

if....

UK : 1968 : dir. Lindsay Anderson : Memorial / Paramount : 111 min
 prod: Lindsay Anderson & Michael Medwin : scr: David Sherwin : dir.ph.: Miroslav Ondricek
Rupert Webster; Sean Bury; Richard Davis; Michael Newport; Martin Beaumont; Charles Sturridge; Brian Pettifer
 Malcolm McDowell; David Wood; Richard Warwick; Robert Swann; Hugh Thomas;
 Christine Noonan; Peter Jeffrey; Arthur Lowe; Mona Washbourne; Graham Crowden;
 Geoffrey Chater; Ben Aris; Anthony Nicholls; Mary McLeod; Simon Ward

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	€	M	☼	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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The delectable Bobby Phillips (Rupert Webster) fags for Denton (Hugh Thomas), most puritanical of the house whips
 Source: indeterminate

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

"Magnificent, surrealistic study of students¹ at a boarding school who plot revolution – or do they? Originally X-rated, later trimmed for wider acceptance. Written by David Sherwin.
 **** "

¹ Or "pupils," as we say in English.

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above

Halliwel's Film Guide review:

"Discontent at a boys' public school breaks out into rebellion. Allegorical treatment of school life with much fashionable emphasis on obscure narrative, clever cutting, variety of

pace, even an unaccountable changing from colour to monochrome and vice versa. Intelligence is clearly at work, but it seems to have suffered from undigested gobs of Pinter, and the film as a whole makes no discernible point. *** ”

“The school... is the perfect metaphor for the established system all but a few of us continue to accept.”
– David Wilson

“It’s something like the writing on the wall”
– **Lindsay Anderson**

“Combines a cold and queasy view of youth with a romantic view of violence”
– **New Yorker**

Brief Encounters – Lesbians and Gays in British Cinema 1930-1971 review:

“Lindsay Anderson’s **“if...”** is set in what the director once described as “a fictitious, but extremely authentic public school... a microcosm of the [English] social system.” It is here that a violent revolution takes place, staged by a group of young student rebels. The leader of the group is Mick Travers (Malcolm McDowell), a character modelled on James Dean in **“REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE”**. It is difficult to put into words the impact Lindsay Anderson’s **“if...”** had on audiences when it was released. In some ways it acted as a war cry to young people who were being increasingly smothered by commercialism, but feeling isolated from political power which, in spite of a Labour government, was still in the hands of a small, secretive establishment. The timing couldn’t have been more perfect. Just before Anderson completed the film, the 1968 student riots broke out in Paris. So into this climate Anderson, working closely with writer David Sherwin, dropped his small, but deafening grenade.

According to film critic David Robinson, **“if...”** is a film that: “...must be acknowledged as a peak in British cinema history. As no other British film before or since, it caught – and perhaps moulded – the spirit of a time. Anderson used a public school as a microcosm of British society; but his observation of that society discovered something universal. Other films of the day and of the Swinging Sixties that preceded it were determinedly modish. **“if...”** was not, and perhaps that was its strength.

“Anderson wrote: ‘*The heroes of **if** are, without knowing it, old-fashioned boys. They’re not anti-heroes, or drop-outs, or Marxist-Leninists or Maoists or readers of Marcuse. Their revolt is inevitable, not because of what they think, but **because of what they are**. Mick (Malcolm McDowell) plays a little at being an intellectual – ‘Violence and revolution are the only pure acts’, and so on – but when he acts it is instinctively, because of his outraged dignity, his frustrated passion, his vital energy, his sense of fair play if you like. If his story can be said to be **about** anything, it is about freedom.*’ ”

British cinema is full of public school stories about tyrannical masters and rebellious boys.² What Anderson did was to tell it from the boy’s point of view and draw strongly, if ultimately superficially, from a political manifesto that was out there on the streets of Paris, and later on American campuses.

The leading actors in the film, Malcolm McDowell, Richard Warwick (later to appear in Derek Jarman’s **“THE TEMPEST”**) and David Wood, became instant heroes because they were playing upper-class boys with a working-class agenda. McDowell gets all the best lines (and numerous close-ups) and deservedly so, because he was a force to be reckoned with. So much so that Anderson featured him and his character – Mick Travers – in two other films: **“O LUCKY MAN!”** (1973) and **“BRITANNIA HOSPITAL”** (1982).

The villains of the piece are the school bullies who are also exploiters of the younger boys, and enthusiastic participants in the war games played in the school regiment. The masters are depicted as an unholy gang of fools and pedants. There are no surprises here. The casting of familiar British character actors like Arthur Lowe and Mona Washbourne help to make the film acceptable to a wider audience who would normally have been repelled by the bolshie message, choppy editing, swerves from colour into black and white, and semi-explicit sex.

In a highly charged moment, mixing reality with wishful thinking, Travis engages in a tigerish fight with a young waitress. This is followed by a lingering scene of adolescent love when a young boy observes Richard

² Not so, in fact. You would be hard put to it to name me four.

Warwick exercising on the parallel bars in the gym. A full frontal nude shower scene may have been cut after press screenings, but the eroticism in this dreamy, poetic sequence was

unmistakable. So dreamy – and so right – that a latter scene, with the same boy sleeping



"Which side are you on?" – rang the poster's imperious challenge. It was a trick question. Anderson had already made up his mind who was on which side. It isn't just the photography that veers into stark black-and-white.

