

# 100 years of "Urszene" („Primal scene“). Notes on a controversial term

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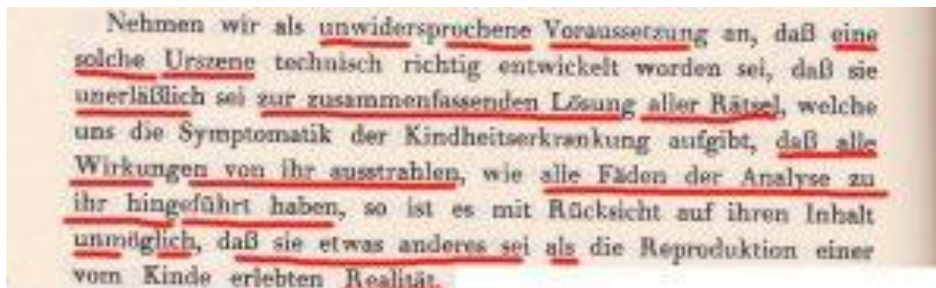
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## Psychoanalytic rubble heaps

Johannes Cremerius (1995, p. 47) assess that psychoanalysis only has a future if it undergoes "tidying up" in concept formation instead of continuing to stumble along "rubble heaps of arbitrary, ambiguous terms or that are understandable only to the initiated." Even "in the center of psychoanalytic theorizing" one encounters "generalizing ideas," "private philosophies," which have never been clarified and passed on without reflection.

I share this view.

The allegedly traumatizing "primal scene" understood as a childlike observation of parental sexual intercourse seems to me to be one of the concepts worth questioning. Therefore, I wanted to know: How is Freud's actual use of this term considered in psychoanalysis? Has the effect attributed to this scene been empirically tested in the meantime?



*Sigmund Freud 1918:  
The primal scene as  
'Solution to all riddles.'*

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<sup>1</sup> Please cite as Andreas Peglau (2023): 100 years of "Urszene" („Primal scene“). Notes on a controversial term (<https://andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de/100-years-of-urszene-primal-scene-notes-on-a-controversial-term/>)  
First publication: Peglau, Andreas (2014): 100 Jahre "Urszene". Anmerkungen zu einem strittigen Begriff, *Werkblatt. Psychoanalyse und Gesellschaftskritik* 73, 2/2014, pp. 253-260.

Illustrations, subheadings, some supplemented source notes, slightly changes: July 2019.

The quote from the English Wikipedia edition and the last sentence were added in March 2023.

For information, material, and exchange of opinions I thank especially Gerhard Dahl, but also Brigitte Boothe and Hermanns Staats, for hints for research in the digitized Freud edition, Karsten Worm, for critical reading of the text furthermore Gudrun Peters and Galina Hristeva.

**Please note:** My English skills are not very good. Therefore, I first translated the text with DeepL and then corrected it. I expect that there are still translation errors - and ask those who discover such errors to send a message to [info@andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de](mailto:info@andreas-peglau-psychoanalyse.de)

## The "Wolf Man" - Freud's most famous case

Largely completed in 1914, published in 1918, the treatise on the "Wolf Man" became Freud's most famous "and undoubtedly most important" case history (Editorial Preface in Freud 1989, p. 127).

There he illustrated "Urszene" in this way: a one-and-a-half-year-old patient "witnessed a thrice-repeated coitus a tergo [from behind], could see the mother's genitals like the father's penis, and understood the process like its meaning"- on which allegedly the later obsessive-compulsive disorder had been based (Freud 1918, p. 64). Freud asserted,

"that such a primal scene [...] is indispensable for the summary solution of all the riddles which the symptomatology of the childhood illness poses to us, that all the effects radiate from it, as all the threads of analysis have led to it" (ibid., p. 84).

Gerhard Dahl (1981, p. 96) is the German psychoanalyst most intensively concerned with the primal scene. He writes: "The theme of the primal scene runs through Freud's psychoanalytic writings from his first publication to his last major work".

In the index of the *Collected Works* (Freud 1999, p. 693f.), however, this term is missing. Instead, dozens of references to "Ur(szene)" suggest frequent uses in numerous writings. However, if you search the given passages or the digital version of the *Gesammelte Werke* (Worm 2010), you will notice: The word "Urszene" appears exclusively in the "Wolfsmann": 64 times, never elsewhere, although Freud dealt with this case several times elsewhere (see Freud 1989, p. 127f.).

