A Dangerous Method narrates the beginnings, flowering, and ultimate demise of their collaboration. The film has first-rate acting with Viggo Mortensen as Freud, Michael Fassbender as Jung, Vincent Cassel as Otto Gross, and Keira Knightley as the film’s true heroine, Sabina Spielrein. In addition, there is a compelling script by Christopher Hampton, based largely on a book by John Kerr with the title A Most Dangerous Method (Kerr, 1993). The characters come alive on the screen with a combination of nuanced acting, the accurate rendering of the times through the period costume designs, interiors, and shots of Switzerland and Vienna from 1904 to 1913. Director David Chronenberg expertly draws on photographs of Freud and Jung to both create uncanny likenesses and to render historically the ambience and personalities of his protagonists. Outer appearance and inner worlds mutually reflect on one another.

A Dangerous Method is an excellent film not just because of its beautiful images, complex and psychologically well drawn characters, but because it raises issues touching on a key moment in the history of psychoanalysis—issues which also have much contemporary relevance. The narrative reveals the triangular relationship between Freud, Jung, and Sabina Spielrein, at first based on clinical concerns, specifically the treatment of a sick young patient, Spielrein. The humane treatment of Spielrein by Jung, employing Freud’s methods, at the Burgholzli Psychiatric Clinic in Zurich evolves into a complicated nexus where professional, political, and personal issues intersect and ultimately clash.
What focuses the film is the story of Sabina Spielrein, a previously forgotten, fabulous figure in the history of psychoanalysis. Spielrein was an exceptionally gifted Russian Jewish woman, who first entered this history as a patient at the Burgholzli Hospital in Zurich, suffering from severe symptoms of hysteria. Spielrein is the real discovery of the film. She is nothing less than extraordinary: flawed, ill, traumatized as a child, suffering from severe hysterical symptoms including dissociation, conversion, and sexualization. The grotesque jutting of her mouth is an excellent metaphor and filmic device to emphasize that these distortions of her speech will not be resolved until she works through her conflicts. By undergoing the talking cure, she finds her voice, internally rediscovering her sense of self.

We first meet Spielrein at the beginning of the film being taken to the Burgholzli in a horse drawn carriage with violent symptoms, bodily contortions, yelling and screaming, laughing and crying histrionically, actively resisting treatment. The film records and documents her gradual recovery. It then shows her formation as a physician, developing an astute comprehension of psychological process. She demonstrates proficiency with word and image association as developed by Jung, and not least, an uncanny access to the unconscious. The film alludes to her subsequent emergence as a respected psychoanalyst, someone who made path breaking contributions to the literature on the understanding of schizophrenia and the dialectic of sexuality and destructiveness. Spielrein would also become interested in the psychology of children, writing innovative papers with a developmental perspective. She understood the power of language in the unconscious, the importance of early bonds with the mother, and ways in which object relations structure aspects of the personality. Her writings anticipate later elaborations of Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan, and relational theorists. She would later integrate some of the perspectives of Jean Piaget on cognitive development in children, whom she analyzed in the early 1920’s.
The film is explicit about the issue of sexuality. Spielrein and Jung move beyond the bounds and limits of the analytic relationship, engaging in a passionate love affair. The love affair is consummated sexually. There are vivid scenes of Spielrein losing her virginity to Jung; we witness her blood spilling over onto her white dress. We watch them having sado-masochistic sexual foreplay with Jung standing up, Spielrein leaning over a bed, while he forcefully spanks her backside, first with his hand and in a second scene with a strap. She is aroused to a frenzy by these sexual encounters, experiencing pleasure in her pain. Spielrein, we learn, had been beaten by her father, an early trauma which terrified, shamed, and excited her. She is exposed to embarrassing and degrading feelings, is easily prone to humiliation, as are all patients who suffer from traumatic abuse. She has a history of compulsive masturbation, of sudden eruptions of anger, and a massive problem with feelings of unworthiness. Spielrein is also prone to an omnipotent sense of her own importance with a grandiose sense of her destiny in history. In the film, she is cured; this is largely due to the care, attention, consideration, and sustained listening and tender approach of Jung. There are lovely scenes showing how the treatment unfolded, beginning with Jung sitting behind her on a chair and inviting her to free associate without looking at her analyst. Other scenes show Spielrein’s associations to images, moving into words, calling up painful affectively tinged reminiscences. With a pictorial imagination, Jung functions like an artist with unusual access to the primary process of the visual. He is able to translate the pictorial into the secondary process of words and abstract representation.

