Lindsay Anderson, 
unfashionable humanist, 
in conversation with 
Gerald Pratley

Gerald Pratley: Seeing O Dreamland with you here brings back to mind the tremendous excitement so many of us felt during O Dreamland and when we heard about the Free Cinema movement which you were involved in. We had been reading Sequence in which you started your writing career — and there was a new vitality about the cinema at that time, an enthusiasm and an awareness that movies could be more than just mass entertainment. You and your colleagues were writing fascinating studies; then you started making films; the film societies began to show the Free Cinema films, and I remember how interesting it was to see these films — so different from what we had seen before.

Lindsay Anderson: It's interesting now to see O Dreamland because it could almost be regarded as a piece of Sunday painting. The technique of it is, I suppose, rough; could be described as primitive. It's interesting to remember, of course, that in those days the facilities for tape recording, sync tape recording, which are commonplace today, didn't exist. Perhaps a very good thing. Sometimes think, because I have never been a believer in what's known as "direct cinema," and I think that the necessity of using sound, opposed to naturalistic recording of whatever sound happened to be taking place when the shots were taken, imposed on one the need, in some way, to be creative. O Dreamland was a little film that I made with my friend John Fletcher, who was concerned with the Free Cinema. Actually, it was made at the time when I was also working on Thursday's Children, a film about deaf children in Margate, which was on 35mm and considerably more polished. Walking around Margate and the funfair called Dreamland, I saw this sideshow called "Torture Through the Ages," and I thought that was so classic it ought to be recorded. And that's actually what started the film off. I wrote to the managing director of Dreamland, I remember, and asked for permission to shoot there and said that perhaps he would be interested to use the finished film for publicity purposes. We got into a great deal of trouble because the voice, as it turns out, that says: "This is Torture Through the Ages" happened to be his — he had recorded it for fun — and when bits of it were shown on BBC Television, he found that he was laughed at at his golf club! He got very annoyed. And, in a way, the film shouldn't be shown because the copyright on the whole music would, of course, have been astronomical — if we'd ever paid it!

I made O Dreamland and it sat on the shelf for a couple of years because I felt there wasn't anything I could do with it until in about 1955. I suppose, I happened to be working on a piece with an Italian girl in London, Lorenza Mazzatti, called Together, and my friends, Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson, happened to be shooting a 16mm picture about a jazz club. We wanted to find some way of bringing our films to the attention of people, even of critics, and the only way we could think of was to make a movement. We put the films together and called it Free Cinema. We wrote some principles, which were not principles that we didn't believe in, exactly, but it was part of a conscious and concerted effort to get our work shown. And, of course, it was a time when British cinema was still quite formal. When the documentary movement too, I think, had lost any kind of bite or vitality, and perhaps looking at it now, I can see that there is also in it this kind of, shall I say, generalising itch, if you know what I mean. In other words, a British cinema that ends with more, much more general, poetic implication. And I think that that is so classic it ought to be shown because the copyright on all the hands, and giggles, it's a bit like 1984 really. It has that kind of personal and subjective vision. I think, perhaps looking at it now, I can see that there is also in it this kind of, shall I say, generalising itch, if you know what I mean. In other words, a British cinema that ends with more, much more general, poetic implication. And I think that that is so classic it ought to be shown.

Gerald Pratley: By the time it ended, I also thought that it was very, very sad. But that fits in with your manifesto, if that is what it was at the time, in which you said what Free Cinema was, and spoke about the use of visuals, the image, the use of sound, not depending on the words, and above all, the importance of human character, the nature of the people who were in the film.

Lindsay Anderson: I think that's certainly true. The tone of Free Cinema and probably of all my work has been to use a very unfashionable word, humanist. Humanist does not mean sentimental, but it perhaps implies that the centre of our world is, for good or ill, the human race, and that can be regarded as depressing or challenging, but not in any way, sentimental. That probably is something reflected 30 years later in Britannia Hospital. The viewpoint is probably the same.

Gerald Pratley: What I find most interesting about this is that you have said that when you started you didn't know anything about making films, and there was nowhere to learn in those days. There were no courses in universities or colleges, there were no books, there was nothing, and so you learned by experience. But what is so remarkable about O Dreamland is that it was made by just the two of you. Even the simplest student film today needs a whole battery of people to help with bits and pieces, yet here you did all the camerawork and the sound and with fairly primitive equipment by today's standards. How did you manage to get the close-ups of the people? Did they know you were there and they paid no attention?

Lindsay Anderson: I think by dazzling in and out.

Gerald Pratley: They seem completely
unaware that there’s any camera there at all.

