

Four Characters in search of an analyst: A Dangerous Method reviewed.

Bennett Roth Ph.D

The recent Cronenberg movie “A Dangerous Method” (2011) has caught the attention of film critics, but seems to have been largely ignored within the Psychoanalytic community. Two earlier films, both released in 2002, and both made by women, cover much of the same material (“The Soul Keeper,” and “My Name Was Sabina Spielrein”) were also ignored.

A historical piece set in various European centers, the recent film interweaves the life of Sabina Spielrein, first encountered as a rampant hysteric on the way to her treatment by Karl Jung at a private sanitarium in Switzerland, with the emergence of psychoanalysis: she is to become a multiple instrument in the founding men’s lives.

Carl Jung embarks on the new “talking cure” and sets about to partially free the young girl from her pathological misery and

return her to a normal life. Jung is inexperienced in these new matters, as most neurologists were at that time, and his excursions into the treatment are only hinted at in this movie based on a play by screenwriter Christopher Hampton, which is itself based on the exceptionally well researched [nonfiction book](#) by John Kerr, from which the movie takes its title.

I found the title for this review in the fragmentary recollection of my own analysis, where once commenting on a seeming error by Freud in the group paper my analyst replied to my astonishment with “ he had a counter transference problem with his analyst.”

Cronenberg, more recognized for violence in his films has crafted a mannerly and formal film, marked by attention to authentic period details as well as such provocative elements as graphic S &M scenes, the wounding of Jung in a lover’s quarrel, and an unsparing view of Spielrein’s physical symptoms of hysteria. At the same time, it is a fiercely thoughtful and revealing

film, a movie that demonstrates the power of psychoanalytical ideas, and the personal impact of these ideas upon each of the four central characters. These characters, Freud, Jung, Spielrien and Gross are searching for an analyst.

Psychoanalysts, as John Kerr notes in the introduction of his book, have created a “heroic” history of the founding of psychoanalysis, and continue to sustain an “aura of inviolability, around its primary founder, “S. Freud M.D.,” and his cohorts. Kerr finds this attitude unconscionable, and many others have also struggled with its ongoing autocracy to Freud’s early theories. Although only a small bit of Kerr’s muckraking makes its way into the screen play, the film is nevertheless suggestive in its revelations. The focus of this review concerns the provocative transference issues raised by Kerr and suggested by the movie.

Even though the focus of the film is upon the relationship between Freud and Jung, the role of Sabina Spielrein is catalytic. The film’s screen play was based upon Kerr’s original non-fiction

book, which made use of her diary and letters, which came to light in the 1970's and 80's, as well as upon other carefully annotated other historical material.

Gender is a significant consideration for both the film's maker and for its characters. Importantly, this is a film made by a man, whose vision about the genderized conflicts at the core of its telling is apparent in the melodramatic form of the movie. This film is a modern variation upon the traditional genre of female melodrama; the usual patriarchal role found in this cinematic genre, often represented by a pastoral or nurturing home, is absent while the tarnished woman is present. The generative nurturing home belongs to the Jungs' in this film. This cinematically required patriarchal role is filled by the three men in Dr. S's life: Freud, Jung, and Gross and their differing ideas about sexuality. In addition this cinematic patriarchy is not pure but is erotic. This variant in the expected character of patriarchy contributes to an unspoken uncertainty and tension about Spielrein's impact on others and her personal resolution. The melodrama rests, in part,

upon this ambiguity. Dramatic tension is also created between the classic patriarchal structure of the time, represented by Freud, and the more graphic issues of unrepressed sexuality such as Spielrein's attachment to Jung who reciprocated her desire in some manner. Added to this mixture is the tension associated with Sabina's emergent desire for her analyst in which are embedded her own masochistic wishes.

Spielrein's transference love and sexuality, apart from what is briefly shown to be perverse, is not unique in this cinematic context because generic melodramas usually stop short of mature sexuality. In all melodramas, the woman is looked at the nearly constant object of male gaze and attention, and often she is watched while being behaving in an immoral manner. The opening scene visually supports this convention as Spielrein struggles to free herself, pressing against the coach's window as if imprisoned. In this film she also serves as a dynamic catalyst between the two struggling men as she seeks her own identity as a woman and psychoanalyst.