Source for McDowell still – Channel 4 press pack

beside Warwick – caused little outrage, though it was a first for British cinema.

The film's total acceptance of gay love and sex is discreetly but firmly conveyed. Neither McDowell or Wood ever demean Warwick, probably because they are in love with him too, or had been.³ The nasty, unnatural side of public school life is clearly depicted by the school prefects who ritualistically have the fags run errands and do their (off-screen) sexual bidding. The beating of the three rebels is plainly meant to represent their perverse desires linked not to passion, but to power⁴.

For a gay audience, "if..." is particularly fascinating for the way Anderson takes homoeroticism a stage further than his 1963

film "**THIS SPORTING LIFE**". For Gavin Lambert, "if..." – "...is more openly and highly charged, with its naked adolescents in the shower, dialogue loaded with sexual interplays, and – one of the most purely lyrical homoerotic scenes in any movie – the sequence in subliminal slow motion of the pretty junior schoolboy watching the handsome senior exercising in the gymnasium. And from his first appearance, black scarf masking his face below the eyes, black hat on his head, body wrapped in a loose black overcoat like a cape, there's a halo of glamour about Malcolm McDowell's Mick Travers, the sardonic and beautiful rebel hero."

"if..." was only nominated for two British Academy awards: Lindsay Anderson for Best Director and David Sherwin for Best Screenplay. Both lost to America's "**THE GRADUATE**". Surprisingly, though it was one of the most innovative and critically acclaimed British films of the decade, it did not receive a Best Film nomination, neither was Malcolm McDowell – in his first film role

³ Nonsense. Loyalty between friends is not **exclusively** built on homosexual yearnings!

⁴ Even worse nonsense. There's no suggestion at all that the whips go further (or would care to) than indulging in playful homoerotic badinage about the younger boys. It is crass thinking to imply that "bad guys have **bad** sex – good guys have **good** sex".

– nominated for Most Promising Newcomer. Likewise, in America, the film did not receive a single Oscar nomination, though in 1969 it received the Golden Palm Best Film prize at the Cannes Film Festival, and was shortlisted for Best Film by the New York Film Critics Circle. Anderson and Sherwin were also shortlisted.”

The British Film Catalogue 1895-1985 listing:

“Drama. Senior schoolboys lead murderous rebellion. Cert "X".”

The Cinema Book commentary:

“Co-produced and directed by Anderson, the film is interesting both in the context of Anderson’s work as an explicit, if not entirely coherent, expression of his personal concerns and as a break with the naturalism of British social realism.

The film combines fantasy and social satire in a critique of public school life and mores and was explicitly influenced by Jean Vigo’s **"ZÉRO DE CONDUITE"**. Anderson admired Vigo, Humphrey Jennings and John Ford as personal film-makers who combined their own concerns with a sincerity and honesty of style.

The film was made in colour and black-and-white and although this was primarily due to economic pressures it works to add greater stylisation to the film, which is concerned with the power of the imagination and its place in political action. It could be argued that the effect of this stylisation is to give the spectator a critical distance on the events in the film, denying the pleasure of identification in favour of a more intellectual perception. The extract illustrates the influence of surrealism on the film, representing Anderson’s interest in repressed desires and their return in the form of destructive fantasies, and in the role of fantasy in political action.”



New boy Jute (Sean Bury), whose first task is to learn by rote all the school's arcane slang-words.

Source: The Moving Picture Boy



Flashing the matron was one of the hallowed start-of-term traditions supervised by the whips...

Source: 50 Years of the Movies

“A new term begins at public school; the boys settle in and Mick Travers drinks vodka with his friends.

One afternoon while the rest of the school are watching a college rugby match, Mick and Johnny steal a motorbike and ride to a roadside café. They have coffee and Mick kisses the waitress. She slaps his face but they then play a fantasy game. (Ext. 1a , 7 mins)

On their return, Mick, Johnny and Wallace are beaten by the head of house for their general

negative attitude towards the school. During a Cadet Corps field exercise, Mick shoots the college chaplain. As a punishment he is given the task of clearing out the junk room where a stock of forgotten guns and ammunition is discovered.

Speech day at the school. Boys, teachers and parents gather in the chapel to listen to a speech by General Denson, a national hero and old boy of the school. Smoke begins to seep through the floorboards as he speaks and the congregation stampedes. As they leave the chapel they are gunned down by Mick and his friends. The headmaster steps forward to reason with the rebels, but is himself shot down. The remaining parents start to shoot back. (Ext. 1b, 7 mins) ”



Travis exults to see real blood drawn during a fencing bout with Knightley and Wallace. "There is no such thing as a wrong war" he opines, "Revolution and violence are the only true acts".

