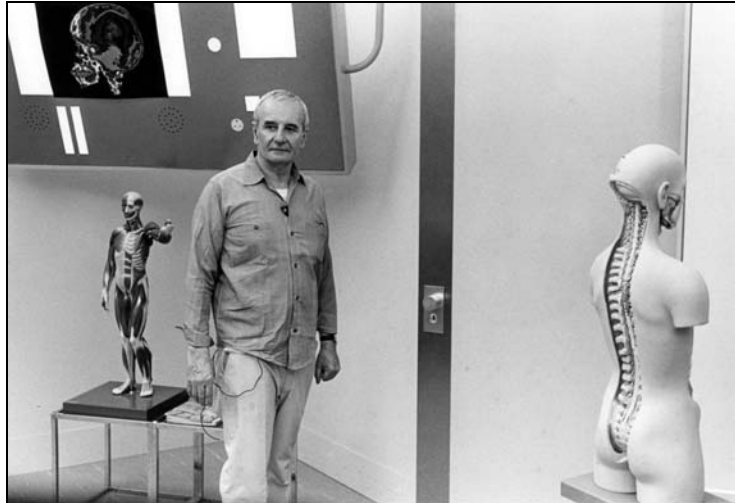


Britannia Hospital: Searching the Archives for an Audience
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Lindsay Anderson on set of *Britannia Hospital*,
Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling

Earlier this year I presented a paper entitled *In Search of an Audience: Lindsay Anderson's Britannia Hospital*. This paper discussed aspects of the relationship between the director and his audience by examining the strains exerted on this relationship by the promotion and critical reception of *Britannia Hospital*. Today I'm going to look in a bit more depth at how the material in the Anderson Archive informed my research and how the work I am doing in cataloguing the Collection will aid future researchers.

Karl has already discussed the variety of materials in the Collection but I thought it would be useful to outline the materials specifically relating to *Britannia Hospital*. There are large correspondence files, covering correspondence with the film's producers and distributors, fans, friends and film critics; scripts at various stages of development; production material, including audition and casting notes; promotional material including ideas for the advertising campaign; related entries from Anderson's diaries; and press cuttings after the release of the film.

Britannia Hospital was released in 1982 and was the final part of a trilogy of films starting so successfully with *If...* in 1968 and *O Lucky Man* in 1973. However this final part was condemned by the critics and not much better received by the public. In the words of David Robinson, the British film critic and author "...no major British film can ever have suffered so calamitous a debut."¹ Robinson was referring to a number of things here; firstly the same day that *Britannia Hospital* opened in Britain was the day the Cup Final replay between Tottenham Hotspur and Queens Park Rangers was being televised; and the following day the Pope was due to arrive in Britain. Less glamorous but undoubtedly more important for the reception and success of *Britannia Hospital*, Britain

at this time was in a period of serious economic instability, with unemployment reaching a record high since the 1930's², the Falklands war occupying people's minds and the media, numerous strikes in the public sector, and continued IRA bombings. In the light of this social context it is hard to overstate the effect that negative reviews, and articles in which the film was portrayed as being 'unpatriotic', would have on the cinema-going public. Add to this the fact that the number of people even going to the cinema in the UK had dropped dramatically, from just under 140 million in 1972 to around 60 million in 1982³. Although there were, as Robinson points out, a few exceptions, in general the film received very negative reviews in the British press and unsurprisingly, did very poorly at the box office.

I'm now going to show the British trailer for *Britannia Hospital* as I think this is the best way to introduce the film. **SHOW TRAILER FOR BRITANNIA HOSPITAL**

As you can see from the trailer there are a number of different storylines running through the film. The eclectic nature of the film provided the opportunity to promote different aspects that would appeal to different audiences but this variety, this lack of a single image or theme, proved problematic. Through looking at Anderson's correspondence with EMI it became apparent that he was very critical of the way they were handling the publicity and promotion of the film. There are long detailed letters, where Anderson outlines exactly what he feels the publicity campaign should and shouldn't contain, for example in a letter to an executive at EMI he writes, "It is certainly not desirable that the first or chief reaction to BRITANNIA HOSPITAL is that it is "anti-establishment"... the film is not restricted to the English in its appeal"⁴. He urged them to involve an outside PR agency, which they did, employing an agency which Anderson himself suggested for the British publicity campaign.

The Collection contains material which the PR agency produced for the promotion of the film, and Anderson's own ideas on how the film should be promoted.