The film does not follow Freud's life, and only glimpses Jung's marital and professional life and problems, focusing instead on the relationship between the two men once Spielrein enters their lives. While viewing the film I wondered, for a moment, whether a woman might have made this work with Miss S. at its center. Given her intelligence and background Sabina Spielrein was a perfect candidate for the new method of treating hysteria. The real Dr. Spielrein is revealed in part in John Kerr's introduction and the documentary "My Name was Sabina". A history of Dr S is found in Appendix 1\_

It might be instructive to apply some of the analytic methodology in order to understand some of the linked elements of this movie. It is not possible to treat the movie as a dream, as it is a consciously constructed artistic group effort. Nor can I suppose that I am not attempting to understand any of the directors and screenwriters' wishes. I will treat the historical representations of the characters as cinematic although we may "know" them to

different degrees which effects our perceptions. I will use the film as a canvas or text in which four distinct views of sexual theory and transference are represented by the major characters.

Here I must confess that I have engaged twice before with the study of Freud's history, once to evaluate his group theory and some of its origins, and again to examine the regular presence of his dog in Freud's office. The latter event was hidden from Freud scholars and not well received by psychoanalysts at the time I made the discovery of Jo-Fi; Marie Bonaparte's gift to Freud. I made a different acquaintance of Dr. Jung as my dissertation subject, analogical reasoning, led me to explore his early experiments on free association and "complexes". My adviser suggested to avoid any mention of Jung in a psychological dissertation. I had no prior experience of the two other symbolic characters I will attempt to analyze, Dr Spielrein and Dr. Gross. I "met" them in this movie.

While enjoying the animate visual representations of the

dramatic participants I am forced to see them at the same time as cinematic symbols which engage [the audience, raise emotions as movies intend, and force us to respond in some internal psychic manner.

My own response during the initial movie viewing was to focus on the early divergent theories of sexuality, as well as upon the emergence of the erotic and competitive transferences between analyst and patient, and the pervasive ignorance of the effect of counter-transference.

Freud, however, was not able to pursue counter-transference as a "blessing in disguise" with the same suppleness and flexibility that he brought to bear in his explorations of transference. Of course, any understanding of counter transference at that time was germinal. Initially, analytic emphasis was upon the patient's erotic transference rather than upon aggressive, narcissistic, or other manifestations of transference; counter-transferential feelings could not be acknowledged and understood until psychoanalysts



experienced these feelings as they actually began to be treated and supervised.

As I think about it, the events depicted in the film suggest that, although stepping into the unconscious world of sexuality may in fact have been a courageous act at the turn of the century, yet, in hindsight, it left its various voyagers in a quest for both understanding and analytic help for the aroused transference among practitioners of the new talking method.

Two further notes: I could not help but notice that Dr S had the apparent awareness (in the movie) of one of Mrs. Jung pregnancies when a patient, somewhat a reminder of Breuer's withdrawal from his case of Anna O following her phantom pregnancy.<sup>1</sup> And two, that this was the early time in the founding of psychoanalysis when concern for doctrinal orthodoxy to libido theory and to the patient's transference overrode the search for psychoanalytic truth. In actuality as Britton (2003) points out,

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Sabina, like Bertha Pappenheim, was a sensitive and difficult child. The erotic transference that involved Pappenheim and Breuer was symbolic while that of Sabina and Jung was conscious and knowing.

Although Cronenberg has crafted a modern melodrama, the general form of the film's narrative trajectory bears certain clear resemblances to its 19th century progenitors. Its narrative and expository course is not linear; instead, its organization is plastic and ambiguous. The narrative selectively taken from Kerr's (1994) book seems driven by an inner logic that is often not only at odds with itself, but is, at the same time, beset with emotional conflicts between the men, Freud and Jung, men who appear to be seeking psychoanalytically to understand women's emotional problems. From the opening sequences showing Spielrein being borne off to an asylum, there is the sense of something meaningful, impending, dangerous, and unpredictable about the impact of this film's heroine on the men--and that something is erotic and

transferential.

I imagine Cronenberg's invitation to enter the primal scene space occupied by this film, to use the film as a device to impart knowledge and emotion. I take as my interest the struggle over the libido-sexuality evidenced in this film and the attempts to understand its meanings. If the psychoanalytic treatment room is the psychoanalytic primal scene room where information is imparted, then, by extension, I read John Kerr's book and make this film the historical primal scene room in which the Dangerous Method was born. Most of what follows is derived from the film except where noted,

Spielrein and Jung are each depicted as struggling with her or his own demons. Sabina struggles with her emergence into adult sexuality and identity. Jung struggles with the two-headed monster of, on the one hand, early psychoanalysis with his transferential father figure S. Freud, and, on the other, his own erotic counter-transference to his patient, Sabina. Freud, as we come to know

him, is struggling with keeping sexuality as the centerpiece of his emerging theory and technique, and with keeping himself as the father of the method of exploration and cure.