Source: Radio Times

The Critics' Film Guide review:

"Schoolboys rebel against the authoritarianism of an English public school. Heavily influenced by Jean Vigo's **"ZÉRO DE**

CONDUITE", Lindsay Anderson's film is a high point of 60s cinema. The changes from colour to monochrome, and naturalism to surrealism, are distracting, and the politics are simplistic; but the film caught the 60s spirit of revolt like no other. I particularly enjoyed it, since the school being satirised was very recognisably Tonbridge, which both the writer David Sherwin and I attended. (The film was shot at Anderson's Alma Mater, Cheltenham.) Malcolm McDowell leads the rebels against the Establishment. **8/10** ”

Anti:

"They loved it at the Cannes Festival, though. And the comment made to me by an approving Swedish female may, for all I know, typify the universal reception. Looking me straight in the eye, she said brightly "It certainly makes one understand why the British are so arrogant and stupid." I consoled myself with the belief that she had Mr Lindsay Anderson in mind."

– Vernon Young

"It does suggest that the only way to deal with a corrupt or a decadent society is to wipe it out. That brings up the old question: which came first, the hen or the egg, men or society? And if we destroy society shouldn't we find ourselves re-inventing it?" – **Dilys Powell**

"Brilliantly captures the sadistic side of the public school system... But fantasy has its rules, and you break them at your peril. By resurrecting the padre in the office of the headmaster, and making him exact an apology from the offenders for killing him, Anderson is guilty of cheating. It profoundly diminishes the impact of his message."

– **Ken Russell**, 1993

Mixed:

"The funny or cruel scenes work very handily; it is only the apocryphal and apocalyptic material that fails to persuade. Yet the film is never uninteresting, seldom unspirited, and there is some sort of intelligence even in its miscalculations."

– John Simon

Pro:

"The general effect is to make you rock with laughter and then send you away for some very serious thinking." – Cecil Wilson, **Daily Mail**

“Has a topical revolutionary fervour, fine direction and an insight into the elitist traditions of British public schools.”

– **Alexander Walker, Evening Standard**

“**“if...”** reminds me of a hornet. According to aerodynamic theory, any creature so woefully misdesigned is not supposed to be able to fly at all, and according to such theories of movie construction as I hold, a mixture of film moods and methods like **“if...”** shouldn’t be able to get off the ground either. But it does – angry, tough and full of sting. A public school boy himself, Mr Anderson has obviously thought

hard about what happens when unformed adolescents come into conflict with rigidly formed institutions. The result is that his film is felt.”

– Richard Schickel

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

“The director attended Cheltenham College, which is where he filmed this account of public school life, which is more or less documentary till three rebels (Malcolm McDowell, Richard Warwick, David Wood)



*“Let me show you lads what a **REAL** stink bomb can do !” chortled the chemistry master darkly.*

Source: Cinema Book

School meals for the toffs were just as bad as for the rest of us, evidently, though the cuisine was rather more adventurous.

Source: Radio Times



decide to question the system: at that point it moves towards predictable, if incomprehensible, mayhem, with machine-guns mowing down bishops and such. * ”

Images in the Dark – an Encyclopedia of Gay and Lesbian Film and Video review:

“Inspired by Jean Vigo’s classic **“ZERO FOR CONDUCT”**, this extraordinary allegorical film is set in a repressive public boarding school where Malcolm McDowell is one of three unruly seniors whose refusal to conform ultimately leads to a full-scale student rebellion against the authorities. McDowell

made his film debut in this explosive, furiously funny attack on the British establishment that features a casual, almost matter-of-course depiction of homosexuality, adolescent sex and male companionship⁵. Surreal and manic, the film has perplexed audiences with its alternating use of black-and-white and colour photography. But rather than an artistic statement, Anderson has said that the reason for the switching was that he was not filming in sequence, and when he ran low on money, he was forced to shoot in black-and-white.”

Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89 review:

“A striking, enormously powerful if episodic drama about life in a repressive boys’ boarding school in England. **** ”

Rating the Movies (1990) review:

“Searing, intelligent drama set in an English boarding school, where students rebel against harsh discipline. Director Lindsay Anderson cleverly portrays this school setting as an allegory for the oppression of the individual by authority. The story is not presented as a straightforward narrative, but is interrupted by surrealistic images, the use of both black-and-white and colour cinematography, and title cards. The use of such cinematic devices makes the audience aware of the techniques of film-making, and requires the complete attention of the viewer in order to understand what is going on. **** ”

Sixties British Cinema commentary:

“If 1967 was the summer of love, 1968 was the year of expected revolution. Jeff Nuttall in the preface to *"Bomb Culture"* apocalyptically declared that: "the plain and obvious fact is that between the autumn of '67 when I completed this manuscript, and the summer of '68 when I am writing this preface, young people under various pretexts made war on their elders, and their elders made war on them. The war continues." In fact, the demonstrations and sit-ins proved to be echoes of events occurring elsewhere and the shockwaves of America's disastrous war in

⁵ *Matter-of-fact male companionship is hardly surprising in a single-sex boarding school. There is no homosexuality depicted, but a deal of flirtation between the seniors and the prettiest younger boy. This is homosexuality in the same sense that "DEATH IN VENICE" is claimed as a "gay" movie.*

Vietnam. But a handful of British films were touched by the whiff of revolution...

