

Language

3-Day Conference on Sex Is All Talk

By Glenn Collins

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NEW YORK — The subject of the conference was "Sex and Language." The film director Lina Wertmüller sat on a vinyl chair and considered the proceedings. "You may think that at a conference like this there is very much more language than sex," she reflected. "But you really don't know what is going on all night."

She paused for effect.

"I refer to these people's *dreams*, of course," she said. "This is a psychoanalytic conference, after all."

Well, sort of. Wertmüller had been flown in from Rome by the organizers of the Fifth International Congress of Psychoanalysis. For three days more than 100 speakers — psychoanalysts, writers, artists and scenemakers of indeterminate pedigree — lectured 1,000 guests who paid \$40 each to wander among the banquet halls of the Plaza Hotel.

"What do I know about sex and language?" asked Alain Robbe-Grillet, a French writer and filmmaker. "Nothing. I feel that my sex is vague and my language is absent." Then why was he there? "I am here to observe the scene — and the circus."

"Useful to Evolution"

Lionel Tiger, a Rutgers University professor of anthropology, was more in command of his material: "The reason we speak is because language was useful to the sexual evolution of our species." He that human language became part of the process of natural selection. "The advantages of speaking beautifully and persuasively — as in courtship language — are obvious. It led to better partners."

Maurice Girodias belied his reputation as a Parisian publisher of controversial books by gently addressing the issue of beauty. "Too often the language of sex is the expression of fury, violence and degradation," he said. "This is a tragedy. In fact, language, as used in relation to sex, has refused the dimension of beauty. . . . Freudian psychology has ignored the idea of beauty."

To one Freudian, sex and language were indistinguishable. "Sex does not exist except in language," said Armando Verdiglione, a psy-

choanalyst from Milan who was the host of the conference. "Sexuality is an erogenous zone in the images of the unconscious."

Verdiglione, who has a doctorate in philosophy, is given to distributing publicity photos showing him puffing a cigar. He founded what is known as the International Freudian Movement in Milan in 1973, and it has become an element of the Italian avant-garde.

Bid for Publicity

The Plaza Hotel meeting, Verdiglione's spokesman said, was intended not only to focus on the relationship between sex and language but to establish a U.S. beachhead for Verdiglione's organization and give it attention in the world press. So that this would not be left to chance, the organization paid the expenses of 60 Italian and French journalists to cover the meeting, and the total cost of the conference was more than \$200,000.

The money "came from mem-

bership payments, donations and from fees in our seminars and discussion groups throughout Italy," said a spokesman. The conference was also supported by the Banco di Roma, Alitalia, and Spirali, a publishing enterprise founded by Verdiglione.

Was the conference all talk and no action? "Possibly," said Dr. Thomas Szasz, professor of psychiatry at the State University of New York at Syracuse. "But that may be the truth about most conferences of this kind, don't you think?"

Some in the audience felt the event was useful. "The symbolic aspects of sex and language are fascinating — I use these themes in my work," said Charles Lassiter, a Manhattan artist.

Others were less enthusiastic. "I think it's outrageous that so many of the promised speakers never showed up," said a gate-crasher who refused to give her name. "But for the price I paid, it was worth it, and what a spiffy-looking international crowd it is!"