



Blood, hypnotism, sex and cocaine: ‘Freud’ on Netflix

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The eight-part German-Austrian series ‘Freud’ is a curiosity. One might wonder who it was made for – its intended audience – or who has actually watched it and why. Reviewing the first episode, the *Guardian* on 23 March 2020 called it ‘ridiculous’. Anyone anticipating a ‘serious’ examination of Freud’s early work and career might well think the same. Not for Freud *afficianadoes* then? I turned up the series through the browser and started to watch out of curiosity about how Freud, the man and the work, would be portrayed. I stayed to binge the rest, finding it a surprising and somewhat guilty pleasure. It is bloody and dirty, sickening, farcical, touching, even very funny in parts. It is preposterous, over-the-top, revolting quite often, but it is not stupid. What you know about film and televisual genres and indeed what you know about Freud will probably determine how much you like or loathe it, or whether you can watch to the end.

Freud is the central *character* in this story, which is fictional, extravagant, gory, bawdy and extreme in several registers. It is knowing, sometimes witty, opulent in some of its settings, dripping with blood and damp in others – steamy and sleazy. Its hospital or asylum scenes are stark white or dank in their unfeelingness. Even the most credulous of viewers, recognizing ‘Freud’ as a famous name but perhaps having only the vaguest notions of what he wrote or did, would be unlikely to believe this as a ‘true’ story of that man Freud. The style of the presentation militates against such a fatuous acceptance at every twist and turn. And yet, this rollicking yarn, this confection, is not entirely unfaithful to what is known – what some of us have made it our business to know – about Sigmund Freud. So, for those in the know, provided you can ‘go with it’ what you know can add to the pleasure of this entertainment – but do not expect to feel clean.

What ‘we’ know about Freud comes from what he wrote and what others have written about him and his work – shading through explication, self-justification, hagiography, academic analysis (of various stripes) to condemnation. To say that this Netflix ‘Freud’ takes all of that in would be saying too much – would be ‘ridiculous’. And yet ... if we can say that there is a portrayal of the young Freud here, however fictionalized, that portrayal is irreverent but not revisionist, not dismissive but rather sympathetic, forgiving of human foibles - including driving ambition and faulty judgment. For this Freud is ambitious, beleaguered, stubborn and frequently bewildered, but trying to do his best for what he thinks is right – like the ‘real’ one. He is also very interested in having sex, and he and other characters are frequently out of control.

What ‘we’ know about film depends upon what we have seen, read and studied. I cannot doubt that this series is ‘knowing’ and ‘referential’, but what I take it to know and to refer to depends on what I recognize, what I read out of it and also what I read in. This is interesting, I feel, in a Freudian sense. After all, is it not the case that Freud always thought he knew more than his patients; that he saw more than they were able to see? And similarly, those who have looked at Freud, re-read him, have seen things that he did not – his evasions and his blind spots, his fantasies even, particularly about women. All

of that is available to us viewers, to read out or read in in this Netflix 'Freud', whether it is there explicitly or allusively and perhaps unconsciously, on either side. Again, the more you 'know' the more this confection feels crowded with referents and even revenants.

A first referent, for me, was to the 1962 film starring Montgomery Clift, called variously *Freud* or *Freud: The Secret Passion* – for a 'secret passion' for a patient is central to both plots and in both Freud is presented as a kind of detective. The Netflix series preserves the *naiveté* of the character Freud, along with his intense ambition and the composite nature of the female patient (derived from, or hinting at, various case studies). John Huston directed the 1962 film and the original scriptwriter was, strangely enough, Jean-Paul Sartre. Anna Freud vehemently opposed and tried to prevent the filming.

Interestingly, the patient part was intended for Marilyn Monroe, who was in analysis with two key Freud 'disciples' at the time. Opposition to the film from the Freud family and perhaps her analyst Romi Greenson meant that she declined it. The Huston film was purportedly a 'biopic', a tricky genre which often seeds historical, biographical 'facts' within a fictional narrative, for the purpose of either excavating a deeper 'reality' or 'truth' – as fiction often claims to do – or (depending on one's point-of-view) for the purposes of excitation, engagement, entertainment. The Huston film is only one of several references or revenants that, for me, circulated in the Netflix 'Freud'.

At the beginning of the series, Freud appears to be hypnotizing a woman patient. Actually, he is coaching his housekeeper to pretend to be hypnotized so that he can convince the Viennese medical establishment of the validity of this treatment for mental illness. Freud believes in it, but unfortunately is rubbish at it, so he concocts a trick to prove the truth of his method. Even more unfortunately, Freud accidentally succeeds in hypnotizing the subject Lenore, who, according to his fake scenario, had been struck dumb for 30 years following a trauma. Instead of calling her to speak, as intended by the subterfuge, Lenore is rendered incoherent and Freud is condemned as a misguided charlatan – a failure, but not precisely a fraud.

