



O DREAMLAND! LINDSAY ANDERSON'S DARK BRITISH CINEMA

## No Film Can Be Too Personal

### Is That All There Is?

Director: Lindsay Anderson  
Production Company: Yaffle Films  
Commissioning Company: BBC Scotland  
Executive Producer: John Archer  
Producer: Trevor Ingman  
Photography: Jonathan Collinson  
Editor: Nicolas Gaster  
Music: Alan Price  
With:

Lindsay Anderson  
Alexander Anderson  
Murray Anderson  
Kathy Burke  
Laurence Cohen  
Andrew Eaton  
Dr Tom Farrell  
Jocelyn Herbert  
Bernard Kops  
Rosemary Martin  
Catherine O'Neill  
Rohit Patel  
Brian Pettifer  
Neil Pilkington  
Mark Podmore  
Alan Price  
Sheridan Russell  
Mark Sigsworth  
Davey Sherwin  
David Sterne  
David Storey  
Tom Sutcliffe

#### uncredited

Alan Bates  
Alan Bennett  
Graham Crowden  
Edward Hardwicke  
Anthony Page  
Alexander Walker  
UK 1994  
52 mins  
Digital

### Lucky Man

Director: Ken McMullen  
Production Company: Looseyard  
Producers: Hannah Wiggin, Sean Lewis  
Photography: Tony Costa  
Editor: Guy Landver  
Music: David Cunningham  
With:  
Sean Lewis  
John Cartwright  
UK 1995  
38 mins  
Digital

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### A contemporary review

This article, I had better start by saying, will not be an 'objective' review of *Is That All There Is?*, but as personal as the film Lindsay Anderson has made. An old friend, he asked me to write about it – provided, of course, that I liked it – because he said he 'couldn't think of anyone else who would fully understand what I've tried to express'. And as I like the film very much, I shall try to express here how it affected me, the delayed echo I hear as I write.

In 1971 a soon-to-be-defunct American magazine, *Cinema*, published a monograph by Lindsay on John Ford – something I had originally commissioned, when I was editor of *Sight and Sound*, as the first of a projected series on film directors, delayed and then cancelled owing to lack of funds. In the introduction that *Cinema* asked me to write, I noted – from the vantage point of a California expatriate – that Lindsay had always been far more 'British' than myself: 'He is impatient and sometimes furious, but remains deeply attached. He will always live there, I guess, because like Ford he loves the idea of solid, far-reaching roots, and like Ford he is fundamentally a secret person. Exile involves self-exposure...'

Well. Lindsay still lives in Britain, of course, but he's a kind of exile anyway. And *Is That All There Is?* tells me first of all, with a degree of self-exposure new in his work, how he feels about it. The film was commissioned by BBC Scotland as part of a series called *The Director's Place*; there were no guidelines, just a request for a 50 minute account of how he lived and worked. At first, having no idea what was expected of him, he felt disconcerted. But it was finally liberating. The film creates its own unexpected form, a kind of controlled free association. One episode follows another, seemingly isolated, but in fact linked by a subtext.

After an opening shot of a dour, turn-of-the-century London block of flats comes the first of several intertitles in the style of silent movies, used (as in *O Lucky Man!*) to punctuate scenes: 'Every Day'. The next shot shows Lindsay waking up in bed, switching on his bedside radio and being subjected to the first of various media bombardments that will provide more violent punctuation – salvos of bad news alternating with explosive images. 'Every Day' continues with the director swallowing a few prescription pills, then lying almost entombed in a bubble bath as he gazes up at the posters of his films that decorate the bathroom walls. He doesn't let on what he's thinking, his eyes are veiled, enigmatic, almost saurian, but the television in the living room has supplied an implicit comment in the form of a peculiarly brutal and disgusting clip from *Lethal Weapon 3*. This is (almost) all there is now.

