individual paintings, oil on canvas, with their fluent

brushwork and sombre palette, are evocative of states of anguish, rage, terror, despair and madness. A large painting shows the six men together in one space, isolated in their individual torment. The exhibition also includes a series of sensitive pencil drawings of the same characters.

“Representations of psychosis have the potential to confront us with our most primitive terror”

In *The Devil’s Pool* (2022), a short film which forms part of the exhibition, rising waves of dark liquid threaten to engulf a frantic, trapped man as he screams at imaginary persecutors and demons, and mutters disjointed but poignant phrases: ‘everyone knows’, ‘what have I done?’, ‘sleep, can’t sleep.’ The film evokes a nightmarish sense of being assailed by inner torment, and perhaps the lure of surrendering to the depths and going under when overwhelmed by unbearable anguish. The multi-sensory aspect of the film medium, and the fact that the protagonist is not given a label intensify the potency of the piece. The work is unsettling, placing the viewer in the push/pull tension of fascination/repulsion.

The psychoanalyst Michael Eigen (1999) refers to ‘a deep madness within all of us, which we cannot tolerate knowing because we are not equipped to know it’ (p. 157). He proposed that psychoanalysis offers the patient the opportunity to dip into his original madness in manageable doses to experience ‘bits of madness’ from which he can recover, and that this contact with the unknown is enlivening. I suggest that art too can provide the opportunity for such an encounter, with similar effects. Representations of psychosis have the potential to confront us with our most primitive terror, what Melanie Klein (1957) referred to as annihilation dread,

a fear of psychical as well as physical annihilation, of losing our mind. The encounter may invite us to make contact with our own ‘bits of madness’, to reckon with aspects of ourselves we may tend to disavow, and to empathise and identify with the suffering of our fellow humans. Paradoxically, they may also satisfy our voyeurism and our sadism, confirm our prejudices and our view of the afflicted as irredeemably other, and in subjecting us to enjoyably manageable jolts of horror and fear serve to distance and defend us against recognising our own disturbance. It was in search of such thrills that the members of high society came to Bethlem Hospital (Bedlam) in London, and paid a fee to be entertained by viewing the caged ‘lunatics.’

“Much human destructiveness has its roots in our tendency to assign the mad, bad and shameful parts of ourselves to others”

Brennan’s *Six Men* brought to mind Théodore Géricault’s *Portraits of the Insane* (1822/23), commissioned by a psychiatrist, Georget, as studies of individuals with various mental afflictions, with the goal of challenging the stigma around mental illness by showing the essential humanity of the subjects. Although Géricault depicts his subjects with empathy and respect,

the portraits are not entirely free of traces of Philippe Pinel’s (1801) views regarding the distinctive physiognomies of the insane. Only six of the original ten survive, among them the *Portrait of a Kleptomaniac*, *A Woman Suffering from Obsessive Envy*, *A Woman Addicted to Gambling* and *The Child Snatcher*.

The potency of an artwork and its capacity to disturb and unsettle in potentially fruitful ways may lie in the tension created by our conflicting responses, when we find ourselves caught between identification and repudiation, empathy and voyeurism. Much human destructiveness has its roots in our tendency to assign the mad, bad and shameful parts of ourselves to others, allowing us to feel justified in persecuting, incarcerating and even exterminating them. Both art and psychoanalysis have something invaluable to offer in providing a revealing mirror for our flawed complexity, and inviting us to recognise and reclaim our most disturbing and disavowed aspects.

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Review

A Normal Nazi: *The Zone of Interest*

Lynn Froggett

During three full minutes of black screen, birdsong emerges from mournful, suffering music giving way to a lush summer riverside scene. The bathers appear to be a well-to-do, unremarkable German family. They live in a spacious villa with a swimming pool and beautiful garden. Rudolph, the father, goes out to work nearby, while mother, Hedwig, runs a clean and orderly household. Her staff are ‘treated’ with gifts of secondhand clothes. Visitors are courteously shown around, birthdays are celebrated, the baby is caressed, father reads bedtime stories after a working day. In the grounds a gardener tends the soil for wholesome vegetables, and flowers are alive with bees. A succession of domestic scenes depicts lives of privileged ordinariness in surroundings that are well-appointed, but curiously sterile.

The Zone of Interest, directed by Jonathan Glazer and loosely adapted from Martin Amis’s novel, captures prosaic household detail. The documentary style: natural lighting, static cameras and wide-angle mid-distance shots, supports an observational neutrality. Reactions have been divided. A dismissive voice finds it boringly ‘arthouse’ and pretentious in its moral vacuity. For others it offers a haunting enactment of the paradox that Hannah Arendt called ‘the banality of evil’, foregrounding the mundanity of the everyday rather than the murderous cruelty unfolding next door.

