

Seeing Huston's *Freud*

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Ironically, to see this movie about the discovery and undoing of repressions, you need to do some repressing yourself. To see, to really see, John Huston's *Freud*, you need to push out of consciousness two kinds of things that make the filmic values of the movie hard to see. First, gossip. Second, psychoanalysis.

The Film as Event

Gossip first. In this, as in other Huston films (*The Misfits*, *The African Queen*), the offscreen hijinks tend to take over. They're fun, of course--gossip always is--but if you are thinking about Huston trying to hypnotize Jean-Paul Sartre or Montgomery Clift's cataracts, your own eyes will have trouble seeing the movie as movie. Let's get the gossip out of the way.

Huston's decision to have Sartre write the script provides me with the most fun. "Sartre was a little barrel of a man," Huston wrote in his autobiography,¹ and said in his *Playboy* interview: "He was without egotism and was probably the ugliest man I have ever laid eyes on--one eye going in one direction, and the eye itself wasn't very beautiful, like an omelet. And this pitted face."² Huston took Sartre to his castle at St. Clerans in Galway. There, during their story conferences, Huston tried to hypnotize Sartre. He claimed to have learned to hypnotize people while working on *Let There Be Light* (1943), his documentary for the U. S. Army on the treatment of shell-shocked soldiers. Predictably, "It turned out to be quite impossible."³

Sartre's first draft of the script was, in Huston's words, "as thick as my thigh."⁴ It would have made a movie of five hours. Asked to shorten it, Sartre came back with a script twice as long as the first. "*On peut faire un film de quatre heures s'il s'agit de Ben Hur*," grumbled Sartre, "*mais le public de Texas ne supporterait pas quatre heures de complexes*."⁵ The script moreover featured incest, homosexuality, masturbation, prostitution, child abuse. Clearly none of this could achieve commercial distribution in the early 1960s.

After working with Sartre at St. Clerans--listening to Sartre's unstoppable monologues in French is the way Huston remembered it⁶--Huston gave up. He called in Wolfgang Reinhardt, who Sartre said knew more about Freud than Sartre did. And finally he turned to Charles Kaufman to finish the script. (Kaufman had worked with Huston on his earlier venture into filming psychiatry, the 1943 documentary.)

Reinhardt contributed most, but there were endless rewritings during the shooting as various experts put their oars in. Sartre dissociated himself entirely from the final version, although it contained many of his ideas.

In particular, Sartre contributed the excellent scheme of creating a composite patient, Cecily, who could take on story elements from a whole cast of patients (Anna O., Elisabeth von R., Dora, et al.) in Breuer and Freud's *Studies in Hysteria*. Less fortunate was the scene Sartre invented of Freud massaging the buttocks of "une jeune et jolie fille," lying naked (except for her black stockings) under a towel on the canonical couch.⁷ But perhaps the scene says more about Sartre than Freud.

According to Huston, Sartre suggested that Marilyn Monroe play the composite patient, Cecily.⁸ Monroe's analyst (Ralph Greenson?) objected, however, but not on therapeutic grounds. Anna Freud, ever the guardian of her father's reputation, opposed the whole project.⁹

Instead, the part went to the young and inexperienced Susannah York. Her wholesome English look was supposed to carry off repugnant material about brothels, incest, and the like.¹⁰ Unfortunately, she and Montgomery Clift (another self-appointed expert on psychoanalysis) would rewrite scenes or refuse to play them as written. Huston called her "the personification of the uninformed arrogance of youth."¹¹

Clift proved to be the major problem with the film. Huston prized his acting. "It was impossible not to marvel at and admire his talent. Monty's eyes would light up, and you could actually `see' an idea being born in `Freud's' mind."¹²

The eyes seem to me precisely the problem. Clift tries to do Freud almost entirely with his eyes. Now, as it happens, virtually every one of Freud's biographers and memoirists comments on his eyes. Invariably, they speak of his piercing gaze, his fixing stare, or his penetrating brown eyes. Clift's are pale blue, and to me they seem more questioning than fixing, more opaque than piercing. Nevertheless, cinematographer Douglas Slocombe highlighted the eyes.

In 1957, while making *Raintree County*, Clift had run his car into a tree, seriously damaging his face. As a result he was limited to his right profile. Freud's beard helped, but it prevented Clift from using his face for expression. Perhaps that was why he tried to do the part so much by his eyes. Certainly the eyes fit with Huston's symbolism around Freud's "vision" and the "blackness" of the unconscious. Similarly, it had become difficult for Clift to move his body without pain, and he used his hands a great deal to express feelings instead of his body which in the film seems relatively wooden.¹³

Although he knew of these problems, Huston wanted Clift to play Freud, having been pleased with their work together in *The Misfits* (1961). As soon as the company went to Munich to begin shooting in the fall of 1961, however, Huston realized he had a problem. He had bawled Clift out for bedding a visiting reporter (male) while at St. Clerans.¹⁴ Now, they had to pour Clift off the plane. He was drinking heavily, and he was also doing barbiturates and amphetamines. He couldn't remember his lines--or wouldn't learn them, because they didn't suit his idea of psychoanalysis. Huston resorted to cue cards and finally to taping the lines on bottle labels, door frames, and other objects around the set.¹⁵ Clift was suffering from hypothyroidism,¹⁶ which made it hard for him to keep his balance. An accident on the set revealed he had double cataracts.¹⁷ There were disputes about how to play love scenes, whether Freud used notes when he lectured, what Freud's thinking was about repression, oedipus, and the rest.