The character of Dr. Otto Gross, on the other hand, depicts historical character types well known to psychoanalysts. These types condemned repression of sexual desire as neurotic, and saw in the emerging foundation of psychoanalysis a vehicle for their own pleasures. While not quite advocating the flag of free love, such characters as Gross urged, to their own advantage, that the erotic transference should be given into and enjoyed. Reading Kerr reveals that Cronenberg hid from view Gross's attack on monogamy with its Oedipal scaffold while suggesting that as a patient Gross's ideas may have influenced Jung to act on his erotic fantasies.

Jung and Spielrein bring to the fore the two-person problem of sexuality in the transferences elicited by psychoanalysis. For her part, Sabina's erotic attachment clearly has some perverse and

anal-ized elements; her own experience of treatment leads to the emergence of her own theoretical foundation that some love/sexuality results in the loss of ego, or is destructive. For his part, Jung trespasses the boundaries of the analytic relationship by having some kind of affair with his former patient and later professional collaborator. A pattern he would repeat. Perhaps we must consider Freud's insistence on being the father of it all and to have a loyal son together with Jung's challenge to Freud's rational approach by his insistence on religion and mysticism. Together they create the loud thunder of the Oedipal conflict that can be heard and felt in the film's narrative trajectory, and that Jung wishes to ignore the necessary boundaries between patient and analyst. The core complex, the Oedipal triangulation and its meaning is still a few years away from this depicted situation.

Jung's forays into the psyche's unconscious are vastly different from Freud's. If Freud saw himself as the detached decoder of its meanings, Jung wished to be in direct and sensitive

conversation with that part of his psyche and follow its messages.

Historically, Gross became the victim of his own pleasure-seeking, while Spielrein seems to have met a constructive if censorious father in her second treatment with Freud, and in her fate of first being caught in brutal Russian politics, and then finding death at the hands of the Nazis.

In the end Jung's prescient dream of "the bloody tide" is a symbolic representation of the end of these seemingly petty matters and political innocence as bloody devastation of people and empires will occur in the shock of the Great War. Cronenberg juxtaposes the period in which early psychoanalysis flourished as so inner directed that it contained a denial of impending murderous modern warfare: the violence of trench warfare was soon to effect all. This would only partially end this seemingly innocent era.

At the end of the film, a number of symbolic moments change the movie's pace: Spielrein's pregnancy, her visit to Jung's home and her lasting transference wish that the child she is

bearing were Jung's to complete her fantasy. Cronenberg consciously uses the tools of narrative, violence, and symbolism in his spare account, at the conclusion of the movie, of the fates of each of the four major characters. With the final poignant recording of her murder in yet another even more violent war of racial violence.

I can only admire Cronenberg's solemn reminder in plainly pointing out the fates of the 4 major characters that there are two major impulses in the psyche as well as in movies. Freed of Freud's insistence on the centrality of libido theory, following the recognition of the core Oedipal conflict later psychoanalytic theorists would struggle with destructive violence and be compelled to recognize its separate psychic force. As Spielrein intuited, the passionate yearnings she so strongly lived with, i.e., the libido, has two sides: it is the power which beautifies everything and under certain circumstances destroys everything. Britton (2003) intuitively that this idea was a continuation of her

hysterical eroticized death wish. Where Freud say love and work,  
Croneneberg ends the film by saying “Love and death.”

1 According to Strachey (1953), Freud began treatment of Dora in 1900, shortly after the completion of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He completed the bulk of his case history of Dora in 1901, but delayed publication until 1905

Barron, J.W. and Hoffer, A. (1994). Historical Events Reinforcing Freud's Emphasis on "Holding Down the Countertransference".

*Psychoanal Q.*, 63:536-540

Britton, R (2003) Hysteria 11 : Sabina Spielrein . In :*Sex Death and the Superego*, Karnac: London, England P. 27-42

S. Spielrein “Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido”

[“Transformations and Symbols of the Libido”] *Jahrbuch*, Vol. 3

Kerr, J. (1994) *The Dangerous Method*, Random House.

