From Free Cinema to British New Wave: A Story of Angry Young Men

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Introduction

In February 1956, a group of young film-makers premiered a programme of three documentary films at the National Film Theatre (now the BFI Southbank). Lorenza Mazzetti, Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson thought at the time that "no film can be too personal", and vehemently said so in their brief but potent manifesto about Free Cinema. Their documentaries were not only personal, but aimed to show the real working class people in Britain, blending the realistic with the poetic. Three of them would establish themselves as some of the most inventive and irreverent British filmmakers of the 60s, creating iconoclastic works –both in subject matter and in form– such as *Saturday Day and Sunday Morning*, *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* and *If…* Those were the first significant steps of a New British Cinema. They were the Big Screen's angry young men.

What is British cinema? In my opinion, it means many different things. National cinemas are much more than only one idea. I would like to begin this presentation with this question because there have been different genres and types of films in British cinema since the beginning. So, for example, there was a kind of cinema that was very successful, not only in Britain but also in America: the films of the British Empire, the films about the Empire abroad, set in faraway places like India or Egypt. Such films celebrated the glory of the British Empire when the British Empire was almost ending. Here we could include films like *Four Feathers*, *Sanders of the River*, or some of the films made in the 1930s and 1940s.

British producers may have some sort of inferiority complex, and unconsciously think that their films are successful only if they succeed in America and in the world. That happened in the 1930s with some British films. It was the starting point for some genres and kinds of films which were very successful. These are also films in which there are plenty of kings, queens, royalty and aristocracy. We can find many films and miniseries with that subject. Maybe the most famous was *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933). Charles Laughton, a very good character actor, was actually very popular in America. Curiously enough, the producers and directors of this film were the Korda brothers, Alexander and Zoltan. They were from Hungary, and when they went to Britain they made all these successful films with their company, called London Films.

For some, then, British cinema is prestigious. A cinema with important subjects, and with very famous actors.

I now have to go back to the 1940s and mention Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, who produced critically and commercially successful films in the 1940s and 1950s: *The Red Shoes*, a very particular musical set in the ballet world, or *Black Narcissus*, a story about a nun (Deborah Kerr) who falls in love in the Tibet.

For some people, British cinema may also represent horror films. In the 1950s and 1960s, there was a vast production of horror films in the UK, with new versions of, for example, *Dracula* and *The Mommy*. For others, it may represent comedies, of course. There was also a very strong documentary movement and films were flooded with social issues. In fact, social issues in British cinema are everywhere.

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Free Cinema appeared in the mid-1950s as a reaction to the way social documentaries were made. This group of film-makers started producing social documentaries which were different from the ones made before, and that is interesting in itself. The most successful director in Britain in the 1930s was Alfred Hitchcock, both critically and for the audience. He was a blockbuster film director.

The Free Cinema Directors

Lindsay Anderson (1923-1994)

He may be considered the father of Free Cinema because he was the most thoughtful in a way. He was a film critic –a very good one– and he wrote many books on cinema. His most famous work is *John Ford*, a book about the American director, whom he interviewed a couple of times when he went to shoot *The Quiet Man* in Ireland. Anderson was born in India and his father was an Irish officer. He directed a very interesting short film in 1953 called *O dreamland*, shot in the Margate Fair in Kent. Lindsay Anderson was one of four film directors who in the late 1940s and early 1950s got tired of not being able to show their films, so they wrote a brief manifesto. They had a friend, Karel Reisz, who was one of the programmers at the British Film Institute. They talked about it and decided to show these films together in a programme called Free Cinema, a name which is rather bombastic. They succeeded, because that first night, in February 1956, there was a long queue outside the National Film Theatre waiting to see these films, the short films of these unknown film-makers, and that is when the whole thing started. One of Lindsay Anderson's latest films is called *The Whales of August*, made in the early 1990's, starring Bette Davies, Lillian Gish and Vincent Price, very talented actors indeed.

Tony Richardson (1928-1991)

Tony Richardson is maybe the most famous of them all –certainly, the most prolific. He made around twenty films in his career, apart from directing theatre, TV programmes and TV series. He married Vanessa Redgrave in the 1960s and is the father of Miranda and Natasha Richardson. One of his latest films is *The Hotel New Hampshire,* made in the early 1980s, starring Jodie Foster.

Karel Reisz (1926-2002)

The third director in the Free Cinema group is Karel Reisz. His name may not sound very British, because he was actually Czech. He fled from his native country with his family when he was very young –he was only seven or eight years old. That is why he is considered a British director. Apart from being a film-maker, he was a film critic. As stated before, he was a programmer at the British Film Institute. One of his latest films, made in the 1980s, may be regarded as the most famous of all these films: *The French Liutenant's Woman*, starring Meryl Streep and Jeremy Irons.