“The focus is on the mind of the perpetrator and the bystander”

The garden’s high boundary wall is shared with the Auschwitz concentration camp where Rudolph Höss is commander. The air, the river and the household itself are assailed by emissions from furnaces that fire day and night. Ash conditions the soil in which the roses grow. Staff treats are confiscated clothes of camp inmates, whose fate is never shown.

Within the household, signs of disturbance are oblique and unacknowledged. Hedwig’s visiting mother leaves suddenly in the middle of the night. The children mimic strange sounds in their play. A daughter sleepwalks.

And always, there is Johnnie Burns’s

unnerving, pitiless soundscape and Mica Levi’s score. Only the Auschwitz rooftops and upper storey can be seen, but emanating from the camp is a droning leitmotif of industrial slaughter, a semi-decipherable blend of clanking, banging, hissing and wailing, that sometimes resolves into gunshots or human screams. One critic dubbed it ‘Holocaust reduced to background noise’ (Dargis, 2023), as if only spectacle can do justice to atrocity.

“It offers a form of witness, an emotional understanding of what can usually only be cognitively grasped”

What troubles some is that the hell visited on Jewish inmates offscreen is only peripherally the subject of this film. Unlike Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993) and László Nemes’ *Son of Saul* (2015), the Holocaust is not represented. The focus is on the mind of the perpetrator and the bystander and an unfathomable conundrum: the disavowal of these people is monstrous, but they are not monsters in their own house. They are ‘merely’ a family that has evacuated interior life in a quest for the abnormally humdrum normal. They appear ‘flat’, and in themselves uninteresting. If you are looking for character development or narrative forget this film – if you can. It offers portrait rather than story, a study of the normotic Nazi mind that cultivates mindlessness in order to live with its own moral void. Christopher Bollas (1992) sustains that it is not just splitting that the Nazi must achieve to preserve the illusion of decency, but a form of ‘doubling’ whereby each part-self becomes a functioning whole. Excesses of sadistic cruelty are lodged in the ‘Auschwitz self’ while weakness is projected into the victims. Extermination of these ‘polluters’ affords a circular moral economy. Meanwhile, in the parallel sphere of the normotic, considerate fathers and dutiful mothers hold sway.

While we are shown nothing of Rudolph’s working life inside the camp, the soundtrack feeds the imagination unendingly, efficiently supplying what the eye would rather not see. Efficiency



is another virtue of the normotic – when Rudolph ‘brings work home’ it is to meet with sales reps to view an improved design of crematorium, the better to handle volume. Plans are pored over dispassionately, much as one might consider a rearrangement of kitchen cabinets.

What the viewer is forced to imagine, the family must disregard – or fall apart. Bollas (1992) describes psychic conditions of totalitarian certitude as a special form of ‘binding’ whereby ‘doubts and counterviews are expelled and the mind ceases to be complex’ (p. 201). The creativity of the unconscious is foreclosed. The film depicts the family’s stultification and self-entrapment in willed heedlessness, a numbing amidst surrounding sensory delights. It offers a form of witness, an emotional understanding of what can usually only be cognitively grasped. However, a troubling voice might object that in explaining nothing and refusing a moral stance, perversity is aestheticised through sound as well as vision.

“How can we stand by as political and physical walls enable and conceal unimaginable horrors on the other side?”

The Zone of Interest shows us what it is to cultivate a life on one side of a boundary that contains the ‘normal Nazi’ within, tending our mental garden in oblivion to

the human condition beyond. We could infer that this is how we have lived in the postwar security of the West – now threatening to fall apart – suspending guilt and responsibility for the ‘goings on’ next door. Where Holocaust movies have represented to condemn, they have also – unwittingly – historicised. This film abjures a moral stance, only to elicit a contemporary moral question with all the more urgency. How can we stand by as political and physical walls enable and conceal unimaginable horrors on the other side?

As Glazer, who is Jewish, accepted his Oscar, he located this question at the Israel/Gaza border. ‘Our film shows where dehumanisation leads at its worst. It’s shaped all of our past and present.’ For this he has been praised and also attacked as a Jew-hating Jew who shows nothing of Jewishness. With inadvertent irony, Nemes – whose *Son of Saul* aims to educate – hailed the importance of the film but held that Glazer should have remained silent.

Lynn Froggett’s research has focused on arts and culture in society; currently including technology and the experience of ageing; also VR and AI in mental health. She is Professor Emerita of Psychosocial Studies at the University of Lancashire and Chair of the Association for Psychosocial Studies.

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