Lindsay Anderson: Well, yes, but remember in a film you have to cut out the bits that didn’t come off. Depending on whether you think there is any creative charge in a film like O Dreamland, and if you do, I think that what is interesting is the extreme economy of it, and the assertion of the fact that anybody can make a film and you can make it out of anything, and that certain refinements of technique really don’t matter. For instance, I think that genre in really films today are too well-photographed. I am sick of what critics always call ‘stunning photography’, and I think that in the end all these techniques are valueless unless they minister to, or support, or express, a central or essential creative idea. And, yes, it’s true that myself and John did do the whole film — and there you are.

Gerald Pratley: And you went up on the Big Wheel to get your closing magnificent aerial shot?

Lindsay Anderson: That’s a good last shot that, but the Big Wheel unfortunately went round the wrong way, because actually sitting on it with the camera it was going down like that, going away. So, as far as I remember, we held the camera upside down and joined the shot in back-to-front. And that’s how you do that kind of shot. Anyway, that’s O Dreamland.

Funnily enough, I don’t think I could do that kind of film now; not only that kind of film but another sort of film I made during the Free Cinema period, a film about Covent Garden called Every Day Except Christmas, in O Dreamland. I was accused by left-wing critics of sneering at the working classes, and in Every Day Except Christmas, I was accused of patronising the working classes or being sentimental about them. But I find it difficult today to make these films. Documentary can be a very satisfying medium, but it is to some degree restricted, and I think there does come a time when, to express more complex kind of truths about human nature and predicaments, you have to admit drama, and that I suppose takes us on to the next film.

Gerald Pratley: Your comments on documentary are of extreme importance and interest to us, because Canada’s main claim to fame as a film-producing nation is for its documentary films made by the National Film Board. O Canada was founded by a fellow Scotsman, John Grierson. What did he think of your form of documentary, the Free Cinema?

Lindsay Anderson: Well, Grierson was no friend at all. I have relatively unorthodox feelings about John Grierson. I certainly would not attempt to take away from him anything that he did in the ‘30s in founding and nourishing the documentary filmakers of Britain. I don’t know much about his work in Canada to be honest. I know about the creation of the National Film Board and I’m sure it was a good thing — well, whatever becomes of it, I’m sure it was a good thing at the beginning. But I do think that Grierson was a philistine. He was extremely patronising to people like Flaherty. He was extremely unpleasant to someone like Humphrey Jennings. He had a social propagandist view of cinema and what documentary ought to be, which was curiously unpolitical in many ways. I don’t think Grierson had a very strong political position, but he was a propagandist. I have absolutely no objection to that, except that I do object to people who try to impose that as the only valid function of documentary cinema. It is interesting that, after the war, Grierson was extremely denigratory, hostile if you like, dismissive of Free Cinema. I can’t remember the actual words he used, but it was something nasty. Indeed, the old relics of the documentary movement were never friendly, and that’s rather sad. There was no line of development from the old art of documentary whom we really respected and, I am sure, to some degree, influenced by, was Humphrey Jennings. We like Basil Wright, who’s a nice fellow, the sort who are not particularly nice and weren’t friendly. I think that some day, I know it would be painful, but the truth should be said about John Grierson and his attitude toward Free Cinema.

Gerald Pratley: How did you make the transition from documentary to the dramatic film. This Sporting Life?

Lindsay Anderson: Well, Free Cinema did not last very long and we packed it up when we realised we weren’t able to get sponsorship for the kind of films we wanted to make. We didn’t have a Grierson to do that for us, and I doubt whether a Grierson would have been able to anyway because we didn’t want to make propaganda or advertising films. At the Ford Motor Company, which did come forward and give money for myself to make Every Day Except Christmas and Karel Reisz to make We Are The Lambeth Boys, there was a shuffle, and the chap who was in the position to help us was pushed into something else and it all fell through. We brought Free Cinema to an official end after not so very many shows, and not very many films. By luck I was then given the opportunity of going into the theatre. Tony Richardson, who had worked with Karel on Momma Don’t Allow, was much more of the theatre in those days and he was, together with George Devine, running the Royal Court which assumed a huge importance in the late ‘50s, starting in 1956 with the production of John Osborne’s Look Back In Anger, which was one of the great symptoms of change and renewal of that period. With the success of that and of The Entertainer, Tony and John Osborne formed a film company called Woodfall Films, and they made a film of Look Back and of the Entertainer, and most significant, actually, Tony then produced through Woodfall Karel Reisz’s first film, Saturday Night And Sunday Morning, and that was a big success. There was a whole new wave, tide, whatever you like, that swept through British theatre in those days, and then the screen at that time, and it became possible for new directors to make feature films, which was unheard of before in British cinema. I was invited by Tony to go and work at the Royal Court. The first full-length play I did there was called The Long and The Short and The Tall, and it was symptomatic of the time that I could direct a play that was very successful (Peter O’Toole played the leading role), but when Ealing Studios bought the rights, they wouldn’t let me direct it. They wouldn’t let Peter O’Toole play in it. It was made by Leslie Norman with Laurence Harvey, and it was a pretty awful film. That was very typical of the British cinema of that time, but after Saturday Night And Sunday Morning.
Morning things loosened up considerably, and Tony had always said to me: “Why don’t you do a film for Woodfall?” I had read a book in the early ’60s called This Sporting Life and I did suggest this to Woodfall but—there’s a long story about that which I won’t go into—in the end Tony Richardson didn’t make it, and it was bought by the Rank Organization which asked Karel Reisz to direct the film because of Saturday Night, Sunday Morning. But Karel wanted to have experience of producing and he came to me and said, “Can I put you up as director of the picture and I’ll produce it?” And that’s what those days were like. For a brief period they were a time of renewal, of new ideas, and of close association, which is always, if it can happen between artists, immensely valuable.