Poor critical reception [to Peter Watkins' film *"PRIVILEGE"*] meant that Rank executives, who found the film offensive, needed little excuse for giving it only a limited release. Memorial Enterprises, the company set up by Albert Finney and Michael Medwin which had initiated *"PRIVILEGE"* for Universal, needed considerable courage to persevere with Lindsay Anderson's equally controversial *"if..."* (1968), but fortunately George Ornstein, by the late 60s Paramount's production chief in London, had sufficient faith in Anderson's ability as a director to back the film.

Anderson was keen to point out that *"if..."* was not just about public schools, describing it as "a metaphor, if you like, of life in Britain today – the image of the school as a reflection of a certain British tradition." If one accepts this, the film's view is a bleak one. Whatever virtues the public school ethos once embodied, here it is in a state of advanced decay. The housemaster (Arthur Lowe) is bumblingly ineffectual, the headmaster (Peter Jeffrey) more interested in business management than Greek grammar, and real power is in the hands



*Travis (or Travers) is awarded a punitive early morning cold shower for wearing his hair "too long". Remember the days when **long** hair was a right teenagers fought for, and ultra-short hair was inflicted on them by the army, school, or prison?*

Source: Virgin Megastore ad

of a triumverate of prefects, forerunners of the young fogies of Thatcherism. They are opposed to proto-revolutionary Mick Travers (Malcolm McDowell), but the violence he is provoked into using by their mindless authoritarianism is indiscriminate and seemingly futile.

David Robinson reported while "if...." was being made that "despite the passages of slow motion, the satire, the fantasy, it is predictable that the film will have little relation to the current school of modish, geary, swinging post-TV cinema." Anderson's use of colour and black and white seems to obey a not always comprehensible logic, but nobody could accuse him of following someone else's trend. "if...." is as bravely idiosyncratic as any other Anderson film, but Mick Travers – enigmatic but passionate, scruffy but glamorous – was a perfect symbol for the aspiring revolutionaries of 1968, just as David Warner's Morgan Delt had been in 1966 for future hippies, and as with "MORGAN", the film was an unexpected box office success."

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

"Lindsay Anderson's masterly parable. Fantasies in public school – expressed and merely imagined – of masters and boys. Malcolm McDowell gives outstanding performance as intelligent rebel. 33 "



Left: Mick steals a motorbike from a town showroom and rides off to a coffee date with the tigress of his dreams... Source: Radio Times

Below: "Malcolm McDowell strikes an alluring pose" - in the imagination of the author of Images in the Dark at any rate...



The Time Out Film Guide review:

"A modern classic in which Anderson minutely captures both the particular ethos of a public school and the general flavour of any

structured community; thus achieving a clear allegorical force without sacrificing a whit of his exploration of an essentially British institution. The impeccable logic of the conclusion is in no way diminished by having

been lifted from Vigo's "**ZERO DE CONDUITE**", made thirty-five years earlier. "**if....**" was also a timely film – shooting began two months before the events of May 1968 in Paris. Along with "**THE WHITE BUS**", it put Anderson into a pretty high league; the major disappointment of "**O LUCKY MAN!**", followed by the disastrous "**BRITANNIA HOSPITAL**", took him back out of it again."

TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995 review:

"Lindsay Anderson's weird but powerful indictment of the public school system (and the country as a whole?) made a star of Malcolm McDowell in a role he recreated, a few years on, in the same director's "**O LUCKY MAN!**" and again for Anderson in "**BRITANNIA HOSPITAL**". Here he plays a sixth form boy in whose mind symbolism and fantasy gradually take over from reality, as they do in the film, the first half of which is a kind of up-dated "**TOM BROWN'S SCHOOLDAYS**", with public school ritual being observed down to the last hideous Stone-Age detail. A fine cast includes Arthur Lowe and Mary McLeod as Mr and Mrs Kemp, Peter Jeffrey as the headmaster and Mona Washbourne as matron. *** "

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

"Punchy, poetic film that delves into the epic theme of youthful revolt. "**if...**" is ostensibly about a rigid, tradition-ridden British private boarding school for boys from 11 to 18. The film blocks out a series of incidents that lead to a small group rebelling with mortars, machine guns, gas bombs and pistols.

Film is divided into chapter headings as the boys arrive for a new term. The teachers, nurses, housemasters, etc are all fairly typed characters but never descend to caricatures, which is true of the many students.

There is a romantic dash during the early part of the film in the growing insistence of three rebel friends that all is not right in this caste-ridden school. But there is never any sentimentality, which makes the film's veering to a bloody revolt acceptable.

Film is a generalised tale of revolt. The violence is symbolical and reflects and comments on it rather than sentimentalising it or trying to make it realistic."

Video Movie Guide 1993 review:

"This is British director Lindsay Anderson's black comedy about English private schools and the revolt against their strict code of behaviour taken to the farthest limits of the imagination. Malcolm McDowell's movie debut. Rated "R". **** "

The Virgin Film Guide review:

"A highly unusual modern classic. McDowell is a rebellious pupil at a strict British boarding school who, with his friend Wood, refuses to conform. During a rugby match the pair sneak into town and meet a waitress. Upon their return McDowell is brutally beaten by the headmaster⁶, sparking revolt in the youngster. Together with his fellow schoolmates, McDowell prepares an attack on the administration. Or does he? The surrealistic finale has the gang of youths opening fire with an arsenal of weapons during a speech by an alumnus, as the waitress shoots the headmaster in the head from a rooftop.