Preceded by an actual disaster image from television, of the floods in Pakistan, the director ventures into the street – 'ventures' because his deliberate but wary pace suggests someone who expects the territory to be hostile. But here, as he sets out on a round of local chores at the dry cleaners, the wine shop, the supermarket – he is beginning to 'play' himself, very much a 'character', ironic and a bit crusty, in his exchanges with the shop people. This is clearly a ritual: they expect it, Lindsay enjoys it, and there's an affectionately programmed, Beckett-like futility to the whole thing. As a later hospital visit for a heartbeat check-up suggests, age has made physical inroads, but his spiritual eyesight remains as sharp as ever.

Another intertitle announces 'Visitors', and as a succession of friends and colleagues – the writers Bernard Kops and David Sherwin, a couple of actors, a young television producer – drop by the flat, it becomes clear that the centre of life is the kitchen. As well as more posters on the walls, there are a John Wayne collage and a newspaper photograph of the Queen Mother, smiling with the same terrible sweetness as the actress who impersonated her in Britannia Hospital. Around the table, improvised conversations circle the same topics: the unpromising state of the world and the rejection of film projects. Although downbeat, the tone is oddly cheerful. When Lindsay reads aloud to Sherwin various letters declining their latest script, it is less to commiserate than to mock the pomposity and/or stupidity in the responses.

One eruption occurs, however – not from the media, though as startling as a previous television image of an exploding washer-dryer. Lindsay's nephew Sandy leans back too far in his chair and overbalances. When the others laugh, the nephew advances on his

## **O DREAMLAND! LINDSAY ANDERSON'S DARK BRITISH CINEMA**

### **No Film Can Be Too Personal**

Thu 2 May 20:20

### **Home**

Sun 5 May 15:20

### **The White Bus**

Sun 5 May 17:30

### **If....**

Mon 6 May 17:50; Thu 16 May 20:30; Tue 21 May 18:10; Fri 24 May 12:10; Tue 28 May 20:45

### **BFI Library Event: Outing Anderson**

Wed 8 May 20:00 BFI Reuben Library

### **In Celebration**

Thu 9 May 20:25; Wed 22 May 18:00

### **O Lucky Man!**

Sun 12 May 14:10; Sat 18 May 14:20; Mon 27 May 19:20

### **Britannia Hospital**

Tue 14 May 20:35; Sat 25 May 18:00

### **This Sporting Life**

Wed 15 May 17:50; Thu 23 May 12:00

### **The Whales of August**

Thu 16 May 12:20; Sat 25 May 16:00; Fri 31 May 20:30

### **The Old Crowd**

Thu 16 May 18:30

### **Lindsay Anderson vs the Short Films**

Industry + intro by Patrick Russell,

Senior Curator of Non-fiction, BFI

### **National Archive**

Thu 23 May 18:20

### **Stand Up! Stand Up!**

Thu 23 May 20:30

### **Never Apologize**

Fri 24 May 17:50

### **In Collaboration: Anderson and Others**

Sun 26 May 18:10

### **Lindsay Anderson Experimenta**

Mixtape, curated by Stephen Sutcliffe

Thu 30 May 18:10

### **With thanks to**

The Lindsay Anderson Archive at the University of Stirling

### **O Lucky Lindsay Anderson!**

4-week course from 7 May – 28 May, 2-4pm at City Lit, Keeley St. exploring the work and influence of visionary director, Lindsay Anderson, with course tutor John Wischmeyer. To book online [www.citylit.ac.uk/courses/o-lucky-lindsay-anderson](http://www.citylit.ac.uk/courses/o-lucky-lindsay-anderson) or call 020 3871 3111 and quote course code **HF364**

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**SIGHT  
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uncle in an outburst of manic rage and starts pouring the contents of a wine bottle over his head.

