Young Dr. Freud : a television film

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Young Dr. Freud (*Der Junge Freud*) was originally produced for Austrian television in 1976. It recently ran at the Film Forum in New York City, which specializes in screening older films. The script was written by Georg Stefan Troller; Axel Corti directed. Karlheinz Hackl plays Sigmund Freud. The distributor is Kino International.

The television film takes on the subject of Freud's life from his childhood to the beginnings of psychoanalysis. The film combines drama and documentary. Various stages of Freud's development, both personal and intellectual, are portrayed. A narrator asks Freud, who is portrayed observing these events, for explanations of the significance of the various stages of his life.

The subject is obviously an important one, and the filmmakers deserve credit for the attempt. The production is definitely worth seeing. However, one key problem is that the viewer is required to know a good deal about the history of Freud's early development to really comprehend the film. It takes on a number of substantial issues, which are only partially explained. Perhaps I am demanding too much of a film that lasts for little more than 90 minutes. Nevertheless, it seems to me that a better job could have been done to explain the intellectual problems that led to the emergence of psychoanalysis.

Sigmund Freud was born in Frieberg in 1856. His parents were Jews, and his father Jakob was a poor wool merchant. When Freud was four years old, his father, for financial reasons, took his family to Vienna. It was here that the young Freud would receive his education and begin his career.

During his formative years Sigmund had to struggle with anti-Semitism and its consequences. In one of the film's early scenes, as Sigmund is walking down the street with his father, a group of individuals force Jakob off the pavement because he is a Jew. They then knock his hat off, and Jakob picks it up in a compliant way.

The film hints that this event, and Sigmund's struggle with anti-Semitism as a whole, is perhaps responsible for not only his independence of thought, but also for his theoretical ambitions, and perhaps also for his ability to criticize society to its most unappetizing roots. Freud is frequently pictured as a very serious and somber individual, a man driven by the need to accomplish something that is objectively significant.

Freud's first serious work as a scientist begins in the physiological laboratory of Ernest Brucke where he works from 1876 to 1882. At this laboratory, Freud is given the task of finding the sexual organs of eels because at that time it was not known how they reproduced. Freud successfully solves the problem (although this fact is not made clear in the film), and demonstrates his abilities as a methodological researcher.

More importantly, however, is Brucke's philosophical approach to science, which undoubtedly has a profound impact on Freud. The film shows Brucke explaining that the laws of science can explain all phenomena in nature, including so-called “miracles.” This clearly helped Freud not only develop a negative attitude to religious faith, but also to understand how and why it is incompatible with the scientific method.

On the other hand, Brucke is also seen maintaining that all phenomena in nature, including psychology, can be reduced to the laws of physics and chemistry. Unfortunately, the film then drops this important issue, as well as the entire impact of nineteenth century thought on Freud's thinking. In my opinion, Brucke's ideas, which were common at that time, would later have a major impact on the concept of psychoanalysis, especially on the role of instincts. The idea that human needs or instincts can be understood as a kind of energy system, which drives not only the behavior and psyche of individuals but is also the ultimate source of all human history, is, in my opinion, the weak side of psychoanalysis.

In any event, as the film portrays it, Freud is confronted by the need to make an important career decision, as it becomes clear that he will not be one of Brucke's chief assistants. He eventually becomes convinced, apparently for financial reasons, to enter the field of general practice. It is without doubt a great irony that although Freud thought he was perhaps surrendering his scientific ambitions, it would be his work with neurotic patients that would allow him to make his profound mark on science and culture.

The movie then revolves around Freud's work with those suffering from hysteria, which would play a most significant role in the founding of his psychology. Hysteria can currently be defined as a form of psychoneurosis characterized by disturbances of the sensory and motor functions, with a high degree of susceptibility to autosuggestion or hypnosis.

However, hysterics weren't always viewed this way. In the Middle Ages, they were considered possessed by demons, and sometimes burned as witches. The film examines Freud's relationship with the two men, French neurologist Jean Martin Charcot and Vienna physician Josef Breuer, who would have

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the greatest impact on his thinking about this condition.