Jung clearly treats his patient with compassion and sensitivity. With Jung’s assistance, Spielrein overcomes horrendous memories through the retrieval of horrific events in her childhood. The film shows that early psychoanalysis was attentive to trauma and the need for affective expression of emotions. Jung employs the cathartic therapy developed by Freud and Breuer in their early Studies on Hysteria. She becomes his research assistant and collaborator, learning his methods, rapidly assimilating his understanding of unconscious process. Jung and Eugen Bleuler, Director of the
Burgholzli Clinic, encourage her return to her formal studies, facilitating her attendance at the University of Zurich Medical School.

The film suggests that a critical component of the curative process of early psychoanalysis was the analyst’s complex love for his patient. Part of this love consisted of deep respect for the inner world of the patient. Freud once wrote to Jung that psychoanalysis was essentially a cure through love. Jung optimally responds to under-developed, constricted, but beautiful aspects of her personality; he understands emphatically the pervasive cultural and familial modes of repression during this era, which deprived women of educational, research, cultural, and scientific opportunities. There would be no cure without the lifting of these repressions. The healing process will turn on a corrective emotional experience with the analyst.

If Jung is aware of the dynamics of transference during his clinical experimentation, he seems unaware of, even oblivious to, countertransference, which will ultimately create enormous difficulties for Spielrein, Freud, and him. Jung’s inability to reflect upon and use his erotic countertransference results in an acting out of the countertransference. This would ultimately unleash a scandal, requiring him, he believed, to break off relations with his former patient. Hurt, bewildered, and enraged by Jung’s betrayal and rationalizations, and cover-up of the affair, Spielrein violently attacks Jung in his office with a knife. She cuts him on his face, leaving him scarred. The audience gasped at this scene as it unfolds on the screen. They reconcile once again, resume the love affair, only to have him break it off again in a state of agitated shame and guilt. Jung permits formal but distant relations with Spielrein after the rupture of their relationship, but without the mutuality of their previous bond. Spielrein turns to Freud, hoping to go to Vienna for an analysis with the master, hoping to be accepted in the Viennese Psychoanalytic Society.
Unlike his other patients at the Burgholzli Hospital at this moment, Spielrein is intelligent, cultivated, well educated, cosmopolitan, and well traveled. She was fluent in German, French, and English, knows classical languages and a great deal about ancient mythology and the history of religion; in addition, she was musical, particularly enamored of Wagner, and compassionate in her approach to people, exquisitively attuned to the suffering of others in her environment. The film shows a scene of an early experiment with Emma, Jung’s young and wealthy wife. Based on a reading of Emma’s responses, Spielrein resonates with the latter’s anxieties about pleasing Jung and producing a male son. She intuited that Emma recognized her husband’s shallow investment in preserving his emotional relationship with her. Spielrein also correctly guesses that the lady undergoing the experiment is Jung’s wife.

Intellectually, the Spielrein of the film emerges as an original thinker, with a distinct idealistic, romantic, and mystical orientation. These qualities are linked to her being Russian. Unlike either Freud or Jung, she leaned toward the synthetic in her thinking, blending opposites, seeking unity and complementarity as the theories of her two mentors radically diverged. She hoped that somehow a dialectic could emerge which might integrate the ideas of these two master thinkers. She feels personally hurt by their dispute, imagining it will damage the subsequent history of the psychoanalytic movement. Capable of bold forms of theorizing, Spielrein fashioned modes of thinking far ahead of her male contemporaries, including Freud and Jung, who are begrudging in their acknowledgement of her ground-breaking studies. One of the significant female figures in the early history of psychoanalysis, Spielrein would be forgotten, relegated to footnotes or vague bibliographical citations because of the scandal with Jung, her precarious position between Freud and Jung, and because she was a woman. While adhering to Freud’s version of psychoanalytic technique, believing in the clinical efficacy of his honest and penetrating grasp of sexuality and its discontents, she continued to value Jung’s researches and writing, seeing greatness in his emerging theory, significance in his cosmic speculations. The film
shows her transformation from naïve to sophisticated, sick to healer, and suffering from illusions to a more adult, realistic view of herself and the world.

