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FREUD (1962) – A STYLISTIC AND THEORETICAL APPROACH

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to discern - guided by works such as Frank Sulloway's *Freud, Biologist of the Mind*, or Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* - the main stylistic and discursive elements contouring the myth of the hero in John Huston's 1962 film *Freud*. It is contended that the biographical approach constituting the most apparent layer of the film is built on a theoretical approach covering the main tenets of psychoanalysis, as well as on a mythical approach gradually unfolding the archetypal figure of the hero, shaped by aspects such as the protagonist's isolation and originality, the presence of helping characters, the descent to the underworld, etc. However, as it is famously the case for psychoanalysis, the founder's biography is closely linked with the fate and image of his work: specifically, in this film, Freud's journey is doubled by the emergence of psychoanalysis as a discipline, molded by inspiration, observation, and opposition. Thus, the film follows the main events in Freud's life over ten crucial years, from his decisive travel to Paris and his acquaintance with Charcot's work, up to his abandoning hypnosis in favor of free association and the birth of psychoanalysis. Even if - with the hindsight that Freud's efforts of promoting his work have proved to be more than fruitful - one might be tempted to assume that this is a flawless hero's journey, the end of the film stays somewhat ambivalent, casting a shadow of doubt over the apparent note of triumph: both Freud's image and that of psychoanalysis are fated to an open future.

Keywords: Sigmund Freud, history of psychoanalysis, film, Frank Sulloway, Joseph Campbell, myth of the hero, hero's journey, interpretation of dreams, hypnosis, Charcot, Oedipus complex

FREUD (1962) – O ABORDARE STILISTICĂ ȘI TEORETICĂ

Rezumat: Scopul acestui articol este să evidențieze – ghidat de lucrări precum *Freud, Biologist of the Mind* de Frank Sulloway sau *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* de Joseph Campbell - principalele elemente stilistice și discursive care conturează mitul eroului în filmul lui John Huston, *Freud* (1962). Se afirmă faptul că perspectiva biografică, care reprezintă cel mai vizibil strat al filmului, este construită atât pe o abordare teoretică ce acoperă principalele teze psihanalitice, cât și pe o abordare mitică, care dezvăluie gradual figura arhetipală a eroului, descrisă de aspecte precum izolarea și originalitatea protagonistului, prezența personajelor care îl ajută, coborârea în lumea cealaltă etc. Totuși, așa cum se întâmplă în cazul psihanalizei, biografia fondatorului este strâns legată de soarta și imaginea operei sale: mai precis, în acest film, călătoria lui Freud este dublată de apariția psihanalizei ca disciplină, modelată de inspirație, observație și opoziție. Astfel, filmul urmărește principalele evenimente din viața lui Freud, de-a lungul a zece ani cruciali, de la călătoria decisivă la Paris și întâlnirea cu opera lui Charcot, până la abandonarea hipnozei în favoarea asocierii libere și la nașterea psihanalizei. Chiar dacă – știind deja că eforturile lui Freud de a-și promova munca s-au dovedit a fi mai mult decât productive – am fi tentați să susținem că aceasta este călătoria unui erou perfect, sfârșitul filmului rămâne oarecum ambivalent, aruncând o umbră de îndoială peste aparenta notă de triumf: atât imaginea lui Freud, cât și cea a psihanalizei sunt destinate unui viitor deschis. Totuși, este indiscutabil faptul că impactul lor va fi imposibil de ignorat.

Cuvinte-cheie: Sigmund Freud, istoria psihanalizei, film, Frank Sulloway, Joseph Campbell, mitul eroului, călătoria eroului, interpretarea viselor, hipnoză, Charcot, complexul lui Oedip

1. Introduction. The Creation of a Mythical Aura

The 1962 film portrayal of Freud approaches its object from a three-fold perspective: biographical, theoretical, and mythical. Thus, despite the fact that it covers only ten years of Freud's life, it manages to include references to and illustrations of a great part of Freud's theoretical work.

The beginning sets the stage for a mythical perspective on the history of psychoanalysis, using Freud's own comparison to the other two great "outrages against [humanity's] naïve self-love": Copernicus' pointing out that the Earth was not the center of the Universe and Darwin reducing mankind to a species among many others. A parallel is drawn between "the great astronomer", "the great biologist", and "the great psychologist", delivering the third blow to the "I" by showing that it is not even "master in its own home", being subject to the rule of the unconscious. The introduction summarizes Freud's role as that of an explorer delving into the ominous depths of the unconscious, "almost as black as hell itself", while also announcing the triumph of his mission: "he let in the light"; thus, from the first few minutes of the film, we are invited to see Freud as an archetypal hero, who, if he inflicted a terrible wound to mankind's vanity, also provided it with hope due to the increased possibility of self-knowledge. This description, implying courage, clarity of sight, abnegation, and honesty, will be corroborated by further confirmations throughout the film (this attitude of a crusader for the sake of science/truth is encapsulated in one of Freud's remarks to Breuer: "In science, there is nothing holy but the truth"). The introduction is echoed by the ending of the film, which closes the circle with the statement that mankind is now (after and through Freud's work) in possession of the "knowledge" that could open the path towards victory over vanity, "its oldest enemy".

