

Freud (John Huston, USA, 1962)

That a biopic about Sigmund Freud should prove to be a troubled production should surprise no one, even if to say so is to evoke the kind of superstition Freud's generation of doctors and scientists strove to extinguish. It's not as if the film's crew should have talked about 'The Psychoanalyst's Film' to avoid an ancient curse round Freud's name the way that adaptors of *Macbeth* refer to 'The Scottish Play'. But troubled minds were Freud's business and a figure as sharp and wily as film director John Huston – a practical joker, an encourager of spontaneity, vividly masculine in the Hemingway mold, as eager to box or race horses as read books – maybe ought to have foreseen that such a fraught inward-looking role might be hard on the damaged figure that actor Montgomery Clift had become by 1962, especially as he had just worked with him on *The Misfits* (1961) – unless it was exactly Clift's vulnerability that he sought to exploit.

Once perhaps the most complete method actor of his time, Clift had a car accident in 1957 that half-wrecked his soft-chiseled looks and compromised his brilliant talent. Afterwards he was often in pain, could happily present only his right profile and manage limited facial expression. On *The Misfits* he'd played a rodeo rider who's suffered from similar injuries and handled it well. His character even sends up his condition, telling his mother from a call box, "Oh no, my face is fine. It's all healed up – you would too recognize me." *Freud*, however, would turn out to be Clift's last completed movie.

By the time of the shoot Clift was drinking too much, taking barbituates and amphetamines, had problems with his balance and was diagnosed with double cataracts. The consequence, according to Huston's sympathisers, was that he either couldn't learn his lines or refused to because he didn't agree with the script's interpretation of Freud. By 1962 Hollywood's filmmakers had been infusing Freud's ideas into melodramas and film noir for at least two decades, so everybody in that town who had undergone analysis – Clift included – thought they were experts on the subject.

From the Clift side came complaints that Huston was being too rough, that he was using the movie to work out – or cover up – some of his own repressions. The disputed script already had a tortured history. Huston had first approached philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who had written a first draft that would have run for five and a half hours and a second that was even longer. Huston got fed up and switched to Freud expert Wolfgang Reinhardt and then finished the script off with screenwriter Charles Kaufman. What survived from Sartre was the idea of combining the separate hysterical symptoms of several of Freud's most famous cases into one embodied by Cecily Körtner, the female lead character, and that Marilyn Monroe should play the part. Ironically, Monroe turned it down on the advice of her therapist. It went instead to Susannah York, who had her own opinions about analysis and tended to side with Clift.

What's astonishing under these circumstances, then, is that *Freud* should turn out to be such a successful merger of melodramatic biopic and intellectual detective story. When we meet Clift as Freud at the film's beginning, he is one of a gaggle of doctors in a corridor of a Viennese clinic, joining the arrogant Professor Maynert on his rounds. He steps out of the crowd when he's required to acknowledge he's admitted a forbidden hysteric – Meynert thinks hysterics are more or less fakes. After a brief contest of wills and tests, Freud is ordered to dismiss the patient. We next find him asking career advice of his mother (played by Rosalie Crutchley, who was born in 1920, the same year as Clift – a casting choice which, of course, heightens this scene's oedipal potential). Frau Freud, who is sewing, suggests he should leave the hospital. While they're talking, Freud turns his back on us, then stands at a distance, but finally sits down opposite his mother and begins to lean in (the film relies heavily on close-ups throughout). As he excitedly talks about the hypnotic experiments with hysterics being done by Charcot in Paris, we first see how Clift – who, despite a beard and smoking jacket, looks in pretty bad shape – is going to play the thinking Freud: through the medium of his eyes, which, when highlighted

by Douglas Slocombe's gorgeous monochrome cinematography, seem to have a translucent glow, what critics of the time called Clift's basilisk stare.

The eyes are important because although *Freud* is a biopic about the founding father of psychoanalysis, the film is most interested in the young doctor's early experiments with hypnosis. That emphasis may have been there because mesmerism, though a more disreputable practice, has more dramatic potential than the 'talking cure'. It also imposes, as we shall see later, a more intimate contact between patient and doctor. Hypnosis had its own occasional parallel career with psychoanalysis in Hollywood films. In Otto Preminger's 1950 noir thriller *Whirlpool* kleptomaniac Gene Tierney, married to a psychoanalyst, becomes a murder suspect after visits to José Ferrer's hypnotherapist. Ben Hecht, who wrote the screenplay, was one of the foremost Hollywood explorers of Freudian ideas, having scripted Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), reputedly the "first film about psychoanalysis", in which psychoanalyst Ingrid Bergman falls in love with her new boss Cary Grant, who turns out to be an amnesiac implicated in murder. John Frankenheimer's cold war thriller *The Manchurian Candidate*, made around the same time as *Freud*, has Korean War captive US soldiers brainwashed by hypnotic techniques. The knowledge of such lurid film treatments of mesmeric and freudian themes seems to feed back into Huston's film.

