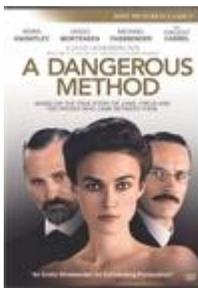


## Did Jung Really Sleep With Sabina?

A review of the film



### **A Dangerous Method**

(2011)

David Cronenberg (Director)

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Reviewed by

[Eugene Taylor](#)

*A Dangerous Method* is a highly entertaining and well-made film that should be seen by anyone with a keen interest in the mind and historical fiction, as the story really happened, but not exactly the way it is portrayed in the film. It tells the story of Sabina Spielrein, a psychotic patient who later became an accomplished physician and scholar, who was analyzed first by Carl Jung at the Burgholzli Asylum in Zurich using the new method of psychoanalysis in 1904. She ended her analysis with Jung and entered medical school in 1905. Upon completion of her studies, Sabina then moved to Vienna to undertake an analysis with Sigmund Freud, involving herself in the developing theories of these two men.

Produced by Sony Pictures, the film was directed by David Cronenberg (*Dead Ringers*, 1988; *Naked Lunch*, 1991; *A History of Violence*, 2005; and *Eastern Promises*, 2007, among others) and stars Viggo Mortensen as Freud, Michael Fassbender as Jung, and Keira Knightley as Sabina. Stilted, ponderous, and gratuitous in only one or two places, the film has as its core the manner in which Sabina allegedly helped to actually craft the early

theories of Jung and Freud as both patient and confidant, particularly on the issue of transference.

As Freud conceived it, transference is the feeling of affection or hatred projected onto the therapist that actually derives from distorted relationships with the patient's parents that need fixing, whereas countertransference is all about feelings that well up inside the therapist for the patient that are actually derived from the therapist's own unresolved oedipal relationship with his or her parents. According to the film, Freud had written about the transference but not in detail by 1905, wishing to withhold the technical aspects of psychoanalysis from being purloined by other writers. Jung could pry only general statements from Freud and beyond that was left on his own to interpret how to use the idea in therapy for the treatment of sexual neuroses.

At that early time, did Jung interpret Freud to mean that it was indeed permissible for the patient to sleep with the therapist? This was a belief reinforced in the movie by the asylum patient, sexual deviant, and aspiring analyst himself, Otto Gross, whom Freud had sent to Jung to be analyzed. In the film, Jung's philosophical arguments with Gross are all about Gross's erotic encounters with his patients and the staff, as well as his attempt to strongly urge Jung to sleep with Sabina.

Meanwhile, driven by her own insatiable impulses, Sabina sends an open invitation for Jung to visit her at any time in her apartment. Jung hesitates and struggles with his conscience, cognizant all the while of the sanctity of his own marriage. But, then, the movie shows, late one night he appears at Sabina's door. They fall into each other's arms in a most passionate embrace, and in the next scene we see Jung and Sabina, still a virgin, in bed for the first time having highly erotic and ecstatic sex.

One of Sabina's original presenting complaints, however, was the sexual abuse she endured all her young life by her father, who would send her to a small room on a regular basis, make her disrobe, and then beat her with a strap, often involving her genitals. Her greatest conflict was that she was terribly frightened and horrified, yet admitted in therapy that she grew to love being whipped for the highly stimulating erotic effect, the origin of her later adolescent nymphomania. Later in the film, as part of her continuing therapy, Sabina is presented half-naked while Jung is depicted in the sadomasochistic act of whipping her, as Sabina's father had done earlier in her life.

The stage is set in elegant upper class surroundings in turn-of-the-century Zurich and Vienna, buttressed by spectacular scenes of Lake Zurich, impeccably designed period clothing, and beautiful cinematography, all of which conspire to draw the viewer in to Sabina's inner conflicts as the patient in the asylum, which are solved by the new methods of psychoanalysis. Much of the backdrop seems true to life as the historians of the period know it. Parts of the theory discussed are surprisingly accurate. Because psychoanalysis was called "the talking cure" there is lots of talking, especially between Freud and Jung. These interactions in the film will appeal particularly to psychoanalysts.

The problem is that there is no evidence that any of the sexual scenes in the film actually ever happened. We have only Sabina's ravings to any and all that she and Jung were lovers. Cronenberg made sure that the statement that the most intimate, erotic parts of the movie remain "highly speculative" is buried deep in the credits at the end. Did everyone who has an opinion about the movie actually catch that? In fact, according to investigators in the new Jung scholarship, there is no definitive evidence whatsoever, except in the case of Tony Wolff, that Jung ever engaged in sex with any of his patients or other women aside from his own wife (S. Shamdasani, February 1, 2012, personal communication); this, despite the assertions to the contrary by authors such as McLynn (1997).

The movie spans only the early period of Freud and Jung's relationship and portrays mainly Freud in his eminence and Jung as the disciple. Jung's composition of *Symbols of Transformation* in 1912, which led to Freud's rejection of Jung and their break in 1913, was a thoroughly Jungian document in the manner in which we are familiar with Jung's writings today. Indeed, shortly after their break, Jung left his post at the University of Zurich and, although he continued to see patients privately, entered into what he characterized as a dialogue between waking rational consciousness, what he also called the "consciousness of the times," and his unconscious, a "consciousness of the depths."

The existentialist historian of psychiatry Henri Ellenberger (1970, pp. 672–673) later called this a prolonged period of "creative illness." The result was *The Red Book: Liber Novus* (Jung, 2009). It is an account, rendered into a giant red leather-bound book, written in Jung's own hand in old German Gothic script, complete with Jung's fantastic drawings, of an inward journey he took over a several-year period in search of his soul, which he had lost during his years with Freud. Readers will be happy to know that, despite the psychotic-like character of what he saw, heard, and recorded within himself, he not only found his soul but also saw the blueprint that would define all his later work in psychology for the rest of his life.

Such struggles as he went through became for him the necessary journey to lead his patients back to sanity and on to the actualization of their highest spiritual potential, which he came to call *individuation*. *The Red Book* remained unpublished for nearly 100 years, however, until a facsimile edition was cotranslated and produced under the editorship of Sonu Shamdasani and published by Norton in 2009 under the imprint of the Philemon Foundation.

The work is highly relevant to the film, as Freud's patients were largely Viennese housewives suffering from ambulatory psychoneuroses, whereas Jung's were mostly confined to the Burgholzli asylum and characterized as psychotic. The challenge was much deeper for Jung because he was dealing with what lay at the very deepest core of the apparently disordered psyche. Both *Symbols of Transformation* and *The Red Book* reveal clearly that Jung had his own complex psychology that was already under way long before he first met Freud, and what it produced after he left Freud's inner circle from then on had nothing to do with Freud's version of psychoanalysis.

The film is thoroughly Freud-centric in this regard, as we get no hint of what would later turn out to be Jung's own psychology of transcendence. Nevertheless, *A Dangerous Method* is worth seeing for its quality production, its fine acting, and for its entertainment value alone. A caveat remains, however, over the historical accuracy of the sexual relationship between Jung and Sabina.

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