The film uses the device of mutual analysis to dramatize and focus the audience’s attention on various couples that become central to its themes. At the same time that Jung was treating Spielrein, he also began the analytic treatment of Otto Gross, a trained psychoanalyst, physician, and one of two figures in the early analytic movement that Freud thought a genius. Yet, Gross was a mad genius, capable of enormous destructive actions and self-sabotage. The other figure Freud considered truly original was Jung. Gross was institutionalized at the Burgholzli Clinic against his wishes by his powerful father, the criminologist, Hanns Gross. Besides being a brilliant, handsome, seductive, and flamboyant figure, Otto Gross expressed a powerful, libertarian critique of patriarchal society and the authoritarianism of the modern family. He advocated polygamy, the sexual rights of women, while attacking monogamy and myriad forms of bourgeois respectability. He had incisive insights into hypocritical sexual attitudes and practices, which functioned to make society sick and individuals defensively organized, therefore tortured and tormented. Modern urban civilization, he prophesized, would remain neurotic and oppressive unless individuals freed themselves sexually, liberating their desires, imagination, and capacity for freely chosen relationships. Gross would ultimately self-destruct in life because of his addiction to morphine and cocaine.

Gross switches positions with Jung in the film, refusing to surrender to the privileged power and scientific knowledge of his male physician analyst. He cannot bear the asymmetry and implicit hierarchy of the analytic relationship, which, for him, recapitulates his disturbed and sadistic relationship with his father. Engaging in an experimental form of mutual analysis with Jung, Jung discloses much intimate detail about his inner world, fantasies, and difficulties in his marriage. Stimulated by these exchanges, he feels immensely understood and helped by Gross. At the same time, he is naively enthusiastic about
Gross’ progress in the treatment, until Gross rather summarily bolts from the Burgholzli. When he discusses the case with Freud on a walk, Freud mentions his disillusionment with Gross, stating that analysis does not work with addicts. Freud adds that figures like Gross would damage the diffusion of the psychoanalytic movement, making the public mistake psychoanalysis as a disreputable form of pan-sexualism, as if it functioned to unleash the instincts. Gross, by the way, is the one figure in the movie who is caricatured historically and badly served; his visionary thinking about sexuality would await further elaboration by Wilhelm Reich in the 1920’s and 1930’s, and would be taken up by cultural radicals in the 1960’s. He is shown in the film always wearing a black turtleneck, an anachronism consistent with his depiction as an intrusive, reckless, drug popping crackpot, a wild bohemian anarchist. In point of fact, Gross articulated a well thought out critique of society and an emancipatory view of the individual. For a corrective, the reader is advised to consult a new collection of essays on Gross’ broad influence. (Heuer, 2011).

Under the influence of Gross, Jung establishes a mutual analysis with Spielrein. As analysts know from their own clinical work, mutual analysis opens up profoundly moving, pleasurable, and intimate encounters, potentials for insights, as well as possibilities for twinships, mirroring, and idealizing self-object transferences. It also contains risks, possibilities for the blurring of boundaries, confusions, merger fantasies, and enactments. Mutual mirroring can be seductive and difficult to resist, particularly if the members of the analytic couple have deep emotional affinities. There is also the danger of exploiting the patient. Mutual analysis can justify the acting out of incestuous and other forbidden fantasies. Yet, Spielrein recovers under the care of Jung. The treatment gradually slides into collaboration, intense sharing of ideas, charged intellectual and clinical exchanges. Therapy get blurred as friendship, sliding into passionate embraces, romantic outings, and a sensual love affair, first initiated by Spielrein in an active masculine manner and not resisted by the passively receptive, feminine Jung. Though there is no definitive evidence that the love affair was sexually consummated, the film assumes
that they were lovers. There is an intelligent paper by Zvi Lothane (1999, 2003) that holds that their relationship did not include sexual intercourse. Jung’s biographer also sees the evidence as ambiguous. (Bair, 2003). I am unconvinced by their arguments.

