

# Nexflix's *Freud* – An Interview with Writer Benjamin Hessler

by Karen Dougherty

IPA Social Media Committee

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**Karen:** Hello, Benjamin. Thank you for speaking with me today. You have a built-in, natural audience for the eight-part Netflix *Freud* series in the international psychoanalytic community. The IPA, as you may know, was founded by Freud in 1910 – about 25 years after the action in the series takes place. We take our Freud seriously. We can also be somewhat possessive and territorial; you may come to discover. Freud has been quite used and abused, especially since the “Freud Wars” starting in the 80s or so.

**Benjamin:** Well, the series was not made for psychoanalysts but a much broader audience. And it is not about psychoanalysis, *per se*. *Freud* features the young man, 30 or so, who hopes one day to be famous. He has just returned from Paris, where he has been studying hypnosis with Charcot. He is brimming with ideas and brings them back to Vienna. Curiously, Freud burned a lot of his papers from this time in his life, he says in a letter to Martha [Bernays, his then-fiancée], “I’m going to burn all these papers--and I hope the biographers have a hard time with this period in my life.”<sup>1</sup> So he left an island in his biography, and we just go ahead and say, what we depict in our show, that’s what happened there. It’s not entirely impossible!

**Karen:** That brings me to one of my questions. Which sources did you go to for information about his life?

**Benjamin:** Well, the Freud literature fills shelves and shelves, doesn’t it? And I believe, for factual reference, I tend to be catastrophic with titles and names, sadly, but it’s Peter Gay [*Freud: A Life for our Time*]?

**Karen:** Yes. Peter Gay’s biography...

**Benjamin:** I think yes. It’s a huge tome.

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<sup>1</sup> “I have destroyed all my notes of the past fourteen years, as well as letters, scientific excerpts, and the manuscripts of my papers. As for letters, only those from the family have been spared. Yours, my darling, were never in danger. In doing so all old friendships and relationships presented themselves once again and then silently received the *coup de grâce* (my imagination is still living in Russian history); all my thoughts and feelings about the world in general and about myself in particular have been found unworthy of further existence. They will now have to be thought all over again, and I certainly had accumulated some scribbling. But that stuff settles round me like sand drifts round the Sphinx; soon nothing but my nostrils would have been visible above the paper; I couldn’t have matured or died without worrying about who would get hold of those old papers. Everything, moreover, that lies beyond the great turning point in my life, beyond our love and my choice of profession, died long ago and must not be deprived of a worthy funeral. As for the biographers, let them worry, we have no desire to make it too easy for them. Each one of them will be right in his opinion of ‘The Development of the Hero,’ and I am already looking forward to seeing them go astray.” Freud, S. (1885). Letter from Sigmund Freud to Martha Bernays, April 28, 1885. Letters of Sigmund Freud 1873-1939, 140-142.

**Karen:** It's the gold standard.

**Benjamin:** It's a huge tome. And, let's say, the discussion on the scientific level, the discussion of Freud's legacy and the anti-Freud, there's a book that I read, it's called *The Anti-Freud*. I don't know if it's part of what you call the Freud Wars in the '80s. It probably is. It's like a very, very, very comprehensive take-down, very polemic and aggressive in a way that took me aback. The three of us [Marvin Kren – who else?], now, we can't claim our show is basically based on this or that book or on those two books or so. We put everything we found in drop-boxes. We weren't very academic in our footnote and citation strategy. So really I would be at a loss if you asked me now. If you watch the series, and then you ask me, "Where did you get this piece of information from," or, "What did you base this hypothesis on," I would be hard-pressed to answer that, I think. It's just a giant cloud. What became so apparent is that it is so incredibly difficult to imagine a world without Freud, it's impossible to take Freud out of our culture. What's even left? It's like one of those figures or one of those ideologies or thought systems that have influenced culture so much that it would definitely not be the same thing if that hadn't happened. So this was something that became so apparent. It's like the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon applies a thousand-fold with Sigmund Freud because suddenly, you see that there apparently really is a Freud cartoon in every New Yorker. He's just everywhere.

