



Anderson, Lindsay (1923-1994)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Film and stage director Lindsay Gordon Anderson was a foundational figure in the "Free Cinema" movement of the 1950s, a group of British filmmakers who created low-scale realist works that focused on the ordinary or the socially marginalized, particularly the working class and the younger generation. A leader among such peers as Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson, Gavin Lambert, and John Schlesinger, Anderson was influential in shaping what now might well be considered the golden age of British cinema in the 1960s.

Ironically, as a result of his independence and idealism, he directed relatively few major films, and both his professional and personal lives were affected by the repression and sublimation of his homosexuality.

Anderson was born April 17, 1923 in Bangalore, India, where his father was a captain in the British army. His family sent him to Cheltenham, an English private school, where he met his lifelong friend and colleague, Gavin Lambert, who like Anderson, was not only gay but would also enjoy a significant directorial career.

Subsequently, Anderson attended Oxford University, where he specialized in Classics and later co-founded the film journal *Sequence* with Lambert. In his essays and reviews in *Sequence* and other journals, Anderson took aim against the conventions of contemporary British cinema, which tended to avoid controversy and favored the lives and loves of the upper middle class as its subject matter.

Anderson's first films were short semi-documentary studies, looking at the everyday activities of the lower classes. Yet while Anderson had paved the way for feature films about the lives of working-class individuals, such as those that Richardson, Reisz, and Schlesinger directed throughout the early 1960s, he left filmmaking in 1957, when he became a director at the Royal Court Theatre, London.

In this capacity Anderson directed many major theatrical works, including the 1975 revival of Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw*, the first unexpurgated performance of the play. It was not until 1963, that he made his first feature film, *This Sporting Life*, which, in detailing the career of a young coal miner turned professional footballer, seemed to follow rather than lead then-current trends. As such, it was not a commercial success, yet it is significant inasmuch as its depiction of the frustration and the emotional and physical violence that characterize the lives of ostensibly heterosexual working-class men has an inescapable homoerotic undercurrent, as seen in the film's nude bathing scenes.

Many of these themes, although in a very different context, recur in Anderson's best known film, *If . . .* (1968). Set in a British private school--indeed, filmed at Cheltenham--the film explores the social fascism that is inculcated in such privileged institutions and ends with student rebels machine-gunning a school assembly. It is also noteworthy for its frank representation of homosexual relationships among the schoolboys.

Although *If . . .* was well-received as a cinematic political statement in the zeitgeist of the late 1960s, Anderson's subsequent films, though often equally daring, fared less well. *O Lucky Man!* (1973), the second of a trilogy featuring the character Mick Travis, the protagonist of *If . . .* (played by Malcolm McDowell), is a

rambling three-hour satire in the mode of Voltaire's *Candide* on the evils of military-industrial capitalism and scientific experimentation. Ambitious and idealistic, the film was nonetheless a commercial failure, and, as a result, Anderson had few offers or financial backers for subsequent film projects. The third film of the trilogy, the cult classic *Britannia Hospital* (1982), is a satire on the British national health service.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Anderson continued to direct for the stage and directed a number of television plays, as well as some rather uncharacteristic features, including *The Whales of August* (1987), starring Lillian Gish and Bette Davis as aged siblings, and *Glory! Glory!* (1989), a satire on televangelism. He also directed *Wham! in China: Foreign Skies* (1986), a documentary of George Michael's pop group on tour.

On August 30, 1994, he died of a heart attack while in southern France.

Despite Anderson's daring as a director, his recently published letters and Lambert's biography show a tormented man who struggled with his own sexuality. He tended to fall in love with his leading men, including Richard Harris, Albert Finney, and Malcolm McDowell, all of whom were heterosexual, married, and unattainable. His closest associates have speculated that his life was, for the most part, a celibate one. His films, in which homoerotic elements are often presented in a violent or disturbing manner, became the outlet for the desires he could not express in life.

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About the Author

Patricia Juliana Smith is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University. With Corinne Blackmer, she has edited a collection of essays, *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*. She is also author of *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction* and editor of *The Queer Sixties* and *The Gay and Lesbian Book of Quotations*. She serves on the editorial advisory board of www.gltbtq.com.