



BOOK REVIEW:

Andrea Sabbadini, *Moving Images: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Film* (Routledge, 2014), pp. x + 140

Andrea Sabbadini, *Boundaries and Bridges: Perspectives on Time and Space in Psychoanalysis* (Karnac Books, 2014), pp. x + 162

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‘The only subject-matter of psycho-analysis,’ Freud concluded in 1926, ‘is the mental processes of human beings and it is only in human beings that it can be studied’ (Freud. 1926: 254). It’s a bold claim, grounding Freud’s defence of psychoanalysis, its forms of intelligibility, against the presumptions of the medical profession. At immediate issue was the question of ‘lay analysis’ – the practice of psychoanalysis by analysts who were not medically trained – but Freud was also embroiled in a series of questions that continue to structure the encounter between psychoanalysis and the humanities: What *is* psychoanalysis? What does it do? Where and how does it happen? How do you learn to do it?

‘I will begin by pointing out that I never refer to my profession ... as a form of *treatment*’: the opening pages of Andrea Sabbadini’s *Boundaries and Bridges* situate his work within that ongoing reflection on what psychoanalysis is, or can be. Language matters to Sabbadini, not least as a means to resist both the medicalization of the profession carried by the very word ‘treatment’ – widely accepted, of course, by psychoanalysts – and, more broadly perhaps, the mastery implied by the idea of ‘treating’ another person (dealing with, acting upon, applying a process to achieve a particular result) (*Boundaries*: xiii). By contrast, what Keats might call ‘negative capability’ –

‘when a man,’ as he puts it in December 1817, ‘is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (Keats in Buxton Foreman, 1901: IV 50)– emerges as one of the essential, and disarming, features of Sabbadini’s theory and his daily practice as an analyst: what matters, he insists, is not that the analyst knows where he is going but that he is prepared to stay with his ‘patient’ (it’s worth noting that Sabbadini retains the word ‘patient’, though not without question). And, in the course of this book, to stay with the process of making the reflections of a professional lifetime – 40 years of analytic practice – available to his readers.

Moving that capacity to *not know* – or, perhaps, to wonder and to interpret – into the experience of writing and reading, Sabbadini does not shy away from the unanswerable question (‘Are we ultimately responsible for our unconscious?’) and the (potentially) overwhelming concept (*Boundaries*: xxiii). On one level, ‘time’ and ‘space’ co-ordinate the diverse chapters of *Boundaries and Bridges*, taking us into Sabbadini’s exploration of the origins of a sense of time in infantile life, for example, or into fantasias of millenarianism. In so far as a capacity to distinguish among past, present and future is vital to the development of a sense of ‘self’, much of *Boundaries and Bridges* is more broadly concerned with the issue of ‘personal identity’ and its vicissitudes. Take, for example, chapters on ‘The Replacement Child’ – a fascinating, if painful, discussion of a particular organization of family life in which a baby is born to parents in mourning for a dead child – and ‘The Window and the Door’, a discussion of the ongoing significance of virginity in which the hymen is cast as a type of anatomical representative of the superego (an insight that brings Sabbadini’s short chapter into contact with the long history of psychoanalytic discussion of the feminine superego, its supposed weakness in the face of girls’ failure to develop a castration complex: what do they have to lose?).

Elsewhere, the issues of time and space are more obviously at the forefront of discussion. In particular, ‘Boundaries of Timelessness’ and ‘On the Couch’ take us into the fine grain of the practice of psychoanalysis, its structuring of temporality and the experience of space. Preoccupied with the transitional spaces of psychoanalysis – the door, the waiting room, the street – Sabbadini points to the difficulty of differentiating temporal and spatial elements and the need to interpret both. ‘[W]hen we speak about the waiting room,’ he points out, ‘we are referring to the space of a room, but also to the time

of waiting' (*Boundaries*: 43). Brief clinical vignettes accompany such insights and Sabbadini's patiently wondering reflections on the experience of the psychoanalytic 'rules' – the 50 minute session, for example, or the analyst's holiday break – for both analyst and analysand. At issue, often enough, are Sabbadini's reflections on the structuring function of the spatio-temporal dimensions of psychoanalytic practice – a function comparable, he suggests, to that played by the 'environment' (holding, containing, facilitating: this is the language of Winnicott and the British Independent Tradition). Similarly, his phenomenological attention to the experience of 'the couch' – one of the icons of psychoanalytic practice – returns to whatever it is that is 'special' (Sabbadini's word) in this 'artificial setting', and the particular human relationships it fosters. What does it do – what does it mean – to be in the presence of another, speaking to another, but not face-to-face? Can analysis take place face-to-face? If not, why not?

