

**CINTRA WHITEHEAD (1929 – 2015)**  
**PIONEER OF CONSTRUCTIVIST LITERARY CRITICISM**

**Jörn W. Scheer\* & Viv Burr\*\***

\*University of Giessen, Germany, \*\*University of Huddersfield, UK

The relationship between personal construing and artistic creativity has received increased attention during the last decade (Scheer and Burr, 2016). But the idea that ‘art appreciation’ and literary criticism informed by personal construct theory can provide valuable insights dates back to Kelly himself. According to the literary scholar John Lee, “Kelly’s approach – in its humanist and constructivist aspects – lends itself to an account of the literally literary aspects of personality and of change” (Lee, 2000, p. 175). Fay Fransella suggests that

*Kelly was, himself, something of a literary critic. He talks at length towards the end of his second volume about Hamlet in relation to the CPC (decision making) and the Creativity Cycle ... In fact, Kelly makes his admiration for Shakespeare’s writings clear in his acknowledgements in Volume I. He says ‘... and, of course, that distinguished and insightful colleague of all personal construct theorists, Mr. William Shakespeare’ (Fransella, 2003, p. 449).*

Following in Kelly’s steps, Bannister and Fransella (1971) included a brief discussion of a scene from Richard II as an illustration of bipolarity and preemptive construing.

Don Bannister is often credited as being the first (after Kelly) to apply personal construct theory concepts to the understanding of literary works: at the International Conference on Personal Construct Psychology in 1985 he presented a paper on “A PCP view of novel writing and reading” (Bannister, 1988). But already in 1974, A. E. St. G. Moss, a clinical psychologist at the University of Surrey in Guildford, UK, had pub-

lished two articles on “Shakespeare and PCP” (Moss, 1974 a, b).

However, it was Cintra Whitehead, a psychologist in Toledo, Ohio, USA, who also held a PhD in English who set out to create a “construct theory of psychological literary criticism” in a paper of that title that she presented at the International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology in 1983, taking up ideas she had developed in her PhD dissertation of 1977. It went largely unnoticed, probably because it was not included in the published collection of papers from that conference (Epting and Landfield, 1985).



*Cintra Whitehead, ca. 1965*

Photo courtesy James Whitehead

Cintra Whitehead was born in 1929 as Cintra Dolores Blum in Russell's Point, a small village in country Ohio, USA. She pursued her undergraduate studies in Columbus at Ohio State University (OSU) where she received a B.A. in English and Psychology. George Kelly taught at OSU from 1945 to 1965, and Cintra Whitehead was first exposed to PCP there. She did her Master's degree at Bowling Green University, Ohio and received a M.A. in English at the University of Toledo, Ohio. She obtained a PhD in psychology and in English, also at Toledo. Her early interests in PCP were nurtured by Kurt Adler, the son of the psychoanalyst Alfred Adler and himself a psychiatrist with whom she had met at conferences.

In her PhD thesis with the title "Modern personality theory and literary criticism" she focused on Kelly's theory, contrasting it with Freud's and Adler's views, exemplified in her and their treatment of Hamlet (Whitehead, 1977). Some impetus for her interest in PCP grew out of music and theatre studies and her feeling that critics were mistaken in many of their analyses of the characters' motivational structures, and that there was more to be gained in better critical understanding. This, coupled with her being very active in local theatre, together with her husband James Whitehead, spurred her on. Later she taught English and psychology at John Carroll University and Dyke College in Cleveland, Ohio (James Whitehead, personal communication, 2016).

In 1991 Cintra Whitehead decided to start a self-published journal to advance the cause of literary criticism informed by PCP. Unfortunately, it was discontinued after one year. But during this year she published as many as nine articles on literary works. The centrepiece consists of her engagement with Shakespeare studies: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*. But the range of her interests was much broader: From ancient Greek (Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*), to the Victorian era (Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*) and the Twentieth Century with Ezra Pound's difficult to access *Cantos*. The four issues of the journal included also an article by Moss (1991) ("Toward a more literate psychology") and a number of short stories and poems by unknown

woman writers (including a short story by herself) that she must have thought to be illustrative of her ideas. The journal was probably announced in the 'PCP Clearinghouse' newsletter of the time but it was apparently not widely received, if at all. The only citations provided by a *Google Scholar* search were two footnotes in books on Thomas Hardy. The literary scholar Lee who devoted a chapter to personal construct psychology in his book on Hamlet (Lee, 2000) didn't mention her work.

Had the Internet existed thirty years ago Cintra Whitehead's work would have quite certainly been known not only to the PCP community but also in the world of literary criticism. Cintra Whitehead had considered republishing articles of the 1991 journal in digital as well as printed form. This did not materialise as she passed away in August 2015, at the age of 86. After publishing an article on choral singing in this journal (Whitehead, 2009) we are pleased that we are able to provide access to her work through this journal. Included are the nine articles that appeared in *Constructive Criticism* in 1991, the conference paper of 1983 (Whitehead, 1983) and an unpublished manuscript on the novel *Deliverance* by the American poet and novelist James Dickey which is probably better known through the 1970 film version. Both texts were provided by James E. Whitehead whose support and permission to publish Cintra Whitehead's work are deeply appreciated.

## REFERENCES

- Bannister, D. (1988). A PCP view of novel writing and reading. In F. Fransella & L. Thomas (Eds.). *Experimenting with Personal Construct Psychology*. (pp. 509-514). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (reprinted in J. W. Scheer and K. W. Sewell (Eds.) (2006). *Creative construing – Personal constructions in the arts*, Giessen: Psychosozial Verlag)
- Bannister, D. & Fransella, F. (1971). *Inquiring Man*. London: Croom Helm.
- Epting, F. & Landfield, A. (1985). *Anticipating personal construct psychology*. Lincoln: Lincoln University Press.
- Fransella, F. (2003). New avenues to explore and questions to ask. In F. Fransella (ed.) *Interna-*

- tional handbook of personal construct psychology* (pp. 447-454). Chichester Wiley.
- Lee, J. (2000). *Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' and the controversies of self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moss, A. E. St. G. (1974a). Hamlet and role construct theory. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 47, 253-64.
- Moss, A. E. St. G. (1974b). Shakespeare and role construct therapy. *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 47, 235-52.
- Moss, A. E. St. G. (1991). Toward a more literate psychology. *Constructive Criticism*, 1, 241-265.
- Whitehead, C. (1977). *Modern personality theory and literary criticism*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. University of Toledo, Ohio.
- Whitehead, C. (1983). *Toward a construct theory of psychological literary criticism*. Paper presented at the Fifth International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology, Boston, MA, USA. (reprinted in *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 13, 2016, xx-xx).
- Whitehead, C. (2009). It isn't just the music: A PCP view of the complexities, perplexities and joys of choral singing. *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 6, 42-50
- Whitehead, J. E. (2016). *Personal communication*.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jörn Scheer and Viv Burr are editors of *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*.

Email:

[joern.scheer@joern-scheer.de](mailto:joern.scheer@joern-scheer.de)

[v.burr@hud.ac.uk](mailto:v.burr@hud.ac.uk)

#### REFERENCE

- Scheer, J. W., Burr V. (2016). Cintra Whitehead (1929-2015) - Pioneer of constructivist literary criticism. *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 13, 80-82  
(Retrieved from <http://www.pcp-net.org/journal/pctp16/scheer-burr16.pdf>)

Published 1 May 2016