It got so that as many as forty or fifty takes would be required to get a scene that Huston would accept.¹⁸ "Monty looked intelligent. He looked as though he were having a thought. He wasn't, Christ knows," wrote Huston in his autobiography.¹⁹ But, "I was amazed how good the end result was, because it was really an ordeal."²⁰

The *Freud* company became polarized.²¹ Reinhardt, York, and many of the women on the set took Clift's side. According to the Clift faction, Huston was brutalizing Clift, threatening him with physical violence for not learning his lines, making him haul ropes until his hands bled,²² insulting him publicly, or simply refusing to speak to him. The pro-Clift group claimed that Huston was using the movie to cover up his own repressions, and this was what was causing the

trouble. The production crew working with Huston felt it was Clift who was making the movie impossible, not learning his lines, insisting on rewrites, being drunk or stoned. It is something of a miracle that the movie was ever finished, with so divided a set. The difference persists even to Clift's posthumous biographers. Robert LaGuardia treats Monty as a kind of persecuted saint. Patricia Bosworth tends to take Huston's side.

By the end of the film, Clift had become so ill as to be uninsurable. For that reason, or because his performance on the *Freud* set was so notorious, he got no movie work for the next four years.²³ Not until Elizabeth Taylor put up money for his insurance did he get a serious offer.²⁴

Freud flopped. It had a long run at an art house in New York, and the critics (mostly) liked it, but the larger public gave it a miss. "The box office was decent in the big cities, but poor in the rest of the country, where it counts," reports LaGuardia.²⁵ Nor was it a critical success. Bosley Crowther in the *Times* listed *Freud* as one of the year's ten best,²⁶ but *The New Yorker* disliked Clift's performance, saying that a boyish young American of the nineteen-sixties had little to do with a somber young Viennese Jew in the eighteen-eighties.²⁷ Penelope Gilliatt, writing in *The London Observer* was sarcastic about Clift's "freezing basilisk eyes, which is what commercial filmmakers feel visionaries should have."²⁸ *Time* also spotted the special feature of Clift's acting:

Montgomery Clift has the singular ability to make his eyes light up. This is an enormous convenience in *Freud*. Thinking, after all, does not lend itself to visual representation, and it would have been excessive for director John Huston to draw a cartoon light bulb over Clift's head to indicate inspiration. With Clift's odd physiological talent, however, Huston can show the instant of young Freud's conception of the theory of infantile sexuality, the theory of repression, and the theory of dreams. The technique is to give a generalized cue . . . and then zoom into Clift's lit orbs.²⁹

Predictably, Anna Freud repudiated the film in her most magisterial fashion. "In our opinion neither historic nor scientific truth about the person, Sigmund Freud, or his work, can be or is conveyed by the film, contrary to the pretensions made by its producers."³⁰

Her remark suggests how too great a knowledge of either Freud or of psychoanalysis can put you off from the movie. That is the second thing to be put aside while you watch the film, whatever you know about Freud or early psychoanalysis.

The Film as Psychoanalytic History

The film garbles Freud's life in important ways. It never mentions the six children born to him and Martha during the period, 1885-1897, covered by the movie. Nor his attempt to become famous through research on cocaine. Nor his struggle to advance himself through the professorial ranks. The final, humiliating lecture is a fiction. It was Brücke, not Breuer, who urged Freud into private practice instead of research. And so on. The necessary trimming in a biopic.

More important, the film never mentions the immensely important Wilhelm Fliess, an eccentric physician, whose work survives today as "biorhythms." He became Freud's intellectual confidant, the one individual from whom Freud received uncompromising support as his theories became more and more improbable and intolerable to the average psychiatrist. Most historians of psychoanalysis today believe that Freud had established what amounts to a therapeutic transference onto Fliess, and his letters constituted a form of self-analysis on Freud's part

supported by that transference.[31](#) The omission is the more strange, because the letters to Fliess had been published in German in 1950 and in English in 1954. Since they had been "out" for ten years by the time Sartre began working on the script, he naturally included Fliess in the script. But Fliess was dropped from the final version, compressed into Breuer.

The movie is more accurate in the difficult task of rendering Freud's psychoanalytic discoveries. If we match the sequence in the film against Peter Gay's useful chronology,[32](#) we can see that the writers (from Sartre through Huston) have done a very decent job in taking Freud through the steps of his intellectual quest. I have put on the left the sequence as the film gives it, on the right the dates as given by Gay. The major discrepancy between fact and fiction is, of course, the switch of the first two items. The rest is more accurate.

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|---|--------------|
| Hypnosis as revealing the unconscious (learned from Charcot) | 1885-86 |
| Hypnosis as cathartic therapy (learned from Breuer) | 1880 |
| Development of free association | 1895 (10/15) |
| Dream analysis | 1895 (7/24) |
| "Seduction" (sexual trauma) as cause of neurosis | 1895-97 |
| Abandonment of seduction theory for infantile sexuality as cause | 1897 (9/2) |
| Oedipus complex | 1897 (10/15) |

There are some inaccuracies. In the film, Freud gives more weight to the early mother-child relation than he tended to do in his works. Freud does not use symbolism this much in interpretation until about 1910, long after the period of the movie. He did not become aware of transference--here, the most salient feature of his treatment of Cecily and key to the discovery of his own oedipus complex--until the Dora case in 1900. But given the difficulty of the task, Huston and the writers did quite a creditable job.

Huston had set himself the daunting task of making an intellectual journey cinematic.

It was an intellectual suspense story, and no step in its logic could be removed without affecting the whole. The audience had to be educated during the course of the film, but the educational process had to remain integral to the flow of the story line. . . . Making clear a concept so difficult as the unconscious took some doing. Yet without an understanding of the nature of the unconscious, the story made no sense.[33](#)

Huston's task is all the more difficult because we know--and audiences of 1962 would have known--where it was going to come out. We all know Freud is going to discover free association, how to interpret dreams, and the oedipus complex.

Everybody knows what it means when he drops the watch his father has just given him. Everybody knows what it means when he is angry when his mother goes into his father's bed.

Everybody knows what a "red tower" stands for. How, then, can we feel the "sheet lightning and sulfur" Huston wanted us to feel?³⁴ Huston is trying to tantalize and scare us with a detective story, but we already know whodunnit and how.

