

# COUCH AND SCREEN

On making a documentary film on psychoanalysis

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## **1. Privacy**

Psychoanalysis is an intimate relationship. Two people meet regularly in a quiet room. As a rule, one lies on the couch. They discuss whatever comes up, attempting to take seriously the most powerful current feelings of the patient. The intimacy is not enacted but monitored and used for understanding. Complete privacy is intrinsic to the process.

## **2. Curiosity**

Privacy means exclusion. Such a scenario inevitably arouses curiosity. What are they up to? I remember my six-year-old son asking me why I wouldn't change places with him: I could go to his school while he would lie down on my analyst's couch. No one is immune to the temptation to peep through the keyhole; no one lacks Oedipal wishes.

### **3. Film makers and the portrayal of secrets**

Such a prospect is also, naturally, alluring to film-makers, whose art, like the psychoanalyst's, is a sublimation of voyeurism and listening in. Kieslowski offered an affectionate image of this in *Three Colours Red* (1994), while the perverse use of a camera in Michael Powell's powerful film, *Peeping Tom* (1960) offers an altogether more cruel analogy to the finding out of secrets by film-maker (and psychoanalysts).

Finding and showing secrets is a sort of second nature to the director. And ever since Pabst's great film – *Secrets of a Soul*, (1926) – made rather against the wishes of Freud, but with the help and advice of Abraham and Sachs - film directors have attempted, in feature film and on television, to portray the dramas of psychoanalysis.

*Secrets of a Soul* may well have been based on an actual case. But the film was a dramatisation rather than a documentary. I will argue here that, in the case of psychoanalysis, one thing that differentiates dramas from documentaries is that actual sessions cannot be portrayed directly without distorting, damaging and

degrading the analytic process itself. This leaves us with a problem if we want to make a documentary that is not merely a studio discussion or a number of talking heads.

#### **4. Frustration**

And this is frustrating. A well-made, fly-on-the-wall documentary on psychoanalysis would undoubtedly win acclaim for the filmmaker and de-mystify psychoanalysis, while informing and entertaining the public. And it might seem that such a film would be the most direct means of letting the public know about our work and ideas at a time when they are in competition with so many other psychotherapeutic approaches.

#### **5. Dead-ends**

In my experience negotiations between interested filmmakers and psychoanalysts tend to come up against a wall on this issue. The former are wedded to the idea of filming, no doubt often with respect and care, sessions as they occur, which is precisely what in the end we reluctantly conclude we can't with integrity allow.

#### **6. Arguments**

The director/ producer is not insensitive to the analyst's problems, but tends to believe, deep down, that our qualms reveal a kind of reticence about exposure with which they are familiar in other fields. They assume that it is no different here.

They believe that once they have established their credentials of trustworthiness, our archaic, quaint over-caution will fall away. They suspect that we share with other 'Establishments' a fear of open access to what we do. Perhaps like the fraudster who opposes the intrusions of the Inland Revenue we have something to hide. Are we not all in favour of Open Government, at least until we become the Government ourselves?

My view is the opposite: that this is a situation in which those who demand to look, to get right inside, are the ones on the side of perversion of the truth. Such a stance goes against a prevalent contemporary view, according to which nothing should be kept private.

Here I can only give my arguments in a schematic form:

(i) More than any other process, analysis both requires a measure of co-operation and trust – so that the patient may become able and willing to say whatever comes to mind - and is also an ongoing examination of the conscious and unconscious reasons for lack of trust. Any (mechanical or personal) third-party presence would be an intrusion into that delicate process. A comparable example might be the confessional, though I am not suggesting that the two processes are in other respects similar. The filming of sessions would turn psychoanalysis into a version of 'In the Psychiatrist's Chair' – good journalism, even sometimes some revelations - but not an occasion for the

patient's freedom to express whatever he thinks and feels in a setting of confidentiality.

(ii) The issue of intrusion is a fundamental one in any analysis. We are bound to find fantasies of others getting into the sessions from outside, and wishes in the patient to get into the analyst's life or mind. The presence of another in the session would make it inevitable that these phantasies would be side-stepped or acted out. If the analyst were to allow it he would be colluding in such an acting-out, whatever the meaning for the patient who has sought it –whether exhibitionism, appeasement, triumph, or the creation of a dilemma for the analyst.

(iii) The presence of a camera in sessions, however discreet, would interfere with the analyst's attempt to achieve a proper state of 'evenly suspended attention'. The analyst like the patient is vulnerable, though for different reasons. He would certainly be vulnerable to his own tendencies to appeal to a neutral 'audience', or to fear of rebuke, and this would interfere.

(iv) So far my reasons have been that giving permission to film would be anti-therapeutic and unethical. Such a film would also fail to give what is wanted. The hoped for transparency could in fact be an illusion, as these conversations and silences have their own dense history and unique code. Much is taken for granted between the participants, rather as in intimate conversations between people who know each other

well. Moreover there would also be falsification. Bion speaks of the idea of 'mechanical recordings' being introduced into sessions. He says: 'These have the truth that pertains to a photograph, but the making of such a record, despite a superficial accuracy of result, has forced the falsification further back – that is into the session itself. The photograph of the fountain of truth may be well enough, but it is of the fountain after it has been muddied by the photographer and his apparatus; in any case the problem of interpreting the photograph remains. The falsification by the recording is the greater because it gives verisimilitude to what has already been falsified'. I agree.