Later, Freud's hypnotic ineptitude is contrasted with the unexplained powers of the Hungarian Countess Sophia who can, without the paraphernalia of swinging pocket watches or rhythmic laying-on of hands, apparently hypnotize whole rooms and bend them to her will and higher political purpose. This latter involves bringing about the freedom of her native Hungary from Austrian rule, but the machinations of this plot tend to remain obscure and are Ruritanian in their twists, set dressing and preposterousness. Her husband, Count Viktor, is chiefly remarkable for his dressing gown and what seems to be excessive use of eyeliner. Their adoptive daughter, Fleur Salome (an interesting name) is a medium, crucial to the storyline, whom Freud is drawn to, attempts to save and cure and, as we see, fucks. Sophia's hypnotism can certainly be deadly, as we witness more than once. Fleur, more than once, is her agent and yet, somewhat like Dora/Ida Bauer, she escapes from it all in the end, either with the help or in spite of Freud's intervention.

The humiliations of the young Freud, the antisemitism he suffered and the mixture of brutal and nonsensical treatments and neglect that patients endured within the

white spaces and dark underground cells of the hospital/asylum are all there. When he begs his superiors to let him diagnose and help these unfortunates, there is no doubt that ‘we’ viewers are on his side, even though we see how misguided he is himself.

This Freud’s ambition and lapses of judgment are fuelled by a copious intake of solutions of cocaine, which sets up another of the referential elements. Freud becomes entangled in trying to solve a sexual murder and also a child abduction and mutilation. His cocaine habit links him to Sherlock Holmes, and we follow him as he tries to find the solution, in association with Inspector Kiss, who is a noble character, somewhat like Don Quixote at first, with his sidekick, who in some ways resembles Sancho Panza. Kiss has a war trauma, the foundations of which we see unfold. Despite love for his daughter and grandchildren, he is deeply damaged and flawed. All three of these characters grow as the series progresses but do not exactly triumph and aspects of the mystery are not totally resolved. Indeed, there are plenty of McGuffins along the way, including the opera singer/cannibal imprisoned in a waterlogged cell with a metal cage around his head, reminiscent of ‘Silence of the Lambs’ (Jonathan Demme, 1991).

The initial killing is nasty, a Jack-the-Ripper-type sexual crime (very reminiscent of David Fincher’s 1995 film ‘Seven’) that sets something of the tone. We swiftly know who-dun-it, although he does not remember it. Indeed, there is forgetting, and memories that might be nightmares, and events that might be fantasies.

The Hungarian medium Fleur could easily have been one of the patients that the ‘real’ Freud treated, as he tries to treat her in this drama, at one point characterizing her as a split personality. This is after they have had sex and he says he wants to talk to other one, Fleur, not this one, who we see as a kind of ravening animal. If you happen to know it, Greenson also characterized Monroe as a split personality ‘borderline’ as he termed it.

There are lots of episodes where the role of the mother (or surrogate) features in this drama, and also the father-and-son relationships, actually familial relationships, which appear to be, for the most part, toxic. But what I actively liked best came at the end, where, I suppose, for the principal characters, the madness (if I can say that) that has gone before appears to resolve into a conventional happy thereafter.

In the last episode, Martha Bernays pitches up unexpectedly into the overwrought Vienna that has embroiled her fiancé. She reads the manuscript that Freud has written, telling the story that we have been watching. She tells him fervently that he will change the world as he wishes to do – that he is the genius that he has always thought he was. Sheepishly, he confesses that he has not told all about his relationship with Fleur. Martha’s response is an example of the pleasure and the wit of this series; ‘we’ know that the ‘real’ Martha would not have said it, and we also know that despite supporting her soon-to-be-husband through all his tribulations and his fame, she did not really believe in psychoanalysis. What the Netflix Martha says is this: ‘You overestimate the power of the genitals, Sigmund, especially your own’. Oh yes, some of us might consider that indeed he did, and cheer Martha for having said it, even in a fiction.

As the series ends, to ensure his career, this Freud cannot publish his manuscript, and so he burns it. ‘We’ know, don’t we, that Freud did burn a lot of his writings. We know, don’t we, that there was a lot he did not want us to know. And so, this

representation of that man Freud is not a truth, not a biograph. It is an entertainment – excessive, outrageous, but not ridiculous.

Wendy Leeks went to university as a mature student, after a short career in journalism. She did art history because she knew next to nothing about it. She received a First Class* degree from Leeds University and developed her interest in psychoanalytic (specifically Lacanian) and feminist perspectives in her PhD on the 19th Century painter Ingres and his female nudes. Since retirement from academic management in 2014, she has pursued a project of a number of psychoanalytic [readings](#) including a chapter in *Femininity and Psychoanalysis (2019)* [on biographical writing, Anna Freud and Marilyn Monroe](#).