
 FILM-PHILOSOPHY

A Review of Andrea Sabbadini (ed.) *The Couch and the Silver Screen: Psychoanalytic Reflections on European Cinema* (2003)

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Andrea Sabbadini (ed.) (2003) *The Couch and the Silver Screen: Psychoanalytic Reflections on European Cinema*
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The Couch and the Silver Screen collects the contributions of the 2001 symposium organized by the Institute of Psychoanalysis in London on psychoanalysis and cinema, with the participation of analysts, scholars, and also film-makers and actors (B. Bertolucci, N. Moretti, M. Apter, M. Aviad, T. Rosenheimer). The topics were diverse and some are frequently discussed, which makes this book a really useful one for scholars, psychoanalysts and students.

This symposium is part of an ongoing dialogue between psychoanalysis and film studies harking back to the 1970's when feminist scholars started to pay attention to Jacques Lacan's teaching. Since then, 'this more open attitude of mutual exchange and constant cross-referencing' (7) has included cineasts (in or out of psychoanalysis, like Bertolucci, or subject to the cultural dissemination of Freud's thought like all of us) and scholars that work at the margins of different schools of psychoanalysis. The reader will find Freudian readings along with Bion and Klein-inspired studies, as the teaching of these two psychoanalysts is thriving in Great-Britain. Lacan's influence is recalled, although it does not appear in the published texts, which are according to Andrea Sabbadini, 'rooted in classical Freudian theories' (6). True enough, Lacan never engaged in cinematic analysis (although one may well forget his words on *The Realm of the Senses* in 1977). However he

has left the categories of the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary that found some echo in C. Metz's *Le Signifiant imaginaire*, but more importantly in the feminist theories of Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis, Mary Anne Doane, which have renewed film studies, along with Derridean post-modern deconstruction and audience-centered readings.

This said, the reader will find contributions by cinema-loving psychoanalysts or cineasts finding their inspiration in psychoanalysis, a fact which may account for the necessary 'discrepancies of language and style' (7) in the book. The editor has tried 'to create an organic text' (7) so as to give the reader 'a consistent, if varied, tool for psychoanalytical reflections on European cinema' (7).

One cannot question this aim or deny that it has been carried out: all varieties of readers (beginners or more scholarly) will find food for thought, all the more so as the topics are unexpected (*Film*, the only movie with a scenario by Samuel Beckett, in 1963, directed by Alan Schneider and starring Buster Keaton, gave rise to a discussion with film scholar Ian Christie, actress Juliet Stevenson and psychoanalyst H. Taylor Robinson). Other topics discussed here do not appear in most film studies anthologies: the impact of traumas, or the "'horror" scenarios in our unconscious minds' (8) that the horror genre caters for. Others are better known such as the best way of representing the inner and outer reality.

The book is divided in 4 sections including several chapters. 'Set and Stage', the first section has two chapters. The first one, 'The Filmmaker's Temporary Social Structure' is the transcription of a debate between filmmaker B. Bertolucci, actress Fiona Shaw and psychoanalyst Chris Mawson. It deals with the group relations during a shooting and on the constitution of the film as an object. 'Samuel Beckett's *Film*', the second chapter, deals with how the eye/camera can perceive the reality it is immersed in as perceiving eye. For Beckett, the essence of the cinema is the look: however the movie is in denial of this.

'Working through trauma', the second section has five contributions focusing on traumatic events and their impact on characters and viewers. First, filmmaker N. Moretti discusses *The Son's Room* about the loss of his son by a psychoanalyst: 'How is the work of a psychoanalyst affected by the events, vicissitudes, joys and sorrows of his or her private life' (57)? He concludes that 'bereavements do not unite but divide' (59). The topic is quite interesting as it reverses the economy of grief: here the analyst is confronted to the work of mourning which he usually helps his analysands to accomplish. American psychoanalyst Jed Sekoff discusses the ontological 'aloneness' through two experimental movies: *The*

