Reviews

Gloria expunged

Katy Wakelin

A review of New Contemporary Gestalt Therapy Films (2017) by Robert Resnick. Free 30-minute theory synopsis available at: www.vimeo.com/ondemand/gestaltfilms. With a 30% discount for Gestalt therapists, trainees and all students, the entire set of 8 films downloaded from Vimeo (or mailed as DVDs) costs $250 (£186 approx.) + p&p for the DVDs. Rates for institutions differ. Contact resnickfilms@gmail.com for online discount vouchers, DVDs, and further information. See Vimeo website for downloads.

Bob Resnick has released eight films (with subtitles available in seven languages, with more in the pipeline) of him working with therapists and trainees who attend his GATLA summer European training workshops. The films range over a number of summers from 2001 to 2015 and each is with a different client with the exception of one client who appears twice. In addition, there is a free 30-minute synopsis of Gestalt, in which Bob gives a succinct and wide-ranging summary of Gestalt theory.

This is a heart-warmingly generous set of films in two main ways: first, it is a generous teaching resource for our community, both the theory film, which would be an excellent introduction to Gestalt for therapists/psychologists from other modalities, and the client work. Second, many of the pieces of therapy are heartwarming: Bob brings his heart into his work and I-Thou moments regularly emerge and deepen.

In order to discuss the films with others and hear a range of opinions, I watched some of the films in groups with other Gestalt therapists (and popcorn) and I would like to thank them: Sarah Duncan, Kathryn Morris-Roberts, Brenda Luckock and Christine Stevens all took part. This review reflects the others’ opinions indirectly through their impact on my own opinion and I have felt free to borrow words and phrases from others when I have found them appealing. Bob’s work is so interesting and watchable; I watched all eight films although I had intended to only watch half of that. Each film comes with a short written synopsis and some have brief discussions at the end.

Starting with the theory film, Bob explains how he ‘stumbled on’ Gestalt therapy after his psychology training and ‘found a home’ with two main mentors, Jim Simkin and Fritz Perls. In 1969, Fritz asked him to go to Europe and introduce Gestalt therapy there, which turned out to be a ‘terrific experience’ and something he has been doing every summer since. He describes the pillars of Gestalt and goes on to discuss field theory, phenomenology, and dialogue in a straightforward, jargon-free way without losing complexity. He is critical of some early developments when Gestalt was associated with a license to do as you please after one weekend of Gestalt training.

A phrase he uses in his clinical work is to get ‘access to the freshest fish’, a lovely image and one that explains neatly how we look for a figure with energy behind it. As with any synopsis, parts will be left out and I would have liked more on existentialism, though that lack is made up for in clear insight into how change is up to the client – ‘restoration of choice’ is the aim of the Gestalt therapist through awareness. He also makes a lovely distinction between insight and awareness, with the latter more experience-near: contact with what I am doing when I do it (rather than something I think I know about myself). He explains experimentation (when you undertake something without knowing the outcome), and gives the example of asking a man afraid of commitment to drive his car without using reverse for a week. He will soon start avoiding some parking spaces, possible dead ends, etc., neatly showing that if we believe commitment is irreversible we will avoid it.

He explains how fixed ‘character’ becomes habitual and is anachronistic, and how, through attention to contact in the present, we can see how anything relevant from the past is palpable in the here and now. This is clear from his work when an intervention he frequently makes is a variation on ‘what’s typical for you about your reaction?’ or ‘what do you know about this?’. There is a clear match between Gestalt theory, as he outlines it, and how he practises. I also particularly liked the description of character as like a pollutant (a chemical in the wrong context), a pollutant of self-regulation. He also believes that the process orientation of Gestalt therapy makes it easily exportable to other countries.

It is worth describing the filming process briefly in order to explain when it works best. In most cases there are two cameras and the movement from one face to another has then been edited-in afterwards without leaving any of the interaction out. This is done well and is not distracting. In some cases, there is also the use of
a split screen so you can see both the face of Bob and the client at the same time. I found this particularly helpful and I think it allows the viewer to really identify with the work and the small phenomenological changes in both faces. One film, ‘melting frames’, has a different set-up, with only one camera that is side-on to the therapist and client (so you see each face in profile only), and set back so more of the room and many of the other participants are in shot. This is very distracting and I think it is not by chance that this was the piece of work we all found hardest to track and get into. The field conditions for the viewer are profoundly different in this case, making it hard to focus on the therapist and client. The dialogue is generally clear and there is the option of subtitles in case you have hearing difficulties.

