LINDSAY ANDERSON (17 April 1923, Bangalore, India – 30 August 1994, Angoulême, France, heart attack). Biography from Leonard Maltin’s Movie Encyclopedia: “Born to a Scottish major-general stationed in Raj-era India, Anderson was educated at Oxford before cofounding (along with future Scottish major-general stationed in Raj-era India, Anderson

he continued for some four years in London, ending its existence in 1951.

Anderson advocated a greater emphasis on social consciousness in filmmaking. His writings along these lines contributed greatly to the "Free Cinema" movement of the 1950s, which favored universalist subject matter and exhibited general disdain for Hollywood-type commercial product (though one of his heroes was director John Ford, about whom he wrote a 1981 book).

Beginning his directing career in 1948 with small-scale, personal, nonnarrative films such as Meet the Pioneers, Anderson, won an award in 1953 for Thursday’s Children, a touching documentary about deaf children. His first feature film, This Sporting Life (1963), told the story of a disturbed rugby champion with low-key dramatics. Anderson is best known to American film buffs for his trenchant trilogy starring Malcolm McDowell as Mick Travis, a British “everyman” who survives the public school system in If... (1968), the media in O Lucky Man! (1973), and the medical establishment in Britannia Hospital (1982).

His trademark outrage at social inequities was muted in the elegiac Chariots of Fire (1981), and in 1992 adapted his book on John Ford into a television documentary which he hosted on-camera.


MALCOLM McDOWELL (Malcolm Taylor, 13 June 1943, Leeds, Yorkshire, England) has been in 116 films, most of them utterly forgettable, some of them unspeakably awful, and a small number of them superb. Biography from Leonard Maltin’s Movie Encyclopedia: “Best known as the rebellious protagonist of Lindsay Anderson’s trilogy of films indicting British traditions and institutions, McDowell was a popular actor during the 1970s, and continues to work in showy acting roles, most notably in Chariots of Fire (1981), and in 1992 adapted his book on John Ford into a television documentary which he hosted on-camera.

“My first connection with the cinema was as a critic. Together with my friends Gavin Lambert and Peter Ericsson I edited a film quarterly, Sequence, which started as the magazine of the Oxford Film Society and continued for some four years in London, ending its existence in 1951. When I came down from Oxford (with a degree in English) I started directing industrial films for a company of conveyor manufacturers, Richard Sutcliffe Limited of Hoby, near Wakefield in Yorkshire. This was a piece of great good fortune, since I had no experience whatever of practical filmmaking, and was able to learn some craft by ‘writing’ (in so far as they were written at all), directing, editing, and putting music to a succession of films, documents for a purpose commissioned by a sponsor for a friendly and liberal sponsor. I made a number of other commissioned documentaries in the first half of the 1950s, though I never succeeded in becoming assimilated into the mainstream of the movement.
Together with a friend of Oxford days, Guy Brenton, I made a ‘poetic’ documentary about the education of deaf children, *Thursday’s Children*, which managed to win a Hollywood short subject Oscar in 1953; and in 1957 a documentary about Covent Garden Market, *Every Day Except Christmas*, which was sponsored by the Ford Motor Company and won the Grand Prix at the Venice Festival.

“In 1956 Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson and I (all struggling independents) launched a series of shows at the National Film Theatre under the title of Free Cinema. Partly as a result of the quality of our work, and partly through our canny manipulation of publicity, these attracted a good deal of public attention. But they also aroused a good deal of resentment—both from the old Establishment and from the new Establishment which was growing up in and around television—and when the Ford Motor Company withdrew its sponsorship, we found it impossible to get further funding to make the kind of films (individually expressive, free from propagandist obligations) that interested us.

“In the last half of the fifties, the frozen surface of British society began to break up. The English Stage Company at the Royal Court made a huge impact with its new authors, headed by John Osborne with *Look Back in Anger.* At the invitation of my friend Tony Richardson, I started directing plays at the Royal Court. So I was lucky enough to be involved in that pioneering movement, inspired by a Left which had been both stimulated and liberalised by the events of 1956–Suez and Hungary . . . “

“Although the sixties were a time of comparative fertility in the British cinema, I did not manage to follow *This Sporting Life* rapidly with further films. Partly this was because I had the Royal Court to return to, and partly because I have always been dangerously lacking in ambitious energy. This is a serious debility in a filmmaker.”