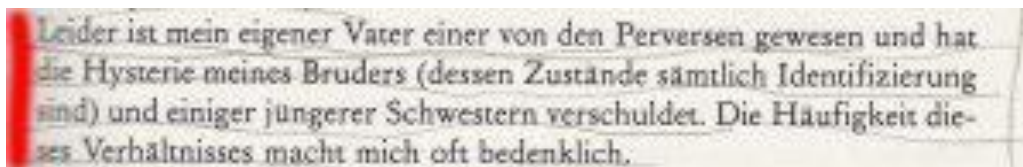
Moreover, the register is incomplete. For originally the term had a clearly different content: in the correspondence with Freud's friend Wilhelm Fließ.

## The original primal scene: sexual violence against children

Freud initially gave this content other names there. Thus, on January 1, 1896, it was stated that at the beginning of the neuroses there were mostly "traumatic, premature sexual experience[s] to be displaced," which he alternatively called "primary experiences," "sexual scenes," or simply "scenes" (Freud 1986, pp. 171, 197f.). Even when Freud spoke to Viennese physicians on "On the Etiology of Hysteria" on April 21, 1896, he emphasized the "genuineness of infantile sexual scenes":

"[I]t is [...] a question of sexual experiences in one's own body, of sexual intercourse (in the broader sense)," of "those traumas [...] from which [...] the development of hysterical symptoms emanates. [...] It certainly seems to me that our children are exposed to sexual assaults far more frequently than one should [...] expect."

As perpetrators he names in particular close relatives, educators, or even other children (ibid., pp. 440-444). To Fließ, Freud now classified hysteria "as a consequence of perversion of the seducer." Finally Freud came to the shocking realization on February 11, 1897: "Unfortunately, my own father has been one of these perverts" (ibid., pp. 223, 245).



Freud 1897:  
"my own father  
has been one of  
these perverts."

On May 2, 1897, Freud now also combined "scene" with the prefix "Ur": in hysteria, "impulses derived from the Urszenen" were "affected by repression." In a manuscript enclosed with the letter, he used this neologism for the second and, for the time being, last time.<sup>2</sup>

As Jeffrey M. Masson, editor of the Fließ letters, quite rightly states: "'Urszene' at this time still meant a real scene of seduction, mainly with the father" (ibid., p. 253, fn. 2).<sup>3</sup>

Freud continued to write about "father etiology" (causation by the father) and "father scenes" in the letters to Fließ. After he reported on 22.12.1897 about a father who had "deflowered" his two-year-old daughter so "violently" that she "became dangerously ill," he even chose, borrowing from Goethe, as a "new motto: What has one done to you, you poor child?" („Was hat man Dir, Du armes Kind getan?“, ibid., pp. 312-315, Masson 1986, pp. 140f.).

At this time Freud in no way give a thought to the idea that watching parental intercourse or fantasizing about it could make one neurotic.

In 1896, lecturing on the "etiology of hysteria," he did mention the "involuntary witnessing" of pubescents "during sexual acts of the parents" and attributed a potentially traumatic quality to this experience.

But he listed this only as one example of various disturbing factors, which he by no means considered to be the origin of neurosis: The latter would basically lie earlier in the life history and in sexual abuse, but could push more strongly into consciousness by watching the parents and other stressful events (Freud 1896, pp. 436-438, 444).

After Freud, from January 1898 on, moved more clearly away from the "seduction" theory, which he probably also found quite personally too frightening,<sup>4</sup> the word "scene," which stood for the reality of a sexual abuse, was as if erased from the further Fließ letters.<sup>5</sup>

Only 16 years later, when he wrote about the "Wolf Man" in 1914 did he fall back on the term "primal scene,"<sup>6</sup>[5] Now, by means of this term, he suddenly attested the highest relevance to the childlike observation of a sexual intercourse.<sup>7</sup> Because: Beside or before a primal[!] scene there could not have been anything equivalent.

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<sup>2</sup> "The aim seems to be the attainment of the primal scenes" (Freud 1986, p. 255).

<sup>3</sup> A complete index of Freud's *Collected Works* would therefore also have to refer under "Ur(szene)" to all the thematizations of early abuse contained, for example, in *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* (Three treatises on sexual theory). But this is not the case.

<sup>4</sup> He never completely negated them (Masson 1986, pp. 129-169).

<sup>5</sup> Only in the letters on 7.7.1898, 21.12.1899, 8.1.1900 I could still discover "scene", but used rather casually and without reference to sexual abuse (Freud 1986, pp. 349, 430, 434).