**Karen:** It's true. And so what do you think of as his major contributions in terms of ideas?

**Benjamin:** I feel it's not my place to answer that. But of course, well, he gave us a handy metaphorical system. He gave us language or a system of metaphors we can use to talk about ourselves, I think, to talk about our psyches, if you will. I believe that is a large part of his contribution to the everyday life of the everyday person today. Very many people have a vague idea of the id, ego, and super-ego, and even without their knowledge, it's what I was trying to describe just now, even without their knowledge, it has influenced everything that they soaked up. The entire culture has integrated this idea into its whole.

**Karen:** And, of course, the Unconscious!

**Benjamin:** Yes, of course, yes.

**Karen:** Which must absolutely, again, not having seen the series, but must be essential to the story, because you've got Freud as a detective? Is that right?

**Benjamin:** We actually don't have Freud as a detective. Something about putting it this way feels wrong to me because that feels a bit easy. Okay, we have Sigmund Freud, he's a psychologist. We have basically a sub-genre of crime fiction, which is psychologists profiling and hunting criminals. And now are we going to do this with Sigmund Freud? That seems exactly the thing that we *didn't* want to do. So our show is not that, I think. Because that has been done, I don't know if you know *The Alienist*?

**Karen:** Yes.

**Benjamin:** Yes, and that is the show. And I think it's based on a series of books that pretty much does this, so the character in *The Alienist* is heavily inspired by Freud, I think. And if I'm not completely mistaken, it is claimed that he's a pupil of Freud that came out when we were already really deeply at work, and that just reinforced our decision not to go that route. So if this is what you expect this, it's a good thing because you will be, I think, pleasantly surprised by our show.

**Karen:** Interesting.

**Benjamin:** The Unconscious is very much on our minds, because that's exactly the point in Freud's life when he came up with that concept, and that is the moment in Freud's life when he came back from Paris. Charcot had made him obsessed with hypnosis. And it's basically the moment where Freud comes back to Vienna and really wants to become the big new superstar with this new French idea of hypnosis, which is, of course, something that Theodor Meynert and Freud's peers or the people he wants as his peers really looked down upon him. And this is the moment when we meet him. So, you have possibly seen the trailer?

**Karen:** Yes, I have.

**Benjamin:** The audio of the trailer, that is a monologue—which I'm still very, very happy that I came up with it—in which Freud basically describes his idea of the Unconscious in a metaphorical way. I don't suppose Freud himself would have spoken metaphorically, but we needed to have an easy-to-grasp metaphor for the Unconscious, to tell the audience early in the show, what is this guy about? Because of course, we're talking about Freud like he's our best friend, but that's not true for everybody, and this is really not true for everybody we want to reach on Netflix. Let's be honest. And mainly actually this is a show that is supposed to entertain ideally millions and millions of Netflix viewers, so we have to be a little careful with Freuding it up too much.

**Karen:** And so that's one way, monologue, words, story, but what are some of the other more maybe ineffable or enigmatic ways that you threaded the idea of the Unconscious through the series?

**Benjamin:** Yeah, oh, my God, I could think about this probably for the rest of my life, because the Unconscious... Finding a way to visualize the Unconscious in a movie, in a film, in a television series, I think the problem with that is that the movie, the television series, the moving image itself is sort of not quite consciousness, it is sort of in itself a dream, a dream-like state. I believe Freud late in life actually called, I don't know which novel, possibly a Schnitzler novel, he called it a form of day-dreaming. So he was very aware that we can consciously and voluntarily delve into this semi-conscious dream-like state of perceiving, of letting fiction into us, basically. And going to the movies, that's something that, I suppose, that has been really talked about in psychoanalysis too, that this is a very comparative state to being under hypnosis

or dreaming, etc. So you have this problem that if you want to depict in a visual medium this other place, the Unconscious, your problem is that you're basically already in that place in a way.