“Back [from Poland] in London I started working on an original script by two young writers, David Sherwin and John Howlett, a story inspired by their schooldays which they had titled ‘Crusaders.’ It was naturally difficult to find backing in Britain for a subject which seemed so essentially British in its inspiration and significance; but eventually, with finance from Paramount Pictures, we were able to make the film with no concessions in either scripting or casting, and it appeared at the end of 1968.”

*The White Bus* (1966, 46 minutes) is more than a travelogue, however. There is a moment early in the film, before the girl leaves London, when we suddenly see her hanging from the ceiling of her office....

As Anderson says, the film was important to him on account of these experiments with a “nonliteral freedom of style” that was to become an essential part of his cinematic vocabulary, and because it was the first film shot for him by Miroslav Ondříček, whose work for Miloš Forman and Jan Němec he had greatly admired.

By this time Anderson was working with David Sherwin on the script of *If . . .* coproduced by the director and Michael Medwin for Memorial Enterprises and backed by Paramount. The setting is a great English “public” school—one of those exclusive institutions where the British ruling class has traditionally sent its sons to learn the uses of power. (The school in the film is actually an amalgam of three, including Anderson’s own public school, Cheltenham College.) Anderson was attracted to the script, he says, by “the extent to which school is a microcosm—particularly in England, where the educational system is such an exact image of the social system.”

Like *The White Bus*, the film was photographed by Ondříček mostly in black and white—the budget was only $500,000—but with certain scenes (selected intuitively rather than rationally) in color. *If . . .* is organized into eight “chapters,” with titles like ‘College House,” “Discipline,” and “Resistance,” each chapter being further divided into short scenes. This was intended from the outset as a Brechtian alienation device, to remind the audience that they were watching not reality but an artificial construct. Anderson says “there had to be in it a strong element of objectivity, as there must be in a film aimed at the understanding. *If . . .* is not meant to be a film that excites or agitates” (though it became one, all the same).

. . .Mick plays the wild free music of the Congolese Mass *Missa Luba* and dreams of revolution. Subsequent scenes reveal the links between religion and militarism in the school’s ideology, introduce the anarchic force of adolescent sexuality, and emphasize the growing rebelliousness of Mick and his friends Johnny and Wallace.

What follows might be seen as a logical outcome of an educational system founded on so much violence, repression, and hypocrisy: during a Cadet Force field exercise, in which the boys are instructed in slaughter, Mick shoots and bayonets the Chaplain, who is also commanding officer of the Cadets.

The Chaplain is then resurrected from a large drawer in the Headmaster’s study (in a scene that some critics found discordant in its extreme surrealism). The smooth, “progressive” Headmaster is displeased with the rebels but gives them one more chance to make amends. Instead, during a Speech Day ceremony that is full of references to Jean Vigo’s *Zéro de conduite*, Mick and his friends open fire on their enemies with automatic weapons from the school roof. They have been joined by the girl from the café, who is a symbolic representative of the forces of life and sexuality and freedom— all “off-limits.” It is she who shoots the Headmaster dead before the establishment forces mount their counterattack.

The film closes with the rebels fighting for their lives and their impossible revolutionary ideals against overwhelming odds—and at the end Mick is firing directly into the eye of the camera, the eyes of the audience, which is society.

“I think the most important challenge is to get beyond pure naturalism in to poetry,” Anderson has said. “Some people call this fantasy, but these terms are dangerous because words always mean different things to different people. I would call *If . . .* a realistic film—not completely naturalistic, but trying to penetrate the reality of its particular world.”