Huston faced another problem. The "that's all it is" syndrome. Dr. Richmond at the end of *Psycho* parodies the effect. After we have felt the terror of the film, he comes out and explains it all. Explains it all away, really. "His mother was a clinging, demanding woman . . ." And I think, So that's all it is, and laugh at the smug Dr. Richmond.

Interestingly, Freud himself identified this problem. In 1905 he wrote a five-page essay refining Aristotle's notion of dramatic catharsis.³⁵ He discussed psychological tragedies, and prescribed three conditions for their success in an audience's mind, the last of which is the important one for Huston's *Freud*. "The impulse struggling into consciousness, however clearly it is recognizable, is never given a definite name." The problem for Huston is that that is exactly what his movie has to do. It has to say in so many words the names of Freud's discoveries: repression, infantile sexuality, the unconscious, oedipus, and so on. That's the whole point!

The essay was published posthumously, in 1942. Whether Huston and Sartre knew this essay or not, they succeeded in keeping the mystery prescribed by Freud--in part.

The triumph of Huston's film is that despite all the obstacles in the filming Huston escapes these traps. That is, he does if we heed the film as film. He has left us places for mystery, if we will only put aside what we know of the history of psychoanalysis and its founder, and if we do not look too closely for traces of the hectic conflicts in scripting and acting. Huston wanted his audiences to try to experience the film as an intellectual thriller, and that is **exactly** the way to see it.

The Film as Such

We can begin with the symbolism set out in Huston's prologue: light and dark. This is the story of a man going into a dangerous, dark place. The unconscious is a darkness, "almost as black as hell itself." In the early part of the movie, however, Huston concentrates this darkness on Freud: his dreams and his walks at night as he tries to puzzle out his findings. Darkness is associated with Freud's unconscious.

By contrast, Cecily's scenes are resolutely high key, taking full advantage of York's lush blondness and her white dresses. The only dark spots in these scenes are Breuer and Freud's tailcoats or--more ominously--the figure of her mother dressed in widow's black and knitting like Madame Defarge.

The lighting thus parallels the dual structure of the second half of the film. Once the preliminaries of Charcot and Meynert are over, the film concentrates on two parallel journeys into the unconscious. One is the treatment of Cecily, first by Breuer, then by Freud. The other is Freud's self analysis.

Cecily's discoveries at first reveal her to have satisfied her oedipal wishes. Her father seduced her, and her illness comes from punishing herself. By contrast, Freud's self-analysis reveals that he suffers from guilt for his **un**gratified oedipal wishes, his death-wishes toward his father. It is as though he got the suffering side of the oedipal deal, Cecily the pleasurable.

Gradually, however, her dreams and flashbacks become darker, culminating in her actual visit to

Red Tower Street (the red- light district frequented by her father). There she tries to commit suicide by jumping into the river--complete blackness. Freud prevents her, confesses his own guilt, and their next scene together takes place in the same ordinary lighting as earlier scenes with Martha or Breuer. It is as though Huston (or his cameraman, Douglas Slocombe) worked out in the lighting Cecily's transformation from unnaturally cheery denials and repressions through the gloom of Huston's version of the unconscious to what Freud dryly promised his patients, "common unhappiness."[36](#) Here it is symbolized by the normal gray scale.

Those are two of the three strands of the film: Freud's self- analysis and his treatment of patients. The third is the dominant and over-arching one: Freud's intellectual quest.

In all three, Huston's problem was to render an intellectual quest, one that wants to be told in words, in images suited to film. He chose a metaphorical structure that runs all through our literature, from the *Odyssey* to *Star Trek*:

THE MIND IS A BODY MOVING THROUGH SPACE.

[37](#)

Huston renders Freud's (and Cecily's) explorations of self and childhood as physical movements from one place to another. For Freud the journey culminates in his childhood train trip from Freiburg to Vienna. For Cecily it ends with her sexualized rush into Red Tower Street. And the over-arching plot, Freud's intellectual discoveries, Huston renders as his dark night-time walks as he puzzles through such issues as repression and infantile sexuality. When he and Breuer are sharing insights, they confer outdoors, in an open carriage. When Breuer (or Freud) resist the new theories, they pace back and forth in their studies. They are, as we say, "blocked."

A key symptom leads Freud to his final discoveries in the film. He faints, unable to pass through the cemetery gate to his father's grave. That gate parallels the gate outside of which he had earlier stood when he learned that his patient, Carl von Schlosser, had died, his oedipal wishes forever buried. It parallels the arches under which Freud walked when he pondered the mechanism of repression. That gate is one among many of what Richard T. Jameson calls "yonic arches" through which Freud passes on his way to discovery.[38](#)

In this metaphorical structure, one can render discovery, the passage from one state of mind to another, as the passage from one space to another. The discoverer moves through a gate or door with (Freudianly) sexual overtones as erect human figure passes through yonic arch. Constantly, in this film, characters are moving or trying to move in this fashion.

Practically the first image in the diegetic film is the arrogant Meynert, the man who **knows** it all, striding through a door. The last is Freud, finally passing through the cemetery gate, to stand with his hand on his father's erect tombstone. The first and last images of the whole film make a bracketing statement of the image. These are the gloppy shapes that the camera penetrates as Huston voices over the image the theme of the film: Freud's "journey into the unconscious."

In this context, the film frame itself becomes an image for consciousness. Hence (as pointed out by Richard T. Jameson in his fine 1980 essay on Huston), a certain movement recurs in this film. Freud himself or other people or objects flow into the film frame or fall out of it, as when Cecily fails to walk and slumps to the floor after Breuer's supposed "cure" or when Charcot's male patient collapses, slipping down out of the frame.