"**if...**" was a landmark of 60s cinema and of the emergence of the counter-culture, and bears a striking resemblance to Jean Vigo's innovative "**ZERO DE CONDUITE**". It was originally conceived in 1958 and scripted in 1960 under the title "**THE CRUSADERS**". The film's violence was a subject of great controversy. Its promotional picture depicted a group of youths armed with machine guns and hand grenades asking "Which side are you on?" Envisioned as a violent "**REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE**", the picture was originally offered to director Nicholas Ray, who suggested it would be best served by a British director. Based on a script by David Sherwin and John Howlett entitled "The Crusaders". *** "

The Virgin International Encyclopedia of Film profile of McDowell:

"Actor. Born: Leeds, England, June 15 1943. Boyish, blue-eyed lead of the English stage who made a striking debut as a rebellious schoolboy in Lindsay Anderson's "**if...**"

⁶ No he isn't

(1968). McDowell also played the lead in the subsequent instalments of Anderson's surreal trilogy attacking corrupt British institutions, "**O LUCKY MAN!**" (1973) and "**BRITANNIA HOSPITAL**" (1982). His blithely amoral, anti-authoritarian persona was perhaps put to best use by Stanley Kubrick in the controversial "**A CLOCKWORK ORANGE**" (1971). McDowell is divorced from actresses Margot Dullea and Mary Steenburgen."

Videocassette – **Paramount CIC VHR 2156** - sleeve notes:

"This incredible film takes a look at a British boarding school and three unruly seniors who fail to conform. "**if...**" is an amazing blend of fact and fantasy which features a young Malcolm McDowell in his first film. The

students [*sic*] at college house are kept in line by tradition, strict discipline and prefects. Director Lindsay Anderson is careful to document the repressive conditions and the painfulness of rebellion as he builds to his surreal and violent ending when the students have *their* day. It is a marvellously funny movie, but also profoundly disturbing and deep."

World Cinema – a Short History comment:

"...Clearly the most gifted and the most influential of the whole generation [*of British socio-realist film-makers*] was Lindsay Anderson (born 1923) whose activities in the 60s were divided between cinema and theatre. He waited seven years before making his second feature film, "**if...**" (1963) in which the



The chickens come home to roost on Founders Day – when the three rebels, Travis' fantasy waitress and Wallace's pretty boy all perch on the rooftops to rain violent death on the conformists and their establishment masters. What larks!

*Sources top left: A Pictorial History of the Talkies
top right: TV Times
others: Virgin Megastore ad*



humanist preoccupation and the anger of **"THIS SPORTING LIFE"** and the earlier short films were if anything intensified; but his method had progressed from literal realism to an epic (in the Brechtian sense of the word) and poetic style, which, in a narrative set in an English public school, moved easily and imperceptibly from direct and recognisable

reality to fantasy. The short films he made between the features – **"ONE, TWO, THREE"** (1967) and **"THE SINGING LESSON"** (both in Poland) and **"THE WHITE BUS"** (1967) – as well as much of his theatre work of the same period looked in retrospect like preparation for **"if..."**."



*Some website wag added his own embellishment to this scene of Jute (Sean Bury) struggling to vault over the horse in the gym sequence. None of the masters in **"if..."** sports a cane. That function has been 'devolved'...*

Incidental note from **50 Years of the Movies**:

"Before the end of the decade, the last taboo, the showing of "full frontal nudity", had gone. For the record, in Britain flashes of pudenda were seen in Antonioni's controversial (mostly

because it was so puzzling) British film **"BLOW UP"** (67)... and in 1968 Lindsay Anderson's compelling story of revolution in a British public school, **"if..."**, showed an erotic coupling between Malcolm McDowell and

Christine Noonan, in which genitals were again exposed without causing a flutter.⁷”

The Movie Book profile of Lindsay Anderson:

“Anderson was first a critic, and then was involved with the Free Cinema British documentary, making three shorts in the fifties, **"O DREAMLAND"**, **"THURSDAY'S CHILDREN"** and **"EVERY DAY EXCEPT CHRISTMAS"**. His first feature was **"THIS SPORTING LIFE"** in 1964, a film about the northern working class and rugby league. This was followed by **"if..."** in 1968, which was a huge success. Later movies have shown a tendency to high-minded sententiousness and to making "state of the nation" simplifications. These include **"O LUCKY MAN!"** and **"BRITANNIA HOSPITAL"**. Anderson's former radicalism seems to have been transformed into a kind of nihilistic conservatism and he has since mainly worked in the theatre.”

NFT Bulletin – February 1994 – review:

“With its revolutionary content and style, this was an extraordinary film to come from Britain. A powerful attack on the Establishment, it was influenced by Vigo and Brecht and described by its director as "deeply anarchistic". The blend of fantasy and realism in the context of a public school uprising mirrored the spirit of student protest that erupted worldwide.”