The consummation of the love affair in the film may provoke moral outrage by opponents of psychoanalysis and denunciation from our more self-righteous and legalistic colleagues, particularly of those who are ignorant of our history. It is easy to judge and condemn, after all. The protagonists of this film are developing psychoanalysis in an entirely different era without our contemporary knowledge of boundary violations and present-centered ethical considerations. They are pioneers, experimental, literally exploring the uncharted terrain of the world of unconscious dynamics. We need to remember the level of temptation involved in practicing our dangerous method, not just of symbolic interpretations, but more essentially of building and sustaining the most intimate of exchanges between two vulnerable human beings left in a room alone often for years. This is one reason that analysts are required to be analyzed. The intersecting of two subjectivities in mutual analysis can be endlessly fascinating and transformational to both participants, particularly if the two share many common interests, aptitudes, sensibilities, and emotional constellations, and especially if there is a potent unconscious to unconscious mode of communication. The closeness that is constructed and the sharing of deep affective experiences may not be replicable outside of this highly unique framework of the talking cure.

Rather than condemn or apologize for Jung’s behavior with Spielrein, the film attempts to contextualize the love affair, to understand without blame, and to empathize with all involved. These intrepid practitioners of psychoanalysis neither fully grasp the destructive potential of certain enactments, nor the ways in which mutual analysis might distort the exploration of transference-countertransference dynamics. They participate in this experiment in the name of freedom and in the
authentic search for truth, including the understanding of romantic love. Freud coins the phrase countertransference in addressing Jung’s difficulties dealing with erotic transference as it emerged in his treatment with Spielrein. He speaks of it as a persistent problem, as a clinical phenomena that needs to be carefully monitored. Freud held that young male analysts are particularly susceptible to these enactments, while we now know that these boundary crossings transcend gender and can occur through the life cycle of the analyst.

The film condenses Spielrein’s ambiguous Siegfried complex. Based on dreams, reveries, associations, and emotional connections, Spielrein’s Siegfried fantasy derived from Wagner’s Ring cycle. There is a scene where Spielrein and Jung observe mental patients while they listen to a recording of Wagner’s music. Let us remember that Siegfried was both the great figure of Teutonic mythology and the son of a hero destined to perform great deeds. For Spielrein the unconscious meanings of the prophetic Siegfried dreams involve self-sacrifice, perhaps even a tragic death, in fulfilling her wish to bear a blond Aryan son to her hero Siegfried. Within the context of the therapy with Jung, it is plain to see the erotic transference contained in this fantasy. Spielrein, however, believes her dreams to be prophetic, thinking of herself as clairvoyant, similar to Jung. Jung also alleges that his dreams were premonitory.

Presenting Jung with a son would be a manifestation of their love union, conclusive evidence of her sense that she would accomplish something great in life. This achievement would entail enormous misery and suffering on her part. Contemporary analysts will see various narcissistic-masochistic character traits embedded in this fantasy. During the merger stage of their relationship Jung shares Spielrein’s fantasies about the symbolic meanings of the Siegfried complex. We could interpret her wish to bear Jung a deeply desired son, view Jung as Siegfried, with Spielrein functioning as the good-enough, protective, and altruistic mother, Brunhilde. Freud, of course, deconstructs Spielrein’s Siegfried
complex, seeing her infatuation with her “Germanic hero,” as nothing more than a failure to mourn her relationship with Jung, an inability to sever her infantile dependence on her mythical savior and rescuer, and a denial of her Jewishness.

Jung, let us remember, was never formally analyzed. He shared this with Freud. Like Freud, he continued to do self-analysis for most of his mature life. Some of his self-analysis would yield trenchant discoveries; at other times, it threatened to obscure his comprehension, overwhelming his ability to recognize his own blind spots. It is elusive, perhaps impossible, to analyze the countertransference while doing a self-analysis. Narcissistic issues may go beneath the radar and field of vision in self-analysis; similarly it may be tricky to grasp how we are perceived by others. While treating Spielrein, Jung meets and corresponds with Freud, seeking out his advice, tactical counsel, and supervision. As the gossip and innuendo in Zurich circulate about his love affair with Spielrein, Jung realizes the high stakes if the love affair becomes more widely public. Rumors of the romance spread to Vienna, orchestrated by Emma Jung, hoping to preserve her marriage. Disclosure of the love affair might cause major damage to his reputation, harm his anointment as successor to Freud, stifle his vast ambitions to make a name for himself as a world class psychologist, and potentially jeopardize his marriage. Things blow up when Emma Jung writes Spielrein’s mother about the love affair. Spielrein appeals to Freud to intercede. Freud behaves badly. He initially supports Jung, placing politics, personal loyalty to his chosen successor, and fraternal psychoanalytic fidelity over the interests—and ultimately the truth—of this specific patient appealing to him in a state of great pain and anguish.