There also follows from this metaphorical mind-as-body principle an interest in the physical beings of the characters. We begin with the black-coated bodies of Meynert's medical students contrasted to the half-naked, white-garbed body of the patient spurned by Meynert. He holds a flame to her eye. Freud pushes a pin through her leg. We go on to the tormented bodies of Charcot's hysterics, then the naked chest of the man on whom Freud first tries hypnosis in the basement of the Vienna hospital. This series of images culminates in Freud's memory of seeing his mother nude to the waist, and longing for her "warm body."

Mostly, however, a cover-up morality prevails in Vienna, as when Freud rejects Breuer's offer to give him a physical exam. The interest in bodies subsides to a preoccupation with faces: Breuer's, Meynert's, but most of all Freud's and Cecily's, seen in extreme close-up. In fact, according to Stuart Kaminsky, "The percentage of close-ups in *Freud* is greater than in any other Huston film and almost any commercial narrative. The viewer is assaulted by huge faces: Freud's, Breuer's, their patients'. Backgrounds, when they are seen are clearly symbolic . . ." [39](#)

The substitution of face for body, body for mind, movement through space for movement in thought--there is a pattern of substitutions running throughout *Freud*. We can profit by a technical term from psychoanalysis, **displacement**. Freud's earliest definition of the term was, "Something has been added to **A** which has been subtracted from **B**." [40](#) "Its essence lies in the diversion of the train of thought, the displacement of the psychological emphasis on to a topic other than the opening one." [41](#) In other words, we begin by thinking someone or something is important, then shift to something else. We focus on B, then displace onto A. In fact, one can describe the whole gamut of defense mechanisms as forms of displacement. [42](#)

Richard T. Jameson was the first to point to this pattern of displacement or substitution in *Freud*. "Freud, as quester, will assume the prerogative of stepping obliquely into frame to lead the narrative toward the respective stages of clarification and resolution." [43](#) Jameson goes on to point to a variety of such "exchanges." Moving into the film frame, Freud substitutes himself for Meynert with the first hysteric patient, Freud substitutes himself for Breuer in the treatment of Cecily K'rtner, Freud substitutes himself for Carl von Schlosser in the role of oedipal criminal, and so on.

If anything, however, the pattern is even more pervasive than Jameson indicates. It occurs not only in various into-frame movements or episodes. It runs all through the dialogue and plot. For a sample, consider just the first ten scenes.

The film begins with a series of galaxy-like figures over which the credits appear. As each credit succeeds the previous one, each shape is replaced by another. Huston in voice over speaks of "three major blows dealt us in our vanity" (a key word).

The opening scene of the diegetic movie takes us to Meynert's clinic. Meynert strides in, leading his medical students on rounds. Freud has admitted a hysteric patient, but Meynert angrily dismisses the very idea of hysteria. "Hysteria is another name for lying." (Displacement.) Meynert "disproves" the patient's hysteria by an experiment. Holding a match before her eyes causes her pupils to contract. Freud counters with another experiment. (Displacement.) She feels no pain when he pushes a pin into her leg. Freud takes Meynert's place in the film frame. Meynert strides off with his entourage.

In the next scene, Freud, frustrated at Meynert's dismissal of his ideas, turns to his mother. (Displacement.) He discusses with her the possibility of going to Charcot. "Is Charcot a city or a

man?," she says. (Displacement, as is Freud's substitution of Charcot for Meynert.) Throughout the movie, Freud replaces disappointing fathers (Meynert, Breuer, even his own father) with his mother.

In the fourth scene Freud departs for Paris at the train station. (Freud had a lifelong phobia about trains, which the screenwriters here capitalize on, without commenting on it directly.) As the family clusters around Freud, we hear a voice. It is hard to tell that it is not a train announcer's voice,⁴⁴ but it is Freud's mother's voice rising above the family's chattering. "A day and a night and a day. Sigi cried the whole way home. The train frightened him." Again, substitution. She is referring to another train trip--the filmic origin of Freud's oedipus complex.

Freud's father now gives him a watch that has been passed down from father to son. (Displacement.) Freud gets on board, but when the train whistle blows, he jumps nervously and drops the watch. We need no analyst to tell us the watch substitutes for his father as the object of his unconscious hostility, nor that the elderly gentleman who comments, "An unfortunate accident," is also a father-substitute.

The fifth scene is the long (8« minute) demonstration in Charcot's clinic. Charcot argues that mind can affect body, and body mind, spelling out the narrative and metaphorical core of the film. Charcot's assistants hypnotize two patients, then they turn the patients over to Charcot. (Displacement.) By hypnosis, he removes the paralysis from the woman's legs, then stops the shaking of the male patient. Then, by hypnosis, he makes each patient substitute for the other. The woman shakes, the man is paralyzed! Overtly, the idea of psychic causation replaces Meynert's insistence on physical lesions, but less obviously we are seeing a whole cluster of substitutions.

The scene abruptly shifts to the wedding of Freud and Martha. "She is as beautiful almost as my own Amalia was on her wedding day," says old Jakob. (Displacement.) But what we are also seeing is Freud's wedding himself to research into hysteria.

The seventh scene is the first lecture Freud gives to the medical society in Vienna, reporting what he learned in Paris. The audience is more or less respectful until, in the question period, Meynert dismisses Freud's ideas contemptuously. The rest of the audience follows his lead (substitution). But afterward, Breuer speaks to "the leper" (as Freud describes himself, substituting body for mind). Breuer encourages Freud, telling him of his own use of hypnotism in the therapy of hysteric patients. Substitution again, Breuer for Meynert, Breuer for Charcot, good father for bad. It is worth noting, too, that in Charcot's clinic, substitutions and transpositions are encouraged, while Meynert forbids them.

When in the eighth scene, Breuer takes Freud to visit Cecily K"rtner, we see these displacements in their true psychoanalytic context. Cecily is unable to drink water from a glass. Breuer hypnotizes her, gets her to remember when the symptom began and why, and it stops. It was her dachshund, Schnapps, with his pointed, phallic nose, "defiling my golden cup." Cecily drinks and laughs, "Is that all it is?" Of course, it isn't, but we are not ready for the real sexual displacements yet. (Later, Meynert will nastily offer Freud schnapps in quite a different context--again, displacement.)

