

Films of My Life with Zadie Smith & Patrick McGrath

Natasha Lardera (November 11, 2014)



The American editions of Le Conversazioni take place in New York in the auditorium of The Morgan Library and Museum. Through the leitmotiv underlying theme of the scenes that make up their life, cultural figures are invited to debate the yearly subject and, in general, their own creative activities. That of 2014 is the ninth edition of Le Conversazioni, a traveling festival that takes place in the beautiful island of Capri, in New York and, for the first time this year, in Rome.

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So on November 6, the 2014 edition of *Le Conversazioni*, created by two Italian film personalities, professor and writer Antonio Monda and producer Davide Azzolini, concluded with a conversation between Monda and British authors living in New York, Zadie Smith and Patrick McGrath. That of 2014 is the ninth edition of *Le Conversazioni*, a traveling festival that takes place in the beautiful island of Capri, in New York and, for the first time this year, in Rome. Previous guests were Renzo Piano, Mark di Suvero, Michael Cunningham, Gay Talese, Paul Schrader, Jonathan Franzen, Martin Amis, Ian Buruma, Daniel Mendelsohn, Marina Abramovic, Daniel Libeskind, Julie Taymor, Jeffrey Eugenides, Isabella Rossellini and Salman Rushdie.

In NYC, *Le Conversazioni* have a subtitle “Films of my Life” as the conversation between the two authors and moderator Antonio Monda is about film. Each guest introduces 4 films that he/she has been inspired by and then talks about it with the others. Before starting with their selection both authors were asked about literature and film, is the former superior to the latter? And how faithful to the original writing should adaptations be? “The two art forms are definitely different but it is hard to tell which one is best,” McGrath said, “with a novel you can say so much more... you can dive into a character's mind and know what he thinks and feels... but with a film there is no need to say so much, something can be conveyed even with a simple gesture.”

Zadie Smith is an English novelist, essayist, and short story writer who is known for her books *White Teeth* (2002), *On Beauty* (2005) and *The Creative Life* (2014). Race, immigration and the role of women in society are themes that the author often touches in her writing and her film choices speak to that. The most significant choice was *Gone with the Wind*, a film she loved as a little girl but thought she had to hide to watch because she was embarrassed to admit she liked (due to the slavery theme presented in the film). “Then one day my mother, who is from Jamaica, found me out. She admitted to love it too and we watched it together.” Apart from slavery, another theme that captured Smith's attention and influenced her thoughts is the role of women. “Despite the severe gender inequality of their time, women in *Gone with the Wind*” show strength and intelligence that equals or bests the strength and intelligence of men.” She also picked *Adam's Rib* a 1949 American film starring Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn as married lawyers who come to oppose each other in court. “Hepburn plays a strong woman, not easily intimidated who is beautiful and smart and even does better than her husband.”

Patrick McGrath is also a British novelist and his work has been categorized as gothic fiction as it deals with recurring subject matters such as mental illness, repressed homosexuality and adulterous relationships. Among his most known novels we find *The Grotesque* (1989), *Spider* (1990), and *Asylum* (1996). McGrath grew up near Broadmoor Hospital where his father was Medical Superintendent and that had a really strong influence on his writing... *Asylum* is set in a maximum-security hospital for the criminally insane. Among McGrath's film choices the only Italian film of the night, *The Damned*, a 1969 Italian-German drama written and directed by Luchino Visconti. The film's plot centers around the Essenbecks, a wealthy industrialist family who have begun doing business with the Nazi party. The film has been described to center on “moral decadence, sexual neurosis, narcissistic self-centeredness and political opportunism.” Some of these themes are recurring in McGrath's writings.

Le Conversazioni NYC are definitely a special way to get to know more about our favorite writers but are also a useful film guide, as they give the audience the opportunity to discover films they have missed. Probably everybody in the audience was familiar with Smith's choice “*Back to the Future*,” but just a few knew McGrath's choice *Carnival of Souls*, a 1962 independent horror film starring Candace Hillgoss that now is a cult classic.

The ninth edition of *Le Conversazioni* confirms that the festival is a lab of ideas that is visibly growing. The theme of the 2015 edition, which will start on February 24, will be “*Revolution*,” and the festival itself will be somehow revolutionized as it will feature more meetings in Rome and more in New York.



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Links

[1] <http://test.ility.org/files/conversazionicover1415687503jpg>