

Hooray for Hollywood? The Unmade Films of Lindsay Anderson

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On the 31st August 1948 Lindsay Anderson, aged 25, wrote the following statement in his diary:

“Some people sky-rocket to fame and accomplishment, but I know I am not one of these. I am not the sort of person to achieve celebrity much before forty.”ⁱ

In terms of his filmmaking career this prediction was amazingly astute. Anderson spent much of the 1950s developing his filmmaking skills directing short films and documentaries. It was not until 1962, at the age of 39, that he made his first feature film, *This Sporting Life*, and in the next thirty years he only made a further five.ⁱⁱ Using the personal and working papers of the director this article examines the reasons why Anderson did not make more films, despite having many opportunities to do so.ⁱⁱⁱ

By the middle of the 1970s Anderson had built up an impressive body of work, award-winning films such as *If...and O Lucky Man!* that were bold, daring and brimming with energy and ideas.^{iv} His work on the London stage with such respected actors as John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson cemented his reputation as a director of note. Anderson wasn't immune, however, from the effects of the disastrous slump in the British film industry. The mid 1970s have been described as “the lowest point in British filmmaking [...] the lowest, most shameful nadir” of the industry's fortunes.^v During this period he directed only one film, the low-key (and American-financed) *In Celebration*, an adaptation of the David Storey play that he had directed at the Royal Court in 1969.

Anderson continued to work as a director on the London stage but was eager to return to filmmaking. In a letter to a friend in 1976 he confessed that “I begin to feel I shall be glad to shed the dust of theatre from my shoes.”^{vi} The poor state of the film industry, combined with the social and political problems which Britain suffered at the time, made the United States an increasingly appealing place for Anderson (and other British filmmakers). In a letter to his agent in Los Angeles he notes that “London is not the most cheery place in the world at the moment.”^{vii} He spent several months on a lecture tour of American colleges in 1976 and also directed a touring production of the play *The Bed Before Yesterday* in New York. This time spent in the United States nudged him ever closer to Hollywood. In his diary in August 1976 he asked himself: “who on earth would rather go back to shabby and unappreciative London? [...] it is very pleasant to be asked with every appearance of respectful sincerity ‘when are you going to do a picture for us?’”^{viii}

To Anderson's great fortune he was a director in demand in Hollywood at the time. He was offered a string of big budget productions such as adaptations of *The Man in the Iron Mask* and *The Last of the Mohicans* – an indication of the high regard in which he was held.^{ix} As the offers continued to arrive he became more receptive to the approaches of the Hollywood studios. Anderson saw an opportunity to get support for the kind of films he wanted to make. He was someone whom Hollywood was willing to indulge and encourage – for a short time at least.

In the spring of 1976 Anderson and his life-long friend Gavin Lambert^x began to develop an idea for a film loosely based on Arnold Bennett's novel *The Grand Babylon Hotel*. Set in a grand old European hotel in 1900, Anderson and Lambert moved the tale of espionage and intrigue to 1912 with the story now being concerned with events leading up to the outbreak of the First World War. Columbia were eager to secure Anderson's services at the time and he pitched the idea of *Grand Babylon Hotel* to them.

Columbia were enthusiastic and signed a development deal (for \$25,000) with Anderson, who began to write a script with Lambert. While Bennett's novel used the hotel as a starting point for a whirlwind adventure around Europe, Anderson and Lambert decided to confine the action to the hotel. Their ensemble of kings, princes, spies, detectives and hotel staff were written with an all-star British cast in mind (Albert Finney, Maggie Smith, Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud, Alec Guinness and Malcolm McDowell were all mentioned in Anderson and Lambert's notes on the film).^{xi} Changes in personnel at the top of Columbia in early 1977 and Anderson's unhappiness with the quality of Lambert's script conspired to sideline the project. However, despite abandoning *Grand Babylon Hotel*, Columbia were still interested in retaining Anderson. In a letter to Lambert he reported:

“Within twenty-four hours of this turndown, a script was on its way from Columbia for my inspection. The script turned out to be the biggest mish-mash of pseudo-sophisticated rubbish I have ever read. Faye

Dunaway (or Barbra Streisand?) as a brilliantly successful, fashionable photographer whose exhibition of decadent subjects is being given at the Museum of Modern Art. Simultaneously she begins to undergo hallucinations or visions when she looks into the viewfinder of her camera and sees her friends with their eyes savagely gouged out. And each vision is followed by an incredibly savage murder. Just how the murderer turns out to be the detective assigned to the case, I was never very clear – nor was the writer. This subject, I suppose, will go ahead to another draft, and another, and another...”^{xii}

