

A Dangerous Method: The Freud-Jung controversy, among other matters

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Directed by David Cronenberg, screenplay by Christopher Hampton, based on a play by Hampton (The Talking Cure) and a book by John Kerr (A Most Dangerous Method)

In *A Dangerous Method*, Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg (*Videodrome*, *The Fly*, *Dead Ringers*, *Crash*, *A History of Violence* and others) has undertaken to direct a film about a major episode in the history of psychoanalysis, the relationship between Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung in the early years of the 20th century and their ultimate falling out. In addition, the film treats their association with a young Russian woman, Sabina Spielrein, first a patient of Jung's, then his lover, and later (outside the scope of *A Dangerous Method*) a psychoanalyst in her own right, in Switzerland and the Soviet Union.

The subject is complex for a number of reasons, including the nature of the epoch, individuals and questions involved. To translate a conflict of ideas between well-known personalities, in part the subject of Cronenberg's film (based on a 2002 play by Christopher Hampton and a 1993 non-fiction work by John Kerr), into compelling and convincing drama, a drama, in other words, in which what prominent people say to each other feels spontaneous and lifelike, is a difficult task. However, the filmmaker chose the project, so the final result has to be judged on what it accomplishes, not merely on its interesting intentions.

Considered as a whole then, one might say that while *A Dangerous Method* raises intriguing personalities and issues set during a period and in locales that continue to exercise fascination a century later, it treats these elements inadequately and even, at its weakest, teeters on the brink of banality.

The film opens in 1904 with 18-year-old Sabina Spielrein (Keira Knightley) being admitted, in a hysterical state, to a clinic near Zurich where Carl Jung (Michael Fassbender) is a psychoanalyst. Jung begins to treat Spielrein, proposing that "we meet here, most days, to talk for an hour or two. ... [To] see if we can identify what's troubling you." This was the revolutionary "talking cure," the effort to work through an individual's psychological difficulties by making conscious what lay hidden in his or her unconscious as a result of past trauma.

With Jung's help, Spielrein, a remarkably honest and forthright individual, locates the source of her unbalanced and violent state in the beatings she received from her father as a child and her ambivalent response to the humiliations. This seems to confirm Freud's theories, and Jung begins a correspondence with the older man.

When the two finally meet, in Vienna in 1907, they have a good deal to say to each other. In their first encounter, Freud (Viggo Mortensen) and Jung speak for 13 hours straight. While expressing his admiration for the Austrian psychoanalyst and theorist's work, Jung suggests that they come up with a "milder term than libido" and generally try "to sweeten the pill when it comes to questions of sexuality." Freud doubts whether

"euphemism is a good idea."

Some time later, Freud asks Jung to treat Dr. Otto Gross, a "brilliant but erratic character" in need of medical help. In the sessions, Gross (Vincent Cassel) urges Jung not to "repress anything" and encourages him to have an affair with Spielrein, who has indicated such an interest. Jung does initiate a relationship with the young woman, which has a sado-masochistic component. Jung's wife (Sarah Gadon), the daughter of a wealthy industrialist, by now the mother of two daughters, feels increasingly marginalized.

Freud, ever more impressed with Jung, chooses him as "the undisputed crown prince" in the field of international psychiatry.

Jung reluctantly and painfully ends his affair with Spielrein, but not before he agrees to acknowledge the relationship in a letter to Freud. This doesn't appear to affect the relationship between the two, who set off on a trip to America in 1910. Freud wonders out loud whether the Americans realize "we're on our way, bringing them the plague."

A few years later, Spielrein brings Jung her dissertation and they discuss her theory about the death instinct. They briefly recommence their sexual relationship. Spielrein visits Freud and discusses her theories with him. By now he and Jung have begun to drift apart professionally and personally. Freud is repelled by Jung's interest in the occult and mysticism, and the latter objects to the Austrian's "obsession with sexuality, his insistence in interpreting every symptom in sexual terms."

At a final encounter in 1913, Freud and Jung clash over whether monotheism originated in a patricidal urge and then stage their own minor father-son drama, as Freud faints and Jung comes to his assistance. They subsequently exchange angry letters and "The rest is silence." Final titles note their fates and that of Spielrein, who returned to the Soviet Union in 1923, played a role in the development of psychiatry there and was murdered by the Nazis in 1942.