<sup>6</sup> In Freud's *Traumdeutung* (Interpretation of dreams) "scene" occurs 47 times, occasionally with echoes of the earlier meaning, in the *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* the word does not appear at all (research in Worm 2010).

<sup>7</sup> He did not mention the enacted change of meaning. The fact that "Urszene" never again found its way into his publications, however, perhaps shows that he did not consider this shift in terminology to have been successful.

Yet in 1917, in his *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse* (Lectures introducing psychoanalysis), Freud listed as *equally important* examples of "incidents [...] in the youth [!] history of neurotics": "the observation of parental intercourse, seduction by an adult person, and the threat of castration." Two pages later he enumerated these three points again, this time as, supposedly phylogenetically anchored, "primal fantasies" - which he equated in the "Wolf Man," but only there, with "primal scenes" (Freud 1916/17, pp. 383, 386; ders. 1918, p. 90).

## Tradition-forming fable

Thus, although Freud used this vocabulary in only one writing and never clearly delimited it conceptually, it made a career for itself. Gerhard Dahl (1981, p. 98) mentions „countless works on the primal scene," by Karl Abraham, Margaret Mahler, Phyllis Greenacre and others.<sup>8</sup> Since 1950, when the first version of the Fließ letters was printed, it has been possible to read what Freud initially meant by this word (Freud 1962, p. 169f.). But references to it as in Dahl (1981, p. 96) have rarity value.

Instead, the 1968 Register of the *Collected Works* of Freud defines "Ur(szene)" exclusively as "coitus observation in infancy"<sup>9</sup> - although here, too, reference is made to Freud's Hysteria Lecture of 1896 (Freud 1999, pp. 693f.).

Ur(szene) [Koitusbeobachtung i. Kindesalter] (s. a. Früherlebnisse; Infantile Sexualszenen), I 184-95; II/III 590f.; XII 63-66; XVI 185; XVII 113f.

*From the index of Freud's Collected Works*

In 1969, the editors of the *Freud-Studienausgabe* commented to the "Wolf Man" writing, that Freud had used "Urszene" "in approximately synonymous already in a letter to Fließ of May 2, 1897" (Freud 1989, p. 158, fn 2). How they reconciled real sexual abuse suffered in their own bodies and perhaps only fantasized viewing of parental copulation as "approximately synonymous" remains their secret.

In 1973, in *Das Vokabular der Psychoanalyse* (The vocabulary of psychoanalysis) "primal scenes" ar described as "scenes of the sexual relationship between parents that is observed or [...] suspected and fantasized by the child," with the child understanding this coitus as "aggression of the father in a sadomasochistic relationship." Initially, Freud had spoken of "traumatizing infantile experiences" that were "arranged in scenes" "without having to be specifically about parental coitus".

<sup>8</sup> Grinstein (1956-1960, p. 2572) cites additional sources under "primal-scene."

<sup>9</sup> The reference "XII 63-66" used there refers to the treatise on the "Wolf Man". Only under "Ur(szenenhaft)", subitem "Erlebnisse" is then referred to "I 437" - thus to a page from Freud's "Zur Äthiologie der Hysterie" in volume 1 of the *Collected Works* (see: Freud 1999, p. 694).

Anyone who looks up all the passages noted in the index on these two pages will see: Freud's preoccupation with an actually experienced "primal scene" does not pervade his work. However, he was increasingly preoccupied with fantasies of such scenes that were apparently assumed to be phylogenetic. What also appears several times is the very differently weighted observation of coitus. As late as 1938, in *Abriss der Psychoanalyse* (Outline of psychoanalysis), Freud (1940, p. 113) was again to classify it as one possible disturbing factor among many.

The question, what else could be taken into consideration, is not answered, the topic of abuse does not come up (Laplanche/Pontalis 1973, p. 576f).<sup>10</sup>

In 2004, the *Wörterbuch der Psychoanalyse* (Dictionary of Psychoanalysis) informed, "Urszene" refers to "the sexual act of the parents that the child observes or fantasizes, interpreting it as an act of violence or rape of the mother by the father." The "term Urszene first appears in Freud in 1897, to be used by him from then on without any further change in meaning [!]" (Roudinesco/Plon 2004, p. 1084).

