

Film Review

We Are the Soul Keepers

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A Dangerous Method. Directed by David Cronenberg.

Cronenberg's film *A Dangerous Method* is based on Christopher Hampton's play *The Talking Cure*, staged in London in 2002, in which Hampton, in turn, drew on a non-fictional account written by Jim Kerr about the story of the relationship between Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, and Sabina Spielrein (Kerr, 1993). In Kerr's account of the well-documented feud between Jung and Freud, he resurrects Spielrein from being an obscure footnote in the history of psychoanalysis in which, according to Kerr, her contribution to the development of psychoanalysis was eclipsed by the massive egos of Freud and Jung. Whatever the truth, it is a fact that Spielrein became the first female psychoanalyst.

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The film opens with Spielrein, played by Kiera Knightley, suffering from an hysterical fit as she is admitted to Jung's sanatorium in Switzerland. She becomes Jung's first patient for analysis and, before long, the tension between patient and analyst spills over into a sexual enactment. There are also several scenes showing the intense relationship between Freud, played by Viggo Mortensen, and Jung, played by Michael Fassbender, which, on the surface, revolves around Freud's insistence upon scientific rigour conflicting with Jung's metaphysical perspective. The layers of meaning attached to these conversations are gradually revealed over the course of the film. Freud's defensive, rather rigid character, is set in the context of his Jewishness and *de facto* his uncertain status in an anti-Semitic world. Intellectual, sexual, and racial tensions are hinted at between all three in a type of psychological *menage à trois*.

A film may be a dangerous "method" to learn about a subject as dense and complex as psychoanalysis. I imagine that the intellectually and psychologically curious will be stimulated by the film to go to primary sources to make up their own minds about these three wonderful, but flawed giants who set us on a way to what is now the well-trodden journey called the "talking cure". The context in which I review this film is as a psychotherapist who has a passionate interest in the ethics and evolution of psychotherapy, and so it is hard to judge the impact of the film on a more general audience. From this analytical perspective I found the film quite sparse and crisp, cleverly acted with brilliant cinematography. The combination of these elements portray, in a deceptively simple way, the relational complexities of some moments in time which, if Kerr is right, have fundamentally influenced the trajectory of psychoanalysis and, more broadly, psychology and psychotherapy to the present day.

The central theme of the film is the sexual relationship between Jung and his patient Sabina Spielrein. An implicit question asked by the film is: "How did the talking cure help Spielrein to recover?" She became a doctor, a psychoanalyst, found a partner and became the mother of two daughters. Are we supposed to think that her recovery was because she had sex with her doctor? There are two scenes of spanking which, though not excessively sexualised, give a confusing message: maybe what a woman needs to bring her to her senses is a good spanking? Or, worse, maybe the best way to cure someone who has been abused is to re-enact the abuse? Did sex play a part in her recovery? In order to think about this it is important to contextualise Jung's sexual transgression in the history of the theory of psychoanalysis. At the time, Freud and Jung were experimenting with a talking cure. When sex emerges in the "talk", Jung is overwhelmed and Freud is threatened. Neither had the benefit of hindsight as we now have, nor the extent of our understanding, about what is now known as the erotic transference and counter transference. It has become more clear that sexual feelings which emerge within the therapeutic relationship can be understood in a variety of different ways: they can be an unconscious way of attacking the therapy; or they can be a sign that something transformative can happen within the relationship – if the feelings are worked with symbolically. On the other hand, if the sexual feelings are enacted or "acted out", then the potential for transformation is abruptly and, instead, a type of "soul murder" takes place – by which I mean and refer to when the client/patient's trust is betrayed by the therapist's enactment of his or her own need, rather than taking responsibility for containing the feelings, however compelling it and they might feel, so they can be engaged with therapeutically. However, to concentrate only on sex, or the sexual dimension of the relationship between Jung and Spielrein, would underestimate the depth of relational exchange that happens between the

two. Jung knows he is behaving in an unethical way but is presented as a man who seems to have lost his way. On the other hand, Spielrein is never portrayed as a victim, indeed she seems more in control of the proceedings than Jung does. It is almost as if, in spite of the sex, Jung still manages not to commit “soul murder”. The clue to understanding this is that Jung is remorseful, troubled and never apparently complacent about the sexual dimension of their relationship, and the evidence is that he does not hang on to Spielrein: she is freed; she takes her power by becoming a psychoanalyst, marrying another, and becoming a mother. Arguably, Jung’s willingness to be moulded and changed by his patient is what sets her free, as is suggested in a scene towards the end of the film when Spielrein visits him for the last time. She is pregnant with her first child; Jung weeps, and acknowledges the significance of their relationship for him: that she has altered him forever. He mourns the loss of her, and of the child he wished could have been his. We are given to understand that the depth of reciprocity, mutuality, even what I would call “soul exchange” between them, has been therapeutic for both parties.

A compelling aspect of not only the relationship between Spielrein and Jung, but the overlapping relatedness between all three characters – which is implicated in Spielrein’s recovery – is captured in two scenes in the film in which we see a close-up of Spielrein’s face; she looks luminous: pouting lips, sparkling eyes, pink cheeks, her breath uneven: the stereotypical features that suggest sexual excitement. On both occasions Jung, and then Freud, are suggesting she become a doctor, a trained analyst, and that she work collegially with Freud. She is encouraged by these men into their world of work. Maybe her “hysteria” was a cry from the prison of her femininity, a longing to be released into the external world where she could be set free from the imposition of the traditional woman’s role in the world. Paradoxically, it is precisely her feminine qualities that allow her a role in the development of the new theory. She attempts to build theoretical bridges between the two men, instinctively infusing the dynamics with her deep sense of relationality and natural intelligence. It is perhaps no coincidence that, as a psychoanalyst, Spielrein went on to develop a conception of the sexual drive as containing both an instinct of destruction and an instinct of transformation, a contribution, originally presented to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1912, which anticipated both Freud’s “death drive” and Jung’s views on “transformation” (see Spielrein, 1912/1994).

On the surface Jung appears the more sympathetic of the two men. He shows himself to be human, sympathetic, honest: he sheds tears and acknowledges that he, too, has wounds. There is, though, a shadow (Shadow) side to his sympathetic persona which is revealed when, on their voyage to America, Jung cannot join Freud for dinner for, as he explains without any trace of sensitivity to a humiliated Freud, that he has been booked by his wealthy wife into the upper class dining room. Freud is compromised by his Jewishness; his insistence upon scientific rigour can now be understood as an attempt to gain credibility not just as a doctor, but as a Jewish doctor. Jung need have no such worries. He is safer in his Protestant skin: more secure, part of the Swiss establishment, supported by a wealthy wife and, therefore, feels free to go wherever his esoteric mind takes him, whereas the fact that Freud was Jewish made him a vulnerable man in every sense of the word.

Jung went on to live the longest life of all three, Freud dying of cancer after fleeing the Nazis, and Spielrein dying an untimely death at the age of 57, at the hands of the Nazis in Russia, in 1942.

Essentially, this is a film which is about putting woman back into the picture of the origins of psychoanalysis, not as a patient, as has so frequently been the case, but as someone who is at least equal, and absolutely necessary if we are to understand the history of the talking cure.

REFERENCES

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