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## EVENT/SCREENING REVIEW:

### AN ENCOUNTER WITH VIGGO MORTENSON'S FREUD

*Viggo Mortensen interview with Lisa Appignanesi at the Freud Museum, London and special screening of A Dangerous Method (David Cronenberg, US, 2011), 1 February 2012*

### SIOBHAN LENNON-PATIENCE

A small ensemble of people has gathered on the staircase and into the hall of Sigmund Freud's last home, 20 Maresfield Gardens in Hampstead. The gallery feature with the wide bay window on the staircase provides an excellent stage for us to meet the latest film incarnation of Sigmund Freud. I, for one, am intrigued: what kind of Freud will we meet?

This audience had the potential to be very discerning, after all, as Richards's has noted; 'Differentiated conceptions of what Freud and psychoanalysis are – or should be about – command powerful feelings amongst their adherents' (1989: 31). We had come to the Freud Museum on this occasion to attend a special screening of David Cronenberg's *A Dangerous Method* (based on the Christopher Hampton play *The Talking Cure* which, in turn, is based on John Kerr's book *A Most Dangerous Method: The story of Freud, Jung and Sabina Spielrein*). The film explores the troubled relationship between Freud and Jung, and significantly, the relationship between Jung and Sabina Spielrein. A guest appearance by Viggo Mortensen, who plays Freud, made this a special occasion.

The Viggo Mortensen we met seemed both charming and erudite. As the assembled crowd settled to hear the interview between Mortensen and Lisa Appignanesi, the hush was abruptly shattered when an audience member dropped a glass onto the highly polished

parquet floor; the sharp intake of breath was audible all round, what if one of Freud's precious objects had been broken? Fortunately, the tension was released by Mortenson who, recalling a scene from the film, remarked that there had been a 'catalytic exteriorization phenomenon'. The audience laughed, thereby returning a sense of ease to us all.

In an expertly crafted scene, with Cronenberg's great attention to detail, we see Jung and Freud discussing psychoanalysis in Freud's study. At this time, Jung is still seen by Freud as the potential rightful heir to carry forward the ideas of psychoanalysis now that Freud had 'opened the door'. As they are speaking a sharp cracking sound disturbs them, and it is here that the audience begins to see the 'crack' that would eventually sever their relationship. That is a 'catalytic exteriorization phenomenon' declares Jung and he explains to Freud that he knew that it was about to happen and that it would occur again. Freud dismisses this, and provides Jung with a plausible explanation for the sound, but even as he speaks, the sound occurs again.

Writing back in 1993, the analyst and author, Alain de Mijola, expressed surprise that film-makers had not sought to explore the relationship between Freud and Jung. Film depictions had tended to focus on Freud's discovery of psychoanalysis and according to de Mijola: 'Everything is occurring as if everybody were obeying the order given by Freud himself namely: my life is of no interest, and my history is the history of the beginning of psychoanalysis' (2001). Choosing to depict Freud in the years leading up to his discovery of psychoanalysis means that most film portrayals show a young Freud. Yet in contrast, the Freud that Mortenson brings to the screen is an older – albeit robust Freud, aged around 50. Although he walks with the aid of a cane, it is not the Freud we see in the archive footage of family home movies, which often show the older Freud who had by then experienced ill health, notably cancer of the jaw. The 50 year-old Freud then was one that had not yet had to endure; 'the unbearable irritation of the prosthesis in his mouth' (de Mijola, 2001).

Mortensen says that he views acting as an extension of childhood play; ‘You just have to go for it. Just let yourself go, and let yourself believe’ (Mortensen, 2012). It is through the work of another psychoanalyst, D. W. Winnicott, that we learn of the true value of play as a creative, communicative experience. Embodied in the creative endeavours of the artist we witness the drive for authenticity, in which there co-exist two trends, an urgent need to communicate and a yet more urgent need not to be found (Phillips, 2007: 151). The actor, as artist, subsumed in character, at once seeks to communicate whilst also achieving the concealment of the true self.