The point is, although the characters do not understand it yet, that **anything in our conscious everyday life can be a substitute for some highly charged event in the unconscious past.**

After leaving Cecily, Breuer and Freud explore ideas while driving in Breuer's open carriage.

Breuer announces his theory, that unconscious memories can cause symptoms. A memory becomes pathogenic when it cannot be expressed directly. Freud compares the pathogenic memory to Pasteur's bacillus. (Another substitution, Breuer for Pasteur, mind for body.)

In the tenth scene, down in the basement of Meynert's hospital, Freud tries hypnosis on a man who cannot stop moving his arms in a swimming motion after his brother has drowned. (Displacement: man for brother.) He is interrupted by Meynert's substitute, who forbids him to continue. He threatens to tell Meynert, and Freud replies, "I'll tell him myself." The **locum tenens** replaces Meynert, Freud replaces the **locum tenens**.

Enough. My point is that the pattern of displacement goes far beyond Freud's taking this or that character's place in the film frame. It pervades the film, permeating shot after shot, scene after scene, and especially, in this very intellectual film, line after line of the dialogue.

Moreover, major plot developments hinge on this pattern of one thing taking the place of another. In general, the whole intellectual movement of the film shows that apparent body illnesses, hysterias, are really illnesses of the mind. Charcot and Freud's psychic determinisms replace Meynert and his physical lesions. In general, there is a long sequence of fathers in the film: Jakob Freud, Meynert, Charcot, Breuer. Finally, Freud can do without his father, can be his own father. That is the ultimate emotional displacement in the film.

Intellectually, as psychoanalysis develops, free association replaces hypnosis, another major displacement. As Cecily progresses, symptom replaces symptom. Her therapy consists in tracing back her substitutions to the core figures of father and mother.

Then, when Freud begins his self-analysis, he, in effect, takes Cecily's place as patient. When he does, we find a succession of trains like the succession of fathers. The first train we saw, to Paris, echoed other trains: the train in his dream after his father's death, the toy train he holds as he asks his mother about the trip from Freiburg to Vienna, and finally that train journey which is the core of his oedipus complex. And, of course, the essence of the oedipus complex is the son taking the father's place.

Huston visualizes this theme of displacement in an odd image: Freud walking under a series of arches as he discusses repression. Gates and arches in turn go back, for both Freud and Cecily, to the door to the parental bedroom.

Similarly, in the language of the film, Jameson points out, a key dialogue with Martha spells out the theme. Cecily has taken to sending boutonnières to Freud as she had to Breuer, and Martha sarcastically asks, "Is she in love with you too now?"

Freud: Her attachments are also symptoms. . . . Before me it was Breuer. . . . Maybe we are both reflections of someone else's image, an original love which for some reason she's repressed. I wonder.

Martha: Falling in love a symptom? I thought love was something between a man and a woman who were meant for each other. What about us? Are we only reflections of others in our past?

Freud: It may be you bear a likeness to some image in my heart, some forgotten image.

He then kisses her in the same position, Jameson notes, in which Carl von Schlosser kissed the

dressmaker's dummy that represented his mother.

My point is that, by using this pattern of displacements, the film embodies what I think of as its own vision of Freud's discoveries. The film develops a conception of psychoanalysis, namely, that psychoanalysis shows us the unconscious **substitutions** that rule our lives. Psychoanalysis is the discovery and thereby the undoing of those displacements to find the original object. Finally, as the movie's Freud says in his break-up with Breuer, "The time comes when one must give up all one's fathers and stand alone."

Yet that noble self-assertion sits oddly with Huston's own claims about the picture. "I had hoped," Huston wrote in his autobiography, "that the picture would send the audiences out of the theater in a state of doubt as to their own powers of conscious choice or free will, an understanding that their conscious minds played only a minor role in many of their decisions."[45](#) His Freud seems to proclaim--and achieve--exactly the opposite.

Huston tells us in the voice-overs at the beginning and end-- and he himself speaks them in his own voice--that Freud succeeded magnificently. In what way? Huston echoes a claim made several times by Freud.[46](#)

Huston says that Freud is the author of one of the "three great changes in man's idea of himself, three major blows dealt us in our **vanity**." First there was Copernicus, then Darwin, then Freud (each displacing the other, incidentally).

"Before Copernicus we thought we were the center of the universe, that all the heavenly bodies revolved around our earth. But the great astronomer shattered that conceit, and we were forced to admit our planet is but one of many which swing around the sun, that there are other systems beyond our solar system and myriad worlds." We lose our **conceit**. We lose our singular, central position. We inhabit one planet among many.

"Before Charles Darwin man believed he was a species unto himself, separate and apart from the animal kingdom." Here, too, we lose singularity. We are subject to evolution "whose laws are no different for us than for any other form of animal life."

Finally, Freud. "Before Sigmund Freud, man believed that what he said and did were the products of his conscious will alone. But the great psychologist demonstrated the existence of another part of our mind . . ." Again, we move from "will alone" to more than one part of the mind.

The three illusions rested on the idea that mankind is something singular. All three disillusionments replace that singularity by a plurality.

Freud wrote of blows to narcissism or self-love. His word was **Eigenliebe**. Huston's word is **vanity**,[47](#) and it occurs only once in the more than two hours between the opening and closing voice-overs, in a mysterious scene between Meynert and Freud. Meynert is dying and has sent for Freud. He confesses that he abused Freud, because he himself is a hysteric, and he was afraid he would be exposed. He even admits to a hysterical paralysis of his right arm. (The gesture is that of Michelangelo's *Moses*--a touch from Sartre.[48](#)) Earlier, Meynert had said none of this was to be let into the light. Now, dying, he urges Freud to descend into hell "and light your torch from its fires." Interestingly, it is in this scene with its many father-references that Meynert admits, "You were my spiritual son."

