

# ANDI ENGEL

By Jason Wood

A key chapter in the history of cinema was closed on Boxing Day with the death of Andi Engel. Born in Berlin in 1942, Engel was a former film critic who migrated to the UK in the late 1960s, and soon after set up a politically motivated distribution company closely affiliated with The OTHER Cinema. In 1976 Andi founded the Artificial Eye Company with Pamela Engel. Through their distribution and exhibition activities – the peerless Lumiere and Camden Plaza theatres are sadly long gone, but thankfully the Chelsea and Renoir Cinemas survive – Artificial Eye were for over thirty years the leading British distributor of foreign language and ‘independent’ films, with Andi, for whom the word independent could have been invented, also helping to produce works by artists such as Peter Greenaway and Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet. The list of films and filmmakers UK audiences have Artificial Eye to thank for are far too numerous and diverse to mention here, but

a visit to [www.artificial-eye.com](http://www.artificial-eye.com) provides some indication of the vitally important shadow Andi cast. His legacy continues, with his beloved company and their catalogue of some 200 titles still very much in existence, albeit under new ownership.

Andi’s indomitable commitment to intelligent and provocative – in all the best senses of the word – cinema was extended when he made his directorial debut with *Melancholia* in 1989. An aptly titled political thriller set in the evocatively shot cities of London, Hamburg and Florence, the film features Jeroen Krabbé as a German art critic living in London. His past all too soon catches up with him when he is called upon by a student friend from the 1960s to prove the political convictions of his radical youth by assassinating a visiting Chilean doctor – a known torturer. The excellent cast also includes three notable British actresses: Susannah York as Krabbé’s old flame; Katie Hardie, as her daughter; and Jane Gurnett,

utterly convincing as the widow of one of the Chilean’s victims. Produced by Engel’s long time friend and fellow cineaste Colin McCabe, *Melancholia* saw Andi crowned Best Newcomer at the 1990 Evening Standard British Film Awards. Though not wishing to pour scorn on the accolade, having worked in film for over twenty years at the time Andi was unable to contain his mirth at his newfound newcomer status.

Evolving directly from his involvement with The OTHER Cinema, another of Andi’s notable contributions to the cinematic landscape was his production of the *Enthusiasm* film journal. First published in December 1975, the magazine was intended from the outset to stimulate debate, discussion and general discourse relating to the moving image. Named after the 1931 Dziga Vertov film admired by Andi for its exploration of the relationship between sound and image, *Enthusiasm* made something of a manifesto of Andi’s desire to get closer to the subject of serious filmmaking and to cut a swathe through the commercial, corporate and cultural bullshit that accompanied the actual practice of making films. ‘This magazine is not much interested in industry-produced films, B-pictures, genre, melodramas or whatever all these fashionable little boxes are called. We will promote those who work today without compromise, and who push forward the development of filmmaking’. In 1975 Andi was not one to mince his words, a characteristic that never left him. Though subsequent production of *Enthusiasm* was at best sporadic – Andi himself found humour in the fact that the length between issue one and two was a period of many years – each subsequent instalment was always cause for celebration, serving notice of the fact that someone, somewhere, was still fighting the good fight.

I am in no doubt whatsoever that Andi Engel would violently recoil at the thought of the kind of self-aggrandising tributes that frequently appear on these occasions and so it is with a degree of trepidation that I state my pride in having come to know him relatively well over the last decade or so. I first met him when he interviewed me for a job at Artificial Eye – I didn’t get it, proving that he was always a shrewd judge of character – and we maintained a polite correspondence from that day on. Our relationship intensified after Andi first encouraged and then facilitated my desire to write, printing my work and giving me access to filmmakers of the calibre of Claire Denis, Bertrand Tavernier and Laurent Cantet. I once dedicated a book to him in a show of sentiment and was delighted by his gruff expression of contempt for the book’s subject; any other reaction from him would have been uncharacteristic and undoubtedly a disappointment.

In closing, I return to the *Variety* review of *Melancholia* and the description of the film as offering ‘A cry out against complacency’. I struggle but fail to find a more fitting epitaph for the man himself.

A memorial service for Andi Engel will be held in London in March 2007.

Jason Wood is a writer and programmer. His latest book is reviewed on page 71.

Image: Andi Engel with Jeroen Krabbe and Colin McCabe during the filming of *Melancholia*, 1989.



IN MEMORIAM