LA/1/9/3/12/1, design possibility for UK advertising campaign for *Britannia Hospital*, Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling

We have draft sketches of a number of ideas for the advertising campaign, this first image of the headless torso (LA/1/9/3/12/1), is the image Anderson originally wanted to use. However as he explains in a letter to Nat Cohen, (a film producer) in May 1982 “I could also see that the image of the headless torso waving a Union Jack ... was not a good idea in view of the wholly unexpected turn that public affairs have taken during the last month or so.”⁵ However, the other ideas (an example of which is shown below) were only slightly more toned down and could still be easily imagined to cause outrage and offence! I just realised when writing this paper that nowhere in the large collection of press cuttings do we have a cutting of the published ad in the UK press, perhaps an indication of how unimpressed Anderson was with it? In another letter to EMI he wrote “the poster for BRITANNIA HOSPITAL has turned out to be as mediocre as I feared.”



LA/1/9/3/12/1, design possibility for UK advertising campaign for *Britannia Hospital*, Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling

The Collection contains the results of a ‘promotional strategy survey’ commissioned by EMI to gauge the interest of cinema-goers in the film. The survey found that the main selling point for the film was the involvement of Leonard Rossiter, a familiar face from TV, this would reassure people that it was a comedy, probably with some home truths in it, but nothing too outrageous. In particular it was noted that “reference to ribaldry at the expense of the Queen Mother should be avoided.”⁶ In fact Anderson himself was adamant that the term H.R.H should always be used, and he was quick to criticise EMI when their own publicity used the term “the Queen Mother”.

The material in the archive shows that even before work began on *Britannia Hospital* Anderson was worried the film would not be well-received, as evidenced in this quote from a diary entry in December of 1980. “Wisdom or folly? Courage or cowardice? I haven’t the slightest idea... From one angle Britannia Hospital is the logical, courageous development of my own style, my own thoughts and feelings. From another it is a

stubborn repetition of ideas which have already proved unpopular, unwelcome, unacceptable to all except an increasingly shrinking minority.”⁷

It’s interesting to compare these uncertainties we come across in the Archive material with his public statements, exemplified by a letter to *The NME* where he writes

“No doubt I was naïf to expect a sympathetic, iconoclastic humour from any representative of *The New Musical Express*... Well, if I have to go out of the window with Aristophanes, Jonson, Shaw and Brecht, Vigo and Bunuel, I’ll be going in good company. And happy to leave Andy Gill to strut around his bonfire of books and movies with the Yahoo philistinism which is nearer than he thinks to the sappy, non-committal alienation of his “liberal” colleagues.”⁸

Anderson himself did not always do the best to promote his film or connect with his audience. In an interview with *The NME*, a youth music magazine, he continually provokes the interviewer Richard Cook (although Cook did begin the interview by saying how much he hated the film!)⁹. Anderson said that in order to understand the film properly it is necessary to ‘use your intelligence’ implying that this was something Cook was not doing! The exchanges with *The NME* continued, with Anderson writing a letter to them in which he attacked both the interviewer, and another writer from the paper, named in the quote, who wrote a critical review of the film.

In Anderson’s own words, in a letter to the American film critic Vincent Canby “the English gave BRITANNIA HOSPITAL a fearful pasting”¹⁰. Anderson thought it was more the broadsheets than the tabloids who reacted so badly, however, looking at a broad range of the British reviews, it appears this distinction is not quite so clear cut. There were some exceptions but the negative reviews ranged from tabloid papers to broadsheets, and through youth publications like the *NME* and *Time Out*.



LA/1/09/6/1/18, The Daily Mail, 18/05/1982, Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling

Although his usual combatative nature comes out in a letter to Davide Ferrario, an Italian journalist and film director “*I am arrogant enough to judge critics and people by their response to my films, rather than to judge my films by people’s response to them (!)*.”¹¹ However in reality the majority of the correspondence shows that, as arrogant as he may appear to be, he still wasn’t immune to the criticism. For Anderson the inability of the critics to understand the film was indicative of, and influential upon, the way in which the film would be viewed by the cinema-going public. As a result when he did get good reviews Anderson often wrote to those critics, thanking them for their work. There is a

great deal of this type of correspondence in the collection, as well as plenty where Anderson tells the critics what he thinks they should have written.

Anderson collected press cuttings of reviews and advertisements for his work. Friends, and sometimes press agencies, would send him the press cuttings and in some cases, books of compilations of press cuttings. He liked to control the promotion of his work as much as possible, and although (I don't think!) he never went so far as I hear Kubrick did, measuring the size of published advertisements to ensure they had followed his directions, he did keep a close eye on the promotion campaigns and controlled it as much as he was able to. I thought it would be interesting to show a few of the images of advertisements from other countries, Italy, America and Hungary, to illustrate the different audiences the film was being promoted to in these countries.



