

“A Dangerous Method”: Freud, Jung, and Spielrein

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David Cronenberg’s new film “A Dangerous Method” begins in the opening years of the twentieth century with the delivery to the Burghölzli Clinic of the Zurich Hospital of a young woman named Sabina Spielrein (Keira Knightly) who, suffering from hysteria, becomes one of the early patients to undergo psychoanalysis. Spielrein, a wealthy, well-educated, and lovely young Russian Jewish woman—whose hysterical outbreaks express themselves in fits, tortuous postures, tormented speech, and bizarre behavior—comes under the care of Dr. Carl Jung (Michael Fassbender). Jung, himself a follower of the Viennese physician Sigmund Freud (Viggo Mortensen), decides to experiment with his mentor’s revolutionary new treatment called “the talking cure.”

The doctors pursue the unheard of radical course of listening to the mad patient. Rather than simply locking them up and administering baths, physical therapy and a regimen of work, these innovative doctors take an interest in the patients, in their symptoms and their words, in their family life and their current situation. Sitting in a chair behind his hysterical subject, Jung asks her to talk about her illness and her life in an attempt to help himself and her to understand the source of her hysterical symptoms. The idea is that through the process of coming to understand the source of her neurosis and by reenacting the relationship that brought about her mental illness through a simulation of that relationship with her psychologist, the patient will become a normal, mature adult. It will prove a dangerous method, for in the experience of the transference and counter-transference of the psychoanalytic experience—in violation of all the rules of Freud’s psychoanalysis—Jung succumbs to temptation and sleeps with Spielrein.

Jung’s relationship to Spielrein stands at the center of this film, with all the other relationships organized and displayed around it. Freud sends to Jung a patient who is another psychoanalyst, Otto Gross (Vincent Cassel), a cocaine addict and womanizer who ridicules the Swiss doctor’s bourgeois morality and commitment to monogamy, daring him to sleep with his patient Spielrein. Jung succumbs to Gross’s taunt, to Spielrein’s intense sexuality, and to his own urges. The affair between Jung and Spielrein, between the older physician and the younger mentally ill woman, has quite different meanings for the two of them. Jung pursued the sado-masochistic sexual affair with Spielrein during the years that he was establishing his reputation at the Clinic and when he and his very wealthy wife Emma (Sarah Gadon) were raising their children. For Jung, however strangely it may have come about, the taking of a mistress simply conforms to his Swiss, Protestant, bourgeois, existence. Men of his class and age, of course, had wives and took mistresses. For Spielrein, a hyper-eroticized person who through the experience of childhood beatings by her father had become a masochist, Jung’s treatment leads her not only to sanity, but also to pursue a career herself as a psychoanalyst. She, as perhaps only a woman of her class, education and time could, experienced the affair with Jung as new found freedom as she becomes liberated from her hysteria and able to express herself sexually. For Jung the affair is really an additional way of confirming and assuring his bourgeois status, while for her it represent a step toward her own liberation.

Through the depiction of Jung and Spielrein’s relationship then, the filmmaker thus takes up one of the great, contemporary moral issues: the role of sex in the individual’s life and the place of sex in modern society, while at the same time he presents one of the great personality clashes and psychological controversies of the twentieth century, that between Freud and Jung. They were not, of course, the first to theorize issues of the family and men’s and women’s relationships. Among others, the great nineteenth century theorists of revolution, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, had

developed their theory of the historic defeat of women with the rise of sedentary agricultural class societies and the emergence of private property and the state. They had scathingly criticized the hypocrisy of bourgeois family values, property relations disguised as personal relationships, while at the same time describing how working class families struggled to survive in the midst of long hours of work, low wages, the super-exploitation of women and the scourge of child labor. Yet it would take a revolutionary of another sort, Sigmund Freud, to examine how family relationships produced both healthy and “normal” people and generated mental illness.