Except for the long tracking and panning shots before and after Mick’s taste of freedom at the café, the film is shot with an almost documentary sobriety and simplicity, and this only adds to the ambiguity of scenes which may or may not be “real”—as when the Housemaster’s wife wanders naked through the dormitories. “Like all major works of art,” wrote John Russell Taylor, *If . . .* “defines definition, it refuses paraphrase. It is more than the sum of its analyzable parts, and finally exists in its own right as a self-sufficient work of art, sublimely careless of how we choose to read it.”

It received the Grand Prix at Cannes in 1969, had great financial success, and became a cult film for young people all over the world.

*O Lucky Man!* (1973) is in the nature of a sequel to *If . . .* It was suggested by the star of the latter, Malcolm McDowell, and scripted by Anderson and David Sherwin.

*Britannia Hospital* reflects an attitude to the working class far removed from the affectionate celebration in *Every Day Except Christmas*. Anderson, however, denies that he has become an enemy of the proletariat, maintaining that “if you truly love human beings, you have to be able to be angry with them.” In fact, his work since the mid-1960s has made it increasingly clear that his “social democratic phase” is behind him. In Anderson’s opinion, Britain missed the chance it had after World War II to dismantle its class structure, especially its class-bound educational system, and it is now too late. This has not prevented the emergence of “a sort of semi-Marxist neo-Leftist orthodoxy” and, being a natural enemy of all orthodoxies, he has shifted his ground to oppose that one from a position he sometimes describes as “anarchist”; “As life goes on, I have to struggle harder to avoid cynicism,” he remarked in a 1985 interview. “There are so many reasons for it.” He remains an active and impetuous polemict, the scourge of inertient critics, and, as David Robins on says. “A bothersome person who writes to the newspapers, asks awkward questions and abuses the British cultural establishment.”

*The Whales of August* (1987) is above all a tribute to its almost legendary stars. As Katharine Dieckmann observed, “it presents its movie icons in roles that reflect their professional histories. Gish is used for the open, receptive quality that made her a silent film queen, while Davis is quintessential cantankerous and flippant [as well as blind]. . . Price cements his reputation as a truly horatious dramatic actor, while Southern is all blowy, exuberant fun, with loud dresses and exaggerated gestures.” By all accounts, Anderson very much enjoyed this project.
Lindsay Anderson is the most important and influential of contemporary British directors—according to John Russell Taylor “the only one, of any generation who is a truly international figure, who can without apology or special pleading be considered in the same frame of reference as Pasolini or Jancsó or Ray. . . . He has a complex temperament, the burning necessity to express himself in film, and the consistent originality that makes any of his films instantly recognizable. . . . Lindsay Anderson’s most extraordinary quality as a filmmaker—and in this he comes closest perhaps to Pasolini—is his ability to keep his instincts uncontaminated by his intellect, his intellect unmuddled by his instincts. His films are about ideas, but defy paraphrase. . . . They do not fumble, they do not need explanation. They speak to our eyes and our ears.”


In a 1958 essay entitled “Get Out and Push,” Lindsay Anderson expressed his approach to working in the cinema. The way Anderson, the individual, approached working in the cinema paralleled the world view he put forth in feature films: the individual must examine the basis of the system within which he finds himself, “the motives that sustain it and the interests that it serves.” It is the responsibility of the individual to actively seek a new self-definition beyond the confines of the established system; the individual cannot look for change to come from or through any outside authority—political, social, or spiritual. This theme is consistently present in Anderson’s feature films.

A narrative technique Anderson used to illustrate the process that leads to Mick’s eventual break from the system is the establishment of verbal language as an essential part of the structure of College House. When Mick expresses his disdain for College House through words, they are simply absorbed by the system. There is no change in Mick’s situation until he initiates action by bayoneting the college chaplain. After this point, Mick no longer recites revolutionary rhetoric; in fact, he rarely speaks. He is no longer existing within the structure of College House. Totally free of the system, Mick launches into the destruction of the established order. Mick is no longer acted upon but is the creator of action; in this respect, he triumphs where Frank Machin fails.