LA/1/9/5/3, American press advertisement
for *Britannia Hospital*, Lindsay Anderson Collection,
University of Stirling

The advertising campaign used in America was a zany comic style campaign which Anderson didn't approve of, but which did seem to work in the film's favour. In a letter to Anderson about a preview screening in L.A., Davina Belling (co-producer of the film), said that of 60 fans who came out in blizzard conditions to see the film 15 walked out, she concluded:

"I think there is a lot to be said for attracting a new generation of fans rather than count on your current ones, based on the reactions to date."¹²

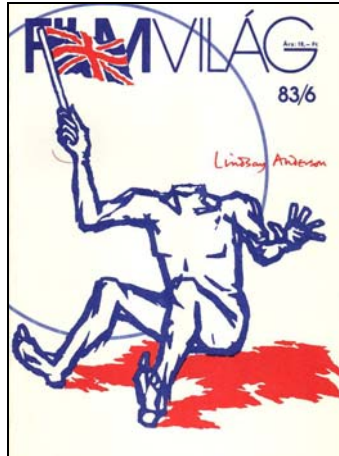
Anderson agreed that he could not count on his 'current fans' noting that he was conscious "of being unfashionable, and not much of a draw with the current art film crowd."¹³

Anderson's pessimistic expectation of the film's critical reception in the US proved unfounded. Many of the US critics noted the comedic elements of the film using terms such as "witty", "outrageous", "wildly comic". In a review of the film's performance in *Box Office* in June 1983 it was noted that "there's no reason that this film shouldn't go on to become a classic ranked with the likes of *A Clockwork Orange* and *Dr Strangelove*."¹⁴



LA/1/9/5/3, Italian press advertisement for *Britannia Hospital*, Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling

The Italian press advertisement for the film (shown above), a Euro-sex-sci-fi fantasy of two Metropolis-style robots in a passionate embrace (an image which bears no resemblance to any characters in, or scenes from, the film!) might be explained by the fact that the film, which was well received in Italy, Portugal and France, won an award at a "Fantasy film festival" in Portugal. We know this from a letter Anderson wrote to Mike Fash, the film's cinematographer, where he seemed slightly incredulous at winning such an award.



LA/1/9/6/10, *Filmvilág* (Hungarian film magazine),
Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling

I have added this image from the Hungarian film magazine ‘Film Vilag’ as it highlights the different response to his films in Eastern Europe. Anderson was generally taken a lot more seriously as an auteur, and indeed, he himself was known to say that he thought the Eastern European audience more sophisticated in their understanding of films. It’s interesting that the image in this one is the image he originally approved of and wanted used.

Having all the promotional and publicity material, together with Anderson’s correspondence discussing it, provides us with invaluable context to analyse the reception of his films in different countries and gives us insights into his relationship with the production and publicity companies, and his audience, which we couldn’t find all together elsewhere.

His correspondence with fans shows his genuine gratitude for the unsolicited support and praise he received from the film’s small (but appreciative) audience as illustrated by this reply to a fan letter.

“I was delighted to get your letter about *Britannia Hospital*. Believe me, such reassurances are needed as well as appreciated – there comes a time when, in the face of almost unanimous public denigration or dismissal, the enthusiasm of friends starts to become unconvincing.”¹⁵

This is typical of his replies to his fan-mail - unguarded and surprisingly candid. He indulges in a shared distaste with his fans for the critics and also the general cinema-going public who didn’t understand the film, frequently referring to the “idiotic press” and the “stupid, lumpen TV-watching public” (or similarly derogatory phrases). Many of the letters of support received by Anderson came from people working in the NHS who appreciated (and identified with) the film’s depiction of hospital life. Indeed these letters provide a clear example of the distance between critics and audience, the raw, emotional, appreciative responses of hospital workers being in stark contrast to the cold, distant analysis of the critics.

All this isn't to say that he didn't challenge or admonish fans though. For example, one letter we have from June 1982 began by complimenting the film but then went on to rate Anderson's films against his 'all-time favourites' list. He says that *Britannia Hospital* wouldn't top *If...* (no 5 in his list, behind *Mean Streets*, *Performance*, *Dr Strangelove* and *Lolita*, in a list of 157) nevertheless [its] a considerable advance on *O Lucky Man!* which at no. 109, he says he felt "it lost its way in its second half, particularly at the end"¹⁶. These comments on his work couldn't, of course, go unchallenged by Anderson. In his reply he wrote:

"I'm sorry that you thought that *O Lucky Man!* lost its way 'particularly at the end.' But are you quite sure that you didn't lose your way? Have another look in a few years time."¹⁷

In these private exchanges with fans about *Britannia Hospital* Anderson appears at his most relaxed and reflective. These exchanges don't require him to adopt the confrontational, tough public exterior that characterises his correspondence with critics or unsympathetic journalists (as shown in the vitriolic letter to the *NME* referred to earlier).