Excerpt from a posthumous tribute to Lindsay Anderson by director Stephen Frears on Channel 4 (94):

“...**"if..."** was the second of only a handful of films that Lindsay directed. It was made for the production company where I worked, and I was assigned to be one of Lindsay's assistants, although I'd known him for ten years. It came in under the title "The Crusaders" and then, briefly, was called "Come the Revolution", until a splendid woman called Daphne Hunter, who was typing the title page, got cross with all this dithering and said "Oh call it **'IF'**.”

⁷ *Though that scene has been censored in all currently available prints.*

It was made in the spring of 1968, at precisely the time when people from Washington to Paris, and most importantly in Prague, were rising up against their governments. One of my jobs was to cut out pictures from the newspapers, which would be made into the collages that the boys stick on their study walls. In May 1968, I was cutting out photographs of student protest. They were the same scenes we had just shot in March.

Cheltenham College, Lindsay's old school, inexplicably but rather maturely, allowed us to make most of the film there. Parts of the film are in colour and parts in black and white. As I recall, this was for reasons of economy rather than art, although it appealed to Lindsay's sense of anarchy. When the film was first shown, Lindsay appeared on stage before a wildly applauding audience, crying "The rest is up to you!"

I don't think Lindsay actually believed in the revolution, but he believed you should stand up for what you believe in. He would say the word commitment, very clearly and patiently, assuming that no-one listening to him would have the first idea what the word meant. He was like a Pied Piper to the young, in many ways a rather Mr Chips-like figure towards the end, whom you showed your films, or brought your work, with great trepidation. And I cannot believe he is dead. A bright piercing light has gone out.”

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Sean Bury:

“Sean was trained for the stage at the Corona School in London, and was a member of the Westminster Cathedral Choir. A few years after co-starring with a Great Dane in a Children's Film Foundation serial, he was priceless as the diffident new boy, Jute, in Lindsay Anderson's **"if..."**.”

After a small part in the musical **"GOODBYE, MR CHIPS"**, Sean Bury touchingly shared the lead with Anicée Alvina in a teenage romance, **"FRIENDS"** (US 71), written and directed by Lewis Gilbert for Paramount. He was in **"THE ABOMINABLE DR PHIBES"** (71), **"THE STORY OF A LOVE STORY"** (73), and starred again in **"PAUL ET MICHELLE"** (Fr/GB 74, more or less a sequel to **"FRIENDS"**) before being reduced to the naval ranks in **"THE SPY WHO LOVED ME"** (77).”

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Michael Newport (who plays Brunning):

“This delightfully unaffected, freckly, often bespectacled boy got his big break as Frank Sinatra’s kidnapped son in **"THE NAKED RUNNER"**, but had had rather more fun, a

year or two before, as a stalwart little Cornishman in **"THE DEVIL-SHIP PIRATES"**. He also appeared with the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford-upon-Avon, for instance in the Paul Scofield *"Macbeth"*.



In 1968 he was a bold Jim Hawkins in a BBC TV serialisation of **"Treasure Island"**, and in 1969 made one last cinema appearance in

"MISCHIEF". Thereafter he quit acting, and much of his work was connected with photography. Around 1980 he invented a form

of illuminated chess, called "Spectrum Satellite".

Radio Times reviews:

"Lindsay Anderson's **"if..."** had a hand grenade in its publicity logo, which is exactly

what the movie was in 1968, an explosive device timed to go bang when students all over the world were at the barricades. Set in an English public school, its call for revolution is intoxicating and it made a star of Malcolm McDowell."



Source for these frame grabs: *The Movie & TV Spanking Page*

“Director Lindsay Anderson showed an acute sense of timing with his controversial drama about a student uprising in an English public school, which went into production shortly before the 1968 riots in Paris. Malcolm McDowell is the wayward pupil whose savage beating at the hands of the headmaster sparks a revolt⁸, in a cleverly worked allegory that gave a tremendous boost to Anderson’s career.”

“Surreal tale about three seniors at a boarding school who opt for violent rebellion when faced with the petty cruelty of tradition and authority. **** ”

“Political satire about public schoolboys who lead a revolt against authority. Starring Malcolm McDowell. **** ”

“Clearly indebted to Jean Vigo’s classic drama **"ZERO FOR CONDUCT"**, this striking story of schoolboy revolt was originally offered to Nicholas Ray in the hope that he would produce an ultra-violent, upper-class version of his classic **"REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE"**. With its surrealistic elements, it was something of a departure for the radical Free Cinema writer and director Lindsay Anderson, but he succeeds in both capturing the atmosphere and absurdities of public school life and investing the satire with plenty of venom. Malcolm McDowell gives a blistering performance in what is undoubtedly a key film in British cinema history, but it’s now just starting to show its age. ***** ”

“The first of two films showing in a tribute to Lindsay Anderson, who died earlier this year [1994]. A pertinent, incisive masterwork from the master director who bites the hand that feeds him in an acerbic attack on the establishment and creates that rarest of creatures – a British film of true originality and vision. Anderson manages a political and social allegory with Brechtian alienating devices, random mix of colour and monochrome filming, as well as a homage to Jean Vigo’s 1933 **"ZÉRO DE CONDUITE"**. And somehow he remembers to make it darned entertaining. ***** ”

“Public school drama, and the first of two films being shown as a tribute to director Lindsay Anderson who died recently. Mick Travers is a rebellious upper-class boy who is sent to a strict British boarding school where he refuses to conform. One day he is brutally

beaten by his headmaster for sneaking off into town when he should have been at a rugby match. This is the catalyst for a battle between the schoolteachers and pupils, with the latter arming themselves with weapons to use during the headmaster’s speech. Lindsay Anderson’s **"THIS SPORTING LIFE"** is tomorrow at 10.00.”

