The Cinema Authorship of Lindsay Anderson

Three-year research project funded by AHRC

This project will use Lindsay Anderson's personal and working papers, together with previously published material, to examine the director's claim to the status of authorship by investigating the connection between his films and his personality. This will be done by comparing his private thoughts, expressed in his diaries, correspondence and other personal papers, with his public statements about his films, the film industry in general, and the ways in which films are received, found in his articles, interviews, books and letters to the press. Both the public and the private aspects of Anderson's claims to authorship will be examined in the wider context of the ways in which his ideas were received, interpreted and disseminated by the various publics to which they were addressed.

In order for the team to make full use of the Lindsay Anderson collection the first step in the research project is the cataloguing of the correspondence and diaries. This is currently being undertaken down to item level with each individual letter and diary page being summarised and indexed. The cataloguing is being carried out in accordance with the International Standard for Archival Description (General). The cataloguing system being used is CALM for Archives and by the end of the project this item level catalogue will be available to view and search online. There are a subject index and names index which have been compiled in accordance with the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) Index to Film Periodicals. Both indexes are fully key word searchable. The cataloguing and indexing of these records will enable the researchers to study Anderson's private opinions and cross reference them with his public statements in articles, books and letters to the press. The researchers will also have access to the recollections of friends and colleagues, both through interviews that have already been published, and also through creating new resources by interviewing individuals who knew Lindsay Anderson.

With the privilege of access to the private thoughts of Lindsay Anderson through his archives we can now research the extent to which his private thoughts and attitudes are visible in his films. Consider Thursday's Children and O Dreamland, both made in Margate in 1953. The former is a tender,
charming documentary set in a school for deaf children. However, the other, a dark, disturbing film, focusing on holidaymakers 'enjoying' the entertainment at an amusement park paints a very different picture with its depictions of people enjoying a 'Torture through the ages’ attraction. These early examples indicate that both the benign and tortured sides of his personality are expressed in his work. Access to the archive collection will enable detailed research to discover if the emotional, personal element was an essential, defining part of his films. For example in This Sporting Life, David Storey has remarked that the raw emotions and the relationship shown between Mrs Hammond and Frank Machin could be taken to reflect Anderson's troubled relationship with (and impossible love for) the actor Richard Harris. Anderson's diaries show that he sometimes developed an attraction to the leading men in his films. This leads on to a further research question, to what extent are his films defined by his sexuality and is this apparent in the films themselves? Do these factors mentioned above define him as an auteur?

There are numerous examples in his diaries of a fear of lack of control over his films, for example when it looks likely that a Hollywood film project might go ahead in the 1970s Anderson gets very depressed. Anderson feared the control that the studios in Hollywood generally exercise over the content and direction of a film in order to make the film financially viable. This is reflected in the correspondence contained in files relating to a number of unrealised film projects in the 1970s and 1980s (in LA/5/04). The fear of lack of control is also evident in his increasingly volatile relationship with his camera man, Miroslav Ondricek, during the making of O Lucky Man!: The fight over control and authorship is clear, both in Anderson's diaries and in his correspondence with friends.

In contrast to the insecurities and uncertainties visible in his private correspondence, the public image that Anderson projected was one of an artist confident in his role as an auteur film director and as one quick to criticise and complain about the behaviour of others or of standards in the film industry. This criticism of others in the film industry is particularly evident in his correspondence. For example, in LA/1/11 there is a great deal of correspondence with and about Mike Kaplan that is highly critical of his method of producing The Whales of August. Although they were good friends, the criticism is a constant feature of their correspondence at this time and it relates to Anderson's fear of losing control over his film and its promotion. Using Anderson's published articles, books and interviews the project team will investigate whether his public pronouncements - on the film industry, his views of the role and importance of the director and his film criticism - are visible in his films. Is it this aspect that would define him as an auteur? The research project will also examine why Anderson felt the need to cultivate this public persona and the effect that this had on his relations with the film industry.

Lindsay Anderson was a central figure in British Cinema history, from his first published writings and his early films through Free Cinema to his feature films. He didn't agree with John Grierson that documentary should strive to be a serious and objective account of a socially relevant topic. Instead he argued that films must be personal to the director and this was an opinion he held to throughout his career, in his film criticism, documentaries and fictional subjects. His ideas were very similar to
those later enunciated by François Truffaut and other novices of the French New Wave. Anderson, like them, was uttering a call to authorship. Given that his ideas were so closely matched to those of the European New Wave why did he end up almost the sole British member of the network? What comes across clearly in both the public and the private spheres of his life and work is that Lindsay Anderson saw himself as an auteur film director.

The Lindsay Anderson Collection will allow the research team to examine Anderson's claim to authorship by comparing his private and public pronouncements in the context of the production, reception and interpretation of his films. This will enable us to give his work in the cinema the full consideration appropriate to his significant role in the British cinema of the 1950s to 1980s

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