According to Frank Sulloway, drawing upon Ellenberger and Joseph Campbell, the myth of the hero as applied to the history of psychoanalysis has two main features that reinforce each other: Freud's intellectual isolation, illustrated by the hostile reaction of his colleagues to his theories, and his absolute originality¹. The isolation component is prevalent throughout the film, being conspicuous mainly during the two

conferences marking Freud's main theoretical positions: in the case of the first conference, the attitude of Freud's colleagues is one of mild reproval, tinged with irony ("he forgets in his enthusiasm that he is telling us nothing new", "our young colleague feels obliged to instruct and enlighten his seniors") and condescendingly contrasting the "metaphysical speculation", seen as typical of Parisian doctors, to the "physiological experiment" "humbly and patiently" practiced by their Viennese counterparts (this latter mention brings to mind Sulloway's observation that the main myth in the history of science is that of the purely empirical character of the founder's discoveries).² The second conference could function as a preview of Freud's further isolation during the later part of his career, this time the attitude of his colleagues being one of resolute hostility, undisguised by any stylistic adornments. This nuance could also be indicative of the increased importance held by Freud's theories – the greater degree of aggressiveness in the audience's reaction being possibly due to their perception of his views as a threat, whereas in the case of the first conference they could afford laughing them off.

The impression of isolation is further emphasized by Freud's remarks (for instance, when asking Breuer if he is not "afraid to touch the leper", or when telling his wife that his theory has offended everyone and that he might be "stoned in the streets" even by his friends). In this case, the film seems to slightly depart from the typical structure of the mythical journey: even after a long and valiant struggle against collective opposition, the hero's final victory, the acceptance of the truth of his teachings, does not appear to be guaranteed. The final note of hope is also one of doubt. This is consistent with Freud's claims of still being professionally isolated even after the growing success and international reach of his theories, a fact that could be due both to a personal inclination to select negative feedback and to a conscious choice of further reinforcing the legend of the solitary explorer – always one step ahead of his contemporaries and, thus, condemned through his own exceptional nature to a lifetime of loneliness among people.

The film is interspersed with clues that define it as a hero's journey, the first important hint after the introduction being provided by Freud's admiring words for Charcot, where one can sense that he would like to

speak about himself in those terms (“a genius” capable of “heresy”, therefore necessarily standing out from the rest of the scientists and defining himself through fearless opposition to received views, a revolutionary). Afterwards, the function of punctuating the main moments of the journey is mainly accomplished by his father (“Now, it’s time for you to depart from your loved ones”; “Martha has here a genius, and soon the whole world will know it”), who then explicitly assigns to Breuer the role of protecting and supporting Freud: “With your help, he has nothing to fear.” However, he is not the only helper intervening in key moments: Freud’s hesitations, another typical element of the hero’s journey, are also dispelled by the salutary interventions of Meynert or of Freud’s mother, further detailed below. An interesting trait of some of these supporting characters’ ambivalence, contributing to the mythical aspect, is their functioning both as helpers and as opponents, who test the hero’s aptitude and determination, thus ensuring that he is truly the chosen one for his mission.³ Their supportive role does not diminish the hero’s aura of uniqueness: his “descent to hell”, the initiation alluded to from the very first moments of the film and most explicitly formulated by Meynert (“Go to the heart of our darkness. Hunt out the dragon”), will have to be effected alone; thus, the hero must manifest both the strength of facing the horrors of the inner dark side on his own, as well as that of returning and bringing awareness to the rest of mankind (“Descend to hell and light your torch from its fires”), whose reaction to these revelations might prove as dangerous as hell itself.⁴

2. Influential Figures

The film consists of a series of vignettes illustrating Freud’s main theoretical points, in a more and more dramatic parallelism between the cases of his patients and his own self-observation. The two courses intertwine and combine in the end, suggesting that they mutually support and confirm each other, leading to a common “discovery” based on sufficient study material. This journey is punctuated by Freud’s relationships with his mentors and/or colleagues, an opportunity to provide the audience with amendments or differing positions and to