Meynert confesses, sadly, "My life has been a sham . . . I suppressed my real being. Result? I am

dying in a state of pride and ignorance. **It is not I who lived my life but another, the creation of my vanity.**" To a psychoanalytic psychologist, this is a striking anticipation of Winnicott's false and true selves or Balint's "basic fault," but even more apropos, I think, is Helene Deutsch's concept of the "as if" personality.

Meynert's "vanity" seems to mean the mask one puts on to meet the world. It is the mask that conveys the illusion that you are not neurotic, that you control your destiny, that you are not subject to the forces of darkness--or earliest childhood. By "vanity," then, I think Huston means something slightly different from Freud's self-love in the three blows to human narcissism. I think he means that we have to give up the idea that there is anything unique in us, in our humanness or our individuality. Huston's three blows all involve **replacement** of man's **singular** position in cosmos, animal kingdom, or mind.

Similarly, we have to abandon the illusion that there is but one unique satisfaction of our desires. We have to substitute. We have to displace. We have to accept other satisfactions, willy-nilly, for what we value as personally central. Everything we think most important is a displacement from something we do not know.

I suspect, however, that this conception of psychoanalysis says as much about Huston as it does about Freud or psychoanalysis.

John Huston the Man

The "as if" personality is

. . . typified by the quality of appearing as if emotionally involved--as in love--although actually lacking that capacity. The `as if' personality may appear normal to the casual observer, displaying emotions of love, sympathy and understanding, but his relationships and affective responses remain superficial. The disorder is based on a lack of stability in the earliest object relationships, . . . Relationships are inconstant and based on an incomplete **identification** rather than object love; they remain at the level of satisfying the person's own needs rather than those of the object. . . . There is enormous suggestibility, and kaleidoscopic changes in behavior reflect a labile shifting from one object, social group, or cause to another.[49](#)

If Meynert is a hysteric, Huston is a classic case of "as if."

This is his summing up of his life from the opening paragraphs of his autobiography:

My life is composed of random, tangential, disparate episodes. Five wives; many liaisons, some more memorable than the marriages. The hunting. The betting. The thoroughbreds. Painting, collecting, boxing. Writing, directing and acting in more than sixty pictures. I fail to see any continuity in my work from picture to picture--what's remarkable is how different the pictures are, one from another. Nor can I find a thread of consistency in my marriages. No one of my wives has been remotely like any of the others--and certainly none of them was like my mother. [**Certainly--NNH.**] They were a mixed bag: a schoolgirl; a gentlewoman; a motion-picture actress; a ballerina; and a crocodile.[50](#)

They are all interchangeable, and he seems to care as little or as much for any one of them as for

any other.

Sartre wrote to Simone de Beauvoir, "Huston used an odd expression to describe his `unconscious,' when speaking of Freud: `In mine, there's nothing.' And the tone made his meaning clear: nothing **any longer**, not even any old, unmentionable desires. A big void. . . . "[51](#)

Again, Huston summed up his life in the closing paragraphs of the autobiography:

So there you are, for what it's worth. The whole story has not been told, of course. I've refrained from making any dark disclosures regarding my secret life. My misdeeds are not sufficiently evil to justify their being put on display. They are insignificant. Damningly so. On the other hand, I haven't recounted some of the more decent things I've done. They, too, lack sweep and magnitude. They are about on a level of insignificance with my wrong-doings. There have been times when I confused the two lists: found myself cringing at the memory of a good deed and glowing at the memory of a bad one.[52](#)

In *An Open Book*, Huston gives just one dream:

My only recurrent dream is one in which I'm ashamed of being broke and having to go to my father for money-- something that happened only a time or two, and then he pressed the money on me. There was an instance when I was flat-assed broke and didn't go to him and, when he found out afterward, he was deeply hurt. Why, then, should I have that dream in which I feel weak, dissolute, and shiftless? it doesn't match up with anything, symbolically or otherwise. It's a random dream . . . [53](#)

Not quite, I think. Wouldn't it make sense to read the dream as John Huston's wishing for something that would make him **not** "flat-assed broke[n]," **not** "weak, dissolute and shiftless"? Isn't John Huston asking for something which is not money, but solidity or stability from the vanishing figure of Walter Huston, actor?

The early chapters of the autobiography give ample evidence of a shifting population of mother, father, aunts, uncles, and grandparents to all of whom the boy was shuttled. Father and mother were both actors playing multiple roles, and other important relatives were performers, too. The book itself consists of anecdotes about this or that escapade or film--all given equal weight.

Although he is one of the great moviemakers, Huston was notoriously feckless about final editing or otherwise polishing his films. "The idea of devoting myself to a single pursuit in life is unthinkable to me. My interests in boxing, writing, painting, horses have at certain periods in my life been every bit as important as that in directing films."[54](#) This is what he had to say to the *Playboy* interviewer about his directing:

HUSTON: I'm a bold visionary with other people's work. I haven't originated my films in any true sense. As for the acting, that is largely the work of the artists themselves. Just as I had done with many other actors, I often said to Albert Finney and the others, "Work something out; I'll leave you alone." I'd leave them for an hour or two and they'd come up with something.

[INTERVIEWER]: Isn't that a favorite expression of yours: "Work something out"?

HUSTON: Yes. And if they are the right people playing the part, what they choose to

do is right, as a rule, and that's a great help. It's a practice of mine to get as much out of the actor as I can, rather than to impose myself upon his performance.[55](#)

According to Anna van der Heide Freeman, who played the part of Grete Hübner in *Freud* and became Huston's companion for two years afterward,[56](#) another favorite Huston word was "caper," Huston's term for the reckless, often physically dangerous practical jokes and pubcrawling escapades he went for. "For besides having talent and fighting ability, he has nothing to lose but his hide, and he has never set a very high value on that," wrote James Agee in the first review to recognize Huston's genius.[57](#)

According to Freeman, Huston was by nature polygamous. He liked to have a girl in every country. Sometimes he would have wife, long-term mistress, and current liaison all at St. Clerans at the same time.

