

Institution: Goldsmiths, University of London		
Unit of Assessment: 27, English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Giving a Place to Psychic Life in the Public Representation of Privacy		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010-2015		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Josh Cohen	Professor of Modern Literary Theory	1996 -
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2013-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Cohen's book <i>The Private Life</i> deals with public debates on privacy as understood through the lens of psychotherapy and literary theory. Its publication has changed how creative practitioners have engaged with the concept of privacy in ways that have benefitted their cultural outputs. In 2014 the playwright James Graham incorporated Cohen's theory (and persona) into the script of his sell-out play <i>Privacy</i>, shown at the Donmar Warehouse, London (2014) and the Public Theater, New York (2016). It influenced the curators of the 2015 Jerwood Prize and artists entering the competition, and Cate Blanchett's performance in <i>Carol</i> and Rowan Williams' book <i>The Edge of Words</i>.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Media intrusion, state and commercial surveillance, data-harvesting and commodification, hacking and identity theft: as citizens of the networked world, privacy is one of the most urgent issues of our time. A tranche of literature debates the social, technical and legal aspects of privacy; but what does privacy really mean to us, psychologically and philosophically?</p>		
<p>Josh Cohen is a literary theorist and trained psychoanalyst whose ongoing research into the fine-grained textures of everyday life explores politics, consumer culture, inertia, sexuality and the individual (See R1-R6). In his 2013 book <i>The Private Life</i>, Cohen turns his attention to the psychic and philosophical dimensions of the privacy debate, bringing rarefied texts into dialogue with urgent issues of contemporary life, from film and reality TV to topical issues such as the 'sexualization' of children and the use of legal 'super-injunctions'. Weaving together vignettes of psychoanalytical sessions with his own experiences, <i>The Private Life</i> explores the rich and complex history that informs social concepts and individual experiences of privacy (R4).</p>		
<p>An inalienable part of ourselves, to invoke <i>The Private Life's</i> subtitle, an element of our private self always 'remains in the dark'. It is this elusive, unquantifiable dimension of our own selfhood that means we are always more than the externalized version of our consumer and social media profiles. Scholarship on privacy usually focuses on ways of protecting oneself from the intrusive activities of global corporations, data-collecting agencies and/or cyber criminals, but Cohen takes a different approach. In <i>The Private Life</i> he interprets psychoanalytic literature to conceptualise the nature of the field and turns to a wide range of historical, technical, philosophical and journalistic literatures to forge a new mode of reading and listening. Drawing on Freud's concept of the unconscious, repression and the drive, Winnicott's notion of the 'non-communicating self' and Aulagnier's work on the 'desire for non-desire', Cohen brings different</p>		

aspects of internal privacy debates to the fore. His argument that there is a dimension of psychic life that not even the most intrusive and powerful technologies of surveillance can reach was particularly influential in a range of public impacts, most notably the 2014 play, *Privacy*. Despite concerted efforts to infiltrate the individual's private life, the central premise of Cohen's argument is that there is an area of psychic life that has always resisted and will always resist exposure or penetration. This idea also inspired the theme of the Jerwood/ FVU film-making prize for 2015, *What Will They See of Me?* By offering an interpretation of psychoanalytic texts, interlaced with research on philosophical writers, novelists, poets and visual artists, such as Hannah Arendt, Maurice Blanchot and Lydia Davis (R2, R3, R5), Cohen reflects on the interior tapestry of our psyche that remains concealed from the outside world. The calibre of Cohen's research in *The Private Life* was recognised by it winning the Chair's Choice Award for the British Medical Association Book Awards 2014.

3. References to the research

- R1. Josh Cohen, 'The Strangeness in the Strangeness', *Static 07* (online journal of The London Consortium) [Article]
- R2. Josh Cohen, 'Amnesiac Passages: Melville, Blanchot and the Question of Psychoanalytic Reading', *Synthesis: Online Journal of Criticism and Theory* (Volume 2, 2010) [Article] <https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16493>
- R3. Josh Cohen, 'Reflexive Incomprehension: On Lydia Davis', *Textual Practice* (Volume 24, Number 3, 2010), pp. 501-16 [Article] <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502360903471888>
- R4. Josh Cohen, *The Private Life: Why We Remain in the Dark* (Granta, 2013) [Book]
- R5. Josh Cohen, 'Bruce Nauman, Jean Laplanche and the Art of Helplessness', J. Fletcher and N. Ray (eds.) *Seductions and Enigmas: Laplanche, Theory, Culture* (Lawrence and Wishart, 2014), pp. 326-43 [Book Section] <http://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/12980>
- R6. Josh Cohen, 'Psychoanalytic Bodies', D. A. Hillman and U. Maude (eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Body* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 214-29 [Book Section]