Reflecting on Columbia’s dumping of *Grand Babylon Hotel*, Anderson later wrote to Lambert that:

“The scale of the idea, together with its inevitably British location is a positive disadvantage. I think there is now very little enthusiasm among the American companies for pictures set in Britain.”^{xiii}

In other correspondence relating to Grand Babylon Hotel Anderson stated his reluctance to make a ‘Hollywood’ movie. In a letter to a producer in Columbia’s British Productions department in April 1977 he wrote that:

“It is really maddening – and galling as well – to feel that interest on the Coast for anything British is very superficial and unlikely to be supported. I find it awfully hard to take seriously the idea of doing an American picture, when the approaches from Hollywood are so thoughtless and amateurish. On the other hand, is there really any possibility that Columbia would ever be interested in a successor to the kind of films which they claim to admire so much – i.e. *This Sporting Life* and/or *If...*?”^{xiv}

In reality, Hollywood was not interested in the films themselves but in their director. Anderson was someone with an impressive track record, someone whom they saw, perhaps, as another John Schlesinger; that is, a British director who could move from ‘art house’ films to mainstream Hollywood fare.^{xv} Anderson found it difficult to adapt to the Hollywood way of making movies. He was engaged in simultaneous discussions with a number of studios and was not used to having to balance a number of different projects at once. In a letter to a Hollywood producer he noted:

“I am really by nature unsuited to working on more than one project at a time. But it seems as though this is a luxury which the film (let alone the theatre) business can no longer provide.”^{xvi}

In January 1979 Anderson signed a development deal with Orion Pictures. Initially he wasn’t impressed with the quality of the scripts sent to him for consideration. He wrote in his diary in May 1979:

“I really seem to be touching bottom as far as Orion’s development deal is concerned. I mean nothing has any reality to me, and none of the scripts I’ve read touch anything deep in my imagination.”^{xvii}

The two subjects which finally sparked Anderson’s enthusiasm were a proposed remake of *In a Lonely Place*, a 1950 thriller directed by Nicholas Ray and starring Humphrey Bogart, and *Empire*, a historical epic set in India at the time of the Great Mutiny of 1857.

Anderson was born in India and had a life-long interest in the country. He had been offered a number of Indian-based subjects by Orion in November 1978, including a screenplay called *Heat and Dust* which was later to become a Merchant/Ivory production in 1983. Out of these subjects Anderson chose to develop the idea of a drama set around the events of 1857, when Indian troops under British command mutinied and sparked a rebellion which spread throughout northern India. The subject provided the type of personal and political combination that Anderson relished. He himself was a ‘child of Empire’^{xviii} and the rigid structures of British rule in India would provide another stiff authoritarian backdrop similar to the public school in *If...*

Anderson travelled to India in early 1979, visiting the areas in which the mutiny took place, photographing memorials and buildings and scouting locations for the proposed production. The writer Ted Tally was brought aboard and Anderson worked with him to on a script.^{xix} Anderson screened a number of films for Tally, such as *Zulu* (Cy Endfield, 1964) and some of John Ford’s westerns including *Fort Apache* (1948). Anderson arranged these screenings because, as he noted in a letter to a producer, “there is an epic approach in those films of Ford which may well be useful”.^{xx} He was disappointed with the early treatments for the film that Tally produced. He reflected on the material in his diary:

“Ted Tally’s treatment has arrived. It is not very adequate. The siege section and the aftermath is extremely sketchy. Characters don’t amount to much. Not too keen on [the hero] pinning his medal on to a dead Indian at the end.”^{xxi}

Things were no smoother with *In a Lonely Place*. Anderson and Orion couldn't agree on a writer, with Orion refusing to hire Anderson's choice and providing their own suggestions (including Oliver Stone, who was in great demand as a scriptwriter after the success of *Midnight Express* (Alan Parker, 1978)). The protracted discussions that took place over *In a Lonely Place* infuriated Anderson. In a letter to an Orion executive in November 1979 he wrote that he was: "beginning to learn that bullshit and pretension are the name of the game, rather than economy and professionalism."^{xxii}