Similarly, in episode after episode of his films, we see that human beings or what they desire are endlessly substitutable. I am thinking of "Miss Wonderly's" multiple identities or Sam Spade's rapid-fire suggestion of different "fall guys" to be offered to the police (*Maltese Falcon*). Or the substitution of boxers in *Fat City*. The put-together gang in *Asphalt Jungle*. The shifting of lovers in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* or the change in Rose's values in *African Queen*. The change in final goals in *Treasure of Sierra Madre*. The fluid relationships of *Red Badge of Courage*.

Could this sense of the substitutability of things underlie Huston's effort to change even the very stuff of which films are made--film? I am thinking of his well-known experiments in tone: the golden amber in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*; the black and white negatives sandwiched onto the film to make the woodcut look of *Moby Dick*; the "Brady look" of *Red Badge of Courage*; the attempt to duplicate Toulouse-Lautrec's palette in *Moulin Rouge*. In *Freud*, we have the use of exaggerated contrasts between high key and low key scenes and the use of high contrast film stock for the dream sequences. This is how he phrased what he was doing in *Moulin Rouge*: ". . . this unique use of color was the best thing about the film. It was the first picture that succeeded in dominating the color instead of being dominated by it."[58](#)

It's as though if something counts, it dominates. It takes over. So nothing counts. The last dialogue between Freud and Cecily is suggestive.

Freud: Cecily, you are not guilty. Or if you are, your guilt is shared by every human being. The innocent is born into a world in which it cannot help but lose its innocence. Every child is foredoomed to become a sinner. I sinned too. I dreamed of killing my father.

Cecily: Then you were a monster too.

Freud: No, I was a child.

We are all equally innocent, and equally guilty, like John Huston with his interchangeable good deeds and bad.

Yet I do not wish to overstate the pathology in Huston's life. No one would deny that Huston had a marvelously good time living, and he was immensely successful financially and artistically. If he was an "as if" personality, he made it work beautifully for him.

Furthermore, the idea that central to human life is a pattern of substitutions sits oddly with what

other critics have identified as Huston's basic theme. Andrew Sarris notes a "remarkably consistent" theme: "His protagonists almost invariably fail at what they set out to do, generally through no fault or flaw of their own."⁵⁹ David Thomson discerns "this pattern of some great undertaking coming to grief," "glory briefly held before it turns to ashes."⁶⁰

Georges Sadoul finds, as a "constant theme," "the importance of a struggle despite the inevitability of failure."⁶¹ Even Robin Wood, after dismissing Huston as a "humble storyteller" without any significant pattern in his work, acknowledges the non-conforming individualist, his final isolation, and the unfulfillment of love.⁶² Peter S. Greenberg asserts as Huston's "traditional" themes, "the strengths in weak men (*Wise Blood*) as well as the weaknesses in strong men (*The Asphalt Jungle*)."⁶³

Richard Schickel was eloquent on Huston's themes in his obituary:

His coolly objective camera hunkered down in the middle distance, watched all kinds of people--the shrewd and the slow, the mad and the merely mistaken--set aside their better natures in order to embrace their greediest impulses. If they mostly came to a bad end, there was neither bitterness nor self-pity in the way they accepted the consequences of their actions. And, sometimes, adventures put the light of self-transcendence in their eyes.⁶⁴

Jameson's phrasing is the tightest, however. He calls the Huston theme, "the necessity of action and its inherent futility" or "the Quest after a no-longer-holy grail, in a world ruled less by Fate than by a peculiarly wry order of dumb luck."⁶⁵

If Huston's theme be a quest by a strong, isolated, but failing individual, Freud in this picture, how does that relate to the idea of substitution? I see the two themes coming together in Huston's answer to an interviewer's question. Having agreed that Tennessee Williams was a genius, interviewer Lawrence Grobel asked, "What is a genius?" "Someone," Huston replied, "who sees things in a way that illuminates them and enables you to see things in a different way." This is precisely Huston's displacement theme for Freud, even to the light and dark imagery ("illuminates").⁶⁶

Freud's quest is heroic because he enables us to see ourselves differently. We are not unique. We are only "reflections of someone else's image," a substitution for a substitution for a substitution . . . Human life is an endless series of displacements from what we really, really want. And if we can't have that, does the rest matter much? Do **we** matter much? Or, as Huston himself wrote, "The pursuit of the quarry is when a man is most alive. The rewards or the benefits or the conclusion isn't all that important."⁶⁷ You have to keep trying, even though success is not a matter of your striving, but chance. It seems to me this is the opposite side of the theme in *Freud*: displacement and substitution seen, looking, not at the object, but at the desirer.

My point about seeing *Freud*, the movie, then, is finally that it is a tremendous success--if you look straight at it. I think that it is not only an extraordinarily good film as a visual experience, as acting, as structure, but it also embodies a highly personal vision of psychoanalysis and its founder. My vision of Huston's vision in *Freud* is that psychoanalysis reveals human life as an endless series of displacements from what we really and originally desire and seek. It is a vision that profoundly expresses Huston's own "as if" view of life. Huston is indeed an **auteur**, a genius,

at least by his own definition. He enables you and me to see Freud and psychoanalysis in a strikingly new, but highly intelligent way.