Anderson’s other features, In Celebration and The Whales of August, contain more subjective narratives but still explore the theme of the individual’s responsibility for self-definition. In his last film, Is That All There Is?, an autobiographical documentary made for the BBC, Anderson presents himself as such an individual; an independent artist who actively sought a self-definition beyond the confines of the established system.

from Lindsay Anderson, Elizabeth Sussex, Praeger NY 1970.

Great films have always been more likely to emerge, against all commercial odds, from the American cinema than the British one. The reasons that Anderson gave for this in Sequence are things he has been fighting ever since: The influence of Class (‘It is not a middle-class trait to examine oneself with the strictest objectivity, or to be able to present higher or lower levels of society with sympathy and respect—limitations which account for the ultimate failure of even so exceptional an attempt as Brief Encounter.’)

‘The first duty of the artist is not to interpret, nor to propagandize but to create. And to appreciate that a genuinely creative work of art involves the willingness to jettison our own prejudices and viewpoints, and accept those of the artist.’ (Anderson)

‘Probably all my work,’ said Anderson in 1968, even when it has been very realistic, has struggled for a poetic quality — for larger implications than the surface realities may suggest. I think the most important challenge is to get beyond pure naturalism into poetry. Some people call this fantasy, but these terms are dangerous because words always mean different things to different people. I would call If. . . a realistic film — not completely naturalistic, but trying to penetrate the reality of its particular world. I think Brecht said that realism didn’t show what things really “look like” but how they really are.

‘I think I am very romantic, very idealistic by temperament, and perhaps I try to balance this with a certain irony and skepticism. I believe in ambiguity.

‘The older you grow, the more you are conscious and believe in and have to accept the ambiguities of existence,’ Anderson said shortly after making If. . . . ‘And you know that in every truth the opposite is also true. The very important thing is to perceive that truth, and yet hold the opposite of that truth, which is that there is a truth.’

The opposites have always been apparent in his work. Idealism is an extreme position, increasingly hard to maintain as time brings experience of what Bertrand Russell has described as ‘the major evils of which life is subject; the treachery of friends, the death of those whom we love, the discovery of the cruelty that lurks in average human nature.’ In Anderson’s work the opposites of idealism (cynicism, compromise, defeatism, apathy) are increasingly perceived.

It is also out of opposites that he creates. As he once put it “The artist must always bite the hand that feeds him. He must always aim beyond the limits of tolerance. His duty is to be a monster.” The humanitarianism combines with the ruthlessness bound up with artistic survival. The truth to which the artist still holds is in the work of art. In If. . . the same truth emerges from the thing said and the way it is said. In form and content there are the same wildly funny and yet recognisably realistic contradictions of existence.

The film is constructed in a series of short scenes which come under eight chapter headings. In the way the picture cuts from scene to scene, ideas are constantly set up in opposition to each other so that stylistically as well as logically we are moving steadily towards the violent explosion at the end.

‘When I worked on the original script with Davis Sherwin, we divided it into chapters. I think that from the beginning I felt that If. . . would be an epic film in the Brechtian sense of the word, so there had to be a strong element of objectivity, as there must be in a film aimed at the understanding. If. . . is not meant to be a film that excites or agitates, but I hope that people understand it; this is why the division into chapters and, up to a certain point, the use of black and white and colour, are what Brecht calls processes of distanciation which detach the spectator from his emotion. . . . For me, the essential problem today is that of the relation between the individual and the technological society, and this is why the capitalist-communist problems are in fact out of date; in other words, the problem applies as much to one system as to the other, and that is why a film like If. . . will be understood by both; certainly in this sense I think that If. . . is a rather Brechtian film.’