TV Times review:

“This political satire about a sixth-form public schoolboy who leads a bloody revolt on the authoritarian pillars of tradition is the first of two films being shown as a tribute to British director Lindsay Anderson, who died in August. **"THIS SPORTING LIFE"** is on tomorrow at 10.00pm.”

The Sunday Times note:

“A public schoolboy rebellion escalates into an all-out war.”

“The traditional public school so mercilessly sent up by Lindsay Anderson is a metaphor for the authoritarianism and hidebound resistance to reform of the British Establishment. Much is brilliant, some is embarrassing, but it is always provocative.”

“Losing it at the Movies” – a review of David Sherwin’s autobiography **“Going Mad in Hollywood”** – by **J.G. Ballard, Sunday Times** May 12 1996:

“Are film makers different from the rest of us? Everything in *“Going Mad in Hollywood”*, David Sherwin’s hilarious but cautionary account of his years as script writer, suggests that people in the film world, from the most powerful producer to the lowliest extra, belong to a distinct and unique species that probably traces its origins back to a scatty twin sister of Eve.

As he graphically recounts, Sherwin suffered a nervous breakdown in Hollywood, although it’s significant that he didn’t realise this until he had left the place. A remake of **"THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE"**, **"but underwater"**, or **"VENOM"**, the **"dry-land version of JAWS"**? Both were serious projects, and both were embarked upon with what Sherwin describes as a mix of folly, ambition, and complete self-obsession –

⁸ This writer seems to have browsed the **Virgin Film Guide** review rather than watch the film for herself.

qualities which alone persuade would-be film-makers to believe in themselves.

Thirty years ago, after first bruising myself against the silver screen, it occurred to me that the experience of bringing up young children was the best possible training for dealing with people in the film world. Those passionate enthusiasms which could evaporate like the mist on a margarita, the life-long friendships virtually signed in blood that never outlasted a lunch, the sudden treacheries and wounded innocence, reminded me that I was dealing with a tribe of likeable but unreliable four-year olds.

Later, when a novel of mine was filmed, of course I saw how wrong I had been - film-makers, I now knew, were sensible and judicious people, dedicated to the highest arts of story-telling, ready to risk their careers on bringing one's modest literary efforts to a vast audience.

None the less, as *"Going Mad in Hollywood"* repeatedly shows, both views are correct. By comparison with novelists, for the most part a dour and gloomy crowd, film-makers share the irrepressible confidence that Sherwin first showed, when he was a student at Oxford in 1960. After failing his exams, in Latin and Anglo-Saxon, he impulsively decided to be a Hollywood script writer. He and a friend, John Howlett, would tell the truth about "that Nazi camp" – Tonbridge School. Everything would be there, "the torture, the nightly beatings, and buggery".

Sherwin's girlfriend, Gilda, a Bardot look-alike, typed out the script of *"Crusaders"*, which he took to Lord Brabourne, the son-in-law of Mountbatten, and the producer of such stiff upper lip British flicks as **"SINK THE BISMARCK"**. *"Crusaders"* nearly sank Lord Brabourne, who told Sherwin that it was the most perverted and evil thing he had ever read and must never see the light of day – the sweetest praise one can offer a writer.

Yet the film script became *"if..."*, a masterpiece of 1960s cinema and the start of a deep and complex friendship between its director, Lindsay Anderson, and Sherwin, which lasted three decades. Anderson is the hero of these diaries, a cantankerous and gnome-like man with a quirky sense of humour who becomes

Sherwin's father-confessor, conscience, and collaborator in two further remarkable films, **"O LUCKY MAN!"** and **"BRITANNIA HOSPITAL"**.

Above all, Anderson always tells the truth. At an appalling Chelsea party, the actress Mia Farrow curls up at Sherwin's feet and with adoring eyes breathes at him: "You writers... you're the beginnings of life itself. You're like God." How wonderful, but Anderson refuses to let Sherwin be taken in. Farrow and her friends, he opines, are spoilt and fey, and lack the bourgeois manners to ask about Anderson's interests. Suitably chastened, Sherwin decides that, "Farrow is bonkers... she plays for effect, bad acting, yet again". A little hard on the young woman, I feel. With Mia Farrow at your feet, who cares whether the acting is good or bad? ⁹

Anderson's fierce integrity becomes the lens through which Sherwin sees the world. When David Owen dares to criticise David Storey's *"The Contractor"* ("who wants to spend two and a half hours watching a tent go up?"), Sherwin flies into a rage and orders Owen and his wife Debbie from his house. "Vilifying a masterpiece. Out, both of you!"

The party is ruined, but a doctor present congratulates Sherwin. "That man makes me ill. God help this country if he should ever gets into power." Were we all so pompous and earnest then? Probably...

