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MEDIA REVIEW

We come to bury Freud, not to praise him: A film review of *Freud's Last Session*, directed by Matt Brown, starring Anthony Hopkins, Matthew Goode, and Liv Lisa Fries (2023)

ROGER WILLOUGHBY 



Anthony Hopkins as Sigmund Freud in *Freud's Last Session* (courtesy of Patrick Redmond and © Last Session Productions Ltd).

Freud was not a fan of cinema or of his would-be biographers and we might reasonably assume he would have cast an at least equally jaundiced eye on cinematic Freudian biopics. If he had troubled himself to follow this sub-genre of films, he would have had plenty of material on which to reflect: there have been perhaps 150 portrayals of Freud in cinema internationally (Schwartz & Qedar, 2025). It is doubtful whether any of these offerings would have prompted Freud to change his views on the subject.

The latest film in this category, *Freud's Last Session*, written primarily by Mark St Germain and directed by Matt Brown, was initially released in June 2024. It is a very disappointing work, involving at best an ungenerous reading of Freud, which too often descends into a hostile attack on Freud's character, utilizing a hotchpotch of poorly digested biographical claims. The film itself followed St Germain's 2009 stage play of the same name, which in its turn had been inspired by Armand Nicholi's 2002 book *The Question of God*. Freud

met an Oxford don when he was living out his final days in London, having escaped Nazi Vienna in June 1938. Nicoli had imagined the *supposedly* unnamed academic might have been the Christian apologist C. S. Lewis, and St Germain took this idea up in his stage play and the subsequent film, setting the action over a single day, September 3, 1939, the day Britain entered World War II. Situating the story on that day, and a mere 20 days before Freud's death, was a plot device intended to ratchet up the wider contextual tension and to inflect the portent of the Freud–Lewis debate: on the existence or otherwise of God and on the nature of good and evil.

St Germain's stage play had restricted its focus to that *imagined* encounter and it attracted positive attention in both critical and analytic circles. Lewis scholar Sørina Higgins, for example, described it as "brilliant" (2010, p. 157) and stated "it is certainly a portrait of Lewis as we imagine him to be" (2010, p. 160). In her *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association (JAPA)* review, Julie Nagel declared that the play was a "tour de force" (2012, p. 884). More recently, in his podcast interview with St Germain, Harvey Schwartz stated, "you really captured his [Freud's] spirit beautifully, his humour, his brilliance, his self-importance, his enjoyment of intellectual jousting" (Schwartz & St Germain, 2023).

Matt Brown's film kept the play's title, the main plot, and much of St Germain's dialogue, whilst adding a *fictionalized* sub-plot about Anna Freud, Dorothy Burlingham, and their supposed love relationship. In contrast to the stage play, the film offers its audience a domestic and often petty Freud, without any sense of greatness (never mind genius), while C. S. Lewis is the younger, privileged and imaginative outsider, untroubled by science, ready for viewers to identify with.

The film begins with a somewhat reluctant Lewis making his way to London, having been invited by Freud to meet with him at his new home at 20 Maresfield Gardens. Arriving late due to disrupted rail services, as trains took evacuee children from London and their parents to places of imagined safety, Lewis meets the elderly Freud, who we soon learn is terminally ill with cancer. Expecting a dressing down for his brief portrayal of Freud as "Sigismund Enlightenment" in his 1933 satirical novel *The Pilgrim's Regress*, Lewis is wrong-footed when Freud says he hadn't actually read the book. They are soon in a well-trodden though sometimes animated debate about the existence of god, within which analagous father–son relationships and the meaning of human suffering assume prominence. Both men are portrayed as disappointed by their actual fathers, while mothers (and women more

generally) occupy a less tangible, parallel realm. Indeed, homosociality – for both men and women – is a foregrounded feature of relationships in the film. Their encounter is punctuated at various points by occasional flashbacks and fantasies, by Freud tuning in to BBC radio news broadcasts about the outbreak of the war, telephone calls with Anna during which Freud demands analgesics and her return from lecturing at the Institute of Psychoanalysis, and a visit from Ernest Jones who wanted Anna to accept both an appointment at a "first rate" psychoanalytic facility being established in the unlikely environs of Bury, near Manchester, and his romantic advances.