I mean, watch a Hitchcock movie! It looks like a film version of some depictions of dreams that Freud has put on paper. And the traditional way, I think, would have been to say, okay, there's this one level, there's this one world of our fictional universe, that is the reality. And then there's that other place; there's like a door you have to go through or like a state you have to enter or something. And that's that other place, that is the Unconscious that you want to show the world in a different way. But that sounds attractive, or that sounds like it's easy to be done, but then you'll find it has been done so often. It has been done starting in the first, in the very, very first silent movies.

This is basically one of the main features of this art form, to open up this possibility of changing a plane of existence or going into another world. And if you watch modern television series closely, you will find that very many of them, so many that I find it interesting as a cultural phenomenon, actually, have that element, this other world, another state you can go into, like *Stranger Things*? I don't know if you've seen that. If you've seen that.

**Karen:** Yes.

**Benjamin:** So we have in our show, I don't know, the strategy is a bit different because we don't say, okay, this is the real reality, because of what is that even? And then there's this door you have to go through. Our show, what you see there is the reality, but it is at the same time, also the perception of the characters. What we always aimed at, which is a very high aim, so it has probably not been reached all the time, is that there's a certain uncertainty, a certain uncertainty in the viewer: what are the rules of this world, or is this reality, is this the real reality in a 100% kind of way, or are our dreams breaking into it, or our secret desires being visible on screen right now, I'm not even aware. So, it's a very... I think it's... For many people, it will be challenging to watch this, I think.

**Karen:** Well, and I think too, I know because of the trailer that you've threaded the uncanny very consciously into the series. It would be so easy in some ways to go over the top with sort of like the Unconscious hitting you over the head, unconscious, dream-like Salvador Dali type stuff. You could do that, but I guess you have to figure out a way to show this uncanny world without it being sort of cliché, but still getting into the weird psyche of the time.

**Benjamin:** Salvador Dali, that's a great idea, actually, but also budgetary constraints would make something like that very, very difficult! But of course, you're right, I agree with you. And the uncanny, if I remember correctly, Freud defines the uncanny as something that is familiar and unfamiliar at the same time, that is familiar and *strange* at the same time. And I think he meant it, if I remember correctly, he meant it like childhood beliefs that you have overcome. It's like the momentary hesitation if perhaps the supernatural exists?

Karen: You're talking [Tzvetan] Todorov, I think?

**Benjamin:** Yes, that's it, yes. Todorov, oh, I absolutely love Todorov. And I've always struggled understanding the difference between Freud's idea of the uncanny and Todorov's idea of the Fantastic, because I couldn't pin down the difference, really, because they both argue that the uncanny, respectively the fantastic, is something very fleeting, something that only exists in a short moment of hesitation where you're not sure what if something is actually happening and if something is scientifically explicable or not.

**Karen:** Yes. With the exception of some very particular works, like *The Turn of the Screw*: for Todorov that's perfect, you're *left* in hesitation, you *never* know. You were brought there, and you are kept there in a very particular state all the way through and then left thereafter. That's one example.

**Benjamin:** I believe the most recent work of fiction that Todorov even talks about is an Edgar Allan Poe story, and that's a shame. I really would have loved to read his thoughts. He died only recently, didn't he? I would have loved to read his thoughts on the great works of the uncanny of the 20th century. But yes, *Turn of the Screw*, I remember that he was obsessed with that. I would probably also add "The Fall of the House of Usher" to that list, because that is also one of the stories that you can read like 500 times and you cannot really say, okay, this and this happened, and I got this and this argument for it because every other argument counts just as much. But coming back to *Freud*, this is of course like making a movie or writing a story, indeed, like Henry James did, that contains a few moments of the uncanny or the fantastic. This was a masterclass in that. And it's really not easy to do! And this was a bit of the goal in *Freud* because... Well, I hope you watch it. I hope you like it. And you will see that especially in the beginning of the show, we try to keep this hesitation boiling on low heat and yes, and we also hope very much that our solution, in the end, is just as surprising and entertaining to you as it feels to us.

