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A Dangerous Method

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Abstract

This is a film review of *A Dangerous Method* (2011), directed by David Cronenberg.

The lush period piece, *A Dangerous Method*, directed by David Cronenberg, transports the audience to perhaps the richest academic conversation of the early 20th century, namely the contentious birth of modern psychoanalysis. Set in the context of the European dialectic of Vienna and Zurich and against the backdrop of an impending World War, the film is ultimately a record of the undeniably defining relationship between the movement's iconic founders, Sigmund Freud (Viggo Mortensen) and his younger protégé, Carl Jung (Michael Fassbender). But the especial value of the film lies in its recovery of another, mostly forgotten voice in this clash of titans, namely the voice of Jung's first mistress, the patient and future analyst, Sabina Spielrein (Kiera Knightley).

The film opens with Spielrein, a 'hysteric,' being admitted to the Burghölzli clinic in Zurich, where the nascent Jung works as a clinician. A spate of therapies is on offer at the clinic, including 'hydrotherapy' and Jung's pioneering word-association test. But for Spielrein, Jung feels led to experiment with Freud's vague but vaunted technique of 'psychoanalysis.' Jung is inexperienced with the 'talking cure,' which includes intimate conversation of Spielrein's relationship with her father and, more importantly, of her deepest sexual desires. It turns out that the two are interconnected, and it becomes clear in the analysis that Spielrein's experiences of having been physically humiliated by her father's spankings were the sources of Spielrein's sexual shame, her 'hysterical' symptoms, and as Freud might have predicted, her most forbidden libidinal desires. Acknowledgement of the connection between desire and shame leads to a 'cure' of her putative hysteria, but also to an unintended consequence. The intimacy of the analysis between Spielrein and Jung results in an irresistible sexual alchemy, a 'transference.'

Despite deep misgivings, Jung becomes embroiled in a passionate sexual affair with the inexperienced, curious, and sexually adventurous Spielrein.

Jung is portrayed as both tortured by conscience and hopelessly complicit in the affair, despite a comfortable living, wealthy wife, and burgeoning family. A deciding factor in the decision to pursue the affair is the presence of Otto Gross (Vincent Cassel) at the Burghölzli clinic. Jung and Freud had already begun an exciting discussion of psychoanalysis, and Freud had sent Gross to Jung's clinic for treatment of cocaine addiction and other maladies. Gross, also a brilliant analyst and libertine, engages Jung in a discussion of modern sexual mores, and further convinces Jung of the Freudian conviction that sexual repression is the cause of all neurosis. Armed with the requisite reasons for rejecting any 'repression,' caught up in the allure of sexual adventure, and still inarticulate in his resistance to Freud's pervasive 'sexuality' theory, Jung will veritably become swept away by the moment.

The relationship between Jung and Spielrein becomes even more complex when she decides also to obtain a career in psychology, for which she has considerable intuitive gifts. As part of her therapy with Jung, she excitedly participates in Jung's experimental sessions, including co-administering the word-association experiment to Jung's wife, Emma (Sarah Gadon). With penetrating insight, Spielrein discerns sexual anxiety in Emma and Carl regarding the birth of their children. Moreover, Spielrein expresses her own anxiety about being a virgin to Jung, seeing the condition as an obstacle to her ability to perform Freud's technique of psychoanalysis. Finally crossing the line from analysis to raw emotional connection, she kisses Jung and invites him to her room, explaining that the surprising sexual initiative is the product of

the male aspect of her own personality (and perhaps anticipating Jung's eventual distinction between anima and animus). In many ways, in fact, she becomes a muse to Jung, performing an extended psychoanalytic study of Wagner's opera *Das Rheingold*. Unbeknownst to Spielrein, Jung had also been working on a psychoanalysis of the work. Their discussions of the Siegfried myth in the opera lead Spielrein to theorize an alternative to Freud's understanding of sexuality, and this novel interpretation further empowers Jung to contemplate ideas outside of Freud's oppressive orthodoxy.

Initially enlivened by Freud's lively correspondence and professional companionship, Jung's relationship to the patriarch eventually sours as both men begin to intuit that the father-son dynamic they have established cannot be long sustained. Jung's eventual rejection of Freud's exclusively sexual interpretation of the unconscious notwithstanding, the conflict between them becomes essentially mystical and religious. In two poignant scenes, the giants clash, first over the reality of psychic phenomena, and second over the patricidal nature of the psyche in giving historical birth to monotheism. The first scene is archetypal. Jung is being scolded over the proscribed boundaries of proper, psychoanalytic science. Superstition and parapsychology are, in Freud's view, not healthy for 'the movement.' Nearly shamed into silence, a break in the conversation allows Jung to vent his own views, as a wooden bookcase nearby splits and cracks inexplicably, as if in response to Jung's passion. When Freud offers a naturalistic interpretation of the noises, Jung shows a gift for the precognitive, predicting that the event will occur again. Mere moments later, it does. (Jung later described the event as a psychic shattering of his 'father archetype.') In the second scene, Jung is so aggressive with Freud, and

so dismissive of the patricide-concept, that the older man faints and begs for sweet death...an Oedipal conflict if ever there was one!

Spielrein also plays a role in the epic split. When rumors surface that Jung has taken a patient as his mistress, Freud seems disapproving. Jung initially denies the rumor, prompting Spielrein to confess the truth to Freud herself and violently to insist that Jung also confess everything, so that she can become Freud's patient and protégé. Leaving for Vienna to study with Freud, Jung is obviously desolate, having lost them both.

The final scenes depict the now married and pregnant Spielrein on a final visitation with the Jung family. Carl, she learns privately, has taken another mistress, Toni Wolff. Spielrein somewhat playfully taunts her old lover, for Toni is also a Jewish analyst, and Jung, who seems strangely unaware of the obvious connection, describes Toni with admiration as a comfort to him, akin to his wife and family. But Jung is clearly haunted by his past actions, and perhaps more importantly, by visions of an impending European bloodbath. In fact, Jung seems highly disassociated and himself in need of analysis. Inversely, Spielrein seems robust, and finally healthily detached from Jung.

While the film seems to have multiple messages and points-of-view, it is a rare joy to see such nuance and psychological complexity brought to the screen. The interplay of theoretical interpretation and lived action in the world remains satisfyingly ambiguous. In the end, none of the three protagonists is fully vindicated. Still, there is a threaded theme that unites the multiplicity of motives and perspectives here. The film is, finally, a testament to the often

invisible forces, sometimes benevolent and sometimes monstrous, which shape our minds and destinies. The connections between sex and intimacy, shame and confession, collegial ambition and final betrayal are tremendously complex and sometimes impenetrable to us. Indeed, why shouldn't they be? After all, they are inexplicably shaped in part by the ever-secretive unconscious, to which this film, and the figures that inhabit it, bear poignant witness as both its hopeless victims and relentless conquerors.