

Journal Title: *Free Associations: Psychoanalysis and Culture, Media, Groups, Politics*  
Number 62, September 2011  
ISSN: 2047-0622  
URL: [www.freeassociations.org.uk](http://www.freeassociations.org.uk)



## **EDITORIAL**

### **THERAPY CULTURE/CULTURE AS THERAPY: PSYCHO-CULTURAL STUDIES OF MEDIA AND THE INNER WORLD**

**CAROLINE BAINBRIDGE AND CANDIDA YATES**

This special issue of *Free Associations* stems from the opening event held by the Media and the Inner World<sup>1</sup> research network ([www.miwnet.org](http://www.miwnet.org)) on the theme of ‘Therapy Culture/Culture as Therapy’.<sup>2</sup> This research network, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK, was established in 2009 with a view to foregrounding the usefulness of object relations psychoanalysis in understanding the role of emotion in contemporary popular culture.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the network sought to innovate by moving beyond the traditional academic working models of intellectual development. In order to do this, it turned to spheres of practice in which notions of feeling and emotion are centre-stage. On the one hand, it invited contributions from clinicians for whom psychoanalysis acts as a touchstone of their daily practice. On the other, it also set out to work with people based in media industries whose everyday currency of ideas increasingly depends on an emotional tenor that reflects the centrality of feeling and its representations in contemporary culture. In this way, the project as a whole embarked on a significant original agenda: to work with ideas from object relations psychoanalysis, in both its theoretical and practice-based forms, to shape new understandings of the role of the psychological in shaping the experience of subjectivity, politics, culture and society. The significance of the triadic approach, which harnessed together perspectives from both theory and practice and which underpinned the logic of the networking activities that took place as part of the project, has been crucial in forging the ‘psycho-cultural’ approach taken in the international selection of articles comprising this edition.

A key characteristic of this ‘psycho-cultural’ approach combines theories and methods from the disciplines of psychoanalytic and psychosocial studies with those from the

fields of media and cultural studies. The application of psychoanalysis to culture can be traced back to Sigmund Freud himself. In cultural and media studies, the work of Freud, together with that of Jacques Lacan, often informs the critical analysis of culture and identity. There has been a concentration in such work on matters related to representation and subjectivity. By contrast, in the psychosocial context, psychoanalysis is used mainly to illuminate the relationship between politics and society.<sup>4</sup> Some of this work draws on a specifically British frame of psychoanalytic theory embodied in the ‘object relations’ work of Melanie Klein and Donald Woods Winnicott amongst others. A psycho-cultural approach takes as its starting point the idea that academic studies of popular culture can benefit from the deployment of object relations psychoanalysis in this tradition because of the increasingly important role of the emotionalised media in shaping a sense of identity, culture and therapeutic inflections of both. This special edition sets out to explore these themes and includes perspectives from the scenes of media and clinical practice as well as others from academia and many of the pieces included here present the case for the particular usefulness of such an object relations approach.

A key theme in this regard is the notion of ‘mediatisation’ as it has emerged in recent debates about contemporary formations of culture and subjectivity. For Caroline Bainbridge, this is a central concern as she argues that ‘the ever closer imbrication of mediatisation and everyday life ... [is] so frequently grounded in discourses of emotionality and feeling’ and this intertwining of emotional lives and experiences with media objects (and more specifically as objects of our inner worlds) is crucial in demonstrating the extent to which media have become integral to subjectivity. Barry Richards and Joanne Brown explore this terrain with specific reference to questions of how media work to create ‘contact between different parts of the self, [thereby contributing] to the project of self-reflection which is at the heart of both psychoanalysis and ... therapeutic culture’. In their argument, they suggest that some aspects of the media do this rather more successfully than others. Such a view is brought into sharp relief in Robert M. Young’s evocative essay on the deeply personal connections we forge with media objects and the way that they come to enrich our experience of the inner world. This reflection on the idea of the ‘personal’ is also foregrounded in Susan Greenberg’s article, where the effects of the ‘crisis’ that is widely deemed to have taken place in journalistic cultures and beyond has given rise to a ‘new idealism’ in which she discusses new forms of ‘alienated subjectivity’. The focus here is on the ‘Me! Me! Me!’ tendencies so

often encountered in new media modes of 'literary' journalism, such as blogs, where an ethos of 'authenticity' can be seen to dominate.

This idea of 'crisis' is, of course, one that resonates widely in the contemporary cultural climate, extending from debates about masculinity through to the collapse of trust in neoliberal economies and the failures of ideology to contain the anxieties that consequently arise. Lynne Layton's discussion of *Fight Club* is explored with reference to precisely this context, suggesting that, against a backdrop of neoliberal capitalism, narcissism emerges as a key psycho-cultural formation, particularly in relation to masculinity, which, for Layton, is defined in these terms. Indeed, a recurring theme in this edition is that of narcissism and its increased visibility in a number of psychological, cultural and social spheres. For Candida Yates, questions of narcissism inflect the full spectrum of debate around what we might understand as therapy/therapeutic culture. Here, the losses and uncertainties of late modernity prompt 'a sense of disorientation' so that we become fearful 'that feelings are more readily accessed than those spaces occupied by thought' with the result that 'the notion of "therapy" becomes both the symptom and solution' and this creates 'a yearning for something that cannot be returned to nor fully grasped'.