As noted above, *A Dangerous Method* concerns itself with interesting matters and people. The performers give of themselves generously, and the settings and physical details are evocative of pre-World War I European culture.

Perhaps, however, the film's greatest benefit is that it encourages the spectator to investigate further the figures and issues involved. Because it cannot be argued that the Cronenberg-Hampton work examines them in any great depth.

Writing dialogue for figures such as Freud, Jung and others is no easy matter. How would the pair of famed psychoanalysts have addressed one another on meeting for the first time in 1907? What would the personal relations of two such intellectual figures have been like? A daunting task!

Hampton (British, born 1946) is an agile writer, with a lengthy history as a playwright, screenwriter, translator and adapter. He writes capably enough about other times and places, but without immense historical or psychological insight, so that even intelligent, worthwhile works such as *Tales from Hollywood*, for example, about European émigrés in Los Angeles in the 1930s, have a somewhat thin and schematic feel.

If Hampton's limitations are coupled with the need to cram complex ideological matters into a restricted number of lines of film dialogue, the result is likely to be unsatisfactory. At times, the Freud-Jung conversations in particular threaten to resemble a "Classics Illustrated" comic book version of the history of psychoanalysis.

Jung, during their first encounter, recounts a dream "about a horse, being hoisted by cables to a considerable height." He continues, "Suddenly the cable breaks and the horse is dashed to the ground, but it's not hurt. It leaps up and gallops away, impeded only by a heavy log which it's obliged to drag along the ground." The pair proceed to submit the dream to a rather heavy-handed analysis. Unfortunately, the dialogue takes on a semi-parodic quality:

Sigmund Freud: This log ...

Carl Jung: Yes.

Sigmund Freud: I think perhaps you should entertain the possibility that it represents the penis.

One is tempted to exclaim, "Sometimes a log is just a log," but ...

Another difficulty is that *A Dangerous Method* proposes to tell (at least) two rather complicated stories, that of the Freud-Jung relationship and Spielrein's emergence from neurosis and her evolution as a psychoanalytic thinker, without exhaustively recounting either one.

Spielrein is an interesting figure, about whom relatively little was known—aside from the fact that she was one of the first female psychoanalysts and had written a number of papers in the field—prior to the late 1970s, when cartons of her letters and papers were discovered in Switzerland.

It is no insult to Spielrein to suggest that whatever her intrinsic importance in the history of psychiatry, and taking her tragic fate into consideration, at least some of the interest in her life and career stems from the needs of present-day identity politics. John Kerr, the author of *A Most Dangerous Method* (the ultimate source of Hampton's play and screenplay), begins his reassessment of her work with the comment, "In a feminist age, I think, no one will object to the notion that the story of Spielrein's career within the psychoanalytic movement is worth telling for its own sake."

Knightley throws herself into the role with considerable energy, but the scenes of sado-masochistic sexual activity add little or nothing to the film. Cronenberg told the performer, she reported to the media, that "he didn't want the scenes to be sexy or voyeuristic; he wanted them to be clinical." Unhappily, whatever the filmmaker may have thought he was doing (and here may be a classic example of the gap between conscious and unconscious motives!), material of this sort tends to have a gravitational force of its own. Creating such inevitably sensationalized moments, frankly, is what the current film industry finds closest to its heart (or other body parts). In other words, these "shocking" and "incredibly important" sequences (in Knightley's words), in fact, represent the very least line of resistance.

On the other hand, *A Dangerous Method* treats Spielrein's theorizing about the death instinct almost in passing. If the point is being made that her work was possibly crucial to some of Freud's later theorizing and has gone uncredited, it is not given enormous weight.

What is "the dangerous method" of the title? The "talking cure" itself, or sleeping with one's patients... or either... or both? No doubt, delving into the most personal details of another human being's life is potentially hazardous work, for everyone involved, and in 1904 was relatively unexplored territory. This is certainly one of the strengths of Cronenberg's film, that it introduces what would become, for better or worse, an important feature of 20th century culture, the practice of psychiatry and its associated contradictions.

It should be noted that even in a film that devotes most of its time to representing, in a relatively sympathetic fashion, one of the central personalities in psychoanalysis at the time, Jung, his eventual opponent,

Freud, comes across as a far more intellectually substantive and courageous figure. Moreover, the scenes in which Freud-Mortensen is present are without question the most dramatically and historically interesting, although the character is hardly given a serious opportunity to present his views.