More dramatically, air raid sirens prompt Freud and Lewis to seek shelter with others in the crypt of a local church, in the course of which Lewis has flashbacks to traumatic experiences in the First World War and Freud is able to help him with grounding exercises. This frees up the subsequent dialogue somewhat, which edges more toward personal rather than theological questions, cowardice and control, suicide, and understanding versus faith. As a counterpoint to Lewis's meeting with Freud, we are shown Anna meeting with Dorothy Burlingham at the Institute of Psychoanalysis, their implied lesbian relationship stifled by Freud's supposed anti-gay attitudes and compounded by his controlling and enmeshed bond with Anna. An unnamed psychoanalyst at the Institute challenges Anna's compliance with her father's request to interrupt her class in order to bring him painkillers, suggesting she has a "compulsion" and an "attachment disorder." Dorothy echoes this shortly afterward, declaring that if one of Anna's patients showed such "co-dependency," she would "diagnose them with an attachment disorder." Back at Maresfield Gardens, Jones hammered this line home to Freud, declaring that Anna – cured through her analysis (with Freud) – previously had a "complex" which stemmed from "an unhealthy paternal attachment."

During Jones's visit, Lewis was charged with walking Freud's pet chow, Jofi, around a local park, at the end of which we see a poster advertising a lecture Freud was to have given on 8 September 1939 about his recent book *Moses and Monotheism*. With a "postponed" label pasted across the poster, tellingly we are shown Jofi urinating at its base. Back at the house, Jofi now won't approach Freud, who explains to Lewis that he is suffering from oral cancer and the dog recoils from the smell. Having shown Lewis a mask of the Greek god of satire, Momus, Freud angrily challenges the place pain, suffering, and death may have in Lewis's supposed conception



The film poster for the United Kingdom release of *Freud's Last Session* (courtesy of Vertigo Releasing).

of god. And he specifically demands: Is cancer god's revenge on me for my lack of religious belief? And what was the point of the deaths of Sophie and Heinz? Lewis attributes man's suffering to man, while embracing god as a mystery. He goes on to criticize Freud for selfishness in planning to end his own life and for concealing his existential terror beneath intellectual constructions. Freud reminds Lewis of his own earlier terror during the air raid alert and declares we are all cowards in the face of death. The film now reaches its main crisis point as Freud begins to bleed from his mouth and ineffectively struggles to remove his oral prosthesis. Lewis helps him in its traumatic and bloody removal, clearly a quasi birthing scene. What, we may ask, was being born? A hard, artificial, horrific, masculine psychoanalysis, perhaps? Overwhelmed, Freud indicates his feeling that it was a close-run thing: "Well the monster nearly won, the little bastard." The sound of aircraft engines then intrudes. Freud says "bombers." Lewis goes into the garden and identifies them as British transport planes. Both men remark that they were afraid, ostensibly at the prospect of being caught up in an air raid, though the preceding experience of the prosthesis

birthing scene seems the more palpable cause. With this shared male intimacy, the men part on friendly terms, Freud giving Lewis a Christmas present, a copy of *The Pilgrim's Regress* inscribed "From error to error, one discovers the entire truth, Sigm Freud." It is, tellingly, a fictitious quote: there is nothing like this in Freud's writings or correspondence.

As Lewis leaves, Anna returns with Dorothy and both face Freud and sit on his analytic couch, holding hands. The women gaze in silence at Freud who looks back and nods, as if in recognition and acceptance of their relationship, his marginalization and his own impending passing.