Lorenza Mazzetti (born in 1928)

Finally, the only woman in this group was Lorenza Mazzetti. She was not British either. She was from Italy, and is the only one still alive. I mention her last because she gave up film-making altogether. She made this very good short film which was included in the Free Cinema programme, then went back to Italy and made a couple of short films, a documentary about Rome in the mid-1960s, and after that she retired completely from cinema and became a very good writer in Italy. She has actually been writing until the present day. However, every time she attends a conference or delivers a lecture, everybody asks her "What about Free Cinema?" So she is probably really tired of that question!

The Free Cinema Manifesto

> These films were not made together; nor with the idea of showing them together. But when they came together, we felt they had an attitude in common. Implicit in this attitude is a belief in freedom, in the importance of people and the significance of the everyday.
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> *As film-makers we believe that*
> *No film can be too personal.*
> *The image speaks. Sound amplifies and comments.*
> *Size is irrelevant. Perfection is not an aim.*
> *An attitude means a style. A style means an attitude.*
> Lindsay Anderson and Lorenza Mazzetti's manifesto.

This is a fantastic manifesto, which was actually written as a marketing tool. Let us not be fooled. That was the idea and it worked that way, but I want to point out something about this question of size: size is not important. Of course, they were short films. And short films are the ugly ducks of cinema, everybody knows that. No film-maker comes to you and says: "Hello, I'm a short-film maker." I think that everybody who is into film-making and has made a couple of short films wants to make a feature length film. There are exceptions, though very few. Therefore, the size issue has obviously to do with the length of the films, but also, and most importantly, with the subject/ideas of these films, which were about common people, people you could meet in the streets in any British city back then. Therefore, the size has to do with the scope of the ideas these films dealt with, so that is actually the most important reason why these films were small.

Momma don't allow is the name of one of those three short films, which were shown together in that first programme. There were actually six Free Cinema programmes. This film is quite interesting because you can see British night-life before the Beatles, before "pop". The music that young people listen to in the film is jazz and it was directed by two of these Free Cinema directors. These films were shot with very cheap 16 mm cameras; they were low-budget productions. I believe that this film, for example, was shot with a Bolex camera, so you can get fifteen or twenty second shots, no more than that. You can shoot for twenty seconds and that is it.

What is interesting about these films, and what in my opinion makes them a very good example of the ideas these directors had about cinema, is that you could see the life of common people. In *Momma don't allow* there is a scene with a young butcher, for example, who is waiting for the working hours to end and go dancing. The film, in the first few minutes, goes back and forth between these guys in the band and some of the people who will go to this dance. And although the film is basically a documentary, there is some fiction in it, because *maybe* the guy was a butcher and *maybe* this girl worked at that place, but the directors are clearly resorting to re-enacting, which is alright. In other words, documentary film-making is not a security camera that you put there without telling the people that they are being filmed.

British documentaries from the 1940s and 1950s showed miners at work or men working in railway stations, but not the young people enjoying themselves, for example. So there was a very strong sense of the importance of the everyday industrial life for these directors. These ideas can be seen in all the films that they made from 1954 to 1959.

Then Free Cinema was over. They ended it. They said 'We are doing something else.' But all these ideas will later reappear in their feature length films. Free Cinema was the seed for depicting working class people. Of the six Free Cinema programmes from 1956 to 1959, three comprised British films made by these four directors and other British directors. The other three were programmes made with foreign short films. There was a Polish Free Cinema (I think it was the fifth), which showed works by a very young guy from Poland named Roman Polanski. There was another with French short films which presented short films by other directors called François Truffaut and Claude Chabrol. Nobody knew their names back then. So in this movement, they were also trying to get together people from other countries as well.

Now we will be moving from Free Cinema to British New Wave, which was not a term coined by these directors, but by the media: the British New Wave was only one of many *new cinemas* and *new waves* that were taking part in Europe and other places as well: the French nouvelle vague, the New German Cinema, the Nuberu Bagu in Japan, the New Wave in Czechoslovakia, and the Cinema Novo in Brazil. Therefore, the late 1950s and early 1960s were one of the most defining and important moments in cinema history. It was the birth of modern cinema. And something happened at that precise time –in different places, at the same time– that completely changed the way films were made and films were seen.

It was maybe one of the most important moments in cinema history. I am sure something similar could be said regarding art, visual arts in particular, because it was a very defining moment indeed.

Key British New Wave Films

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (1960) [Dir: Karel Reisz, based on Alan Sillitoe's novel] is Karel Reisz's first feature length film. He was not the first of these directors to make a feature length film –the first one was Tony Richardson, a year before this, in 1959, when he directed *Look Back in Anger*.

In *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* the main actor is a very young Albert Finney. He plays a very angry character. This idea of the main protagonist of the film being angry is interesting because these film directors were related. They were friends with a group of writers and playwrights, who were known by the media, the public and the audience as 'the angry young men'. The term was coined by the specialized press, although most of them reacted very badly when they mentioned these 'angry young men' thing. However, the idea is that many plays and novels and films were based on and plays dealt with angry young men. Young men were angry about almost everything, and this anger was also in a way angst, anxiety. Their anger was directed at any figure of authority: father, policeman, teacher. It should also be borne in mind that the people that were in their early twenties in the late 1950s and early 1960s were the first generation born after the war, right before the war or during the war.