Over time, Jung’s involvement with Spielrein influences his views of Jung’s suitability to succeed him. His disappointment with Jung over the Spielrein affair, along with significant differences about his sexual theories, explode leading to their break in 1913. Even though he claims to be open-minded, Freud finds Jung’s interest in the collective unconscious, archetypes, Aryan psychology, mysticism, and the occult far
too distant from the clinical process, far too unscientific, and non-verifiable by clinical experience.

Though a latent theme in the film, he increasingly discovers in Jung a rather uncomfortable level of anti-Semitism, including a condescending view of Freud and his largely Viennese Jewish followers, whom Jung dismisses as second-rate “bohemian artists and degenerates.”

In the film, Freud and Jung also engage in their own form of mutual analysis. As they first become acquainted, there are scenes where they met and talk for a thirteen hour interlude—I am tempted to call it an extended analytic session. Times disappears and the two have much to dialogue about. They engage in a passionate correspondence. They exchange photographs. Freud visits Jung in his grand home on Lake Zurich. Jung takes him for an expedition in his newly purchased sail boat. Both the mansion and red sail boat are extravagant gifts from Emma Jung. Jung is shown to be the dominant captain, Freud the diminished and ill at ease passenger. We see Freud crouching down in the sail boat with his walking cane, uncomfortably small and vulnerable. The sail boat is a recurring symbol in the film, standing for research and exploration of the depths and Jung’s preoccupation with an oceanic connection to the vast and eternal possibilities of human existence.

Reciprocating, Freud invites the Jungs to visit his flat at the Berggasse 19, where there is a telling scene at the dinner table. Sitting next to Freud, Jung is offered a platter of meat and vegetables. Oblivious to the rest of the table, he piles an enormous helping of food onto his plate, while the Freud children watch (as do the viewers of the film) with astonishment. Freud states ironically that there are no restrictions at his table. The greedy, oral, self-involved Jung has no idea about how he comes across to others; he is accustomed to be cared for, fed, and babied by Emma.

In another scene, we observe Jung sitting in Freud’s study, finding himself perturbed by sounds coming from Freud’s bookcase. Disorganized, he tells Freud that this is a premonition of something important, that he knows the disruption will be repeated, that he can feel the vibrations in his body.
Jung refers to the incident at a “catalytic exteriorization phenomenon.” Freud, for his part, is put off by this display of Jung’s mystical leanings, his immersion in the occult and esoteric psychology. The episode deepens his skepticism about Jung’s allegiance to basic Freudian scientific procedures and methods. Other scenes also address the dissolution of the mutual analysis, diluting the mutual regard between the two seminal thinkers. On the ship traveling to America in 1909, Jung shares his dreams with Freud; Freud finds them hostile and aggressive toward him, suggesting death wishes of the son toward the powerful father. Feeling threatened, Freud refuses to share his associations to one of his own dreams, very much to Jung’s chagrin and disapproval. When asked why, Freud says that it would risk eroding his authority.

Freud refuses to participate in any further mutual analysis, preferring to maintain his distance, privacy, and prestige as the founder of the psychoanalytic movement. He will not repeat his prior relationships with Breuer and Fliess in terms of personal revelations. Assuming the stance of analytic distance, he treats his disciple as he might approach a patient. This engenders great resentment on the part of Jung, who dislikes being infantilized and pathologized. Freud does not relate to Jung as his equal. Lastly, at one of his congresses, Jung and Freud have another encounter, where Jung’s self-disclosures injure Freud’s sense of safety and trust around him. Jung, once again, reveals his aggression toward Freud. Freud faints. As Jung picks him up, Freud ambiguously states, “How sweet it would be to die.” This utterance foreshadows the death of their relationship, a split that continues to this day in the analytic movement. Jung will eventually refuse to be Freud’s disciple, his son, someone less than Freud. Freud’s suspicious interactions with him, the breakdown of the mutual analysis, injures his narcissistic sense of his originality, his ambition to expand psychology toward the exploration of cosmic and mystical realms of the unconscious. The deeply wounded Jung understands that Freud will never treat him in a reciprocal manner.
The Jung of this movie is rather primitively organized. He is fragile as a character. Over the course of the film he is drawn as serious, intense, brooding, ambitious, and vital. Revealing a powerful desire for recognition, he is dissatisfied with a position of number two in the movement. He rejects the universality of Freud’s libido theory, even though his psychological and emotional constitution seems to fit the theory rather precisely. Incapable of monogamy, Jung repetitively gets involved with Jewish patients such as Toni Wolff, who is mentioned in the epilogue of the film. He can be self-serving, insensitive and cruel, particularly in defense of his cover-up and callous break with Spielrein. He lacks irony and a sense of humor. He clearly belongs to a different social class from Freud and his followers; there is a telling scene on the ocean liner traveling to America where Jung separates from his comrades to stay in the stateroom cabins. There are knowing looks in the eyes of Freud and Ferenczi as they move on to their second class accommodations, realizing Jung’s wealth, haughtiness, and above all, his sense of entitlement. After the break with Freud, he experiences a nervous breakdown, perhaps a psychotic break. He is flooded with dreams about a world historical catastrophe threatening civilization; his dreams contains an apocalyptic vision about the rise of barbarism, and the coming of a tidal wave that will engulf Europe, ending in mass bloodshed.