Roberto Faenza.: *The Soul Keeper* (2002)

Elisabeth Márton: *My name was Sabina Spielrein* (2002)

### *Appendix*

Spielrein was born on November 7, 1885 in Rostov-on-Don, Russia. She was the oldest of five children. Her father, Naphtul Arkadjevitch



Spielrein, was a merchant, and her mother, Emilia (Eva) Marcovna Lujublinskaja, was a dentist. Spielrein's maternal grandfather and great-grandfather were well known Hassidic rabbis. Her grandfather educated Spielrein's mother, who was very intelligent and musical. However, after she became engaged to a Christian, her father arranged the marriage with Spielrein's father, who was Jewish. It was not a marriage Spielrein's mother wanted, nor does it appear that she and her husband ever fell in love or enjoyed a satisfying relationship.

The parents, who were extremely strict, forced the children to endure an extremely harsh upbringing: her father tyrannized the household; her mother beat the children severely. Nevertheless, they placed great emphasis on the children's education, employing a nursemaid, a governess to prepare them for high-school entrance and a music teacher.

Spielrein was a very delicate and sensitive child, subject from infancy to frequent illness. She was also very precocious. While Russian was her first language, by the age of six Spielrein also spoke German and French. Indeed, the entire household communicated in a different language every day of the week, moving between German, French, English and Russian.

At the age of ten, Spielrein began attending a girls' grammar school in her hometown, completing her studies with distinction in 1904. She lived at home with her parents, three brothers—Jean, Isaak and Emil—and one sister, Emilia. In addition to her coursework, Spielrein studied piano. At the age of twelve, she started studying Latin and voice. She very much enjoyed natural science courses and decided that the direction in which she wanted to move was medicine. When Spielrein was fifteen, her six-year-old sister died of typhoid. This episode had a dramatic effect on Spielrein.

Spielrein's mental health "affliction" appeared at age seventeen, although she had been beset with problems throughout her young life. She was taken to Heller Sanatorium, Interlaken, in Switzerland for one month, and was admitted to the Burghölzli Treatment and Care Institution (or Psychiatric Clinic) in Zurich on August 17, 1904. Spielrein became the first patient of Carl Jung, ten years her senior, who treated her until her discharge on June 1, 1905

Carl Jung was just beginning to use Freud's little-known psychoanalytical methods, and reckoned that Spielrein was suffering from 'psychotic hysteria'. She could not sit at table without being overcome by thoughts of defecation,

and 'if she was reproached in any way', Jung wrote in 1907, 'she answered by sticking out her tongue or . . . cries of disgust, and gestures of horror, because each time she had before her the vivid image of her father's chastising hand, coupled with sexual excitement, which immediately passed over into ill-concealed masturbation.’”

Once away from her family, however, she recovered fast - her analysis with Jung was over by December 1904, although she was not officially discharged until June 1905 - and she enrolled at the Zurich medical school. She qualified as a doctor in 1911, with top honours in psychiatry, and her dissertation on schizophrenia was published in the same year in the Yearbook for Psychoanalytic and Psychopathological Researches, which was edited by Jung.

Spielrein's two-month psychoanalytic involvement with Jung developed into an intense intellectual friendship and love affair - which may just conceivably have stopped short of full sexual intercourse. She played a major part in the development of his theories, producing instructive emotional tumult, rare clinical material and a number of new ideas. She longed to have a son by him, and her feelings were at times fully reciprocated. Both were taken with the idea of mixing their Jewish and 'Aryan' genes to the greater glory of the universe. They fell into a habit of mutual 'poetry', according to Spielrein's journals and letter-drafts. At the same time she was employed in print “as proof “ of libidinal theory appearing in a number of case publications.

Spielrein qualified as a doctor after her treatment, she moved to Vienna in 1911, began to take on non-paying patients for analysis and wrote some of the 30 papers that survive in published form. She joined the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society (its second female member) and made arrangements to be analyzed by Freud - who already knew something of her involvement with Jung - just as the rupture between the men was moving into its final phase. John Kerr judges her theoretical work to have been impressive, but it was misunderstood and in effect dismissed, and she is now remembered principally as someone to whom Freud misattributed a version of his theory of the death instinct in a footnote in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Britton credits her with anticipating ideas about narcissistic projection

On certain points of theory Spielrein aligned herself with Freud against Jung, but it seems that she continued to love the man who had 'smashed my

whole life'. She married hastily in 1912, and in the event unhappily. She had two daughters, worked in Berlin and Geneva, analyzed Jean Piaget for a while, and returned to Russia in 1923 to work at the Moscow Psychoanalytic Institute. Here she met the young Luria and the young Vygotsky, helping to 'jump-start Russian psychology into the 20th century'. Kerr has no information about her later career, but at some point she returned to her home town of Rostov-on-Don fleeing a purge by Stalin, for she was murdered there by the Nazi Germans, who occupied the town in 1941. Her two daughters were also murdered.