(v) Nor would I accept various watered down scenarios, like filming a consultation (with regard to which the same arguments apply), or doing pretend-consultations or trial sessions. These would simply be inauthentic. Analysis is not play-acting. It is a living relationship, often dealing with explosive and sensitive material, which needs to be nurtured.

Our objections to the presence of a camera or other recording device in a session are, then, ethical, therapeutic and epistemological.

## **7. Outcome**

The outcome is that potential filmmakers tend to feel that without this inordinately desirable peep into the exciting intimacy

of the consulting room the whole idea of the film loses its fillip and appeal. The warning story of Tiresias , blinded for having seen too much, does not carry much weight when placed in the balance against the delicious prospect of being the breaker of this taboo. The obstacles feel to them insurmountable. They suspect, perhaps correctly, that they will not be able to sell any less explicit scenario to those who might commission such a film. And the enthusiasm drifts away.

Except with one filmmaker. I met Hugh Brody when about three years ago he attended a showing of *Nineteen Nineteen*, as part of the Film and Psychoanalysis series chaired by Andrea Sabbadini and Peter Evans. Hugh has been, as you have heard, intrigued by the challenge, and has grasped the nettle. For the past two years or more, he has been working with two colleagues, Andrea Sabbadini and Paul Williams, and myself, on a different idea for a documentary on psychoanalysis.

## **8. Obstacles to assets**

In our brainstorming debates, we have voiced all sorts of possibilities, but we keep returning to one guiding idea: that we want to make a creative documentary film whose central issue is the fact that we can't make the film we instinctively wanted to make. We are attempting, that is, to deal with our obstacle by embracing it, by embodying it in the film-making process itself. We thus follow in the footsteps of psychoanalysis itself; Oedipal feelings, like the transference and counter-transference, began by being perceived as obstacles, but are now part and parcel of

every treatment. These 'interruptions', as Freud at first called the irruption of transference, have had to be accepted as intrinsic. Thus, our approach is to orient the film round the deep psychological situation that refusal of access echoes and repeats, the Oedipal situation.

## **9. Oedipus Complex**

Ever since the late 1890s, we have followed Freud in the idea that as children we all experience an Oedipal complex. That is, we've all had to come to terms with the fact of the sexual and emotional relation that gave us our existence, and the fact that our mother has desires for someone other than ourselves. We have to deal with these blows to our omnipotence and our narcissism by mourning their loss, and valuing what we do have – which in satisfactory childhoods is also a special relationship with each parent or parental figure. We develop sexual and emotional desires to have one parent to ourselves, and murder and take the place of the other. Our childhood exclusion from our parents in their closest emotional and physical intercourse is a source of frustration for us all. I mean not only physical exclusion (though most people would feel it best for the child to be protected from the incomprehensible, alarming, and arousing position of witness to his parents' love-making), but emotional exclusion. For the child is simply unable to understand the nature of adult sexuality. So the idea of his parents' sexual life leads to unconscious fantasies of many kinds, such as that what is going on is violent or defecatory. The child has to learn that the



parents can do something that he or she cannot yet do, that there is an unavoidable difference between the generations, as well as between the sexes. The complex of feelings, including the various ways in which we attempt to resolve them - structures our minds in permanent, though not unchangeable, patterns.

## **10. The prospective film**

To return to the idea of our potential film. Hugh Brody is willing to try to find ways of turning this pillar of psychoanalytic theory to advantage by retaining the privacy of the analytic encounter, but also making it a focus in the film. The pleasure principle gives way to the reality principle. The film could be structured and enriched by the fact that both director and viewer must bear with and modify the pain of being in the position of outsider, experiencing the feelings of that position imaginatively and thoughtfully, rather than evading it by means of smuggling the voyeuristic camera into the parental bed of the privacy of the session. The plan is that Hugh will weave into the documentary the theme of exclusion and the reasons for it, whether for a small child painfully becoming aware of his parents' special relationship, or for the director and viewer of this film. Such a film would be, like psychoanalysis itself, self-questioning and self-reflective.

We think that our letting go of the Oedipal desire is not a matter to be, in the end regretted, it is to be celebrated. Let me give a

brief example of what I am getting at from another art form. Architect Daniel Libeskind makes the physical centre of his Holocaust Museum in Berlin an empty and inaccessible space, a space of absence. Thus in moving around the museum visitors experience a central fact of the Jewish experience – absence, loss, emptiness, a terrible gap at the centre. These felt or unfelt experiences also represent the impact of the Holocaust on survivors and descendants. And since the memorial is in the heart of Berlin, it also represents the hole at the heart of the members of the non-Jewish majority, whose elders and predecessors were involved in perpetrating or turning a blind eye to the Holocaust. The building conveys, finally, something universal; an experience of feelings of loss or exclusion, as well as a vision of an outcome of our murderous impulses when unbridled.

What we have in mind, then, is a film which will make its point about exclusion by means of its structure and its content.

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