**Karen:** And the team, I understand, is German and Austrian?

**Benjamin:** Indeed, yes.

**Karen:** Having made one of the psychoanalytically necessary pilgrimages to Vienna a couple of years ago, I stayed in a hotel very close to Freud's apartment and his haunts. I was trying to absorb the city that produced Freud and psychoanalysis. And it was so interesting and vivid and palpable. Now I know that you didn't shoot in Vienna, but I was reading an interview with one of your collaborators, and he said, "For the Viennese, Freud is in our genes, he's in the city, he's in our blood, we can't know Freud, we *are* Freud," something to that effect. So that was partially the inspiration for the series, Vienna itself? How did it play into your writing?

**Benjamin:** I hear Marvin saying that and he's not wrong, but I will always add to that, that I think, although the Austrians or the Viennese, of course, have a certain claim, and I completely understand a certain possessive of Freud, but I think what exactly what he said is true for

everybody in the world. Freud cannot be separated from, not only from the Viennese, and Freud has been... It was not of his own volition, but he has been cosmopolitan throughout his life, and it is the Austrian possessiveness, of course, I'm not going to try and take it away from them also, but the couch and the famous set-up with the couch everything and all the knick-knacks is in London, I think. I sort of hope that the world does not perceive him and our show and the Freud in our show as a very particularly Viennese phenomenon, although we do depict and lovingly and lusciously create a very specifically Viennese world that he moved around in at that time, and certain other plot elements of the world and elements of our world-building are very specific to Vienna and that very specific time at the end of the 19th century. So he's right, but it's not the whole story. I think Freud is in everyone's genes.

**Karen:** Yes, and we're seeing it spread even further. Psychoanalysis is now, more than ever before, a global phenomenon that's taking root in China and Africa and Korea, and especially Latin America.

**Benjamin:** That's interesting.

**Karen:** It is! Psychoanalysis is not dead.

**Benjamin:** No, no, no. No, no, how could it? No, no, how could it? No.

**Karen:** And you mentioned the couch, the couch is still used, people still come, I see people three, four, five times a week on the couch here in Toronto.

**Benjamin:** Do you see the same people four or five times a week?

**Karen:** Yes.

**Benjamin:** So there are patients that come to you four or five times a week?

**Karen:** Yes.

**Benjamin:** It's something that I only thought of pretty late in the game to ask myself what does psychoanalysis, as opposed to psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, even look like today? I talked to a psychoanalyst, and this whole concept of seeing your psychoanalyst so often, that was really new and a bit strange to me, and it's a bit alien to me, but I suppose it's necessary or it's helpful.

**Karen:** Well, it's a very different place in the culture from when Freud created it. It's akin now, I think, to any slow movement, a kind of return to authenticity. It's one of the few places that you can't bring your cell phone; you don't have screens four times a week. I was going to ask you if you had been on the couch yourself; if that was something that you would be open to disclosing, but it sounds like that's not something that you've done.

**Benjamin:** Oh, I haven't done it. I'm absolutely open to disclose that I haven't done it, and I would be open to disclosing if I had done it, because of course, intuitively, it feels like something I would like to do. Because when do you ever have the opportunity to sort of, to even think about yourself as much? I don't even have the time to think about myself as much, and to experience this in a guided fashion; this is something I would be very interested in doing. And then at the same moment, I've got to say it feels kind of narcissistic a bit. So it feels like something... It feels like a desire I shouldn't have, which is probably the wrong way to think about it.

**Karen:** It's a side we shouldn't have? So what would Freud say about that?

**Benjamin:** Yes, what would Freud say about that? Yes, but I believe that Freud himself actually assumed or Freud's idea of psychoanalytic practice was not that, I think. I think he said, oh, we can do that in a couple of weeks. It was really not something that should take so long. I think we should meet a few times, and then this should be done. That's something I've read... One of the things I've read somewhere that I couldn't tell you where.

**Karen:** Throughout his life, he saw people, I think, for increasingly longer periods and certainly the people he trained or the people who were his acolytes saw people for longer. But you're right, psychoanalyses, in the beginning, were certainly not four or five, six years, four or five times a week, and they're not always that long now, but they certainly can be, and really Oliver Sacks, for example, famously did analysis on the couch for decades.

**Benjamin:** He himself as a patient?

**Karen:** People would ask him, "What on earth are you doing? Why would you do that? How can you do that? What's that for?" And he would say, "Well, I go because it's helpful, and I go for as long as it's helpful."

