

Discussion of the film, *Nineteen Nineteen*
For: The Center for Jewish History's "Psychoanalysis and Film" Series
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Nineteen Nineteen
Directed by Hugh Brody
Screenplay by Hugh Brody and Michael Ignatieff
British Film Institute (1984)

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Thank you for that very kind invitation/introduction.

Hugh Brody's film, *1919*, is a meditation on memory and history. It is about intimate personal memory and historical memory. It is therefore very close to psychoanalysis, a discipline and a treatment steeped in work with memory and history. I see the subjects of *1919* as memory, history, and time. Its title designates a time. The lives and memories of Freud's two former patients are deployed as means with which to explore memory, history, and time.

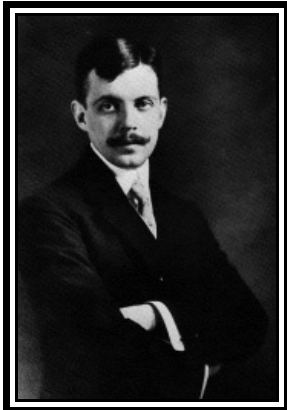


Figure 1 - Pankieff as Pankieff (ca. 1910).

As is probably familiar to everyone here, the film's two major characters, Sophie Rubin and Alexander Sherbatoff, are closely modeled on two patients of Freud's. Freud published his work with Sophie as the case of the homosexual woman and Sherbatoff's as the case that later became known as the Wolf-Man, a Russian aristocrat whose real name was Sergei Pankieff.



Figure 2 - Colin Firth as Sherbatoff

The published screenplay begins and the film ends with this disclaimer:

"'Nineteen Nineteen' is a work of fiction inspired by case histories written by Sigmund Freud. It does not purport to represent actual relationships between Freud and any of his patients."

While apparently a legally-inspired disclaimer, these few words at the beginning of the published screenplay sum up a most important problem. If the film does not represent "actual relationships between Freud and ... his patients," what then does it represent? What then are "actual relationships"? Are there any other kinds of relationships than these "actual" ones?

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One of our best psychoanalytic writers working today is Thomas Ogden. In a recent paper (Ogden, 2005) he struggles, without fully succeeding, to distinguish clinical psychoanalytic writing from fiction. Freud, in writing his famous case of Dora, reflects explicitly on the likeness of his case reports to the works of “imaginative writers,” and adds that they “do not bear the serious stamp of science.” In fact, Freud’s written clinical notes were never recorded during the sessions themselves. Freud counseled against this practice because of the impact of the act of recording on the treatment.

So, accurate recording – and memory involves a form of recording – of the psychoanalytic relationship is not possible. Nonetheless, Freud would make his notes on his sessions after his clinical workday was complete, in the evenings. And this, presumably, is what he did in the cases of the Wolf-Man and the homosexual woman.



Figure 3 - The Wolf-Man's Famous Painting of his Famous Nightmare.

In the case of Pankieff-Sherbatov-Wolf-Man there were additional considerations: Freud saw his analysis of this patient as a powerful weapon deployable in his intellectual battles with Jung and Adler. The Wolf-Man case would provide definitive evidence of the existence not only of sexuality during childhood, but of conflict over those sexual interests, conflict that resulted in neurosis. As a consequence of Freud’s focus, in writing the case he erased most evidence of the adult he was analyzing. The reader of “From the history of an infantile neurosis” learns almost nothing about the man who was Freud’s patient between 1910 and 1914.

Yet despite Freud’s apparent lack of interest in Sergei Pankieff, *the man*, it turned out that Pankieff was the only one of Freud’s published cases for whom significant long-term follow-up was later to become available. Pankieff lived to be 92, continuing throughout the remainder of his life to be a person of great interest to psychoanalysts.

Freud analyzed Pankieff for about 5 years between 1911 and 1914 and wrote the case history “shortly after the termination of the treatment, in the winter of 1914-15.” As indicated in the film, when he first presented himself Freud regarded him as at the time “entirely incapacitated and completely dependent upon on other people,” an assessment with which Sherbatov, now in his “middle sixties,” takes pointed exception. Freud also regarded the end of the treatment as coinciding with his recovery (Gardiner, p. 154). Sherbatov’s view on his having been cured is more ambiguous. To the television interviewer’s question he avers that he had been cured in the sense of having converted his “hysterical misery into everyday unhappiness,” adding edgily, “What else is possible? He ... was a great man.” (Brody and Ignatieff, pp. 20-21). But to Sophie he bitterly rejects his own words:



Figure 4 - Sherbatoff and Rubin (Scofield and Schell).

