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If...

Director: Lindsay Anderson

Country: UK

Date: 1968

A review of the film's re-release by Gavin Lambert for *The Guardian*

In the spring of 1968, when Lindsay Anderson began filming *If...*, he was 45. But it seemed at the time (and still seems today) an astonishingly youthful film, with no hint of patronage in its treatment of the trio of public school rebels played by Malcolm McDowell, Richard Warwick and David Wood. The director is their comrade in arms as he portrays a world of rigid authority: headmaster, staff, chaplain, and a fifth column of prefects, known as "whips".

Although Anderson was still working with David Sherwin on the final script when student rebellions broke out at the Sorbonne in Paris, and Columbia university in New York, *If...* is not a political film. Like its successors, *O Lucky Man!* and *Britannia Hospital*, it doesn't belong in any formal category. At the start of their collaboration, Anderson and Sherwin had been energised by seeing Jean Vigo's *Zéro de Conduite* again, "not for its anarchistic spirit - we had plenty of our own", Anderson said later, but for its "poetic method" and the way it moved between reality and fantasy without appearing to cross a frontier.



Because Anderson wanted to avoid specific contemporary references, the schoolboys in *If...* wear stylised, semi-Edwardian costumes, and McDowell as Mick Travis first appears dressed like a revolutionary from Dostoevsky's *Possessed*: long black topcoat, wide-brimmed black hat, black muffler across the lower half of his face. No one plays or listens to pop music, and the opening shots of the revolution are fired from antique-looking second world war machine guns that the trio discover in a storeroom. A notch above reality from the start, *If...* soon moved a notch higher when the cameraman found it impossible to light long shots of the school chapel in colour, and Anderson decided to film all the chapel scenes in black-and-white, then "shoot a few other scenes in black-and-white when I feel like it". It was an arbitrary gamble, but when he saw how bleak the chapel looked in monochrome, he realised that necessity had provided the key to "when I feel like it" and proceeded to create similar visual/emotional transitions in other scenes.

Like the film, Mick Travis and his two friends are apolitical. They're in revolt against an autocracy that denies them individual freedom in the name of fossilised abstractions: Obedience, Team Spirit, Tradition, Duty. "When do we live?" Mick Travis asks. "That's what I want to know." They first start to live by celebrating erotic freedom (Mick's affair with a local waitress, Wallace's romance with a junior boy), and finally erupt in furious, orgasmic liberation on Founders Day. In 1932, when Vigo's children hurled tin cans and old shoes from a rooftop, it was an innocent prank. In 1968, when the trio and their lovers open fire on school dignitaries, staff and parents, they mean business. But so does autocracy. Led by a military Founder, it fires back with superior weapons from the school armoury, and a close shot of Mick continuing to fire fades abruptly to a black screen, with *If...* reappearing in red letters. This final transition from fantasy to reality suggests that the revolution is doomed to failure, but a failure that's also a warning.

Five years later, at the age of 50, the (relatively) benign anarchist of *If...* has become less young at heart when he makes his next feature film, *O Lucky Man!* His view of the repressive world extends to the country as a whole, a wide-ranging satire on the idea of "This England". McDowell plays a young man named Mick Travis, but he's not a miraculous survivor from the rooftop of *If...* The name is a metaphor for any bright young man of the time, innocently ambitious at first, finally disillusioned by a society in which politicians, the law and big business are corrupt and unfeeling, liberals and do-gooders inept or

simple-minded. Anderson still empathises with Mick, but from a distance this time. In the final scene he appears as himself, a rather formidable although ultimately benevolent authority figure who not only auditions Mick for what turns out to be a film within the film, but acts as a mentor of youth (a role he had begun to play in his own life). So the two-way traffic between reality and fantasy is even more daring and complex, with several actors playing multiple roles and the Brechtian device of Alan Price's brilliant songs commenting on the action. In a film lasting three hours, energy and satirical invention decline from unflagging to sporadic only in the last 30 minutes; but its observations on the cult of success, the various corruptions of power, and the search for longevity through a deranged scientist's version of cloning, could have been made yesterday.

As no British company would finance *If...* or *O Lucky Man!*, they owed their existence to American money, from Paramount and Warner Bros respectively. Only *Britannia Hospital*, Anderson's third collaboration with David Sherwin, was funded by the mother country, but not because EMI's executives liked the script. For tax purposes, the company needed to make a capital expenditure of £3m before the end of 1981. At times the film is more roughly executed than its predecessors, but at 68 Anderson maintains a high level of energy. And this time, he abandons "poetic method" for a continuous exaggeration of the possible. With a grotesquely corrupt hospital as a metaphor for Margaret Thatcher's Britain, everyone connected with the place comes under fire: staff, union leaders, deranged scientist from *O Lucky Man!*, strikers picketing outside the gates, and "HRH", a visiting royal personage whose relentless smile and picture hat identifies her as the Queen Mother.



Malcolm McDowell's Mick Travis is now a slick, not-so-young photojournalist who emigrated to America "for the money" and returns in the hope of a sensational scoop on the mad cloner's secret experiments in one wing of the hospital. But he ends as a decapitated victim, which is how Anderson felt when the film was widely attacked as "bitter" and "mean-minded". It was neither, but the exuberantly pessimistic way it let nobody off the hook obscured an important fact. Like *If...* and *O Lucky Man!*, it presented every character, however

ruthless or venal or misguided, as sincere. Objects of satire, Anderson often told his actors, must be played "with total conviction", and derive their humour from unwavering self-deception. And in different ways, these three films protest the same thing, the dehumanising effect of institutionalised power on the individual. *If...* is ultimately a romantic film, with Anderson up on the roof with the rebels; *O Lucky Man!* the fable of a reluctant optimist; and *Britannia Hospital* the work of a self-described "loner, against all systems", on the threshold of old age. But from younger and older Anderson alike, there's always a closet humanist peeping

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The sixth side of the Pentagon, directed by Chris Marker and Francois Reichenbach.

On October 21, 1967, over 100,000 protestors gathered in Washington, D.C., for the Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam. It was the largest protest gathering yet, and it brought together a wide cross-section of liberals, radicals, hippies, and Yippies. Che Guevara had been killed in Bolivia only two weeks previously, and, for many, it was the transition from simply marching against the war, to taking direct action to try to stop the 'American war machine.' From young men burning their draft cards, to the Yippies chanting "Out, demons, out!" while trying to levitate the Pentagon, to thousands of protestors rushing the steps of the Pentagon itself and some actually getting into the building, *THE SIXTH SIDE OF THE PENTAGON*, by contemporaneously putting us in the midst of the action yet combining the experience with a wry and reflective commentary, is a remarkable time capsule and reminder of events from forty years ago, 1967-the turning point of opposition to a long and unpopular war.



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