**Benjamin:** Oh, good, alright.

**Karen:** Yeah, it's something about having a witness to your own process and thinking that can be very... You hear yourself in a different way. That alone is really valuable, especially to artists. I work with a lot of artists, and it is helpful for their creativity.

**Benjamin:** Oh, I can see how that might be possible. Yes. Well, my feeling is that at a certain point in the creative process, which is of course, always a process that is psychologically and psychically very exhausting, there's a certain point in that process where I have to fiercely protect myself against sharing what's inside of me. I don't know if I can put it any better. I feel something is being created, something is being birthed that is incredibly fragile, and sharing too much about it would be detrimental, which is possibly not true and possibly just neurotic, but that's my feeling towards that.

**Karen:** The analyst is sort of a function.

**Benjamin:** My understanding is that Freud developed the idea of the couch because he didn't want to look at his patients. Isn't that true? Because he himself found it mentally too exhausting to always have this contact and probably because he at times even he zoned out.

**Karen:** Well, I think you mentioned earlier the sort of dream-like state... The couch hasn't really been theorized as much as you might think. We seem to hold it in esteem, but you're right, the way that it came about was Freud didn't want to be stared at for all those hours every day. It was tiring for him. But he did find in not sitting face to face and in listening that he could get himself into the state of evenly hovering attention, he called it, but also kind of a reverie, where he was able to pluck out unconscious particles and bits and weave them together in a way that allowed him to then make an interpretation that showed something to the patient about the way they functioned. And so for him the couch became quite helpful in entering and staying in that state, and he thought too that its regressive nature allowed the patient to enter into a kind of more freely associative state.

**Benjamin:** Which is most certainly true, of course. It is a form of social stress to talk to someone in the sense of having him look at you, of course. I think this whole set up makes a lot of intuitive sense. It is featured only once in our show because as a matter of fact, I think he only developed those ideas much later, but it would not have been complete. A show about Freud would not have been complete without the couch in some form, but we don't make a big thing out of it.

**Karen:** How is the couch then presented in the series, if I may ask? The couch itself, because as you say it came later.

**Benjamin:** Really, it is only a side gag; it's only a visual gag. It's not something that is being discussed or in any way developed; that and the cigar. Those are the two things that everybody expects. The cigars that are sometimes only cigars. But a couple of minutes ago I mentioned that much abused and much used and overused word narcissistic. And that is another important moment in the creation of our show. That was when I read anecdotally that Freud, at age 30 or even younger, apparently, again another quotation that I can't pinpoint now, apparently he wrote to someone or he mentioned to someone, and that was then recorded, that he believed that in a house that he lived in there will be a brass plaque one day. Memorializing this as the place where Sigmund Freud had this and that idea. This is like a such a typical anecdotal quotation from a famous person, so you just read it, and you're, "A-ha." But we were forced to really think about everything that we read... I became sort of obsessed with that, because what kind of a dude is that? Who actually says something like that out loud? And it's very possible that it was sort of a joke, like in a self-deprecatory way, like hubris but ironically performed. If I said it, that will be how I mean it. But we don't know that we can't be sure about that, so my idea was, "What kind of a dude is that?" If I met someone who said something like that and didn't mean it as a joke, what would I think? How hard would I roll my eyes? And that made him incredibly interesting to me. And also incredibly impressive, because we have here someone who, as a young man, basically decides, "Okay, I'm going to be a

monument. I'm going to change the world," and then he goes ahead and *does* it. And he does it in a way that is so conscious of his own image and so controlling of his own image, and it still works. He's still controlling his image.

**Karen:** Yes.

**Benjamin:** He had it all completely worked out just the way he wanted it.

**Karen:** Right.

**Benjamin:** And I believe he would be thrilled if he saw our show.

**Karen:** Do you? I was just going to ask you. If Freud were a viewer, how would he feel about it?

**Benjamin:** Oh, I think he would high-five himself all the time, because... What more can you want? From a 2020 perspective, only from a 2020 perspective, what more can you want? How much more important for a culture can you get than there's a Netflix show about you? At this moment in time in our culture. [laughter]

**Karen:** What that means is that you don't have to explain who Freud is. In other words, everyone knows the word. They may not know everything that it means. They may have the caricature because of *New Yorker* cartoons and *Mad Men* and Woody Allen, and so on, but they certainly know Freud.