The film critic, Mark Kermode, has suggested that Mortensen is the new Robert De Niro in his acting style and abilities (2012). Mortensen takes a methodical and intellectual approach to his craft, making use of a method acting style that seeks to access the internal world of his character. Gilsdorf, arts correspondent for *The Boston Globe*, reminds readers that Mortensen’s career history has involved assuming ‘the shape of outsiders’; his characters ‘drift, wander and resist the status quo’ (2012). It seems to me that such a style lends itself to a film with psychoanalysis as its theme, where depth, rather than surface, is valued and where the key protagonist viewed himself as an outsider, a man who had declared that in the first ten years of his work on psychoanalysis he worked totally alone. It was clear that Mortenson’s efforts to portray Freud on screen had involved wide ranging research into the man. Mortenson had been to Freud’s birthplace, Pribor, and had visited the flat at 19 Berggasse in Vienna where Freud had spent most of his working life. Mortenson searched antiquarian bookshops in Vienna; he said he wanted to not only read Freud, but also to read what Freud himself would have read. His commitment to the role meant that Mortenson taught himself to write in German script for the scenes where we see Freud writing to Jung. ‘That takes real dedication’ remarks Cronenberg in an interview (13 September 2011). Mortenson imparts: ‘Once I started learning about him, I did what I usually do, to find out for

myself, to form an idea of what happened between the cradle and the first line of the script.’

The Freud that Mortenson said he found was not a dour, serious, Dr. Freud, but instead a man with a keen mind and dry sense of humour. He recalls:

The more I read about him, the more I realised he was funny, he had a great sense of humour and that helped me a lot as an actor. Technically, it was a way in; it was a way to make him human.

This is evident in his rendering of Freud on screen where we see a man of dignity, wit and congeniality. For those familiar with biographical accounts of Freud and with his letters, this is perhaps a Freud more recognisable to those who had gathered to listen to Mortenson.

When Jung first visited Freud and his family at 19 Berggasse, he was accompanied by a young colleague, Ludwig Binswanger, who was later to recall Freud’s ‘distaste for all formality and etiquette, his personal charm, his simplicity, casual openness and goodness, and not least, his humour’ (Gay, 1988: 203).

Mortenson’s Freud then, is a distinct move away from earlier characterizations such as that of Montgomery Clift in John Huston’s 1962 film *Freud*. De Mijola noted: ‘Freud almost always appears in the film as being furious, with a gloomy look, rigid, pale, absolutely devoid of humour, trapped in his own neurosis.’ (2001) This Freud was created by Huston, according to de Mijola by mixing up Jean Paul Sartre’s ‘obsessions’ and ‘hostilities’ to psychoanalysis that served as his contributions to the making of the film combined with Huston’s ‘interpretations of history’ (2001).

Even at the inception of psychoanalysis, Freud sought to be a confounder of any future biographers, with periodic purges of his correspondence and papers. His autobiographical work focused only on his professional life; ‘Thus Freud himself set the

parameters for the legend of the psychoanalytic movement and the cult of personality that grew up around him.’ (Sprengnether, 1998: 147) In Sprengnether’s view, Freud consciously sought to maintain an artfully constructed self-portrait, and went to great lengths to destroy any traces that may have called that into question (Sprengnether, 1998). In a punctilious description of Freud, which includes a measurement of his head for its cephalic index, Ernest Jones provided a gift to the make-up artist and costume designer. As Freud’s official biographer, Jones describes his subject, then aged fifty-two, as ‘bearing the marks of a sedentary profession’, yet he had thick, dark, well groomed hair that was only beginning to show signs of grey, a pointed beard and a ‘handsome moustache’ (Jones, 1974: 333). Such a flattering description may have pleased Freud as he was sensitive regarding references to his age, recalling his 1908 trip to America, Freud had visited the Cave of the Winds at Niagara Falls, he had been deeply offended by the guide who had pushed the other visitors back so that they could; ‘let the old fellow go first’, Jones noted in the biography that Freud was only fifty-three at this time (Jones, 1974: 346).

