

COUCH AND SCREEN

If Freud made films... Andrea Sabbadini interviewed

Steven Jay Schneider talks with Andrea Sabbadini, Chair of 1st European Psychoanalytic Film Festival

*Following the 1st European Psychoanalytic Film Festival in London last month, festival Chairman Andrea Sabbadini talks with **Steven Jay Schneider** about its planning and reflects upon its success.*



From 1 to 4 November 2001, the British Psychoanalytical Society held the 1st European Psychoanalytic Film Festival (EPFF) at Regent's College and the British Academy of Film and Television Arts.[\[1\]](#) The festival's Honorary President was Bernardo Bertolucci, and a large number of prominent film scholars,

directors and practising psychoanalysts participated in workshops, read panel papers and discussed screenings with the public in attendance. Among the films shown were Tom Tykwer's *Lola rennt* (*Run Lola Run*, 1998), Vinko Brešan's *Maršal* (*Marshal Tito's Spirit*, 1999), José Luis Borau's *Leo* (2001), Nanni Moretti's *La Stanza del figlio* (*The Son's Room*, 2001), Dominik Moll's *Harry, un ami qui vous veut du bien* (*Harry, He's Here to Help*, 2000) and Ildikó Enyedi's *Az én XX. századom* (*My Twentieth Century*, 1989).

The Chairman of the EPFF Organising Committee was Andrea Sabbadini, who for several years has been in charge of the British Psychoanalytical Society's programme on psychoanalysis and the arts. A former film critic, Honorary Senior Lecturer at University College London, Founding Editor of the journal *Psychoanalysis and History* and Book Review Editor for *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, Sabbadini talked with *Kinoeye* shortly after the Festival's completion.

How did the idea for a European Psychoanalytic Film Festival arise and get put into motion?

For several years now, the British Psychoanalytic Society has been running a series of events at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in central London, involving the screening of films followed by discussions with psychoanalysts, film critics and filmmakers. The success of these events—regularly attended by about 100 people and now imitated by several other psychotherapy institutions—convinced us that there would be room for a major

festival/conference that would bring under the same roof for a long weekend people from different professional and academic backgrounds who had in common a wish to explore the complex relationship between cinema and psychoanalysis.

This was something of a unique festival insofar as it took very seriously the notion of combining academic conference-style panels on the one hand with film screenings, question-and-answer sessions with directors and social events on the other. Were you concerned at all about bringing what are all-too-often distant worlds of film appreciation together? And were you pleased over all with the way it turned out?



Sabbadini (right) with Bertolucci at the festival

More than concerned — I was terrified about it! But I also had trust in the professionalism and personal qualities of the individuals we had invited; in their genuine interest to establish and develop a dialogue with each other, utilising the various

formats we made available to them for this purpose; in the careful organisation of this event on the part of the Committee I had the privilege of chairing; and, last but not least, in the power of "good" cinema itself to stimulate creativity among those reflecting on it and to evoke emotions that we could all share. The friendly atmosphere during EPFF and the enthusiastic feedback we received throughout confirmed to us that people appreciated our initiative.

I gather that one of the operating assumptions behind the organisation of this festival was that psychoanalytic thought and theory must bear some special affinities to European (as opposed to, say, Hollywood) cinema. Is this correct, and if so, could you speculate on what these "special affinities" might be? How would you begin to account for them?

In principle I can see no reason why a 1st *American* Psychoanalytic Film Festival could not be as successful as our 1st European Psychoanalytic Film Festival. Indeed, I would encourage such an initiative myself. Nor should we forget the important contribution given to world cinema by other countries, such as Japan or India. You may be right about "special affinities" between psychoanalytic theory and European films—possibly because of the very European origins of psychoanalysis itself—though I would not find it easy to identify what such affinities may be. Perhaps it is the "language" itself of so much Hollywood cinema, with all its clichés, that does not lend itself well to a psychoanalytic reading. But, more

pragmatically, our decision to concentrate on European films was the result of a "political" choice to counteract the massive invasion of commercial American products on our screens—especially in Great Britain where (unlike in, say, France or Italy) movies from countries other than the USA are rarely distributed.

Is your sense that a particular use/application of psychoanalytic theory or method was especially prominent amongst those reading papers at the EPFF? Conversely, were you "surprised" by any (or many) of the papers you heard in terms of the way they brought psychoanalytic theory to bear on European film?

One of the exciting discoveries during this 1st EPFF was the variety of styles of presentation, coming from different psychoanalytic traditions and using a whole array of theoretical models and interpretative keys—Kleinian, classical Freudian, Lacanian, object relational, intersubjective... you name it! It was refreshing to see how films—not unlike dreams or other analytical material we are familiar with from the daily work we carry out in our consulting rooms—could be discussed and understood within a psychoanalytic framework in such a rich variety of ways; emphasizing at different times issues of authorship, film genre, spectatorship, textual analysis, cultural contextualization, etc.

It is remarkable, I think, that such a multitude of approaches did not on the whole lead to a Babelic confusion of tongues, for which we should probably also be grateful to the high quality of

the majority of the presentations and to the tolerance and open-mindedness of those attending them. Indeed, the active response of the "audience," always keen to participate in the debates with stimulating comments (and often inevitably a little frustrated by the pressures of time), seemed to us to confirm the value of allowing for such an open and non-dogmatic attitude.

Are there any panels or events that you would especially like to see in a future instalment of the EPFF?

Too many to list here! Perhaps, if we decide in favour of a second edition of EPFF, we shall consider offering workshops on the psychoanalytic meaning of new technologies in film production and distribution (eg the video and the camcorder revolutions, the interactive control of images through DVD, the availability of movies on the internet); giving more space for young filmmakers to present and discuss their work; focusing more specifically on the all-pervasive theme of spectatorship; exploring the role of ethnic minorities in contemporary European cinema; looking at the mutual influence of eastern and western European film traditions. But also, the discussion originated in some of the panels and workshops of the first edition of EPFF—for instance on the relationship between documentaries and features, or on ways of representing psychoanalysis itself on the screen—could be fruitfully continued in the future.

In the discussions with directors, did you find any consistencies when it came to their views on the

relationship between (psychoanalytic) theory and their practice of making films?

Not necessarily— in fact, some of them had little awareness of such theories underlying their own practice of making films. Eleven major films from nine European countries were shown, with ten of the eleven directors present and involved in their presentation (the 11th film was directed by Samuel Beckett). What impressed me was their openness to seriously consider the relevance of the psychoanalytic contribution to an understanding of their work, showing none of the contempt so common among those who are ignorant about it.

Regardless of their own sophistication in psychoanalytic knowledge—which varied from considerable to none—the film directors who attended EPFF seemed willing to engage in a dialogue with analytic practitioners and theoreticians, and to want to learn from them. I will add that psychoanalysts too were more than ready to let the filmmakers and their works teach them a few useful lessons about the human condition. I would consider this exchange between the cultural worlds of cinema and psychoanalysis, or at least the opening up of a space where such a dialogue can occur and develop, to be a major achievement of our 1st EPFF.

About the author

Steven Jay Schneider is a PhD candidate in Philosophy at Harvard University and in Cinema Studies at New York

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