Dreamer by Miguel Sapochnik (2001) and *Kissing Buba* by Lindy Heyman (2001), films which “dream back” against the distortion and obliteration that accompany ruptures in our personal and collective lives’ (75). *Festen* is read by the Argentinian psychoanalyst Liliana Pedròn de Martin as staging denial and disavowal against all attempts at disclosure, in the context of Dogme 95’s aesthetics which ‘forces [the viewer] to see and hear without avoiding the facts’ (94). Diana Diamond reads Itsvan Szabo’s *Sunshine* (1999) as the ‘cinematic representation of historical and familial trauma’. The title may not sound appropriate as the series stages the vicissitudes of the Sonnenschein, a Jewish family in Hungary during the first half of the twentieth century. Focusing on transgenerational incest and on the impact of the Holocaust, the series ‘shows how history reverberates in and is resisted by the individual personality and psyche, whose conflicts are configured out of the social and political fabric of the time’ (100). In ‘A Post-Postmodern Walkyrie’, Annegret Mahler-Bungers deals with *Run Lola, Run* which she sees as promoting the redemptive value of the erotic bond: Lola is ‘a post-postmodern Walkyrie, a woman *with* qualities, with a strength, resolution, firmness and love with which the younger generation can fully identify’ (91). Against the postmodern *doxa* celebrating the virtues of the subjective splitting (but which is always ready to counter any manifestations of it as soon as the stability of the mercantile order is threatened), the ‘figure of Lola seems to offer a deliberate *thesis*, by which the film opposes not only the philosophical self-definition of subjectivity, in postmodern times, but also more importantly the social and psychological condition of humankind in the post-industrial and late-capitalistic world which (...) could be characterized as a synthetic, imaginary and totally other-oriented interface world’ (87). Such a reading pleading for a less problematic identity would benefit from a reading of the French analyst Ch. Melman, in his recent *L’homme sans gravité* (2003) about contemporary identity where he contrasts the new ‘economy of jouissance’ and the ‘old’ economy of desire.

The four following chapters deals with horror and the fascination it exerts on our technological society. Steven Jay Schneider’s essay, ‘Notes on the Relevance of Psychoanalytic Theory to Euro-Horror Stories’ recalls the development of the ‘Euro-horror’ genre from the 1970’s. This sub-genre derives from the Gothic literature and mainstream horror films characterized by a form of ‘sexualized violence with a degree of sexual explicitness not found in most Hollywood products’ (100). However Euro-horror is prone to the influence of psychoanalytic theory and may show ‘the extent to which certain

psychoanalytic ideas may have seeped into the narratives and imagery' (125). The latter dimension is illustrated by psychoanalyst Donald Campbell showing how D. Argento's *Phenomena* conveys adolescent anxieties concerning the body which appears as monstrous because it is being sexualized. The filmmaker's solution is interesting as it features a regression to a pre-Oedipal stage to counter the irruption of sex in his protagonists' lives. Less dramatic but as efficient in term of anxiety, Candy Aubry makes a Kleinian reading of Dominik Moll's *Harry, He's Here to Help* (2000) where the eponymous character is but the dark face of the protagonist. The movie is read as 'a study of the use of primitive defence' (139) against the unconscious forces. From another perspective, this section is concluded by film scholar Michael Grant who discusses the aesthetics of the horror movies using the theses of R. G. Collingwood to read C.-T. Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1931) and Lucio Fulci's *The Beyond* (1981).

The following section, 'Documenting Internal Worlds', has four chapters discussing the cinematic relationship between reality and fiction. Michael Apter begins by discussing his work as a documentarist and filmmaker with a lot of *finesse*. He contrasts the analytical setting and the cinema which both seek a degree of authenticity and sometimes reach it through specific modalities. However, one might argue that subjective authenticity is a notion that psychoanalysis has questioned and to which it opposes the subject's necessary incomplete truth. Film studies scholar E. Cowie starts from Freud's theory of dreams to examine the cinematic dream-work of Ingmar Bergman' in *The Wild Strawberries* (1957). Ljiljana Filipovic reads Bresan's *Marshal Tito's Spirit* (1999) that pokes fun at the cult of Great Men (a very Freudian topic which Freud discussed until his last days) using Freud's first theories on abreaction and *catharsis*, the return of the repressed and the use of humour to deflect any tension. She sees the movie as performing a process of mourning through the use of derision as the story verges on comedy.

In 'Documentary Directors and Their Protagonists: a Transferential/Countertransference Relationship?', psychoanalyst E. Berman and documentarists Timna Rosenheimer and Michal Aviad discuss their respective documentaries *Fortuna* (2000) and *Ever shot anyone?* (1995). The first is about six sisters and their mother, the second deals with Israeli reservists. M. Aviad's acknowledges that they helped her to raise the question of her own place as a woman/mother/cineast. This question may have benefited from Lacan's definition of countertransference as the desire of the analyst.