- AS: He thought my problem was in my mind, in my childhood. You read what he said about me? That when I first came to him I couldn’t even dress without the help of a servant? That I couldn’t put on my own trousers? ... A complete fabrication. He wanted to believe that I owed everything to him.

- SR: But on the television you said...

- AS: (*Mockingly*) The television... So what about the television? (B & I, pp. 30-31)

If we reflect at this point on the problem of memory, it is apparent that we have at least four stories here: (1) first, we have whatever Pankieff told to Freud on that October day in 1910, (2) second, whatever Freud heard and recorded that evening on paper, (3) third, Sherbatov's words 40 years later, praising Freud the treatment to the television interviewer, and (4) fourth, Sherbatov's subsequent bitter reflections on Freud's self-aggrandizing "fabrications." I could add a fifth layer, because in 1971 Muriel Gardiner – an analyst and longtime friend of both Pankieff and psychoanalysis, wrote that "The Wolf-Man himself is convinced that without psychoanalysis he would have been condemned to lifelong misery." (Gardiner, p. vii)

Returning to the film, let us note Sherbatov's ironic mocking of Freud's celebration of his b "breakthrough to the woman." Quoting Freud, Sherbatov remembers, "Bravo, Alexander, you have made the breakthrough to the woman." (B & I, p. 66) After describing Nina's (Therese Keller's) suicide, Sherbatov adds (looking "hanuted and deranged"),

- AS: We were married for twenty years. In the same bed. Night after night. (*Wildly*) I never had any desire for her. Do you understand that? I had to make myself. I loved her. And now he adds, "with the bitterest irony":

- AS: The breakthrough to the woman. (*Suddenly shouting:*) What woman? What breakthrough? Remember. Just remember. That's what he said! It doesn't make any difference! (B & I, pp.73-74)

It is at this moment that Alexander attacks his memories, his photographs, mementoes, brick-a-brac, sending all these precious possessions crashing down onto the floor. But it is also true that in 1951 Pankieff remembered the following about Freud and "the breakthrough to the woman:"

- SP: "I perceived at once that Freud had succeeded in discovering an unexplored region of the human soul, and that if I could follow him along this path, a new world would open to me... For Freud the 'breakthrough to the woman' could ... be considered the neurotic's greatest achievement, a sign of his will to live and an active attempt to recover..." (Gardiner, p. 138)

And in 1973, when he turned 86, the Wolf-Man met Karin Obholzer, a young Austrian Journalist who was assuredly not a friend of psychoanalysis. Over the next few years Obholzer, recorded her conversations with Pankieff, at first from her memory, then with a tape recorder. (The tape recorded material, however, was not printed in its entirety.) Pankieff was at first entirely against being interviewed by Obholzer, but soon his interest grew. Then, according to Obholzer's report, he said he would need to seek the permission of Muriel Gardiner and Kurt Eissler before agreeing. That permission was denied him in 1974 in a telegram from Gardiner who urged him not to give any sort of interview. But Obholzer persisted, obtaining Pankieff's cooperation only on the condition that she not publish any of it until after his death.



Figure 5 - Pankieff (the Wolf-Man) at 86 with Karin Obholzer.

In watching the film *1919* the viewer experiences a remarkable layering of history and memory, in which contradictions, reinforcements, supplements, and downright confusions (*e.g.*, the question of Nina's Jewish heritage) are taking place all the time. This is of course a part of the experience of psychoanalysis itself. In the film there is the narrative present, in which

Sophie, moved by the televised interview with Alexander – and perhaps subliminally by its Post Raisin Bran commercial depicting a joyful relationship between a little girl and her Daddy – to attempt to revisit her past. She returns to Vienna, but finds that “everything has changed.” Not so, says Sherbatov, “Everything is the same.” He adds, “What do you want from me?” She replies: “To remember.” (B & I, pp. 25-26)

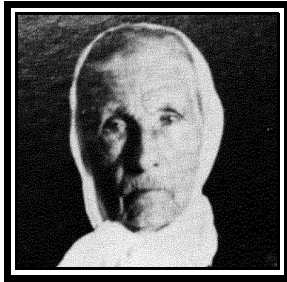


Figure 6 - The Wolf-Man's "Nanya."