When Sartre visited Huston's home in Ireland, Huston had tried and failed to hypnotize him. The director was clearly as fascinated by this process as he was by Freud's various post-hypnotic breakthroughs, though, of course, the latter provide Freud his final success with Cecily and himself. There is, of course, an analogy between the experience of being in a hypnotic trance and watching a film in the dark that Huston undoubtedly understood, and it chimes with the fact that cinema and psychoanalysis emerge almost hand in hand in the mid-1890s.

Huston's laudable ambition was to make his film work both as Hollywood melodrama and plausible education in analysis. His narrative structure takes the form of a parallel investigation in which Sigmund Freud will find self-revelation in parallel with his experiments with Cecily Körtner, the sexually repressed hysteric, fixated on her father, who routinely falls for her analysts – first Freud's friend Breuer (a relationship that's hinted to have become sexual, the reason why Breuer feels obliged to pass Cecily on to Freud), then Freud himself. Huston constantly uses displacement of one person by another as his modus operandi (or one thing by another, as with Cecily's symptoms). Father-figure replaces father-figure throughout (Meynard, Freud's father, Charcot, Breuer). Images of passing through portals abound until we see Freud faint during his father's funeral at the gates of the cemetery he can't enter because of his own neurosis.

As others have noted, the film is careful with Freud's progress through his theories, though it compresses them into a much tighter time frame, – rather in the way that Clive Owen and his surgical colleagues in 1900-set television series *The Knick* discover a new surgical procedure each episode. Cecily develops different sets of symptoms each time so that they can be alleviated by a new technique. First we see hypnosis revealing the existence of the unconscious then having a salutary cathartic effect. The practice of free association proves helpful and leads to dream analysis. As the film builds towards crisis moments, Freud comes to believe in 'seduction' theory (sexual trauma) as a cause of neurosis. Then he abandons 'seduction' for the 'infantile sexuality' theory that so outrages his colleagues before he finally arrives at the Oedipus complex.

Huston dramatizes this progress by plunging Freud into a night-wandering world of shadows and portents. He smashes the pocket watch his father gives

him as he boards the train to Paris – train travel being his key phobia. After Meynert and his colleagues excoriate what Freud has learned from Charcot, he broods constantly, even after Breuer has befriended him and persuaded him into private practice. This melodramatic field is where Huston's approach is most intriguing in terms of what a filmmaker of the early 1960s might do, what the range of stylistic options open to him were.

At first *Freud* adopts the manner of a traditional science discovery biopic such as *Madame Curie* (1943) that – like *Freud* – promises “a journey into the unknown” and in which Walter Pidgeon, playing Curie's husband, wears a beard that's almost identical to Clift's. Later, however, when the dreams of Cecily and Freud are being portrayed there's a shift towards the uncanny, towards the high-strung mood of J. Lee Thompson's wonderfully nightmarish adaptation of the Henry James short story *The Turn of the Screw, The Innocents* (1961) a film that is itself riddled with pop-Freudian hints about sexuality. When it comes to the dream sequences recounted by Cecily, with its red tower and her dog's snout's “defiling” of her “golden cup” the 21st century viewer may need to suppress an instinct to mock. When a district of brothels proves to be on Red Tower Street you may suspect a brief failure of imagination.

Nevertheless, Huston's *Freud* does marshal an incredibly complex interplay of themes, does engross us in its intellectual suspense story through its revelatory stylistic flourishes – even if so many of us know in advance where Freud's discoveries will take us. In his omniscient voice-over introduction, Huston describes the unconscious as a darkness “almost as black as hell itself”, thereby invoking a superstitious place to describe real torments. If *Freud*, in self-mythologising terms, was hell to make, its incarnation of the father of psychoanalysis holds back from deification of its subject. It's as a flawed, half-broken individual that Montgomery Clift and John Huston succeed in giving

him screen life, and whether or not Huston's evaluation of his achievements – putting him on a par with Copernicus and Darwin – stands the test of time, their film describes vividly an intellectual progress like no other.