Finally, in 'Filming Psycho-analysis: feature or documentary?', Hugh Brody (the author of *Nineteen Nineteen* (1985), one of the few movies where psychoanalysis is not mistaken for psychiatry or derided as is so often the case in mainstream movies) and Michael Brody debate on the possibility of filming psychoanalysis as a therapeutic practice in a profit-oriented context. Filming psychoanalysis is not 'good television' (240) according to the authors. Moreover, both point out that unless it runs the risk of voyeurism and inauthenticity, such a question can only be raised within the ethics of psychoanalysis and cinema, as their conclusion makes clear: 'Our objections to the presence of a camera or other recording device in a session are, then, ethical, therapeutic and epistemological' (243).

The thematic and methodological diversity of the book is a precious tool for the beginner who will find essential references, jargon-free explanations of psychoanalytical concepts (let us mention the excellent presentation of Freud's *Traumdeutung* by Elizabeth Cowie), and a good introduction to film studies. The more knowledgeable scholar will find a representative sample of the latest developments of one of the aspects of the dialogue between psychoanalysis and cinema.

The book wants to bring its readers 'individual readings of cinema from a variety of traditions' (12), an aim it certainly achieves, except for Lacanian readings which are absent. Such a concern is complemented by the necessity of maintaining an 'awareness of the structural and functional differences between cinema and psycho-analysis, as well as of some of their complementarities and continuities' (12). In his essay, Steven Jay Schneider rightfully distinguishes between two uses of psychoanalysis: the historicist one (cinematic horror as a scion of psychoanalysis for instance) and the theoretical one for which the names Ferenczi, Abraham and Jones come to his mind. Such a necessity demands that we reconsider the relation between psychoanalysis and its Other. It might be interesting to come back to the strange relationship between psychoanalysis and cinema.

Himself an analyst, Sabbadini leaves aside the therapeutic aspect of psychoanalysis to examine the methodological problems of 'applying' psychoanalysis to cultural productions. Such an 'application' is said to be 'fruitful' (2) from a standpoint we shall term quantitative rather than qualitative as we wish to express some remarks on the first aspect as it appears in the book. According to Sabbadini, psychoanalysis and cinema both share some insight (a term deriving from 'inner sight' as he reminds us), that is to say a way of addressing reality and its representation. As far as the latter is concerned, we won't

mention the distortions that films apply to psychoanalysis, and which are not devoid of ideological intents. Usually, in those movies, the psychoanalyst is either an ambiguous character always prone to morph into a devil, or a fool, and therapy is often debased into a dramatic catharsis, which is a reductive vision and certainly partakes of the mechanism of projection: if we think that according to Aristotle, it is drama which proceeds through catharsis. Let us recall that psychoanalysis is predicated on Freud's recognition of a kernel of Real in the subject (*'das Kern unserer Wesen'*), which cannot be abreacted or subjected to catharsis. It is in that recognition that the Freudian discovery lies.

On the other hand, psychoanalytical-inspired criticism often takes the movie as a discursive production, which we think is total nonsense as a work of art is not a subject whom the analyst leaves the responsibility of enunciating his or her discourse and which is as 'endless' (*unendlich*) as psychoanalysis itself. It does not seem stupid to recall this commonsense unless we mistake two different registers of experience: the aesthetic field and the therapeutic one.

For the reviewer of this book writing from a French Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical standpoint which made us fully aware of the long-time effects of Lacan's exclusion from the IPA in 1963, so far as the English-speaking analysts miss his teaching, or leave it aside. What is also missing, according to us, a real dialectic between psychoanalysis and cinema. Never does the work of art question psychoanalysis, contest its theory as it did in Freud who compared psychoanalysis to a scaffold whose pieces could be changed when they had become irrelevant. Such an acceptance of the work of art in its subversive capacity may be less apparent in Lacan although his reading of Sophocles's *Antigone* in the *Seminar VII* made clear the rules of the game for Lacanian analysts. Yet, every reader of Freud knows how he proceeds: by a constant to-ing and fro-ing between the questioning work of art and the theory which is being built. The work of art allows Freud to modify or to review psychoanalysis, which then allows a different reading, the best evidence appearing in 'Dostoevsky and parricide' where Freud starts by discussing Dostoevsky, then discusses epilepsy before offering a personal and final reading of Dostoevsky's works. In every Freudian text on art, we find this questioning of psychoanalysis by art and of art by psychoanalysis, which has the effect of turning Freud's texts into an experience of the renewing of theory and of a transformation of the way we approach the work of art. When they do not engage in this dialectical process without resolution, contemporary Freudian analysts condemn themselves to the situation