For some people this is the point in the film [when Mick and the girl are rolling naked on the floor] where realism turns to fantasy, a feeling that is perhaps enhanced by the fact that the scene is shot in black and white (although the use of colour and black and white is obviously not directly related to the idea of fantasy and reality in the rest of the film). But the impression of a relationship here is actually no less realistic than that of everyday behaviour in some of the earlier bizarre and cruel school scenes, which the same people laughingly accept as real. All rituals are a kind of fantasy that people have imposed upon themselves as a defense against the real and primitive impulses that lead to destruction. This destruction is the climax of If. . . , and the film could be interpreted as being about the way in which people blind themselves to reality, cut themselves off from emotion, refuse to see both life and death as they really are. The threshold between fantasy and reality in the film is then something that must vary according to how much reality the individual spectator can bear. And the film’s supreme achievement is in enabling audiences to interpret it according to their own idea of what is real. Undoubtedly, some people find a lot of fantasy in If. . . For others, like Anderson himself, ‘it’s all real.’
After the café incident, the system takes its revenge, which characteristically is not called revenge. The Housemaster, weak politician that he is, washes his hands of the whole business; and the Whips beat the rebels not for any specific misdemeanor, but for being a general nuisance. (‘The boys are beaten actually for what they are,’ says Anderson, citing this as an instance of the way in which the film is epic in the Brechtian sense. ‘The concern is much more to show what people are, than to tie everything together in a specific cause and effect.’)

[At the point the Headmaster resurrects the Chaplain from a drawer in his study] All through the film there is an uncertainty about what is fantasy except here. For me, this must be fantasy. ‘Harold Pinter got very upset about that moment,’ says Anderson. ‘He thought it got very out of style. He may well be right.’

Describing the film as ‘deeply anarchistic’, Anderson has said that ‘people persistently misunderstand the term anarchistic, and think it just means wildly chucking bombs about. But anarchy is a social and political philosophy which puts the highest possible value on responsibility. The film is not about responsibility against irresponsibility. It’s about rival notions of responsibility and consequently well within a strong puritan tradition.’

‘Stylistically,’ says Anderson, ‘I don’t really think If... fits very closely into a contemporary picture of film-making, except in so far as developments in the past - what? - ten years have made it possible to work with much greater freedom in the cinema than before, and to be personal and not to be bound to the traditional and conventional ideas of narrative construction and narrative style. All the ambiguities are contained in the characterisation, and the casting, of Malcolm McDowell as the hero. He is, says Anderson, ‘a hero in the good, honourable, old-fashioned sense of the word. He is someone who arrives at his own beliefs, and stand up for those beliefs, if necessary against the world.’ Yet what he is fighting is the denial of the heart inherent in the system, the same denial of the heart that turns him into a monster. And so he has no soft edges, makes no demands for sympathy. He is an absolutely unsentimental figure in whom it is possible to see society’s impression of youthful delinquency as well as its traditional opposition to the kind of intransigence that characterises non-conformists. Unaccepting and unacceptable, he stand defiantly against the values to which the majority subscribe. There are no illusions in If... .

Next week, April 16, in the BFS it's Robert Altman's, Nashville, 1975

This astonishing epic from the director of Mash, is, says critic Roger Ebert, a musical, a docudrama, a political parable. “It tells interlocking stories of love and sex, of hearts broken and mended. And it is a wicked satire of American smarminess. But more than anything else, it is a tender poem to the wounded and the sad.” Altman invented a new sound system to handle the more than 25 speaking parts wonderfully portrayed Ned Beatty, Karen Black, Ronee Blakley, Keith Carradine, Geraldine Chaplin, Shelley Duvall, Henry Gibson, Scott Glenn, Jeff Goldblum, Barbara Harris, Lily Tomlin, Elliot Gould, Julie Christie and others.

After that, it's just 2 more to go: Martin Scorsese's Mean Streets (1973) on April 23 and Billy Wilder's Some Like It Hot (1959) on April 30. Then we're off doing whatever professors do in the summertime and you're on your own Tuesday nights until August 27. Our fall schedule is still being put together, so we welcome suggestions. Send us an email at bjackson@buffalo.edu or engdc@acsu.buffalo.edu.

The summer won't be a complete filmic desert. Michael Faust's MAFAC Sunday Classics will continue every week. This coming Sunday it's the last film in his current series, Jules Dassin's thriller, Rififi (1954). A new series begins the following week. Check the website – http://sundayclassics.com – for details.

And check out http://buffaloreport.com to read about the latest silly things City Hall has thought up....