The nostalgia implicit in this cultural turn is discussed by Helen Powell in her exploration of the emotional labour required by advertising. Here, the focus is on how advertising acts as a 'portal' through which 'an emotional route to the past is forged'. Powell argues that 'advertising creatives mobilise "the lost object", carefully managing its associated meanings', and this is an important aspect of the contemporary emotionalised mediascape. The idea of loss is one that permeates the scene of analysis in Hugh Ortega Breton's work on televisual paranoia, where factual programming can be seen to provide 'something compensatory' in the face of 'the loss of modern political subjectivity', a theme that is also explored by Yates in relation to the celebritisation of the political sphere. For both Ortega Breton and Layton, the psychoanalytic notion of splitting provides a means of understanding how media help to shape our responses to the experience of uncertainty and crisis. The extremes of emotion witnessed in everyday media encounters are also evoked by Greenberg, who signals the 'destructive potential of emotion' that often leads to anger and paranoia.

Of course, all of these themes originate in the concerns driving this opening special edition of *Free Associations* in its re-launched form with its focus on 'Therapy Culture/Culture as Therapy'. As Yates explicates, the idea of 'therapy culture' is nothing new and has its roots in the work of Philip Rieff on the potential vulgarisation of Freud's ideas in

the wake of 1960s counter-culture. Today, at the popular level, the work of UK sociologist, Frank Furedi, is a widely known critique of the negative effects of the therapeutic cultural turn and provides many of the writers in this edition with a starting point for debate and discussion. Writing from a clinical perspective, Carol Leader contrasts Furedi's 'pastiche of therapeutic practice' with what she sees as 'the real concerns and conceptions motivating therapists and their work'. Echoing this position, Richards and Brown contend that

To refer to a culture as therapeutic is to suggest that the social scripts, lenses and vocabularies through which people understand themselves and their lives are strongly inflected by the interior-oriented language of the therapeutic (with talk about feelings, attachments, self-esteem, anxiety, stress, well-being, security, trauma, loss, mourning, and so on).

As this suggests, ideas about therapy/therapeutic culture are riddled with complexities, raising a number of ontological and epistemological questions for scholars and practitioners interested in the phenomenon. In the fields of cultural studies and sociology, previous interrogations of this trend tend to construct their critique with reference to questions of regulation, governance and discipline, and there is a great degree of emphasis on an agenda inscribed in the work of Michel Foucault and Karl Marx. The suggestion here is that psychoanalysis is somehow 'always already' universalising and colonising in its scope and reach and, thus, it is often set aside. Many of these approaches offer invaluable perspectives on the historical and political specificities of socio-cultural thought and experience, yet to reject psychoanalysis in such a wholehearted fashion seems to leave little room for consideration of what has become a key facet of everyday life: the internal life of the contemporary subject and its constitution by means of its interactions with history and culture.

By contrast, a psycho-cultural approach pays attention to the unpredictable and frequently 'messy' or contradictory aspects of contemporary emotional subjectivity, which seems highly pertinent, given the emphasis in much cultural theory on ideas of liquidity, flux, multiplicity, risk, and so on. This creates a range of dilemmas about how to account for subjective experience and this, perhaps, is one reason that therapy culture has come to play such a dominant role in this first place. By attempting to hang on to valuable aspects of psychoanalysis, psycho-cultural studies seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of

what is at stake in this context, acknowledging the significance of living with experiences of negativity, loss and anxiety alongside the pleasures and delights stimulated by a mediated environment. It also provides useful 'mental spaces', to paraphrase Young, for reflecting on questions of process, contradiction and emotional ambivalence at the ontological and epistemological levels. In this way, the psycho-cultural approach leaves room for the exploration of tensions that arise within the academy and elsewhere, allowing silences that have been long held to be broken anew. What we can learn from an eclectic object relations psychoanalytic approach is that the spaces of tension are often the sources of the greatest potential development, and thus, critically and politically, such an approach creates new spaces for what we might as understand as 'working through'. Many of the articles in this edition make precisely this case, albeit whilst drawing on different theoretical paradigms, ranging from the work of Donald Winnicott, through Heinz Kohut, Donald Meltzer and Otto Kernberg to Melanie Klein. In this respect, this collection of articles represents a significant and original contribution to the development of psycho-cultural studies.

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#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The MiW logo is used on the cover of this special edition and the Editors would like to thank Nicola Carter for her design. The Editors would also like to acknowledge, with gratitude, their receipt of funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK.

<sup>2</sup> This title is taken from the Media and the Inner World network Opening Symposium, held at Roehampton University on 7<sup>th</sup> March 2009. Some of the articles in this edition have been developed from papers given at that event. In addition, the editors have included papers arising from work presented at other round table events in the series hosted by the network between 2009-11 and further articles commissioned especially for this collection.

<sup>3</sup> The key aim of the network is to draw on object relations psychoanalysis as a means of creating new perspectives on the highly emotionalised processes of mediation in contemporary culture and to raise questions about the implications of such developments for the study of culture and politics.

<sup>4</sup> See the special edition of the journal *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, 13 (4) (December) (2008).