The prospects for *Empire* appeared to improve in 1980 with an enthusiastic reader's report describing the film as an "Oscar-calibre project [...] a period adventure spectacle" comparable to *Zulu* and *Shogun* (Jerry London, 1980).^{xxiii} A file kept by Anderson on the project contains a notebook in which he wrote an account of a meeting with producers to discuss the kind of film to be made:

"We talked about not making it *Zulu Dawn* or *Charge [of the Light Brigade]* – not making the English look like idiots. [We want a] Film like *Gunga Din* – [a] romantic adventure story. Very expensive. [We have to decide] What 2 or 3 characters we are concentrating on – in talking to my associates they have a particular problem in making the girl die – most of the guys felt very strongly about it. Every time you veer away from the myth it's thumbs down: it's got to be heroic. I think the audience will be pulling for her to make it."^{xxiv}

The final version of Anderson and Tally's screenplay focuses on events in the British garrison town of Brahmapore.^{xxv} By concentrating the action in a single location they escaped the problems of attempting to tell the larger story of a conflict which spread to many locations across India and was eventually put down by the British in a number of separate engagements. However, the film retained all the hallmarks of a historical epic with a number of large and bloody battle scenes requiring hundreds, if not thousands, of extras. It was perhaps the most ambitious film Anderson ever considered. It may also have been a chance for him to make a romantic action adventure like the westerns of his favourite director John Ford, with British soldiers and Indian mutineers replacing cowboys and Native Americans. The film would have been a major departure for Anderson. The closest he had come to the action/adventure genre was as director of a number of episodes of the television series *The Adventures of Robin Hood* in 1956.^{xxvi}

Anderson and Tally created a 'hero' for the film called Phillips, a composite figure based on several historical characters whose exploits were recorded in a number of books on the subject. The script opens with him arriving in India to take up his new posting as an officer in the British army in Brahmapore. The garrison at Brahmapore includes an array of characters which reflect the various attitudes held by the British towards India and its people. When the mutiny spreads to Brahmapore the British army and civilians take refuge in the town's military encampment. A long and bloody siege provides plenty of opportunity for drama, romance and action, with Phillips falling in love with the general's daughter. The battle scenes are bloody and the screenplay doesn't shirk from showing the cruelties inflicted by both sides.^{xxvii} Weeks of attrition lead to a British surrender but treacherous mutineers massacre all the remaining men, women and children. In Anderson's script 'the girl' loved by the producers doesn't survive. The hero Phillips escapes the slaughter and is rescued by the British reinforcements who brutally crush the revolt. The story ends with him returning to Britain totally disillusioned with both India and army life.

Work on *Empire* dragged on for several years but Anderson's enthusiasm waned as his frustrations with Hollywood and Tally increased. By the middle of June 1981 he was ready to abandon the project. He wrote to *Empire's* producer:

"I feel I've been remiss about *Empire*, having made no comment to anyone – including Ted – about his rewritten version. To be entirely honest, when it arrived about eight weeks overdue I didn't even read it. It seemed – and seems – pointless. Ted had plainly run out of fuel; you are fully involved in other projects; and quite plainly Orion will be only too happy if the whole thing sinks quietly into oblivion. Even if I wanted to (which I don't), I simply wouldn't be able to drop everything else, change the pattern of my life, and come to California to join in the desperate and preposterous struggle for a Deal."^{xxviii}

Was the subsequent success of *Gandhi* (Richard Attenborough, 1982) at the Oscars in 1983 an indication of the kind of film *Empire* could have been? The early 1980s saw the release of a number of films and television productions about the British experience in India such as *Heat and Dust* (James Ivory, 1983), *The Jewel in the Crown* (Christopher Morahan and Jim O'Brien, 1984) and *A Passage to India* (David Lean, 1984). Could *Empire* have led the way? Anderson certainly recognised that the film would be a piece of "popular entertainment", with historical accuracy taking second place to a rollicking tale of bravery and adventure.^{xxix} However the subject matter would also have allowed

Anderson to examine (and criticise) imperial rule in the sub-continent, the film ending with despair and disillusionment rather than hope and heroism. The potential of this project was huge and it was clearly an opportunity missed, Anderson turning down the chance to use Hollywood money to make a big budget film about a resolutely British (and Indian) subject.