**Benjamin:** Yes.

**Karen:** Right? The name Freud, the word Freud and what that brings up.

**Benjamin:** No. I'm going to be honest about this. That is of course one of the big economical reasons why this is a good idea, because you have an IP, basically, yes? You have a brand. You have a global brand. And that's true on the one hand, but then if you think about it a little in more detail, you will find, well, it's not that easy because, in fact, there are many people that you do have to explain to who Freud was, even if they have the vaguest idea.

**Karen:** Yes.

**Benjamin:** But that is why we took great pains. We use Freud's iconic stages, the fact that he is a brand name, and we use it for our purpose of entertainment. But that's of course not the only thing we wanted to do because then you would have gotten to a point where it would've been kind of... It wouldn't have mattered that it's Freud. And you could have just taken any kind of any person and he could have solved the cases. So this was important for us to be specifically Freudian too. And that entailed of course explaining to the audience what the great revolution that he caused entailed. And that is so difficult. That is so difficult because we can't really... We

can't go back to pre-Freudian times. You can't put the viewer in a pre-Freudian state of mind so that he can really appreciate the revolution that Freud brought about. But we tried anyway.

**Karen:** Well, I really look forward to seeing this series, and as I said, we're going to solicit reviews from psychoanalysts, so get ready!

**Benjamin:** They will be... I don't think the tenor of those reviews, especially considering what we talked about right in the beginning, I don't think the tenor of those reviews will be all that friendly, because we didn't approach Freud with too much respect, I would say. What I just said about his narcissistic tendencies or the kind of self-regard that he had, that has consequences for the character Freud on our show, of course. He is *that guy*, in a way. So maybe, especially your colleagues, of whom you say that they are fiercely protective of him, maybe they will get to minute seven or something before being heavily insulted. But maybe if they keep watching, then they will end up with a more friendly view.

**Karen:** Well, that's what we'll ask people to do; to watch the whole thing!

**Benjamin:** That's good. Yes. That's good. It's good for our completion rate. That's what it's called.

**Karen:** Yes, not the first seven minutes, but the whole thing. Stay in there, and keeping an open mind, and understanding that something that takes Freud and uses Freud in this way, in the culture, is good for psychoanalysis in general. Those are my thoughts, not having seen it. Who knows, I may have a different idea after I see it. I doubt it. My idea again is sort of like, and it's okay to have fun with Freud. Freud is a part of us all. And so, I assume that we're going to get some reviews that are positive and friendly and some reviews that don't want the cocaine-fueled Freud to be the Freud that people have in their mind.

**Benjamin:** You have to take a step back and look at the complete picture. And I don't think the cocaine-fueled, crazy Freud... That's not even our invention. That's been done, and that's been done in novels and films 50 years old. So I think in the complete picture, our Freud, as you say, may perhaps contribute to a renewed fascination with that character and with everything that he brought into the world. I would hope so. But our Freud is incredibly good-looking. [laughter]

**Karen:** I love it. I mean, not that he wasn't good looking. I'm not saying that!

**Benjamin:** He was! Absolutely, he was good looking, but our Freud really looks like a superstar. [laughter]

**Karen:** Polish up Freud, and we'll polish up psychoanalysis and see where it takes us. And perhaps you'll even consider, now that we've talked about it, trying out the couch yourself.

**Benjamin:** Oh, I would love to. I would absolutely love to as soon as I have messed up my kids enough. [laughter] When they're a little older, and I have more time, then that's what I'm gonna do. Absolutely, I would love that.

**Karen:** Okay, well, thank you so much, Benjamin. I really appreciate this, your time.

**Benjamin:** Great talk, great talk. Thank you.

*Freud, an Eight-Part Netflix Original Series, will premiere on March 23, 2020.*

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