*All outputs available on request or online, unless otherwise stated

4. Details of the impact

In *The Private Life*, Cohen frames privacy as an issue for psychic experience, imaginative freedom and human intimacy, rather than simply a matter of political and legal concern. This approach has inspired creative practitioners, including playwright James Graham, Steven Bode, head of Film and Video Umbrella (FVU) and leading cultural figures, including former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, actress Cate Blanchett and TV writer Nick Payne. Cohen's appearances on BBC Radio 4, specifically two episodes of *Moral Maze*, on *Privacy* (October 2016) and *Moral Complicity* (October 2017); nine articles in *The Guardian*, *New Statesman*, *Prospect*, *Literary Review* and *Times Literary Supplement (TLS)*; and three podcasts have contributed to contemporary debate about the nature of privacy and indicate an osmotic absorption of Cohen's ideas into public debate.

Privacy: The Private Life influences the development and content of a new play and inspires one of the central characters, 'Josh Cohen'

In November 2013, playwright James Graham interviewed Cohen about his ideas on privacy as described in *The Private Life*. The three-hour interview with Graham and one of the play's lead actors helped Graham conceptualise the psychology of privacy and write a new script, and inspired a new character in the play: 'Josh Cohen', a psychotherapist and writer. Reflecting the central premise of *The Private Life*, Cohen's character guides the play's protagonist as he investigates the current state of privacy, in ways as much emotional and relational as legal and political (S1, S2).

Graham's play *Privacy* (2014) was well received by critics and audiences, playing to full houses at the Donmar Warehouse, London (2014) and the Public Theater, New York (2016), where it starred Daniel Radcliffe. Cohen's character was mentioned by 12 reviewers, and the character serves as an interpreter of this 'intrusively intimate and angrily political' atmosphere, as allusions to and quotations from the book throughout the play indicate (S3, S2). Interviewed in the *Evening Standard*, Graham confirms that the emphasis on the imaginative, emotional and unconscious dimensions of privacy as discussed in *The Private Life* was essential in his presentation of the political issues around privacy. This element prompted him to address 'the psychological consequences of a generation who live as though they were public figures' (S3a). This theme is a guiding principle in the play, as one theatre critic observed: 'Over the course of the play, by turn intrusively intimate and angrily political, the audience (and their smartphones) found themselves at the centre of an attempt to chart the status of contemporary privacy – and the seemingly muted public reaction to its loss' (S3b).

In the play, the protagonist, having met 'Josh Cohen' as character, purchases a copy of *The Private Life* and is guided by both book and author over the course of the performance (S2).

'What Will They See of Me?': The Private Life influences the Jerwood Trust's 2015 annual competition and exhibition

Steven Bode, head of Film and Video Umbrella (FVU), informed Cohen in February 2014 that *The Private Life* had influenced his framing of the 2015 Jerwood Trust/FVU award, stressing the power of the book's commentaries on contemporary art (S4). Adopting a phrase from Cohen's book, 'What Will They See of Me', the 150 entrants to the annual young film-makers competition responded to the 2015 award brief, which drew on Cohen's ideas about privacy, to create their moving image works.

Bode invited Cohen to deliver a Jerwood Symposium keynote talk at the Glasgow Centre for Contemporary Art and a public lecture for the London Jerwood Gallery, entitled 'Wasting Time', in 2015. The FVU also invited Cohen to write the covering essay for the exhibition catalogue 'What Will They See of Me' that accompanied the winners' show. One of the two winners of the 2015 Jerwood Trust/FVU award, artist Marianna Simnett, has described the influence of Cohen's book on her creative outputs: '*The Private Life* gave me solace in investigating "the possibility of another in you, an internal stranger at once disturbingly unlike you and infinitely more like you than you want to acknowledge." His book was influential, both as a deeply informative resource of psychoanalytic study, but also as a guide to help me trust the precarity and idiosyncrasy of my vision. [...] *The Private Life* remains a vital source of inspiration for my artwork' (S5).

The Private Life inspires popular cultural outputs and raises public awareness through film, literature and popular media forums

Other cultural impacts of Cohen's *The Private Life* include its influence on the actor Cate Blanchett who, in a *Variety* magazine interview, describes how it helped her to understand her

character in the film *Carol* (S6). Blanchett spoke of the book as ‘relevant on many levels’ and related its theme to the ‘unknowability’ of her character, Carol. Reviews of her acclaimed and award-winning performance stress this aspect, pointing to the unusually ‘soft’ and ‘secretive’ use of her voice (*Telegraph*) by this usually very demonstrative actress, and the subtle conveying of her ‘fear and self-doubt’ (*Guardian*).