Elsewhere, Jonathan Shedler has commented on a common if not hegemonic view of psychoanalysis as "outmoded, discredited, and debunked," with prevalent "pejorative stereotypes and caricatures" being "fueled by misinformation" (2022, p. 405). In *Freud's Last Session* the misinformation abounds and compounds the discipline's image problem. A few examples will here have to suffice to illustrate the many inaccuracies and distortions in the film. Freud did meet an Oxford don, though his identity is neither a mystery nor C. S. Lewis: it was Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997). A

brief account of Berlin's visit, in the late spring of 1939, is preserved in the Library of Congress. In the film, Freud perversely appears rather sprightly for the most part and free from florid suffering, his repeated calls for analgesics appearing efforts at control rather than prompted by severe pain. In reality, by 3 September 1939 Freud was tired and weak, losing weight as a result of cancer cachexia, and was largely bedbound on an invalid couch which had been set up in his study. His cheek, discolored due to skin necrosis, became gangrenous and decomposed, resulting in a hole into Freud's oral cavity at this time. The stench from this and the underlying bone necrosis was now very unpleasant, and with flies being attracted to the wound, mosquito-netting was put around Freud's bed to keep them at bay (Willoughby, 2024, pp. 190–192). Eliding the reality of Freud's serious illness and suffering permitted an imagined image of Freud to be more easily used and abused. It is not, after all, good form to kick a man when he is down.

Freud's doctor, Max Schur, rather than living elsewhere as the movie suggests, had moved into Freud's house on 1 September 1939 to better assist him. Freud's dog, Jofi, who takes a prominent role in the film (not least in urinating at the foot of Freud's lecture poster, a telling joke), had in fact died in January 1937. It was Jofi's replacement, a chow called Lün, and a Pekingese named Jumbo, that kept Freud company to the end, though at a distance (as the film shows) due to the fearful smell. Rather than being homophobic, Freud was at pains to challenge such contemporary biases, prevalent in an era when homosexuality attracted severe social and legal sanctions. This particular issue is one of several trenchant lines of critique advanced by Craig Harshaw (2024) in a blistering review in *The American Psychoanalyst*. With Anna, her portrayal is particularly two-dimensional in the film and most readers will find the pathologizing claims about "attachment disorder" historically out of place. And Dorothy of course was not present in London when the film was set, having sailed on August 25, 1939, for New York as she wanted to be present there when her granddaughter was born.

Given that the film is historical *fiction*, some might suggest the above catalogue of errors rather misses the point of the film and that a deeper truth is being pointed to. That Freud is portrayed as mean-spirited, sarcastic, petty, and embittered, as homophobic and controlling, some might say, is to fail to distinguish a film character from a historical person; that the two may be perceived independently of each other. Yet this is to deny the powerful

hegemonic sway of film and media culture today, in a world of post-truth and alternative facts, where *Freud's Last Session* may be the first and only introduction many in its audience have to Freud and to psychoanalysis. Many will not identify the errors and hostility in the film or may be reassured actually of its relative accuracy by the imprimatur of the Freud Museum London, who are credited with providing design and historical research services. We should thus not be surprised to find shrapnel from the film bolstering prevailing pejorative anti-Freudian and anti-psychoanalytic stereotypes. As a tiny harbinger of this, readers may readily observe the fictitious "from error to error" quotation already proliferating as a supposed fact on the internet. Bion (1965, p. 38) asserted that healthy mental growth depends on a diet of truth and that in its absence the personality deteriorates. Too much in *Freud's Last Session* offers audiences and the wider culture an adulterated and, indeed, toxic view of Freud and, by extension, of psychoanalysis. Silence is not an adequate response in such circumstances.

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Roger Willoughby is a clinical psychologist, historian of psychoanalysis, academic, and writer. He is Fellow of both the Royal Historical Society and the Royal Society of Arts and holds doctorates in psychoanalytic studies from the University of Kent and the University of Oxford. His books include *Masud Khan: The Myth and the Reality* (Free Association Books, 2005) and *Freud's British Family: Reclaiming Lost Lives in Manchester and London* (Routledge, 2024), as well as papers in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, the *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, and elsewhere. He is a co-founder and editor of historiesofpsychoanalysis.com.