In 1885 Freud goes to Paris to study with Charcot. There he observes how the famous neurologist hypnotizes hysterics into making their symptoms disappear and then reappear. Freud is clearly impressed. There is one scene in which Freud explains to Charcot that he had thought that hysteria was exclusively a disease of the bourgeoisie or the financially well-off. Most of the patients in the Paris clinic are from the working class or poor. Charcot explains the terrible and crowded conditions in which his patients live. One is almost tempted to conclude from this scene that Charcot believes in a socioeconomic basis for the neurosis. However, the film does not examine Charcot's own theory that hysteria results from a heredity weakness, which in his view explained why they are so susceptible to the art of suggestion. However, what Freud clearly learned from this, combined with his later work, is the role of the mind and especially the unconscious in the etiology of the disease.

In 1886, Freud marries his fiancée and they settle in Vienna. In the film's examination of his marriage, we see a portrait of a man driven by ideas, especially on the question of hysteria, staying up late reading and writing as his wife soberly urges him to come to bed.

The film shows Freud's work with Breuer, using hypnosis as a technique to help patients suffering from hysteria. This collaboration began before Freud left for Paris and continued after his return.

It would be Dr. Breuer's work with one of his patients, Bertha Pappenheim, that would play a pivotal role in the development of psychoanalysis. Dr. Breuer would put her into deep hypnosis and investigate her thoughts, emotions and memories. While she was still in the hypnotic state, he would suggest that her physical disabilities, such as the paralysis of her arm, no longer existed. When she awoke, she discovered that she would be able to move her arm. The procedure also made it possible to discover that she developed these symptoms while she was nursing her sick father, something that was unknown to her.

Freud eventually concludes that this work with hysterics demonstrates the importance of the role of the unconscious. The source of neurosis, he comes to believe, is sexual conflict, and the unconscious contained feelings and emotions that patients were forced—unbeknownst to themselves—to repress. This is why it would often happen that hysterics who were “cured” would later develop different symptoms. The root of their problem, sexual conflict, remained unresolved. However, Breuer was unwilling to follow Freud's conceptions on the sexual etiology of the disease, and the two men would eventually end their collaboration over this disagreement. I felt that the film did not clearly examine this split.

Another example of lack of clarity in the film is its attempted depiction of Freud's lecture to a local society for Psychiatry and Neurology that took place when he was still working with Breuer. It was at this time that Freud presented a theory that the source of all neurosis was the result of sexual abuse of children by their father, a conception that he would shortly thereafter abandon. It is well know that this lecture was received with outbursts of laughter. However, the film shows us nothing of what happens inside the lecture hall, and the viewer is only allowed to hear the laughter. It seems to me that the production should have presented the audience with some of the content of Freud's presentation so the viewer could understand the reason for the reaction it provoked.

It is at this time that we are introduced to Freud's relationship with Dr. Wilhelm Fliess. Dr. Fliess was an ear, nose and throat specialist from Berlin who concerned himself with broader issues. He believed, before Freud, in the importance of infantile sexuality in human development. In many ways, Freud's interaction with this man assisted him tremendously in the development of his conceptions of psychoanalysis. Freud, much to his wife's grief, spent a great deal of time with Fliess. However the film does not present any of the positive content of their correspondence or personal conversations.

In his quest to treat all neurotics, and not just those who suffer from hysteria, Freud abandons hypnotism and develops the technique of free association. Freud sits behind the patient who lies on a couch. The patient is then asked to allow his mind to freely associate with any words that Dr. Freud may utter. This, combined with dream analysis, allows or is intended to allow the therapist to comprehend the unconscious mind, and to diagnose his repressed conflicts. There is one scene in the film that superficially deals with this, providing no description of the actual content of such a session.

The film ends with a description of the poor reception that Freud's book with Breuer, *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), and his now famous book, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), received. The sales of both of these works were originally pitifully low. However, we all know how the fortunes would turn for the young Dr. Freud, and what powerful influence psychoanalysis would have on the twentieth century.

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