The importance of *The Private Life* has also been invoked by Rowan Williams in his book *The Edge of Words*, where he describes it as ‘a brilliant and disturbing defence of the human importance of what is hidden in ourselves to ourselves and others’ (S7).

In May 2019, Cohen was contacted by acclaimed TV writer Nick Payne, who scripted 2018’s BBC TV drama *Wanderlust*. Payne stated he was ‘a huge admirer’ of Cohen’s work and ‘loved *The Private Life*’. He requested a meeting to discuss his new project about the inner processes of writers for a new series (not yet made) about the life of an author. Payne told Cohen his ideas about the relationship between privacy and creativity had been very important in developing his own related thoughts (S8).

The Private Life has led to nine articles in the *Guardian*, *New Statesman*, *Prospect*, *Literary Review* and *TLS*, three podcasts, and resonated in media forums (S9). A long-form article, commissioned by *The Economist* (1843) and written by Cohen, ‘The way out of burnout’ (2016), expanded on Chapter Five in *The Private Life* and was widely shared through Twitter. Jonathan Beckman, Deputy Editor at 1843, indicated that the article ‘touched a nerve’ and gained one of the highest quantities of page views ever achieved online by the magazine. The article served as a bridge to Cohen’s next book, *Not Working: Why We Have to Stop* (2019), and his ideas about burnout received a second wave of attention when BuzzFeed journalist Anne Helen Peterson referenced it in a piece on ‘How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation’. Peterson’s article went viral on 5th January 2019, eliciting over 350 comments from BuzzFeed readers internationally and demonstrating the ongoing impact of ideas that originate from *The Private Life* in public debate (S10).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1. Written testimony, Playwright, James Graham, November 2013 and February 2014

S2. Script: Extracts from the play, *Privacy* by James Graham (2014) citing passages from *The Private Life* that include the character, Josh Cohen

S3. Commentary and critics’ reviews of *Privacy* that refer to Cohen’s ideas as expressed in *The Private Life*, selected examples: a) Comment: James Graham, [‘Hey, thanks for sharing, but this has gone too far’](#) *London Evening Standard*, 2 May 2014; b) Article/Review: Alex Preston, [‘The death of privacy’](#), *The Observer*, 3 August 2014; c) Review: Alex Sierz, [‘Privacy, Donmar Warehouse’](#) *New Writing for the British Stage*, 22 April 2014; d) Review (blog): [‘Privacy at the Donmar Warehouse: all your data are belong to them’](#), *Colin’s Commonplace*, 22 July 2014; e) Melissa Rose Bernardo, [‘Explore Entertainment’](#), *Entertainment Weekly*, 18 July 2016; f) Review: Elysa Gardner, [‘Onstage, Daniel Radcliffe explores limits of “Privacy”](#), *USA Today (Life)*, 18 July 2016 [grouped source]

S4. Written statement from Steven Bode, Director of the FVU, 13 April, 2014

S5. Written statement from Marianna Simnett, artist/winner of the 2015 Jerwood Trust/FVU prize, 26 September 2020

- S6. Interview/Testimony, Cate Blanchett cites the influence of *The Private Life* on her preparation for the character of Carol, Ramin Setoodeh, [‘Cate Blanchett Opens the Closet Door with Lesbian Romance ‘Carol’](#) *Variety*, May 12 2015
- S7. Citation in Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 119 note 47
- S8. Written statement from playwright and screenwriter, Nick Payne, 27 November 2020
- S9. A selection of representative media reports on *The Private Life*: a) Article, Thomas McMullan, [‘Master of the House, why we should fight for truly private spaces’](#) *The Guardian*, 4 December 2015; b) Blogpost, [Josh Cohen’s The Private Life](#), *Time’s Flow Stemmed*, 5 September 2015; c) Article, Frank Furedi, [‘Chrissy Teigen and the death of privacy’](#) *Spiked*, 5 October 2020; d) Book reviews, [‘The Private Life: Why We Remain in the Dark’](#) Goodreads, retrieved 22 January 2021; e) Review, Helen Tyson, [‘Privacy is for paedos’](#) *Review 31*, (n.d); f) Review, Will Rees, [‘the private life’](#) *3 am Magazine*, 4 February 2014 [grouped source]
- S10. Article, Anne Helen Peterson, [‘How Millennials became the Burnout Generation’](#), BuzzFeed, 5th January 2019