It is indeed the impulse to remember the past that drives the film forward. Because he had so publically been Freud's “most famous patient,” Sherbatov had been asked to remember many times before. But before he had always been plumbed for his memories of Freud. In 1951, in fact, Pankieff published “My recollections of Sigmund Freud,” not under his own name but under the *nom de plume*, The Wolf-Man. By now he is fed up with performing this service of remembering Freud. He calls his remembering his “circus act.” “I'm tired of it... I'm a relic... What's the point of it? What was ever the point of it? And now you.” She replies, “I'm different from the others. I was there. You're the only one left I can talk to.”

As John Berger observed, the film achieves a truly remarkable interweaving of the various layers of time, memory, and experience.

The first layer is that of “the day an elderly man and woman spend together,” – the present. The second layer holds Sophie and Alexander as young adults, analysts of Freud's. The third layer is that of childhood. The fourth is the realm of world historical events.

In addition to these there are others.

There is Sophie's and Alexander's psychoanalytically-recalled or reconstructed pasts, pasts not recalled *by* them, but rather “constructed” by Freud *for* them. For Sherbatov/Pankieff, it is Freud's insistence upon his memory of having witnessed his parents having sexual intercourse, from behind, three times, at 5 PM, wearing white pajamas, at the very moment when his childhood malarial fever was spiking, after which he passed a bowel movement – at the age of 1 ½ years... or, wrote Freud, at 6 months, or perhaps 2 ½ years. For Sophie, it was the memory of the father she had adored as a girl, not the father she later hated as a war profiteer. There is each of their dream time. For Sophie it is teasing Freud with an image of him rising from the waters, “surfacing in her dream.” It is Sophie, deceiving Freud. For Alexander, it is the widely known nightmare of being fixed in the gaze of the arboreal white wolves.

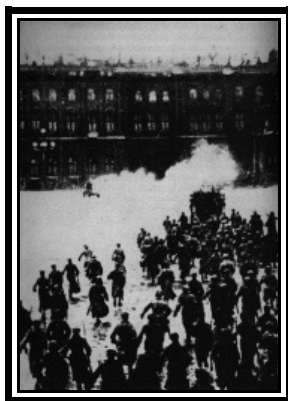


Figure 7 - Storming of the Czar's Winter Palace.

We see old black and white movies and stills from the age of the Czar, with its comfortable aristocrats and wizened peasants. We see a front in The First World War that separated Pankieff from his beloved Therese Keller and from Freud. We see the Bolshevik revolution that separated Pankieff from his vast fortune. We observe the rise of Hitler, the *Anschluss* of 1938, and Hitler's triumphal limousine ride into Vienna. We see Second World War footage, the German occupation, the Soviet occupation. Each of these loomed large in the world of Sophie and Alexander, but their memories of each could not be more



Figure 8 - Platoon of Red Army Cavalry.

different. For Sophie “Everything has changed.” For Alexander “Everything is the same.”

Freud wrote that the Wolf-Man’s principal complaint involved his constipation, a symptom refractory to analysis until he promised to cure him of it. Then according to Freud, this symptom first joined in the conversation that was the analysis and finally was cured. Not so, remembered Pankieff now nearly ninety years old, nearly 70 years after the analysis. The symptom was only briefly ameliorated and continued to recur for the rest of his life. Freud made too much of it. He hadn’t

been cured at all.

Dr. Mack – Ruth Mack Brunswick – then a student and analysand of Freud, treated Pankieff for 5 months beginning in 1926. She published her version of the famous case. She diagnosed Pankieff as suffering from paranoia. She wrote that she cured him with psychoanalysis. Not so, said Pankieff, according to Obholzer, more than 60 years later. Analysis had nothing to do with it, he told Obholzer. The real reason he got better was that he believed that she was wrong in her diagnosis. He knew that patients with paranoia never recovered. He therefore had set about to recover, and succeeded in doing so, as an act of spite: to prove Dr. Mack wrong.

In the end, we must acknowledge that Hugh Brody’s disclaimer is correct. His film *cannot* represent “actual relationships between Freud and any of his patients.” And yet it *does* seem to represent these relationships as well as has anyone who has tried to do so, including Freud himself, Pankieff, the Homosexual Woman, Ruth Mack Brunswick, Muriel Gardiner, and Karin Obholzer. What Brody (and Ignatieff, together with their remarkable cast) have succeeded in representing – to a truly astonishing extent – is a vision of the complex intertwining of current experience, personal memory, and world historical events.

References

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