Like Jung, the Freud of Cronenberg’s film has distinct flaws and weaknesses of his own. Like Jung, Freud, too, is oral. In each and every scene in the movie Freud is seen with a cigar in his hand or his mouth. In terms of anal organization, he demonstrates a fierce, relentless insistence on the correctness of his libido theory, stubbornly refusing to relinquish or modify it or to include other perspectives. On the phallic and Oedipal level, he is a confident and well defended father preoccupied with the rebelliousness and opposition of his sons, worried about secession and the preservation of his cause and movement. We view his character rigidity, specifically his fixed and obsessional ideas about the correctness of his theory of instinctual drives. He could be unforgiving toward past and present figures who have disappointed or broken with him. He can be angry, hold grudges, and be fiercely proud,
pompous, and polemical toward those who oppose his core ideas. He appears more concerned about aging and finding a reliable successor then in continuing to develop a clinical method that overcomes obstacles to understanding and resistance to healing. Shown to be a secular, Godless Jew, emotionally disconnected and alienated from metaphysical concerns, Freud’s perspective is linked to a rational and modest wish to help suffering individuals to understand themselves as they are. Above all, this requires a fundamental self-acceptance, based on knowledge and the exploration of unconscious dynamics.

Freudian therapy then, becomes oriented to people as they are actually constituted, not as they might become, linking them to their own adaptive tendencies. In the film, Freud insists on making the distinction between fantasy and reality, advocates sober analysis of illusions and self-deceptions. He works with a hermeneutic of suspicion toward imaginative leaps into the unknowable, speculations about the unknown. Though a cultivated European intellectual, surrounded by art, antiquities, and books, the Freud of this film is materialistic, desiring his technique to focus on the individual’s psychological states at the frontier of the body and mediated by individual biology. Freud urges therapists to reject the role of prophet or priest. Therapy is not about offering spiritual advice or transcendent solutions. In his debates and final break with Jung, we hear Freud rejecting mysticism, intuition, and spiritual strivings as dead ends and unscientific, as forms of knowledge that cannot be validated.

In the film, Jung rejects Freud’s theory as too narrow, deterministic, materialistic, far too preoccupied with sexual motives, cut off from higher, quasi-religious strivings of the individual. Ultimately, he saw Freud’s theory as “too Jewish.” As Jung turns toward the study of religion, myth, and cosmology, he moves from psychological typologies toward the positing of a collective unconscious. He clearly wishes to provide sick individuals something transcendent to believe in, some form of wisdom to mediate between their lives on earth and those realms beyond the individual—past and present. For Freud and
for director Cronenberg, Jung’s orientation lacks the specificity and rigor of Freudian psychoanalysis. It is a reductionism upwards, as it were.

I detect a creative tension in the film between director Cronenberg’s more pro-Freudian leanings and screenwriter Hampton’s more pro-Jungian leanings. Hampton’s allegiances are not uncommon in artists and those who explore mythical themes in story structure and who find meaning in the unconscious deciphering of dreams. In short, there are different transferences to the theories and personalities of the two protagonists in the film. This provides the film with more dramatic intensity and complexity. The story on the screen can be interpreted on multiple levels and from many perspectives, depending on the viewer’s transferences. In the epilogue of the film, we are told that Jung recovers from his breakdown, becoming the “world’s leading psychologist” after 1939. This is a somewhat dubious statement. Freidan psychoanalysis held significantly more influence than its Jungian rival, penetrating and diffusing itself in Europe and America. It also glosses over Jung’s complicity with the Nazi regime in the period 1933-34 and some of the affinities of his thought with National Socialist ideology.