Despite the performance pressure of giving a ‘master class’ and being filmed doing it, I do not experience Bob’s approach as showy. He is not afraid to ask the obvious question: ‘What are you afraid of?’, nor does he shy away from being direct and contradicting the client (client: ‘I don’t know’; Bob: ‘I don’t believe you’), always in a gentle, warm style. Perhaps for me his standout characteristic as a therapist is his pacing. He often slows things down, gets the client to repeat, to breathe, to say it again looking at him. He also uses his own phenomenological response, feeding back his emotional experience regularly to the client. He is persistent, for instance at the start of ‘a rose on the grave’ when the client does not want to take part in check-in, Bob persists in telling her how he feels pushed back by her (this subsequently developed into a piece of work between them). We (the viewers) see the piece of work between client and therapist without knowing the context of their relationship (in some cases they have met over a number of years, certainly they have been in the workshop together over the days preceding and following the work). Occasionally this lack of context is detrimental. For instance, in this piece of work (‘a rose on the grave’), at the start I was acutely aware of the power imbalance between the male, American, older, well-known therapist and the younger, female client. This was not directly addressed in the work, and I was interested to know if it had been over the course of the workshop.

Many of the pieces involve moments of intense I-Thou contact (‘reclaiming liveliness and peace’, ‘coming home’) where Bob is relaxed in letting the client see how impacted he is: ‘I feel warmed by you and for you’. He is clearly working with a relational orientation: looking for how the ‘interruptions can be interrupted’ in the here-and-now relationship. These would be interesting films to show therapists from other modalities, who are perhaps familiar with Perls working with Gloria, and assume that challenge and frustration of the client is the dominant Gestalt approach. In the discussion after one of the films, a participant asks him about his use of humour with clients, and if this is necessary to maintain a career for forty years. In response, Bob says, ‘you burn out if you don’t use who you are’, and ‘be who you are in meeting the other person’; that burn out occurs if you are constantly suppressing part of yourself or only using a particular side of yourself with clients. I think that is great advice and I have found it supportive since hearing this, to think, if I feel particularly tired one day, or with a certain client, is there some side of myself I am not allowing out? I have noticed that I have a tendency to suppress my playfulness and creativity and that when I do I feel more tired and my work feels heavier.

His work will be very helpful as a teaching tool as you see him often trying to find the ‘freshest fish’. In ‘coming home’ he suggests an experiment with being superficial that the client clearly has no energy for and Bob lets the experiment go. The client then says he is ‘frozen, lost’ and Bob notices the client was not looking at him when he said this and suggested he try it again looking at Bob. It is this experiment that unlocks the client’s feelings and proves to be the ‘freshest fish’. While in many ways Bob’s style is economical – what he says is often brief and to the point and cuts through layers that less experienced therapists might find themselves working through – this example also shows him working towards something. I think this will reassure trainees: we have our theory, we know what we are looking for, but we do not necessarily get there straight away. We try different things and see where the energy is exactly through a process of experimentation.

The biggest gift of watching these films for me is the way they have me questioning, reflecting, and re-evaluating my own practice. Though I may not be the target audience of trainees and graduate students, nevertheless as an experienced practitioner I enjoyed the adrenalin shot watching someone this talented and experienced gave me. I do not think the point is to agree with everything Bob does and to use his work as a template of how to be a good contemporary Gestalt therapist (and he clearly states that is not his intention), although in some cases he is inspirational. Rather, this viewing experience has set me thinking about how I can be a better Gestalt therapist; perhaps stripping away some bad habits I have built up over the years since my core training and going back to what really inspired me about Gestalt at the start. That reinvigoration is very valuable to me and I look forward to using these films as a teaching tool, as a basis for discussion, and as ambassadors to my non-Gestalt colleagues to show them how exciting and effective Gestalt can be.

Katy Wakelin is a Gestalt psychotherapist and supervisor; she has an MSc from the Sherwood Institute in Nottingham and a Diploma in Supervision from the
Gestalt Centre, London. She also works part-time as an Assistant Professor of Counselling at the University of Nottingham. Her work is primarily influenced by a relational Gestalt approach that explores here-and-now embodied experience.

Address for correspondence: 17 Thorncliffe Road, Nottingham, NG3 5BQ, UK.
Email: katywakelin@hotmail.com