In a compilation of recorded home movies that can be seen at the Freud museums in London and Vienna, Anna Freud comments that the footage that, to her, provides the truest representation of her father was film taken of Freud deep in conversation, unaware that the camera was even on him. Writing to Jung in 1907, Freud confessed that he had not willingly sat for a photographer for at least fifteen years; ‘because I am too vain to countenance my physical deterioration’ (Freud et al. 1978: 178). Freud had to have a professional photograph taken for regulatory purposes for the Hygiene Exhibition of 1905. He tells Jung that he detests this professional photograph, preferring instead one taken at a similar time, but by his sons, saying that he favours this one because it is ‘not at all artificial’. Maybe this lack of artificiality allowed for a more authentic view of Freud, more at ease with himself. Or, at the

very least, this more relaxed atmosphere for a photograph allowed Freud the space to present a self that he wanted to be seen. In a letter to Jung from 6 December 1906, Freud wrote:

As you know, I suffer from all the torments that can afflict an “innovator” [sic]; not the least of these is the unavoidable necessity of passing, among my own supporters as the incorrigibly self-righteous crank or fanatic that in reality, I am not. (Freud, E.L. et al 1978: 197)

In Freud’s 1908 visit to America, a day’s excursion around New York was to culminate in a trip to the cinema to see ‘one of those primitive films of those days with plenty of wild chasing’ (Jones, 1974: 344). By all accounts, Freud’s companion Ferenczi had greatly enjoyed the experience. Freud, on the other hand, had been only ‘quietly amused’ (ibid.). Freud’s discovery of psychoanalysis runs in parallel to the birth of cinema, both were new and powerful ways of viewing the self, or as Lebeau suggests, cinema and psychoanalysis represented new technologies of modernity (Lebeau 2001). Yet Freud was not enthused by this new art form and was suspicious of any attempts to represent psychoanalysis on screen, stating that: ‘he did not feel that a plastic representation of our abstractions worthy of the name could be made.’ (de Mijola 2001).

It is a matter of conjecture to imagine what Freud himself might have thought of Mortenson’s depiction of him. Maybe Freud’s reservations about film could have been disarmed by Mortenson’s portrayal. The fact that Mortensen has tried to access Freud through his intellectual life, for example by reading the same authors he found on Freud’s bookshelf, could have pleased Freud. Is it possible that, in the Freud brought to the screen by Viggo Mortenson, we perhaps glimpse Freud as he may have liked to be seen?

I was surprised by the review of the film in *The Guardian* (10 February 2012) by Peter Bradshaw, who considered Mortenson's Freud to be: 'bland, tolerant, opaque', a man in the 'evening of his life' whose 'joyfulness appears in short supply'. Bernardo Bertolucci described how his experience of being in psychoanalysis was to inform his work as a film director; 'I found that I had in my camera an additional lens, which was not Kodak, not Zeiss, but Freud.' (Bertolucci, 2001). As viewers of Viggo Mortensen's Freud, we too apply a lens, the lens of our appreciation, or otherwise, of the founding father of psychoanalysis. Yates (2007) has written extensively on jealousy, masculinity and contemporary cinema, including a piece on Mortensen in a previous incarnation as youthful love rival to the cuckolded Michael Douglas character in *A Perfect Murder* (1998). Following the special event at the Freud museum, Yates observed that Mortensen's role as Freud signals his maturity as an actor who has moved from playing the angry Oedipal son as in *A Perfect Murder*, to a role where he steps into the paternalistic shoes of Freud. Yet if the star struck members of the audience at this special event were anything to go by, he appears to have lost none of his desirability and charisma. Indeed, in an age which is often sceptical about Freud and his work, then Viggo Mortensen's performance as the charming, twinkly-eyed professor, will have done the professor's image no harm at all (Yates, 2012, personal communication). I, for one, liked the Freud we met that night, a Freud that was as artfully created by the founding father, as by the actor himself. The point perhaps, is that the unconscious is always at work; we overlay the image with our own internal agenda. Maybe we see the Freud we want to see.

Viggo Mortensen was interviewed by Lisa Appingnesi at a special event at The Freud Museum, London on 1 February 2012.

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### **Films Discussed**

*A Dangerous Method* (UK, David Cronenberg, 2011)

*A Perfect Murder* (US, Andrew Davis, 1998)

*Freud* (US, John Huston, 1962)

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