show the dynamic of the intellectual landscape of Freud's early career. The film focuses on father-figures, Meynert, Charcot, and Breuer alternately holding this role (the ambivalence of collaboration and rivalry seems to contribute to anticipating the depiction of the Oedipal complex: Meynert and Breuer, who are explicitly attributed this part, move in a symmetrical opposition from rejection to benevolence). Their attitude is mirrored by their relationship with Freud and by his feelings towards them: initially, he is respectful towards a mocking, authoritarian Meynert, who ends up revealing his appreciation and calling Freud his "spiritual son" – whereas Freud's initial questioning of his mentor's views turns into an open rebellion before having the revelation of Meynert's approval. With Breuer, the opposite happens: their collaboration begins with mutual admiration and it gradually turns sour, ending in their final adopting separate roads. Charcot seems to keep his privileged position, being presented in the film in terms that seem inspired by Freud's obituary for him⁵: he is "a genius" who stands alone by having "the courage to break with the axiom that thought and consciousness are one and the same" and by daring "to use hypnosis, a heresy in science". However, Freud's telling Cecily, his main patient, towards the end, that they have found a better method than hypnosis seems to cast a shadow on Charcot's influence as well. As Freud declares before the final scene, "the time comes when one must give up all one's fathers and stand alone". His real father is shown mainly as an ambivalent figure: while Freud keeps stating his positive feelings towards him, there is always a shadow of doubt creeping in his immediately following words, leading finally to a full confession of wishing him dead, used as a proof of the universality of the Oedipus complex.

We are also given a glimpse of the role of women in Freud's theoretical advances: his mother shows him support and helps him make up his mind when he decides to leave Vienna in order to attend Charcot's lectures; she seems to act as a translator for the unconscious, by telling him that his decision probably predated his disagreement with Meynert. Later, she provides him with an essential piece in the puzzle leading to the Oedipus complex, by clarifying his memories connected with his fear of trains; starting from there, his self-analysis, mirroring Cecily's recollections, leads him to conclude on the general nature of the child's

“fixation on the parent of the opposite sex” and “jealousy and hatred” towards the parent of the same sex. Cecily’s input, which Freud acknowledges by stating “we’ve found a better method” (moving on from hypnosis to free association, by asking her to “take the censor off guard” and say whatever comes to mind, without omissions) is completed by Martha’s contribution (she is presented as giving Freud the idea of “reversing” the seduction theory and realizing that children must have wanted to seduce their parents, and not the other way around).

3. Types of Discourse

The film insists on Freud’s notion of his views as “scientific”, based on “facts” and aiming at the “truth”. The technical discourse related to psychoanalytical theories is completed by definitions, especially in the second half, concentrating the essence of the cases and crystallizing the evolution of Freud’s thought: the gradual sliding of his interest from hypnosis towards free association, the interpretation of dreams (“Why do you think you dreamt such dreams? Was it to fulfill a wish you couldn’t consciously admit?”) and the Oedipus complex (“Desire for your father, the death wish for your mother”). At the same time, his more and more self-assured position is counterbalanced by the cautiousness consistently shown by Breuer, who also expresses the attitude of Freud’s colleagues (for instance, by declaring that he is not a prude and that he does not deny the importance of sexuality as a contributing factor, but he does not admit it as the only cause of neuroses). He also questions Freud’s tendency to generalize his theories, given the small number of patients serving as their illustration (“a dozen cases”).

An important tendency pervading the film is that of emphasizing Freud’s conviction of the causal link between the repressed memories of traumatic events and the symptoms. This is initially discussed in the Charcot lecture scene, where it is presented as “a mind divided against itself”, and it resurfaces periodically. Later, Breuer explains the origin of symptoms, stating that trauma did not cause the mind to be divided, as Charcot claimed, but that it created “unconscious memories” due to the emotions surrounding the event: “a morbid symptom is only emotional

energy coming out the wrong place”, and Freud compares his “discovery” to Pasteur isolating the germ; afterwards, when Freud wonders why one of Cecily’s symptoms did not disappear, since the “cause”, that is, the memory of the trauma, had been found and made explicit, it turns out that either the memory was still disguised and not entirely available in its true form, or that there was yet another traumatic event hidden deeper into the past.

The science-oriented language is, however, counterpoised by the presence of ambiguity and the possibility of error, leading to Freud’s continuous need to reassess his theoretical positions; throughout the film, there is extensive reference to the propensity of patients towards acting (in the very first scenes, where Meynert disproves Freud’s conviction that the hysterics are really sick: “our paralytic is putting on an exhibition more suited to the Volkstheater”; “Hysteria is another name for lying”; then, Charcot’s conclusion that “the hypnotic state is a counterfeit, alas. It enables us to understand, but not to cure”; several patients reenacting the traumatic scenes under hypnosis; finally, Cecily’s “play-acting” when she tries to retract her confessions).