described by Michael Grant in the book: 'Interpretations proliferate, and the film, held at a distance in order that it may be subsumed beneath a pre-existing theoretical template, ends up reduced and reified' (147). What is lost is the singularity of the work of art. Quite often, the movies which are discussed are subjected to the Procrustean bed of the Freudian/Kleinian/Bionian theory which interprets them according to its own agenda. Although such readings no longer claim to be the only ones, they remain inscribed within the frame of a meaning that needs to be delivered.

Interesting as it may be, Ljiljana Filipovic's reading juxtaposes quotations by Freud without explanations or references to clinical practice (even the most simple one) and questionable interpretations. For instance, we read that 'Lola is the figure of limitation, framing and structure, and therefore represents the defence mechanisms of the Ego' (87). Is the movie supposed to show a psychical theory? Surely the sentence needs some explanation which is missing. Candy Aubry too indulges in this kind of reductive interpretations: 'Harry can be seen as an unconscious force' (140). It seemed the psychoanalytical theory had moved beyond the vision of the unconscious as a machine or a beast moved by obscure forces. The difference between the metaphorical and the literal meaning should be recalled. This kind of interpretation may verge on Jonesian symbolism when someone as versed in psychoanalysis as E. Cowie proceeds by associations which derive from the structure of the movie she discusses but which are quite soon severed from it, to be wrapped up in an intensely personal (and thus open to contestation) interpretation: 'I nevertheless make a series of associations whereby, for example, the missing hands on the watchmaker's clock and Isak's own watch seem to me to be an image of time lost' (199). The missing hands might as well represent the disappearance of good clockmakers in a capitalist system or expose the absent-mindedness of humanity. This is no longer the *Traumdeutung* but a dictionary of symbols. What is at stake here is the scientific character of psychoanalysis which such interpretation may contribute to mine. The arbitrariness of the sign is about a signifier referring to another in an endless chain. Then, why did not the cineast proceed by using a succession of transparent symbols? To this dessicating kind of interpretation, one may oppose the difficult but rewarding position of M. Grant: 'I have adduced no grounds for appealing to any general theory of psychic structure in order to justify an interpretation of the film, or to vindicate an explanation of its aesthetic effect' (154). The critic refers to no theoretical grid, seeks to explain no effect by some theory but leaves the work manifest and express itself. But Grant is not an analyst

and may not be tempted to succumb to a facile symbolism. Psychoanalysis as a theory changed when Freud took into account a place where meaning falters, which he had already hinted at in the *Traumdeutung* ('the navel of the dream') and which came back with a vengeance on the analytic stage during the cure of the Wolfman (1913). Trying to reconstruct the primary scene which he thought held the key to his patient's symptoms, Freud stumbled on something which escaped all accounts, which had left no script and which could only be inferred from its traces. Such a hole in the subject's unconscious knowledge came to be known as the *Urverdrängung* or primary repression in 1915. So far theory and practice had partaken of an hermeneutics of the unknown text enclosing the subjective meaning, they hereafter partook of the approach of a meaninglessness escaping full enunciation (Lacan's Real, but Freud did not need Lacan to be an analyst and it can be argued that neither do we). This locus, which both men and works of art have in common although is not the same, is precisely what allows our interpretation or reading through a dialectical process which stumbles on this heart of strangeness within the subject, within the work of art, but which constitutes the dynamics of the analytical process. If we do not engage in this process which is both a contestation of psychoanalysis through art and of art through psychoanalysis, and an acceptance of the work as it is, the meeting between psychoanalysis and art is doomed to fail by morphing into two soliloquies with psychoanalysis claiming to deliver the sole meaning of art. Such a perilous non-exchange is likely to come to a sorry end with psychoanalysis being accused of undue hegemony. All denials, all theoretical pairings (psychoanalysis and deconstruction, psychoanalysis and feminism for instance) won't wash this dirty hand. Psychoanalysis brought us outside the realm of meaning and exegesis, whose model came from religion, and it would be a mistake if it forgot this ambitious project and returned to it.