

Some Kind of Dialectic: Lindsay Anderson's Artistic Process

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For the purposes of this paper, I have created a fictional exchange between Lindsay Anderson and François Truffaut. The contrived character of the exercise allows for an insight into the dynamics lying at the heart of Lindsay Anderson's directorial signature. The idea here is to initiate an Andersonian version of the Gestus which is seen as central to Brecht's theatre. Just as this dramatic technique is meant to crystallise our attention to one aspect of the relation between two people by removing it from its emotional, psychological, social or cultural context, the following dialogue forces a process of alienation out of which the specificity of a film director can be seen.

Why Truffaut: He famously stated that British Cinema were two incompatible terms. To which A famous British film director – Stephen Frears – the assistant director on *If....* (1968) retorted: 'Bollocks to Truffaut'.

- **Truffaut**: In 1956 you proved instrumental in shaping up the politics of the Free Cinema along with Tony Richardson, Karel Reisz and Lorenza Mazzetti. You declared in your manifesto: An attitude means a style Does this mean

accepting every film at its own valuation? (from “Angles of Approach” Anderson 1947)

Anderson: I developed a key idea in Angles of Approach which I wrote for the magazine Sequence, the first duty of the artist is to create. However this duty of creation only assumes significance if and when the society appraising the object of this creation – the work of art – is ready to pass judgement based upon the set of standards the artist has put forward. The difficulty lies in our ability or absence thereof to challenge our own prejudices and expectations when it comes to the cinema. The film critic – particularly the British film critic – embodies in my opinion, the ultimate lack of commitment to the art of cinema. The film critic builds his own aesthetic standards by relying on the social and cultural notions of what a film ought to achieve. It is well known: Britain distrusts the arts, and the cinema above all else.

- **T**: I wrote a little article back in January 1954 that caused quite a brouhaha in the world of film criticism. You might have heard of it... (“Une Certaine Tendence...”)

A: I would say I reserve my opinion until I have an opportunity to hear more about your actual conception of the role of the screenwriter in the filmmaking process. Having said that I perceive in your attack on the tradition de qualité, a sense of frustration that recalls my own view of the inadequacy which the film critics display in the exercise of their profession. Just as you castigate Aurenche and Bost for

arbitrarily deciding what is filmable and what is not, I “find [the] distinction between form and content [which the film critics apply to film] somewhat naïf. It is the essence of poetry (in any medium) that the thing said cannot be critically distinguished from the way of saying it” (Anderson 1956: 227). To me, your attack upon the scenaristes’ lack of belief in the potential of the cinema parallels my condemnation of the prevailing attitude in British film criticism: a fundamental lack of commitment to the nature of filmmaking.

- **T**: What is filmmaking for you?

A: In 1958, I reviewed Andrzej Wajda’s *Kanal* which he had directed the year before. What struck me was the visual brilliance that the narration techniques in his film displayed:

This is what I was aiming at when I filmed *The White Bus* in 1967: visual eloquence; in other words, identifying the necessary degree of latitude in the script to maintain an equilibrium between the visualisation of the script and my own directorial intervention. This is a process of interaction I strongly believe in – which is why Shelagh Delaney and I aimed at a script without logic (Lambert 00: 133). ‘Intuition and feeling’ (133) help find the right balance between the need for structuring the script and the tendency to overanalyse it.

- **T**: I personally do not believe that you can ‘put the best moments of a film down in a script.

A: If it is true that ‘a lot of *The White Bus* was not scripted [...]’ this does not mean however that I believe in improvisation as a directorial practice: this means that I define the function of the director on-set as that of an arbiter – in charge of maintaining an equilibrium which is both precarious and necessary to the film itself. which is why I favour the presence and input of the screenwriters I am working with at all stages of production from the drafting stage right through to the filming itself...

In 1948, in an article for *Sequence* which I titled *Creative Elements*, I explained my view of the filmmaking process which I regard as an integrated one. I believe the screenplay is central to the film: any weaknesses in the script and your film will be damaged, no matter how skilled your director might be. However, there is one truth to hold fast: the script does not exist in its own right as a novel or a play might. It is a very specific art form which involves a process of visualisation throughout. And it is the director who negotiates the passage from the script to the screen.