Three brief sequences show the director at work. With designer Jocelyn Herbert and playwright David Storey he talks about the set for his production of *Stages* at the National Theatre; with BBC producer Andrew Eaton he discusses *About John Ford*, the documentary he recently wrote and narrated- but the talk is of Ford, not himself; and while dictating a biographical note for the *Stages* programme, he breaks off to comment that he has 'not a bad record' in the theatre. In each case the tone is matter-of-fact, almost throwaway, and refreshingly free of any attempt to 'explain' his work or to analyse 'the creative process'.

A TV news tidbit, about the Queen under fire for her wealth, kicks off an engaging scene with Lindsay's cleaning lady, who sings 'Always Look on the Bright Side', then involves him in an absurdly complicated argument about bus versus Underground travel in London. A celebration of the 'ordinary', and of the salt of the earth, its mood connects with some of his early documentaries, particularly *Every Day Except Christmas* – just as the epiphany that closes the film echoes the finales of *If....* and *O Lucky Man!*

The riverboat Connaught moves along the Thames, the crowd on board invited by the director to a memorial ceremony for two actresses, Rachel Roberts and Jill Bennett, who were close friends of himself and of each other. Among those present we glimpse other friends and colleagues: Anthony Page, David Storey, David Sherwin, Betsy Blair, Jocelyn Herbert. This being a Lindsay Anderson film, the atmosphere is anti-funereal, a time to demonstrate enduring affection for the lost rather than to mourn the loss itself. Alan Price, at an electric piano, sings 'Is That All There Is?', the song made famous by Peggy Lee and just as effective in his own, more openly protesting style. Then ashes and flowers are scattered over the water, with two brief flashbacks intercut – to Jill in a delicious moment from Lindsay's satirical TV film based on Alan Bennett's *The Old Crowd*, and of Rachel in a sombre mood in *This Sporting Life*. And the ship sails on...

This sequence is extraordinarily moving – as a salute to two passionately vulnerable, talented and quirky outsiders who fought a losing battle with life. And it's no coincidence, of course, that Lindsay appreciated them so deeply. He is still fighting the outsider's battle himself – which is what *Is That All There Is?* seems to me, finally, to be about.

The world it creates, and the self-portrait of the director in that world, has an unmistakable aura of aloneness. But it avoids self-pity. Defiance is the keynote, mellower than in *If....* or *Britannia Hospital*, but no less stubborn. The rebellion may have failed, and those schoolboys on the roof of college given way to the yuppie generation, but Lindsay still leads an opposition party of one. And the price he has paid for remaining faithful to his pungently original, shit-kicking talent is to have made only six feature films in 30 years. Most British directors of his generation have made at least twice that number, and while less may be more in Lindsay's case, the record seems only marginally less frustrating for that. So does the fact that he has done notable work in the theatre; films have always been his ruling passion. From time to time, over the years, I've heard the comment, 'Lindsay doesn't make it easy for himself.' This, of course, is only a way of asking why he doesn't compromise, and overlooks a basic point. If compromise were in his nature, Lindsay would never have made the films he has succeeded in making.

Like Ford, his favourite director, Lindsay is part rebel and part traditionalist. But where Ford's lack of sympathy with contemporary life led him to a poetic idealisation of the past, Lindsay's distaste for an age of moral shabbiness and closed hearts has fired him to attack it directly. Shock tactics have always been his preferred weapon: the incongruous or violent imagery that suddenly detonates in the middle of scenes of 'Every Day', the shots of starving Somalian children interrupting a vista of supermarket plenty. And very occasionally there's the shock of nostalgia, like the still photograph that ends this film, a youthful Lindsay who stands waving from seaside rocks. It comes as a reminder of the long road travelled, from a time when the view was more open and encouraging than it is today.

But the last delayed echo I hear is of unrequited love, for a country of the mind, the better place that he would like England to be – and that in the 60s optimism of *If....* he thought it might become. Slow dissolve, and it turned into *Britannia Hospital*. Now, even if he asks *Is That All There Is?*, he carries on regardless, finding moments of comfort and solidarity where he can, and for the rest of the time, keeping his finger on the trigger.

Gavin Lambert, *Sight and Sound*, October 1994