Notes

1. John Huston, *An Open Book* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 295.
2. [Lawrence Grobel], "Playboy Interview: John Huston," *Playboy* 32 (September, 1985): 63+.
3. Huston, *Open Book*, 286.
4. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Le Scénario Freud* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 10. *The Freud Scenario*, trans. Quentin Hoare (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), viii.
5. Sartre, *Le Scénario*, 10; *Scenario*. viii.
6. Huston, *Open Book*, 295.
7. Sartre, *Le Scénario*, 129; *Scenario*, 109.
8. Sartre, *Scenario*, viii.
9. Huston, *Open Book*, 301.
10. Robert LaGuardia, *Monty: A Biography of Montgomery Clift* (New York: Arbor House, 1977), 240.
11. Huston, *Open Book*, 301.
12. Huston, *Open Book*, 302.
13. Patricia Bosworth, *Montgomery Clift: A Biography* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 310, 366, and 397.
14. Bosworth, *Montgomery Clift*, 363-64. LaGuardia, *Monty*, 234.
15. Huston, *Open Book*, 301.
16. Bosworth *Montgomery Clift*, 369.
17. LaGuardia, *Monty*, 247.
18. LaGuardia, *Monty*, 241.
19. Huston, *Open Book*, 302.
20. [Grobel], "Playboy Interview," 67.
21. Judith M. Kass, *The Films of Montgomery Clift* (Secaucus NJ: Citadel Press, 1979), 88.
22. LaGuardia, *Monty*, 243.
23. LaGuardia, *Monty*, 259.

24. Bosworth, *Montgomery Clift*, 401.
25. LaGuardia, *Monty*, 256.
26. LaGuardia, *Monty*, 256.
27. Kass, *Films of Clift*, 207.
28. Kass, *Films of Clift*, 207.
29. LaGuardia, *Monty*, 256.
30. Kass, *Films of Clift*, 208.
31. Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Psycho-analysis: Letters to Wilhelm Fliess, Drafts and Notes: 1887-1902*, ed. Marie Bonaparte, Anna Freud, and Ernst Kris, trans. Eric Mosbacher and James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1954), see Kris' Introduction.
32. Peter Gay, "Sigmund Freud: A Chronology," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989), xxxi-xlvi.
33. Huston, *Open Book*, 303-4.
34. Huston, *Open Book*, 297.
35. Sigmund Freud, "Psychopathic Characters on the Stage," *Standard Edition*, trans. and ed. James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), 7: 303-10.
36. Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, "Studies on Hysteria (1893-95)," *Standard Edition*, 2: 1-305, 305.
37. `Cognitive linguists' who analyze such structures are George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, and Mark Turner. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Mark Turner, *Death is the Mother of Beauty: Mind, Metaphor, Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Reason and Imagination* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
38. Richard T. Jameson, "John Huston," *Film Comment*, May 1980, 25- 56, 51.
39. Stuart Kaminsky, *John Huston, Maker of Magic* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), 140.
40. Sigmund Freud, "Project for a Scientific Psychology," *Standard Edition*, 1: 283-397, 350.
41. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, *Standard Edition*, 8: 9- 236, 164.
42. Norman N. Holland, "Defense, Displacement and the Ego's Algebra," *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 54 (1973): 247-257.
43. Jameson, "John Huston," 51.

44. Walker and Waldman report the voice as non-diegetic, a voice-over. Janet Walker and Diane Waldman, "John Huston's *Freud* and Textual Repression: A Psychoanalytic Feminist Reading," *Close Viewings: An Anthology of New Film Criticism*, ed. Peter Lehman (Tallahassee FL: The Florida State University Press, 1990), 282-99, 288.
45. Huston, *Open Book*, 303.
46. "A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis" (1917), *Standard Edition* 17: 135-144, 140-42. "The Resistances to Psycho-Analysis" (1925), *Standard Edition* 19: 213-224, 221. "Lecture XVIII: Fixation to Traumas--The Unconscious," *Introductory lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1917), Part III, *Standard Edition* 16: 243-463, 284-85.
47. It is a sufficiently odd choice to have led to an amusing "Freudian slip" by two of the more astute commentators on the film. Krin and Glen Gabbard misheard Huston's closing voice-over, "In them [the words 'Know thyself'], lies the single hope of victory over man's oldest enemy, his vanity." They report this as "man's oldest enemy, his *family*." There is a Freudian truth in that, to be sure! *Psychiatry and the Cinema: A Dual Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 115.
48. Sartre, *Le Scénario*, 41; *Scenario*, 18.
49. *A Glossary of Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts*, ed. Burness E. Moore and Bernard D. Fine (New York: American Psychoanalytic Association, 1967), s.v. 'As If' Personality.
50. Huston, *Open Book*, 5.
51. Sartre, *Le Scénario*, 11; *Scenario*, viii.
52. Huston *Open Book*, 373.
53. Huston, *Open Book*, 5.
54. Huston *Open Book*, 361.
55. [Grobel], "Playboy Interview," 67.
56. Interview, 20 Jan. 1993, with Anna van der Heide Freeman.
57. James Agee, *Agee on Film* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1958), 331.
58. Huston *Open Book*, 211.
59. Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 157.
60. David Thomson, Review of Lawrence Grobel, *The Hustons*, *New Republic*, Jan. 29, 1990, 202.5: 39(4).
61. Georges Sadoul, *Dictionary of Film Makers*, ed., trans., and rev., Peter Morris (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), 119.
62. Robin Wood, "John Huston," *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary: The Major Film-makers*, ed.

Richard Roud, 2 vols. (New York: Viking Press, 1980), 1: 513-17, 514.

63. Peter S. Greenberg, "Saints & Stinkers: Director John Huston Talks . . .," *Rolling Stone*, 19 Feb. 1981, 21(7).

64. Richard Schickel, "Wicked Gleams of the Good Life, John Huston" (obituary), *Time*, 7 Sept. 1987, 130: 64(1).

65. Jameson, "John Huston," 33, 26.

66. [Grobel], "*Playboy* Interview," 63.

67. Gerald Pratley, *The Cinema of John Huston* (South Brunswick and New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1977), 216.

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