The full text of this article can be found in *Sights Unseen: Unfinished British Films*, edited by Dan North (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008)

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- ⁱ LA 6/1/10, diary entry, 31 August 1948.
- ⁱⁱ *If...* (1968), *O Lucky Man!* (1973), *In Celebration* (1974), *Britannia Hospital* (1982) and *The Whales of August* (1986).
- ⁱⁱⁱ The details of Anderson's career are chronicled in the collection of his personal and working papers held in the University of Stirling. The Lindsay Anderson Collection includes scripts, production notes, correspondence, photographs, promotional material and press cuttings for his films, theatre productions and television work. The collection also includes extensive correspondence files and material relating to the various unrealised film projects discussed here. Anderson's diaries, also part of the collection, provide an additional, unique, perspective on the key events of his life. For further information on the Lindsay Anderson Collection, including detailed descriptions of its content, see www.is.stir.ac.uk/libraries/collection/anderson.
- ^{iv} "The critical reception which *If...* received both in Great Britain and abroad, especially in the US, helped to secure Anderson's reputation as a film director of international recognition." Silet, Charles, *Lindsay Anderson: a guide to references and resources*, London, 1979, p. 11.
- ^v Walker, Alexander, *National Heroes*, London, 1985, pp. 135-136.
- ^{vi} LA 5/4/2/3, letter from Anderson to Gavin Lambert, 30 June 1976.
- ^{vii} LA 5/1/4/1, copy of letter from Anderson to Robert Lantz, 10 March 1976.
- ^{viii} LA 6/1/73, diary entries, 8 & 12 August 1976.
- ^{ix} LA 5/1/4/1, copy of letter from Anderson to Robert Lantz, 10 March 1976.
- ^x Author of *Mainly About Lindsay Anderson*, a memoir of their friendship.
- ^{xi} LA 5/4/2/2
- ^{xii} LA 5/4/2/3, copy of letter from Anderson to Gavin Lambert, 30 March 1977. This script (written by John Carpenter) became the 1978 thriller *The Eyes of Laura Mars* directed by Irvin Kershner and starring Faye Dunaway. Kershner followed this film with *The Empire Strikes Back* in 1980.
- ^{xiii} LA 5/4/2/3, copy of letter from Anderson to Gavin Lambert, 16 May 1977.
- ^{xiv} LA 5/4/2/5, copy of letter from Anderson to Boaty Boatwright (Columbia British Productions Ltd.), 12 April 1977.
- ^{xv} Schlesinger went from directing films such as *A Kind of Loving* (1962), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971) to more mainstream fare such as *Marathon Man* (1976), *Yanks* (1979) and *The Next Best Thing* (2000).
- ^{xvi} LA 5/4/5/2, copy of letter from Anderson to Bob Solo, 4 February 1980.
- ^{xvii} LA 6/1/78, diary entry, 8 May 1979.
- ^{xviii} Ryan, Paul (ed.), *Never Apologise: the collected writings of Lindsay Anderson*, London, 2004, p. 35.
- ^{xix} Tally is a writer who later made a career of adapting novels for the screen including *Silence of the Lambs* and its sequel *Red Dragon*.
- ^{xx} LA 5/4/8/12, copy of letter from Anderson to Marcia Nasatir, 17 August 1979.
- ^{xxi} LA 6/1/78, diary entry, 7 September 1979.
- ^{xxii} LA 5/4/8/11, copy of letter from Anderson to Mike Medavoy (Orion Pictures), 28 November 1979.
- ^{xxiii} LA 5/4/8/8
- ^{xxiv} LA 5/4/8/1, file containing information on the Indian mutiny of 1857. Includes notebook with notes on the project made by Anderson.
- ^{xxv} LA 5/4/8/9
- ^{xxvi} Silet, p. 116.
- ^{xxvii} The script for *Empire* provides detailed descriptions of a number of battle sequences. It also includes a number of scenes which illustrate the atrocities carried out by both sides, for example, this bloody retribution meted out by the British army on Indian civilians: "Soldiers are herding into line a long group of Indian males, some only boys. Three cannons stand in a row in the clearing; gun crews stand beside them. Two British privates wrestle a young Indian man forward, one at each arm until his belly is flush against the muzzle of the cannon. They bend him over, strapping his arms to the sides of the cannon barrel, which is streaked with blood. A gunman bends over the touch hole with a slow burning match. As he lowers the match another cannon boom sounds. Blood splatters over the gun crew." (LA 5/4/8/9, pp. 134-5)
- ^{xxviii} LA 5/4/8/12, copy of letter from Anderson to Marcia Nasatir, 24 June 1981.
- ^{xxix} LA 5/4/8/19, copy of letter from Anderson to Anthony Ramsay, 24 October 1980.