Overturning hundreds of years of philosophy and medicine, Freud, the great champion of a humanistic notion of psychic equality, would argue that the sane and the insane, men and women, adults and children in fact shared the same psychological processes. Like his teacher Jean-Martin Charcot, Freud would conclude that hysteria was not simply a disease of women (from *ὑστέρα* or *hystera* the Greek word for womb), but rather had its origins in psychological processes common to both men and women. Freud would find the origin of those processes in family relations and conclude that both sexes could suffer from hysteria. Notwithstanding, the feminist movement’s critique of Freud for his apparent acceptance of bourgeois, male-dominated, heterosexual norms as expressed in concepts like “penis envy,” he was the great psychological equalizer. All human beings have the same minds, and psyches formed in the crucible of the family. For Freud there were no perverts, for all human beings were “perverse” in every way, “polymorphous perverse” as they passed through the various stages of their development, stages at which some got stuck because of family and childhood issues. This film portrays the world in which Freudian psychoanalysis first evolved, at a moment when most of the physician psychologists were Viennese Jews and most of their patients bourgeois neurotics tormented by sexual repression and frustrations found in the patriarchal families of the rich.

Freud saw his young admirer Jung as the person might help him to take psychoanalysis out of the narrow world of Viennese Jews and into the world of Christian Europe. Jung became Freud’s fair-haired boy, his spiritual son, and his chosen successor. We see depicted in the film the very professional and polite breakdown of the relationship, profoundly disappointing to Freud. This was a clash not only of theories and personalities, but also of cultures. Freud stood in the tradition of the European enlightenment, a physician and neurologist who had spent endless hours at the microscope. He was an atheist who believed that science and reason, the collection of empirical evidence and its analysis could provide rational answers to all questions. Freud believed that the many cases he had studied showed that sexual drives stood at the center of all psychological issues. He believed that one day he would be able to show how the processes of the mind which he had discovered could be traced back to the neurology of the brain.

Jung on the other hand, breaking with Freud, moved away from the empirical and rational Enlightenment tradition, toward an interest in parapsychology, the spiritual world and the occult. His Protestant and bourgeois values led him to feel squeamish about the discussion of subjects such as childhood sexuality and the so-called sexual “perversions.” Eventually Jung came to reject entirely Freud’s concept of the libido as sexual desire and to suggest that it referred instead to some vague spiritual energy. Freud became increasingly disgusted with his chosen son, finding his superstitious beliefs repugnant from both a scientific and moral point of view. Jung he believed couldn’t face Christian society’s moral judgments and wanted to sugar coat the bitter pill, the recognition that sex and its repression stood at the root of the family, society and culture. In the end the Christian spiritualist savant and the Jewish atheist scientist could not abide each other. Jung’s transparent hypocrisy in the way he handled the affair with Spielrein, first denying the affair and only later revealing it to Freud at her insistence, may also have played a role in their estrangement. The worldly Freud, who had heard everyone’s most intimate secrets, including his own, could understand having an affair; he could not understand failing to tell the truth about it. For Freud, truth was

everything.

We can see how Marxists seeking to deepen their understanding of the nature of bourgeois society, its social classes and the family would later turn to Freud. The psychoanalyst and socialist Wilhelm Reich and the radical philosopher Herbert Marcuse would attempt to theoretically combine Marx and Freud in provocative studies that linked social and psychological repression. Feminists, including socialist feminists of the 1960s and 1970s would challenge Freud's interpretation, but often on the basis of their own analysis of the origin of male and female psyches in the family, analyses deriving from Freud's original model. Modern psychology and psychopharmacology have largely displaced Freudian analysis, except among the privileged classes. Yet Freud's analysis of the role of sex in society and of the familial root of our psychological problems survives. As Auden wrote in his magnificent poem to Freud, "to us he is no more a person now but a whole climate of opinion under whom we conduct our different lives."

"The Dangerous Method" is a great story, with splendid period costumes and settings, wonderful cinematography, and talented actors; nevertheless it fails to engross and compel us because the director did not find a way to coordinate the various fascinating elements of the plot and subordinate them to a dominant storyline. The various rhythms of the film—the love affair between Jung and Spielrein, the struggle between Freud and Jung, and the rise of psychoanalysis to become central to our modern way of thinking—somehow never come into sync. The movie becomes a series of episodes. While there are some excellent scenes, the film fails to engage and convince us. Keira Knightly, who as Spielrein stands at the center of the story, does not succeed in leading the audience to identify with and care about her and for her. Her unconvincing performance inevitably detracts from Fassbender's, though Mortensen as Freud and Cassel as Gross—superego and id, we might say—give fine performances. Those who are interested in the characters and the issues will, as I did, want to see this film. Those who are hoping to see a great film will be disappointed.