Of course, you might object that Alfred Hitchcock would time and time again declare that all important work in his films is done on the script. My experience as a film director has led me to the same conclusion; however, I believe in the existence of a creative trigger which reinforces the centrality of the script and at the same time positions the director’s role as essential in the overall process: the director guides if you will, the process of ‘fusion’ (199) which operates in filmmaking. Simply put, I believe in the existence of an ‘inextricable Trinity of the film: scriptwriter, cameraman and director’, (198). This trinity

will in turn form ‘a complex series of relationships’. (199) It is the director’s function to acknowledge and make possible this ‘rare, almost miraculous fusion of many and various creative elements’. (199)

- **T**: There appears to be inconsistencies in your vision of the filmmaking process. On the one hand, you are championing the view of an integrated process, and on the other, you suggest a pyramidal structure to that same process, especially in the case of the script which you define as a set of inadequately expressed ideas (198) that need the director’s guidance to become relevant to the film.

A: Bertolt Brecht believed in the existence of contrary pulls within the work of art. At the level of the artist this means both a willingness to challenge the preconceived notions or expectations of your audience and at the same time acknowledging the limits of your own project. In other words, you cannot totally alienate your audience or your work will fall upon deaf ears. Instead, you ought to let it be made up of these contrary tensions. A film director is by definition placed in such a brechtian position or dilemma. Take for example your article – Une Certaine Tendence – you use the term ‘inadequate’ to describe the working practice between Bost and Aurenche that roughly consists in deciding – based upon the written page – on what can be filmed and what cannot. ‘the invention without betrayal’ principle is another way of illustrating the limitations of any work of art that ignores the potential and true nature of its medium. Just as Robert Bresson thought of a

way of including a scene previously judged unfilmable in *Journal d'Un Cure de Campagne*, the film director maintains a constant awareness of his – her – role in the filmmaking process – one that does not overlook the contribution of each constitutive stage, but one that transcends the potential of each taken separately.

- **T**: How *British* is your cinema?

A: I know that Wajda declared *Britannia Hospital* to be the most Polish film he'd seen that year. On the other hand, *If....* (1968) has helped me gain international recognition on the very basis of its inherent British – or should I say English – qualities. I remember the press reviews that came out at the time we presented the film at the Cannes International Film Festival back in 1969. The French press unanimously adopted the view that the strength of my film lay in its documentary value. There was not one article that did not feature at least one of the following buzz words: *chronique*, *document*, *réalisme*, *précision*, *choix du détail*. Not surprisingly, my own educational background came to play a major part in the evaluation of the film: I remember Michel Capdenac in *Lettres Françaises*, he stressed the connection between the vitriolic depiction of this enclosed world and my own 'rich personal experience' which in his estimation lent the story an autobiographical undertone. It has to be said, the French reviewers were not alone in their praise of the documentary value of my film. As a matter of fact, it quickly became the point of reference to which all reviews would ultimately fall back on: they would use it whether to account for what they perceived to be the disappointing conclusion of an otherwise promising film, or to open up the debate on the stylistic choices I had adopted

in If..... Der Tagesspiegel for instance, lent more weight to my subversive account of the system of the English public schools than to the effectiveness of the revolutionary message which they located in the climactic ending of the film. The reviewer particularly criticised the film's references to Jean Vigo's *Zéro de Conduite* which were judged unconvincing. And this pattern I find interesting: it seems that my strength as a film director rests upon my talent as a documentary filmmaker. The Cannes reviews all follow the same pattern: they praise the cinematography, or the *mise-en-scène* of the so-called documentary part, but they stop short of compliments or commentaries for that matter when discussing the meaning intended for the film. Almost as if they feared contradicting themselves. Which actually happened to an Italian reviewer – Aggeo Savioli for *L'Unita* – who appeared to have trouble deciding whether the film carried through the extraordinary value which the documentary side made possible or still fell short of delivering on its revolutionary hypothesis.