The ambiguous nature of the “facts” supporting Freud’s theories is also shown to be enhanced by the influence exerted by the therapists on the patients. This is illustrated especially in the scene of Charcot’s lecture, when the assistant tells the patients that they are “on rapport” with the professor or that they are “given over” to him and that they will obey him, but also later on: Cecily tells Freud, when withdrawing her avowal that her father had seduced her, that she “saw in his eyes” that her lie was pleasing to him. On earlier occasions, she had asked Breuer whether her not remembering the traumatic incident was making him angry, and then provided the memory. The depiction of influence gradually moves on to an illustration of transference, initially concerning Cecily and Breuer, and then being directed towards Freud. In the closing scenes of Cecily’s cure, Freud explains it to her by means of the last elements of her dream: “through love (...) you’ll be able to reveal your secrets to the doctor”, accepting her love “as a sacred trust”.

Apart from the confusing quality of the phenomena studied by Freud, the scientific discourse is also paralleled by references to religion, unfolding in two directions: one concerns the nature of hysteria and

hypnosis (Charcot mentions the witchcraft trials and accounts of possession by the devil as providing early records of hysteria and describes hypnosis as “a practice that science has but recently freed from the service of black magic”; his approach is echoed by Breuer after having attended Freud’s first conference, when he confesses having “dabbled in the Black Art, too”), and the second is formulated by Meynert after the same conference (“why this talk of diabolic ideas and the unconscious? Are we theologians or physicians?”). In his last conversation with Freud, Meynert also casts doubt on the nature of the former’s inquiry: after urging him to go “hunt out the dragon”, in reply to Freud’s protests that he is neither an angel, nor a saint, he suggests making “a pact with the Devil”.

4. Role of Dreams as a Therapeutic and Stylistic Device and Conclusion

Among the most striking scenes of the film are the dream sequences, illustrating Freud’s way of interpreting them and their function as instruments leading to the development of other theories. Freud’s dreams contribute to his elaborating the theory of the unconscious and of the Oedipus complex (the two dreams having as common elements the cave, the mother and the snake); Cecily’s more complex dream, termed by Freud “an allegory” and finally analyzed in detail, provides an example for the various aspects of dream interpretation: it includes elements from the previous day (the mother’s haunting words), it uses dramatization, displacement (shifting focus from the latent content of the dream to its manifest content) and condensation (for instance, the red tower, the man or the painted girl⁶). It also functions as a transition towards the free association as the method of choice for exploring the unconscious, instead of hypnosis. It is also worth noting that the techniques of dream interpretation seem to have been used as well as devices in order to include more significant aspects of Freud’s theoretical work in the film: each patient is a combination of several real-life cases; also, Carl von Schlosser, the other important patient alongside Cecily, functions as a reflection of Freud’s

Oedipal tendencies, bringing to the surface his own neurotic manifestations.

The film's progression culminates in the second conference, describing the Oedipus complex and showing Freud as isolated among his colleagues, the object of their collective disapproval and rejection. His advancement towards this position had already been hinted at in the scene of his first conference, but if then the reactions had been mixed, in the end he seems to have created consensus among them concerning his marginalization. If Breuer still gives a favorable account of Freud's personal and professional qualities, he clearly states his refusal of the latter's theory. The ending reinforces the initial heroic image, stressing Freud's role in shattering the last illusions of humanity, as well as the ambivalence of his position, since the light he casts upon the unconscious makes visible a "shadow of doom". Freud's prophetic tone in the conference, extending the Oedipus complex to the whole of mankind and warning of each human being's responsibility for overcoming it, is echoed by the conclusion of the film, which ends on a semi-optimistic note: "Let us hope".

The most pregnant impression given by this portrayal of Freud is that it gave shape to a hero's journey closely fitting the archetypal model, by privileging his insistence on the quasi-general isolation from and hostility of the majority towards an iconoclastic, visionary figure. The redeeming role is assigned to a future where mankind would admit the truth of Freud's insights – thus vindicating all his tribulations and making worthwhile his sacrifice of an easy and rapid professional and social ascension that would have had to be achieved through conformism. This angle seems to correspond to his wish to obscure the roots of psychoanalysis (not only by modifying the accounts of his case-studies, but also, and more revealingly, by destroying his private papers with the confessed view to throw his future biographers off scent⁷). One could say that the reality of the hero's life was immolated to the myth, both by himself and by his biographers, and that this was their way of giving in to a different type of seduction than the one described by Freud – that of creating epoch-making theories and of forever marking people's minds, most strongly suggested by Freud's fascination when attending

Charcot's lectures: it seems that he was the one who had been hypnotized.

Notes

- ¹ Fank Sulloway, *Freud, Biologist of the Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 446.
- ² *ibid.*, 420.
- ³ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 66.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.
- ⁵ Freud et al., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1999), 11-23.
- ⁶ Sigmund Freud and James Strachey, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 324.
- ⁷ Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Norton, 2006), 13.

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