One has always to recall that Freud, a Jew, had set about bringing to light the intimate and sometimes unappealing facts of psychic life, which many respectable people wanted swept under the rug, in a city where anti-Semitism was being fiercely whipped up. He legitimately felt himself besieged. That the psychoanalyst persevered in his theorizing and in publishing his views, while under sustained attack as a "dirty pornographer," is a tribute to the seriousness of his groundbreaking endeavor.

Recognizing that seriousness and Freud's genuinely scientific concerns is not the same thing, of course, as expressing agreement with his outlook and conclusions. When Jung first articulates his opposition to Freud's one-sided concentration on sexuality in *A Dangerous Method*, one is inclined to agree with him. And this may not be an unimportant point: that if Jung (and not only Jung) was able to make headway with "schismatic" and retrograde theories, it was to a certain extent the product of a more widely felt dissatisfaction with Freud's "one-sidedness" and an intuition that Freudianism had entered something of a blind alley.

A film review is not the place to take up psychiatric theory, nor is this reviewer equipped to do it in adequate depth, but some of the criticisms that Marxism makes of Freudianism should be raised.

In his essay, "Freudianism and Art" (1925), for example, Aleksandr Voronsky points out that Marxists, as opposed to Freudians, inevitably start "from the proposition that they are not dealing with the separate, isolated individual, but with social man." While physiological, climatic and geographic conditions, all of which have obvious consequence for human life, are "relatively stable and invariant," socio-historic conditions, on the other hand, "change incomparably more rapidly. In addition, the social milieu is much closer and more immediate for social man."

Thus Marxism seeks the principal source of changes in "morals, convictions and feelings" in the socio-historical arena. In other words, the determining elements in what people do as social creatures are the facts of social life and history, not their biology, although of course they have to be living, breathing and sexual beings to be able to do anything.

Leon Trotsky addressed the same question in his discussion of the artistic process in *Literature and Revolution*. He also noted that the physiological foundation, "the sexual basis of man, changes slowly. The social forms of love change more rapidly. ... If there were no changes in psychology produced by changes in the social environment, there would be no movement in art; people would continue from generation to generation to be content with the poetry of the Bible, or of the old Greeks."

As Voronsky noted, as long as Freud limited himself "to an investigation of the psychology and even the psychopathology of individual people," he was perhaps the "right man for the job." But when Freudians pass over to sociology, "they remain on the foundation of studying man who is isolated from society. Acting in this way, the Freudians drag us backwards, in the best of cases, to the so-called abstract scientific point of view, which is salutary in biology, physiology and psychology, but justly condemned in sociology as far back as with Marx."

However, Jungianism, even taking into account the glaring weaknesses in Freudian theory to which it claimed to be responding, essentially represented an attack on psychiatric orthodoxy *from the right*, an attempt to turn it away from a grounding in science and physiology. After all, Freud, in a limited and sometimes misguided manner, attempted to locate an individual's neurosis in the concrete circumstances of his or her life and upbringing.

By contrast, Jung's intervention reflected the pressure of subjectivist,

voluntarist and irrationalist ideological trends, so prevalent at the time. The son of a pastor, with a lifelong interest in the occult, Jung, according to Kerr, “objected to the reductionistic materialism of the age—‘the Judaization of science’—while appealing to various authorities in support of spiritualism, telepathy, and clairvoyance. As to the reality of these phenomena, Jung had no doubt.”

From this not very auspicious starting point, Jung ultimately posited the existence of a “collective unconscious,” identical in all individuals and composed of “pre-existent forms, the archetypes” (in his words), which constituted psychic life along with our more familiar immediate, personal conscious and unconscious. Although he claimed to be a man of science, such conceptions clearly point toward “an extramundane reality and its forces (the dead, gods, archetypes),” as one commentator notes, in fact, toward the individual’s communion with some divine or universal mind (i.e., God).

Nothing good could come from such theories, and nothing good has. Jungianism plays a harmful role in every field where it is taken seriously, including in art. Under its influence, artists tend to draw away from the concrete examination of life and turn to myth and delineating the supposedly archetypal elements of existence, a futile and essentially anti-artistic effort.

Cronenberg and Hampton could not have been expected to treat all these questions, and *A Dangerous Method* has the merit at least of having provoked an interest in them, but, in the end, the film covers considerably far too much territory with artistic equipment and intellectual technique not highly developed enough for the work.



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