The thing is I thrive upon contradiction – this is the way I explore my ideas by letting my personality take precedence over any pre-determined message. This enables me to fuse together apparently contrasting elements – and this at the level of the storyline as well as of the choices I make in terms of filmmaking practice. Let me give you an example: in 1982 in an interview I gave on the occasion of the release of *Britannia Hospital*, the journalist enquired about the 'filmed documentary' look of my latest project. This is precisely where my film ethics lies: *I used to throw myself against reality out of which I can create something – but to create that reality is very hard for me. I only seem able to work through some kind of dialectic.* In *If*, and this is also true of *O Lucky Man!* and *Britannia Hospital*, fantasy interacts with realism at all times. This constitutes in my

opinion the essence of a realistic cinema: I privilege absurd situations which I nevertheless do not allow to turn into parodies – this is why I encourage my actors to privilege what I term extravagant performances but insisting all the while on the highest degree of authenticity. That way, you can get entirely contrasting reactions from your audience: they can switch with little warning from hilarity to puzzlement and even to fear.

- **T:** In 1967 you actually made your first polish film – The Singing Lesson – Do you consider yourself a European director?

A: I had my reservations when I started work in Poland back then. I was there to direct the star of Wajda’s A Generation – Tadeusz Lomnicki – in the first production of John Osborne’s Inadmissible Evidence. The production of the play for the Warsaw Contemporary Theatre had its share of frustrations for me: I often felt at odds with the Polish way of getting on about the business. The experience of making The Singing Lesson did not alter the view I held of my work as a film director. Quite the opposite actually; this experience comforted me in the belief of the strong connection between my work for the theatre and my projects for the cinema: one often made the other possible, and The Singing Lesson is a strong case in point: I had been invited by the director of the Documentary Studio to make a documentary, “about anything I’d like”, and it was Joanna Nawroka, my assistant at the Contemporary Theatre who “suggested that I come to watch the classes at the Dramatic Academy given by a revered performer in musical theatre, Professor Ludwik Simpolinski”. I don’t speak Polish and I didn’t know much about Poland then, but the filming of The Singing Lesson fits into the general pattern that

I've seen developing over the course of my career. In Poland, I benefited from the same kind of creative freedom I had been given on *The White Bus*; I also developed an enjoyable and fruitful working relationship with the cameraman – Zygmunt Samosiuk. As expected, I had to travel back to Poland to edit the film, and my film was also met with some degree of resistance and even hostility by its Polish producers who dreaded the outcome of a successful Polish film directed by an outsider. Of course, for me this proved nothing new, and as it turns out, I've had to contend with some degree of hostility towards my work throughout my career. As an artist, I always expect, and somehow favour, a greater or lesser degree of alienation, of loneliness.

- **T:** In 1984 you recounted the circumstances surrounding the release of *The Singing Lesson* in Poland, more specifically, the system of censorship applied within the film industry by other film professionals themselves. How do you see this type of challenge to your work – of a political nature in essence – as opposed to the type of critical and commercial scrutiny you have been exposed to in your country?

A: In terms of commitment. In the article you are referring to, I mention a conversation David Lean would have had with Noel Coward and which in essence said – unless you can give the audience what they want, just forget it. My experience in Poland taught me about commitment to my work and – which is for me the same thing – to my collaborators involved in my projects. Jerzy Bossak in charge of production at Contemporary Films – Warsaw Documentary Studios- saw in the final sequence of *The Singing Lesson*, a direct reference to a book and its filmed version which if remarked

would get everyone into trouble. “I got away with my sequence, just”. This also proved my direct confrontation with the principle I had enounced in an interview with John Russell Taylor in 1963: “All works of art have political implications but they have political implications because they are works of art, not *vice versa*”. In a way, the absence of commitment on the part of the film establishment – and here I’m talking about film critics, or their counterparts in the industry, the film distributors or the filmmakers themselves – this absence of commitment is our form of censorship of the arts. It can take many forms. In Britain, it is the refusal to take the cinema seriously. In France, it could be the tendency to apply ‘pseudo-intellectual’ models to any film dealing with a serious subject, such as revolution, anarchy and order. Back in the time of the Iron Curtain, Poland and the then Czechoslovakia had to side-step political censorship to let their artistic voice be heard. Andrzej Wajda with *A Generation*, Milos Forman with *Loves of a Blonde* achieved just that with the brilliance of their camera-work.

In my own case, I have to fight social and commercial imperatives to make my work relevant or financially viable. My inducement is finding that kind of poetry which can claim the ‘grandeur of generality’. In the best art anyway, style and commitment are inseparable. Stand up! Stand Up! For your films!