

Call for Papers for a Special Issue of the journal *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* (ZAA)

**The Aesthetics and Politics of Psychotherapy:
Literary, Cultural, and Media Perspectives on 'Healing the Soul'**

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This special issue of the [ZAA: A Quarterly of Language, Literature and Culture](#) will explore the aesthetics and politics of psychotherapy from the point of view of Anglophone literary, cultural, and media studies. In particular, we seek contributions that fall into at least one of the following three strands:

1. Investigating *points of convergence* between psychotherapy on the one hand and literary, cultural, and media studies on the other.
2. Analyses of *fictional* representations of the psychotherapeutic process (in novels, films, series, plays, etc.).
3. Analyses of *non- and semi-fictional* insights into the psychotherapeutic process created by (former) psychotherapists or patients (memoirs, podcasts etc.).

As Christine Lister-Ford states in her *Short Introduction to Psychotherapy*, “[s]ince the earliest recording of human culture there has been evidence of human mental and emotional distress and also ways to explain and alleviate it” (11). Literary and cultural texts, due to their capacity to verbalise and label complex interior states, provide a unique psychological archive. But they do not merely record: precisely because they translate emotions into words and images and arrange them into patterns, they arguably perform similar work to that involved in conversation-based psychotherapy. In the words of novelist and psychotherapist Lisa Williamson Rosenberg: “What ties my therapist-self to my writer-self is the ability to translate emotion into words.” One could also claim that literary and cultural scholars decoding meanings and structures and ‘containing’ them through academic language perform a type of work comparable to that of psychotherapists. Contemporary psychologists and psychotherapists are open to the idea that literary and cultural texts can play a role in the process of ‘healing the soul’. Bibliotherapy, as the website *Psychology Today* explains, “is a therapeutic approach employing books and other forms of literature, typically alongside more traditional therapy modalities, to support a patient’s mental health”. Watching films can apparently have similar effects: “cinema therapy”, as psychotherapist Bruce Kircaldy explains, “refers to using movies to help address issues of psychological and mental well-being” (5).

From Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969) and David Lodge’s *Therapy* (1995) to *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *In Treatment* (2008-2021), psychotherapy has been represented in a considerable number of novels, poems, plays, films, and TV series (Anghelescu et al.; Furst; Hotz-Davies & Kirchhofer; Thurston; Wassmann). Some of this work has been produced by therapist-novelists, e.g. Irvin D. Yalom, Salley Vickers, and Bev Thomas. Depictions of psychotherapy have been used for various aesthetic and political purposes. Placing a character in the role of a patient in a psychotherapeutic setting can, for instance, legitimise the inclusion of potentially tabooed topics, harness readers’ voyeurism and attention, create sympathy for a flawed and/or vulnerable protagonist, question normative discourses, or establish narrative unreliability. The power dynamics between psychotherapist and patient are amenable to setting up suspense, while representing the intimacy of the consulting room enables the creation of discrepant awareness, which perhaps explains why psychotherapy seems to feature regularly in thriller and crime genres.

Finally, psychotherapists themselves have been producing popular non-fictional or semi-fictional texts that give insight into their profession and thought. A classic in this regard is *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946) by Viktor Frankl. More recent best-sellers include Stephen Grosz's *An Examined Life* (2014), Philippa Perry's *The Book You Wish Your Parents Had Read* (2019), and Lori Gottlieb's *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone* (2019). Therapeutic podcasts have likewise mushroomed over the past decade: Esther Perel's *Where Should We Begin*, Lori Gottlieb and Guy Winch's *Dear Therapists*, or Gill Straker, Rachael Burton, and Andrew Geeves's *Three Associating* provide glimpses into psychotherapy 'in action', while at the same time raising interesting questions regarding privacy, exposure, and audience interaction in the context of digital media.

This special issue therefore puts its focus not on mental ill health per se, but on the aesthetics and politics of the psychotherapeutic process. Historical approaches, comparative UK-US perspectives as well as transdisciplinary collaborations between literary, cultural, and media scholars and psychologists or psychotherapists are welcome.

Papers may address, but are not limited to, the following topics within the three strands named above:

- theoretical approaches to overlaps between psychotherapy and literature, culture, and media
- shared patterns of communication in psychotherapy and literature
- reading and interpreting texts and/as and psychotherapy
- the cultural imaginary of psychotherapy in novels, films, series, plays, etc.
- psychotherapy and genre (e.g. autofiction, memoirs, thrillers, crime series)
- narratological affordances of psychotherapy
- psychotherapy and discourses of healing and/or self-care
- psychotherapy, voyeurism, and secrecy
- psychotherapy and/in digital culture
- psychotherapy and self-help culture

Please send an abstract of c. 300 words and a short bio profile to joanna.rostek@anglistik.uni-giessen.de by **15 March 2023**. Authors will be informed in the course of March whether their submission has been accepted. Articles (c. 5,000 words) will be due by 15 September 2023, to allow time for the peer-review process. The special issue is scheduled to appear in 2024.

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