In the end that’s how I came to make This Sporting Life after having worked in the theatre for whatever it was—three-four years. Essentially, This Sporting Life is not what’s known as a characteristic kitchen sink film, the way the English described anything that wasn’t set in an upper-class locale. It was a very passionate, deeply-felt and tragic film—from a novel by David Storey, who I think is a brilliant writer, about two very proud and totally ill-assorted characters. A young man who is tremendously ambitious to realise himself and realise his energies by being a professional footballer, and a widow he lodges with, who is a deeply self-denying or self-destructive character and whom I was determined to destroy the relationship. He doesn’t understand this—he’s too immature, too egotistical. I think both the characters need to be destroyed, which is always a very emotional and dangerous venture in the relationship. And she is determined to destroy the relationship.

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Gerald Pratley: But personal also in the sense that you went back to your old school to film it?

Lindsay Anderson: Yes. I did. We hadn’t originally meant to shoot If at Cheltenham, where I was educated; in fact I was a bit apprehensive of it. But we couldn’t find anywhere that seemed better, and we did go back and I did show them a slightly doctored script, which probably wasn’t necessary because people in England don’t take films or art seriously anyway. We did get their permission and it was invaluable, and we shot most of the exteriors at Cheltenham.

Gerald Pratley: When If came out, you were embroiled in a great deal of controversy and accused of attacking the Establishment, and heaven knows what. Also, any number of critics came up with startling theories as to why you had done some scenes in black-and-white and some in colour, and there were all manner of subjective, philosophical reasons for this.

Lindsay Anderson: We didn’t originally think of shooting certain sequences in monochrome. When I shot The White Bus, which I mentioned, with Miroslav Ondricek (who photographed If) we did so in black-and-white. But we had put in certain shots, short sequences, in colour, and that idea had come to Shelagh Delaney and myself when we were scripting it. When we were preparing If, we were looking at the location at Cheltenham and Mirak was very worried about the chapel because the very large windows there meant that the light varied continually, and we didn’t have enough time to cope with it. He was extremely scrupulous, but we didn’t have enough time on the schedule to see that the light would be consistent or enough money to hire enough lamps to compensate. We had various thoughts about how we could shoot—should we try and shoot on 16mm and blow it up, or do something like that? It wouldn’t have worked. Finally I said “Let’s shoot the sequences in black-and-white so that we don’t have to do all that compensating for colour.” Obviously an idea like that takes on some kind of creative significance if one’s going to do it. It wasn’t just for finance or schedule’s sake. The first thing was that, if we did that in the chapel, we would have to make it consistent throughout the film. We’d have to shots in monochrome. But I did like the idea because the thing about If was that it was not a naturalistic picture and, by the end of it, it was going to be anything but naturalistic. And I wanted to do this without recourse to any odd effects of style or photography, and using monochrome would break the kind of naturalistic pattern or surface of the film. It also possibly related to the idea of—I don’t like to use the word ‘alienation’ because it’s so boring—but the separation between the audience and the film they are looking at, leading them into judging it, thinking about it, rather than just being absorbed into a naturalistic story. And I even think that becoming conscious of the surface of the film enhances the colour. So there you are.

Gerald Pratley: The protagonist in If, O Lucky Man and Britannia Hospital is played by Malcolm McDowell. His character’s name is also the same. Could you tell us how he came into your life?

Lindsay Anderson: Malcolm came into my life in a purely professional way in that we were casting If. When we set
Gerald Pratley: Many directors today, particularly in Europe, aided and abetted by solemn critics, are forever going on about political implications in films of their work. You have, very refreshing-

ly, not referred to anything political, or to politics. Yet the three films we are talking about are spoken of in many places as being political in content and in various other aspects.

Gerald Pratley: I know it's expensive to make films, but is there any reason why you haven't worked for television?