And they said that the previous generation was, in a way, a dead-end generation. That was it. It was over. So many of the main characters of these films have a very bad relationship with their parents and they see their parents as completely living-dead people. This rebellion against the *status quo*, against the middle-class values or working-class values is quite interesting and it is all over the place in these films, which are –most of them– black and white, with a very realistic approach to the situations and the dialogues. Sometimes they did extensive use of subjects like sexuality in a very frank way, which back then was completely different from mainstream Hollywood cinema.

It is interesting to point out that these British films were shown in the United States and were marketed as mature films. The other remarkable thing is that there is no way to funnel this anger and this angst. In the film, a few hours after being angry with working at this place, with the boss, with the father, with everything, the main character gets drunk. There is a dead-end situation: these angry young men are angry but they cannot manage it. It is a problem.

Another striking fact is that many of the key British New Wave films made in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including Karel Reisz's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, were produced by a man called Harry Saltzman, who was a quite young British producer. However, in 1962, he got together with an American producer called Albert Broccoli: they bought the rights to Ian Fleming's novel and they produced *Dr. No*, the first James Bond film. So "James Bond" killed "the angry young men" completely. It is well worth noting that the same producer that was making these socialist, big black and white material films went on to produce the James Bond films. Of course, he made much more money with James Bond. And he never came back to social cinema again. What is also interesting is that October 1962 seems to be a turning point, because it was the month when both *Dr. No* and the first Beatles' album were released. Therefore, pop culture killed *The Angry Young Men.* It may not have been exactly like that, but the pop phenomenon was so huge that it completely overshadowed these films in cinema business.

Of course, real social realistic films were made in the 1960s and the 1970s, but Britain in the 1960s was something else and Swinging London[1] was the place to be. Many film directors went to the United Kingdom and to London in particular to make films, such as Michelangelo Antonioni from Italy, who shot *Blow Up*, considered the quintessential of the Swinging London films.

Stanley Kubrick went to the United Kingdom to shoot *2001: A Space Odyssey* and he never returned to America. Many people think that Kubrick was actually British. However, he was a New Yorker.

Look Back in Anger (1959) [Dir: Tony Richardson, based on John Osborne's play] could be considered, in a sense, the first British New Wave film. It was based on John Osborne's play; Osborne is maybe the main figure in *The Angry Young Men* ambiance in theatre in those days.

Richard Burton is on it. He was a very well-known actor by then. He was, one could say, a star. He had made films in America before. And then, a few years after this, he would meet Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*, but that is another story.

A Taste of Honey (1961) [Dir: Tony Richardson, based on Shelagh Delaney's play] is Tony Richardson's fourth film. He made four films in two years; he was very prolific. And it is a remarkable film. Almost all these films are, I wouldn't say misogynistic, but phallocentric: it is the men who are angry. However, the protagonist of this film is a girl, a young girl so it could be said she is an angry young girl. She is a very young girl who is attracted by a black American sailor. She gets pregnant, and she then befriends a gay man. This was 1961. No American mainstream film was made with this impossible interracial relationship and gayness, with the gay guy not getting punished for being gay... It is a very good film, by the way.

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (1962) [Dir: Tony Richardson, based on Alan Sillitoe's short story] is, in my opinion, one of the greatest films of them all.

It was too bad that in Argentina it was released under the title *El mundo frente a mí*. The film was in competition in the Mar del Plata Film Festival in 1964, and won an award for best actor for Tom Courtenay.

This Sporting Life (1963) [Dir: Lindsay Anderson] was Lindsay Anderson's first British feature-like film. It was very good. The main actor was Richard Harris. I think it was released in Argentina as *El llanto de un* ídolo. It is quite an interesting, yet brutal film, about a young fellow who manages to climb socially because he starts playing rugby in a semi-professional way, so he gives up work at a mine and he encounters many problems.

Billy Liar (1963) [Dir: John Schlesinger]. John Schlesingerwas not part of the Free Cinema, but he is part of the British New Wave. Tom Courtenay and Julie Christie are on this film. It is the story of a young man who lies a lot. It is an engaging film.

Each one of these directors, Tony Richardson, Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, and even John Schlesinger won an Oscar. Each of these directors went in different directions. They actually made different kinds of films.

Angry Young Men Movement: Playwrights and Writers

- John Osborne
- Alan Sillitoe
- Kingsley Amis
- Bill Hopkins
- Harold Pinter
- John Arden
- Stan Barstow
- Edward Bond

These are the playwrights and writers that are usually associated with the Angry Young Men **movement**.

1. *Swinging London* is a catch-all term applied to the fashion and cultural scene that flourished in London in the 1960s.