The psychoanalyst Carl Nedelmann (2006, p. 4) eventually moved the word creation entirely to the work on the "Wolf Man," about which he writes: "Freud coined [!] the term 'primal scene' in this context."<sup>11</sup>

Wikipedia also provides the information:

„In psychoanalysis, the primal scene (German: Urszene) is the theory of the initial unconscious fantasy of a child of a sex act, between the parents, that organises the psychosexual development of that child. The expression primal scene refers to the sight of sexual relations between the parents, as observed, constructed, or fantasized by the child and interpreted by the child as a scene of violence."<sup>12</sup>

## Only very few counter-positions

Psychoanalysts hardly seem to harbor skepticism toward Freud's second "Urszenen" concept from 1918.<sup>13</sup> Gerhard Dahl (1981, p. 99f.) refers to only two discussions of U.S. analysts from 1969 and 1978 in which it was questioned whether "Urszenen" necessarily traumatize.

Fundamental doubts based on a "broad overview" of primal scene treatments were probably only dared by the New York analyst Aaron H. Esman. As cornerstones of Esman's critique, published in 1973, Dahl cites, among other things:

"[that] the observation of parental intercourse [...] per se [has] a traumatic effect is not convincing; for the 'sadistic conception'[...] it is not the observation of coitus but [...] the behavior of the parents [...] that is responsible, especially if they are openly hostile to each other even during the day" (ibid., p. 98f.).

Dahl (1982, p. 656) judged Esman's position as "very extreme" and dealt with it in detail (Dahl 1981; 1982). But he, too, could not counter Esman's findings of empirical research.

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<sup>10</sup> Laplanche (2011) later critically appreciated Freud's "primal fantasies" - without connecting them to Freud's first primal scene concept.

<sup>11</sup> Although in the next paragraph he refers to the Fließ letters.

<sup>12</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primal\\_scene](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primal_scene). Query: 30 March 2023.

<sup>13</sup> King (1995) and Klammer (2013) prove that even non-analysts can base several hundred pages of explanations on the 1918 "Urszene" version without being burdened with the question whether this version has anything to do with reality.

## Was there any research?

Perhaps, I thought, today, more than 30 years later, there could be research results available that spoke for (or against) Freud's thesis. I therefore sent inquiries to several departments of developmental psychology at German universities.

Result: No one knew of such empirical tests.

Of course, above all others psychoanalysts would have had good reasons to investigate. At least, the significance of any "primal scene" memories or fantasies in treatments could have been systematically evaluated over a long period of time. But here, too, my inquiries yielded no results.

It only remains for me to summarize my own position.

## Setting the course for denial of reality

I mean, Freud's primal scene version of 1918 charged a triviality with unreal significance, subsequent analysts created a cult out of it. That the observation of parental sexual acts is necessarily traumatic or even highly significant for children does not seem plausible to me.

Moreover, in order to create what he considered a particularly creepy-fascinating scenario for children's eyes, Freud (1918, p. 87) had to use the image of sexual intercourse "from behind, like animals." But what if the parents, for example, preferred the "missionary position" that was also popular around 1900? Or if they belonged to a more sex-affirming culture than the Viennese bourgeoisie?

Gerhard Dahl (1981, p. 99) also cites "ethnological studies according to which children who repeatedly witness parental intercourse soon grasp its significance as a friendly act of love." Moreover, why should a natural occurrence, which can take place tenderly in phases, have a more damaging effect than aggressive quarreling of the parents? Or even: as a brutal treatment of the child?

In 1918, the right to physically chastise children was still far from being effectively challenged. How bad might the sight of naked, lustfully moaning parents have been, compared to the childlike pain and humiliation of - often publicly exposed - bodily harm by cane and strap? Or compared to the "scenes" of sexual abuse and rape of the children originally meant by Freud?

Apparently, in reality, as it later turned out, such an incident was also behind the suffering of the "Wolf Man": he had been sexual abused as a child by a family member (Masson 1986, p. 14).

*Such* incidents do indeed have the potential to make one mentally ill. But even before abandoning the "seduction" theory, Freud had difficulty acknowledging this fact: Repeatedly, the Fließ letters state that the "primary experiences" might have been "endowed with pleasure," later triggering self-reproach and shame and *in this way* leading to neurosis (Freud 1986, pp. 147, 172-174).

The tendency to blame children for the assaultive, traumatizing behavior of adults (Masson 1986, pp. 217-221) and to reduce psychosocial processes to - real or supposed - intrapsychic ones was already clearly emerging.

And likewise the trend to increasingly defuse the social critique that is actually immanent in psychoanalysis.

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