Unanswerable questions, perhaps. But to ask them is to become aware of how rich the basic fabric of psychoanalysis can be as a way into understanding its specificity as a discipline (theory, institution, therapy). The conclusion to 'On the Couch' is, for me, especially tantalizing in its all-too-brief brief foray into the impact of new(-ish) technologies on the practice of psychoanalysis. Can analysts work by telephone or by Skype, the screen now allowing real-time audio and visual contact? 'Only time will tell' is Sabbadini's reasonable response to the questions posed by the recent exploration of 'tele-analysis' ... but, on this issue, it feels rather difficult to wait (*Boundaries*: 90). Certainly, on reading this chapter, I was left with a sense that, perhaps paradoxically, psychoanalysis – its complication of the 'face-to-face' – may be one of the disciplines best able to tell us why being in the actual presence of another person remains vital to being human (see, for example, Gillian Isaacs Russell's recent work (2015).

As a Fellow of the British Psychoanalytical Society and Director of the European Psychoanalysis Film Festival, Sabbadini's writing often takes place on the cusp between psychoanalysis and cinema: in 2003, his editorial introduction to *The Couch and the Silver Screen: Psychoanalytic Reflections on European Cinema*, framed that collection in terms of cinema's 'privileged tie to our mental activities and emotional experiences' – a tie, however elusive, that has been central to the dialogue between psychoanalysis and film since the first decade of the 20th century (Sabbadini, 2003: 2). In *Moving Images*,

psychoanalysis and cinema ‘approach, cross-fertilize, and enrich each other’; it is an intimate exchange between an ‘odd couple’ and *Moving Images* provides a privileged insight into the psychoanalytic ‘canon’ of films – cinema that psychoanalysts engage with, in which they find their profession and their concepts (it will be no surprise to find *Secrets of a Soul*, *Spellbound*, *Belle de Jour*, *Vertigo*, *Rear Window*, *A Short Film about Love*, and *Peeping Tom* all represented here) (*Moving Images*: 80). Beginning with representations of psychoanalysis on screen, Sabbadini provides the (by now quite well-established) history of psychoanalysts’ interest in film from its inception (including, however, a less well-known letter from Freud to his family in 1907 in which he describes being ‘spellbound’ by the cinematograph, its capacity to turn adults into ‘old children’). Again, the canon may not be surprising but part of the interest of this book is that Sabbadini also includes an eclectic mix of films – Ken Loach’s *Kes*, for example, sits alongside Victor Erice’s *The Spirit of the Beehive* – as well as providing a loose thematic arrangement: professions (psychoanalysis, prostitution); psychological development (childhood, adolescence); love and scopophilia. Clearly, this eclecticism tells the history of Sabbadini’s engagement with cinema: once again, part of the interest of this collection for those of us working between psychoanalysis and visual culture is the opportunity to read a psychoanalyst’s struggle to articulate the relations between the two.

To read *Boundaries and Bridges* alongside *Moving Images* is an especially productive, if coincidental, experience. Inevitably, perhaps, the very emphasis on the unique discipline of psychoanalysis in *Boundaries and Bridges* raises questions not only about how that discipline can encounter others – studies in cinema, for example – but also how far its structuring functions, its forms of holding and containing, might be found elsewhere. In forms of cultural experience, for example. Crudely, if there is a correspondence between mind and cinema, then might there also be correspondence between the experience of cinema – as an object, a relation – and the experience of analysis? Sabbadini does not pose such questions directly. On the contrary. But they press nonetheless. Take, for example, the discussion of Michael Radford’s *Il Postino*: in finding aspects of the psychoanalytic experience represented throughout this film – ‘I would like to suggest,’ Sabbadini writes, ‘that Neruda [the poet] is also Mario’s [the postman’s] “psychoanalyst”’. The “sessions” are represented by the postman’s uphill

journeys by bicycle, at regular intervals, to the poet's villa' (*Moving Images*: 17) – Sabbadini describes a relationship, however fictionalized in this particular instance, that reproduces something of the therapeutic process. What that something is may be voiced by *Il Postino* as follows: 'poetry is the experience of feeling', a phrase that, on Sabbadini's view, captures something of what is shared between psychoanalysis and cinema (*Moving Images*: 18).

Moving Images offers a glimpse of that sharing between, but no more than that. At this point, Sabbadini moves back to the more familiar framework: 'viewing *Il Postino* through a psychoanalytic lens by drawing parallels between the two situations can hopefully enrich and deepen our understanding of both.' I hesitated about this formulation, because it doesn't quite give voice to Sabbadini's complex response to *Il Postino*. Perhaps it is because psychoanalysis, its 'lens', turns up on both sides of the equation here – it is reflecting on cinema, using cinema to reflect on itself and cinema – that something seems to go missing: the third term, as it were, that brings them both together but also exceeds them (in this case, poetry). The language of 'parallels' and 'enrichment' does not quite capture the question that, for me, opens up between psychoanalysis and cinema, Sabbadini and *Il Postino*, in *Moving Images*: namely, the question of the formations of psychoanalysis outside the consulting room, beyond the couch.

References

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