Lindsay Anderson: There is one reason. I think it's simply because Britain, in that it does tend to be, not exactly a closed shop, but people work in television and they like to graduate, as they may think, to cinema, but there isn't a great rush to get people from cinema or theatre to work in television. The other thing is that I think that television is a very conformist medium. I have rarely heard of a film that was really effectively, one piece for television which was from a script by Alan Bennett, a writer whom I like. I was asked by Stephen Frears who is now a director in his own right and was an assistant at the Royal Court and on if who was producing, if I would do a play by Alan Bennett, and I worked with it for two or three years, and then one would on a film script, which is very much not the kind of many people work in television. The function of directors in的关系 to these films is not just to execute, so I'm more inclined to understand the way that he is used in television - that idea was written this as a script.

Gerald Pratley: Do you prefer to work in the theatre?

Lindsay Anderson: It's terribly difficult to say. Let's give the obvious answer first: there isn't a great rush to, shall I say, finance the kind of pictures I manage to get round to. There aren't many. And I'm not a money-making director. I don't think I've lost companies an enormous amount of money, but I'm not a profit director. I don't think it's necessary to commercialize and work out ideas such as are contained in my films. They take a long time to germinate and then it's not so easy to be surprised at the number of films that I haven't been able to make. I really am. It would be nice if we lived in a different world, but I wish that I had more creative freedom, and also some of the people who I would have and that is necessary to promote a career. I don't claim this a virtue, but I haven't actually got it. I absolutely no good at it, and therefore I'm still with O Lucky Man and I am very grateful to find people who enjoy the film and remember it. It's awfully interesting that there is so much more interest in Britannia Hospital than in every other film. I don't understand that, and that's an interesting question, as to why that should be the case, but perhaps in the end it's just because it's a small film.

But the last thing I will say about it is that sequence came from a lot of people didn't understand. A lot of people presented all that stuff at the end in a sort of haphazard way. It didn't appear in that scene as a character through any personal effort. I just didn't imagine it being done by an actor, because that wasn't my job. We were told that Malcolm, having gone through his quest, first in pursuit of success and then in pursuit of goodness, ends with a final understanding of what life is about. The speech he makes is lifted from Gorky, from The Lower Depths - nobody's ever spotted that. I think is so not sentimental. But if I had accepted it as a character played by Malcolm, or I had tried to understand the problem of how to live in the world - a modest ambition!....

Gerald Pratley: And it should not be for television, but to have a chance, that you did the film In Celebration.

Lindsay Anderson: I liked that film, actually.

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Lindsay Anderson: Mostly, in Britain, the picture was totally rejected, not understood, I think, in many ways. That opens up a big question about Britain and the kind of television and its capacity to accept satiric or reality, which is not very great. I don't know whether the attempt to make people think through films can ever be very successful. Satire, of course, invites thought. And Britannia Hospital is a satirical film. Poetic, and all that too. I hope it is a film that has to be thought through to the end. I didn't use any alienating or thought-provoking devices in it. I hoped to make a film that would be absorbing and entertaining enough to amuse people who didn't want to think. Britannia Hospital is the development of the idea of a film as a moral fable. It certainly ends with a very large question, not a solution, and this is also something that a lot of people don't like. They want to be given solutions and they don't want to be left off the hook at the end of it. And I think the thing about Britannia Hospital is that it doesn't goad up the audience on a rather large hook. So, it poses certain questions. The final thing I will say about it is that it is a humanistic film in the sense that I used the word earlier in that it does, rightly or wrongly, suggest that this world, our world, is one centered on a human being, on human species. And if we are going to find solutions, we are going to have to find ourselves and not with any help from God, who doesn't exist in this film. They are not, strictly speaking, a trilogy. The phrase I have sometimes used is that they are philosophical and character of, for instance. Britannia Hospital is not conceived at all as being a third section in the adventures of Nick Travis. Britannia Hospital came out of, originally, just an item in the strike at a hospital being led by a very ferocious lady shop-steward, determined to eject the private patients from the hospital. There isn't a character, played by Malcolm, sort of came into it, but he wasn't originally even Nick Travis, and then as I was working on it with David, we both thought, well, that's a good part for Malcolm, and we'll make him Nick Travis again. It all sort of fitted, it all sort of worked organically. No, the only time he recognises people is at the end of O Lucky Man, which was quite an odd apprehension that he's seen these people around before. But I don't think it would be proper to have that in Britannia Hospital, which really is a different kind of film.

Gerald Pratley: You were recently asked to do a music video. Can you tell us about that?

Lindsay Anderson: Well, I was asked to do what is called a video promo for a group - well, it's hardly a group: a singer called Carmel, who has a bass player and a chop on drums. And she sings in a sort of jazz-derived way, not rock, and the company suggested I should do it. I talked to them, and I thought the number was rather nice, and I did a little film, a 3.1/2 minute film which came out rather like musical reprise of A Taste Of Honey - something like that. It was totally unlike any conventional rock video. (Anderson has just completed a video on Wham's recent China tour - ed.)

Gerald Pratley: What observations would you like to make about the representation of political films in the '70s?

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