Bloomington was the gathering place for film directors and scholars from September 28 to October 1 as IU’s West European Studies Center hosted a celebration of the first hundred years of European cinema. Among those attending the conference, European Cinemas, European Societies, 1895-1995, were three world renowned directors — Americans John Landis (Blues Brothers and Animal House), and Peter Bogdanovich (The Last Picture Show and Paper Moon), and Italian Ettore Scola (Passione d’amore and Una giornata particolare). The three directors presented their films and took questions from the audience. There were also over 70 papers presented by some of the most respected names in film theory and criticism.

The hundredth anniversary is actually on December 28. On that date in 1895, the French brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière held the first public film screening in history at a Parisian café. The 10 short films took less than 20 minutes to screen, but it captured the attention of artists, writers and promoters who saw the great potential. Within a few years, moving pictures became both a mass media form and an art form to be discussed and analyzed by critics.

Conference organizer and Distinguished Professor Peter Bondanella, chairman of the Department of West European Studies and renowned Fellini scholar, pointed out film’s uniqueness in society. “Cinema is the only art form invented in the modern era, and it reaches nearly everyone,” Bondanella said.

He pointed out that European film has had great influence on films in this country. “American cinema is European in many ways,” he said. “All one has to do is to think of names such as Chaplin, Hitchcock, Jean Renoir, and Fritz Lang in order to understand the essential European contribution made to American film.”

 Appropriately, the major task of the film conference was to address the question of whether a “European cinema” with a common lexicon exists. Bogdanovich stressed that film, in fact, was completely “international” in the silent era. A premium was placed on the ability to tell a story almost purely through visual means, with minimal help from title cards. He argued that the sound era has not only erected national boundaries through language, but has allowed “lazy” directors to rely too much on dialogue. He characterized many of today’s films as being “excessively juvenile.” Yet he delighted the audience with his own impressions of several Hollywood notables.

Other directors and film critics analyzed the question of national boundaries. Fellini’s longtime scriptwriter, Gianfranco Angelucci, said that both his and Fellini’s experience in Hollywood taught them that there were almost insurmountable differences between European and American film production. Yet U.S. films are more popular than European films in Europe. Even in France, which has one of the strongest film industries, Hollywood films easily dominate the market, taking over 60 percent of the box office and video revenue. That figure would be even higher if not for French protectionism. In contrast, French films only hold one percent of the U.S. market.

Keynote speaker Pierre Sorlin, a French sociologist, frankly admitted that Europe could not compete with Hollywood on big-budget films. He called for Europeans to specialize in smaller productions using professional actors, not the big stars. He also recognized that French and other European films do best in the American market on video, not in the theaters.

Other participants disagreed, citing recent French and Spanish successes in the U.S. market, and praising the new generation of French directors who use international crews and make some films in English. These films appeal to the American audiences’ desire to see light comedy, action, and happy endings, things that European films have not traditionally provided. While European and American intellectuals have criticized American films as being too escapist, Landis staunchly defended them: that’s what audiences want.

The conference’s many sponsors included film organizations from Hollywood and Italy.