At the end of the film, we see Jung seriously ill, unable to work, dysfunctional, not seeing patients, not writing, in short rather disorganized. Emma Jung invites a recently married and pregnant Spielrein to a visit at their Zurich mansion. Emma asks Spielrein if she would be sad about not having a son. Spielrein replies no, that she is wishing for a daughter; a daughter would further release her from her ties to Jung and her Siegfried fantasy. Emma has struggled with several pregnancies to present Jung with a son, an heir apparent, always trying to satisfy her insatiable husband whom she indulges as a child. She says that Jung has admired Spielrein’s clinical acumen and insight, asking her to stay in Zurich in order to take her husband into analysis with her. Spielrein declines, saying that she has transitioned into clinical work studying the psychology of children.
Emma asks her to speak to Jung. Sitting next to Jung on a bench overlooking the lake, but facing in opposite directions, Spielrein reverses positions once again with her former therapist. She is the well analyzed one, centered and mature, the adult capable of holding onto a realistic view of the world and of people, of continuing with her projects, and breaking her bonds to those (especially to her family and to Jung) who traumatized her. She now functions as the therapist to the sick Jung. Freud had told Spielrein that they were Jews and that as Jews they would be misunderstood and misrecognized by gentiles. (In the film this is a bit softened; in their letters Freud wrote: “We are and remain Jews. The others will only exploit us and will never understand or appreciate us.”). (Carotenuoto. 1982; Fisher, 2009).

Spielrein correctly intuits that Jung has a new lover, Toni Wolff, not coincidentally a former patient, an analyst in training, and a Jewess. She knows that Toni reminds Jung of her. He reluctantly admits it. Jung asks about her husband. Spielrein replies that he is a Russian Jewish physician. Jung inquires what she likes in him. She answers with one word: “kind.” Spielrein is returning to her Russian Jewish roots. Once again, she appears to be separating and individuating from Jung, by emphasizing the Jewishness of her husband and his fundamental decency—contrasting implicitly with Jung. Jung gazes at her pregnant stomach, saying that it ought to be their baby. Spielrein agrees. This is the final return of the Siegfried fantasy, its appearance and disappearance will permit her to terminate their relationship. We view a crying Spielrein leaving the Jung estate in a car. The film has now gone full circle. Knowing that Jung and she have definitively broken, she must grieve the loss once again, integrate the experience, leave Zurich permanently, and attempt to lead a constructive and loving life as a physician, mother, and creative practitioner and contributor to psychological knowledge.

In the epilogue of the film, we are told that Spielrein and her two daughters perished at the hands of the Nazis who invaded Rostov-on-Don in 1942, tragically massacring them in a synagogue.
A Dangerous Method is a relatively short film that illuminates a significant moment in the history of psychoanalysis, Freud’s break with Jung. It will provoke much reflection. It does much good in restoring the memory of the magnificent and forgotten Sabina Spielrein. The film is really her story, recounting her recovery first through the psychoanalytic method, then through the force of her personality and her own creative and adaptive way of building a life after much trauma and destructiveness. Keira Knightley’s performance captures Spielrein’s recovery after being disillusioned with idealized authority figures, without losing a cohesive sense of herself, still able to affirm her own idealistic world vision. The film simultaneously humanizes Freud and Jung, showing their strengths, courage, and revolutionary insights, while not glossing over their flaws, limitations, and at moments their indecent and self-serving behavior. Instead of romanticizing this history and exalting our psychoanalytic forerunners, the film beautifully and successfully shows all of the early psychoanalysts as wounded healers.

In the poignant late scene with Spielrein in the bench, Jung refers to the two of them as “wounded physicians.” This thoughtful movie helps us to contemplate our origins as we figure out where we are now. Lastly, it reminds us that the founders of our discipline discovered a strong but potentially dangerous method, one that needs to be practiced with care, compassion, ongoing self-reflection and fundamental respect for the other. It is a method that encourages us to know more about ourselves as we practice our craft with our wounded patients. Wounded healers continue to heal themselves as they heal others.

References