I consider myself very lucky to be cataloguing such an interesting and valuable collection and I still get surprised by how much wonderful material I come across. These next two images give us a valuable insight into the amount of preliminary research Anderson did, and the sources of inspiration for his films, in this case the first image is one of many (a whole folder full) of press cuttings which Anderson photocopies, cut out, then re-assembled, of stories which were inspiration for the film. The second image shows a booklet which Anderson made by assembling press cuttings, like those in the previous image, as a mock-up newspaper.



LA/1/09/6/2, press cuttings contemporary to *Britannia Hospital*, Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling



LA/1/9/6/3/1, mock-up newspaper created by Lindsay Anderson, Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling

The main part of my job is cataloguing, to item level, the correspondence and diaries in the Anderson Collection. In the *Britannia Hospital* file alone there are over 300 letters,

and this is not including the amount of correspondence elsewhere in the Collection which will be relevant to this film. I am cataloguing each letter by writing a short description of it and linking it to subject and name index terms. The whole Collection is key word searchable, or can be searched through the names and subject index, with relevant material appearing in a hit list. The catalogue is being catalogued, as far as possible, in the same order which Anderson and Kathy Burke, his secretary, had organised the files. When the project is completed this item level catalogue will be available online for researchers. This will aid researchers as they can determine before visiting how much material there is, and therefore how much time they will need. It also means that remote researchers can be much more specific in the material they request.

The decision to make *Britannia Hospital* proved to be a turning point for Anderson. It is perhaps the most neglected of his films, a victim of the poor reception it received on its British release. After the failure of *Britannia Hospital*, Anderson didn't make another feature film until *The Whales of August* in 1987, his final feature. In the five years between these two there was an ill-fated trip to China with the pop group Wham and many attempts to make other films, for example, work with David Sherwin on a proposed sequel to *If...* but none of these projects came to fruition.

The correspondence in the Collection shows us how much time and effort Anderson put into replying to correspondence from fans, friends and critics, illustrating that he placed a great deal of importance on it. The huge amount of press cuttings about the film collected by Anderson, and sent to him by friends and press agencies, show that, although Anderson may claim in public to be unaffected by the reaction to his work, in reality it had a profound effect on him. It is also interesting to see how much research work Anderson carried out for the film, through the collection and ordering of press cuttings of news stories which would provide inspiration for the film. All this unique material provides insights in the relationship between the director and his audience that we wouldn't be able to get through secondary sources.

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- ¹ LA/1/9/6/9, David Robinson, 'Time to reconsider a masterly vision', The Times, 15/10/1982.
- ² BBC 'On This Day – January 26 1982' URL http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/26/newsid_2506000/2506335.stm [visited 20/03/2009]
- ³ UK Film Council 'A short note on UK cinema admissions during recessions, 1970 to 2007', 16/09/2008, URL: http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/media/pdf/6/s/UK_cinema_admissions_during_recessions_-_16Sep08.pdf [visited 20/03/2009]
- ⁴ LA/1/9/3/6/3, Lindsay Anderson writing to Michael Buist (EMI), 09/12/1981
- ⁵ LA/1/9/3/6/8, Lindsay Anderson writing to Nat Cohen (a film producer), 18/05/1982
- ⁶ LA 1/9/3/15/12, A promotional strategy survey for BH conducted for EMI films by The National Research Group, Apr 1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling
- ⁷ LA/6/1/81 Lindsay Anderson diary entry from 30/12/1980
- ⁸ LA/1/9/6/9, Lindsay Anderson, 'The Wonderful (?) World of Lindsay Anderson', New Musical Express, (letter written by Lindsay Anderson re: review of Britannia Hospital), The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- ⁹ LA/1/9/6/9, Richard Cook, 'Growing Old Disgracefully', New Musical Express, 05/06/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling
- ¹⁰ LA/1/9/3/8/11, Lindsay Anderson, writing to Vincent Canby, 16/03/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- ¹¹ LA/5/1/2/12/4, Lindsay Anderson, writing to the Italian journalist and film-director Davide Ferrario 11/08/1982
- ¹² LA 1/9/3/11/14, Letter from Davina Belling to Lindsay Anderson, 17/01/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- ¹³ LA 1/9/3/11/15, Letter from Lindsay Anderson to Davina Belling, 23/02/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- ¹⁴ LA/1/9/6/8, Review about Britannia Hospital in Box Office, June 1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- ¹⁵ LA/1/9/3/16/60, Lindsay Anderson replying to a 'fan' letter, 27/04/1984
- ¹⁶ LA 1/9/3/16/28, Letter from 'fan' to Lindsay Anderson, 22/06/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- ¹⁷ LA 1/9/3/16/29, Lindsay Anderson's reply to 'fan' letter, 20/08/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.