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The loneliness of the long-distance runner

Director: Tony Richardson Country: UK Date: 1961

A review by Keith Hennessey Brown for *Eye for film*:

Though it never achieved quite the same level of accomplishment, or recognition, as its French counterpart, the British New Wave of the late Fifties and early Sixties nevertheless managed to produce a number of felicitous films, such as Tony Richardson's *The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner*.

Adapted for the screen by Alan Sillitoe from his own short story, the film relates the story of Colin Smith (Tom Courtenay), a rebellious and disaffected teenager, whose kicks against the pricks, along with some thievery, swiftly lead to borstal. There, his talent for cross country running is noticed - a talent which earns him both preferential treatment from the regime and the enmity of less favoured inmates. Things come to a head when the governor (Michael Redgrave) has Colin enter a race against a group of local public schoolboys...

The British New Wave was always marked by apparent contradictions, not least the fact that predominantly public (i.e., for the benefit of our American friends, private) school and Oxbridge educated filmmakers were seeking to make gritty and realistic - as the cliché invariably puts it - films about working-class life; a situation always likely to lead to touristic, impressionistic pieces that presented a world the director/auteur found a nice place to visit, but wouldn't want to live in.



Questions of class voyeurism aside, *The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner* works better than many of its peers, retaining its freshness and a degree of relevance 40 years on, thanks to the timeless, placeless main theme of rebellion-vs-conformity and the continuing fallout of debates over the influence of American/mass/consumer culture, as epitomised here by the villainous TV set (though oddly trad jazz - the subject of Richardson's earlier Free Cinema short, *Momma Don't Allow* - seems to be okay) on "the British way of life". This said, Richardson displays a surprising affinity for the material, possibly the result of an insight that, be it boarding school, barrack room or borstal, Britain's "total institutions" - to use Irving Goffman's phrase - have always been much the same in terms of corrupt(ing) master/slave power relations.

But if anything contributes to its lasting influence, it's not all this lefty stuff, rather the brilliant performance by Tom Courtenay - all the more remarkable given his youth and inexperience in what was his film debut - and the beautiful, alternately poetic and documentary realist black-and-white, cinematography by Walter Lassally.

Overall, the film retains its power and impact and deserves the viewer's attention over its louder, but ultimately emptier, offspring *If...* and *A Clockwork Orange*. Set against *Les Quatre Cents Coups*, *Kes* and Bill Douglas's *Trilogy* it's probably outclassed - Francois Truffaut's stylistic experiments feel more harmonious, the approaches of Ken Loach and Douglas more honest and authentic.

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