The huge success of *"if..."* propels Sherwin across the Atlantic to an even crazier world. Against Anderson's sage advice, he finds himself in Hollywood, working with an exuberant Jon Voight on a project remake of Robin Hood. "I want everything to be in this movie," Voight exclaims, "Jesus Christ, love, little children. Robin's a dreamer, he's got a quality that gives meaning to the dying. I have it, too! I tell them death is a privilege!" It is all more bizarre than **"The Beverly Hillbillies"**, but Sherwin plunges in, eventually earning huge fees for a successful blockbuster, **"VENOM"**.

But the shadows are lengthening across the Astroturf. Endlessly coping with the whims of stars and senior producers

⁹ Hard to resist the temptation to kick out though..

drives him to drink and beyond. His long-suffering wife overhears him whispering Dictaphone messages to Harold Wilson, "the saviour of the British film industry". Spies prowling the multi-storey car parks of Santa Monica, and a distraught girl begs him to rescue her from a snake. By the time Sherwin takes the 707 to England he is suffering a full-scale crack-up, and imagines he is the prisoner of both the CIA and the KGB.

He eventually recovers, but the 1980s are a difficult decade. After the shattering failure of "**BRITANNIA HOSPITAL**", the commissions dry up. He is forced to work on a remake of "**THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE**", to be called "**WET GOLD**". "All about greed and lust?"

"Yes," the producer tells Sherwin. "But under water. Very existential."

A desperate pathos descends as he and Anderson try to produce their own remake – "**if 2...**". Sherwin is on the dole but still dreaming of a come-back. In 1994, Anderson suddenly dies. Grief-stricken, Sherwin looks through the diaries he has kept for more than 30 years, seeing them as a memorial to his old friend. But "*Going Mad in Hollywood*" is far more than a tribute to Anderson. Witty, shrewd, and unflinchingly honest, the book is the best script that David Sherwin has yet produced. If only it could be made into a film. "if 3...", "if 4 ..."



“ Wisdom is the principal thing:
Therefore get wisdom:
And with all thy getting
Get understanding ”
[proverbs IV]

For the record, there was a British film by the name "**IF**" made in 1916, about a dastardly German plot to divert London's air defences using fake airships.

In the world post-September 11 2001, the film's message and climax acquires a different tang from the revolutionary air of the late sixties. We are only too familiar with what can be done by fanatical suicide bombers, venting political grievance on the Establishment. McDowell's first appearance, in black hat and swirling coat, face swathed in a scarf (to conceal a sinful moustache) makes him look the epitome of a 19th century anarchist. Anderson, with his triumphal cry "The rest is up to you!" was not literally calling on youth to rain murderous fire on their oppressors, but there's no denying that suicide bombers have in the main been teenage youths and young men, who perhaps have a tendency to over-literal interpretation. But that's merely a topical observation. Great films, like great men, should be judged in the context of their own time, not ours.

"Education in Britain", quips jovial Headmaster Peter Jeffrey to his school prefects, or "whips", "is a nubile Cinderella – sparsely clad and often interfered with!" If that was true in 1968, it hasn't become any less true thirty years on. Perpetual political interference has swept away most of the anachronisms and absurdities Anderson was scoriating in this film, and replaced them with completely new absurdities, every bit as intolerant of dissension. Ah, *la plus ça change...*

The whips of College House, Head Boy Rowntree and his Jesuitical sidekick Denson, are the heavy-handed police in this allegory of the British state. It is they, and not the staff directly, who prowl the school enforcing obedience to obscure and senseless traditions – "Run! RUN in the corridor!" – enabling the masters (or politicians) to spout vacuous formulae of flexibility and progressive-mindedness. It is of course the whips who carry out (on their own impulse) the ritual flogging in the gym, who harangue the other boys about getting their hair cut, and carry out impromptu dormitory inspections. It is they, not the masters, who gossip about the prettier of the younger boys, who exhort the house to show more *esprit de corps* at the rugby match, who carry symbolic rods (or *fasces*) everywhere they go. This sly delegation of day-to-day discipline from the masters to the eldest pupils may be recognised implicitly by ex-public schoolboys, but comes as something of a revelation to the rest of us. The staff are always at one remove from the grinding edge of authority, insulated like Mafia chiefs from the dirty work of enforcement.

Fertile breeding ground, then, for the constitutional bully. But head boy Rowntree is not in point of fact portrayed as a martinet, despite that misinterpretation by some reviewers. He speaks kindly to the new boy Jute (Sean Bury) and is patient with his lazy "fag" Philips. It would be more accurate to characterise Rowntree as a small-minded time-server, an Establishment figure-to-be, diligently attending to his functions in the unquestionable chain of command. Travis perceives this in him, and commits the cardinal sin of telling him so to his face. It is for this, as much as any infractions of school discipline, that Rowntree beats him so savagely – and vindictively – in the gym. But that does not make him another Flashman ("**TOM BROWN'S SCHOOLDAYS**"). He is more of a Steerforth ("**DAVID COPPERFIELD**") whose dignity is mortally affronted. When he shakes hands with Travis after the caning, it is not in order to humiliate, but as the "decent gesture" of a gentleman. The director may well have detested that particular breed of "officer class material", but he does not make Rowntree into some archetypal public school thug.

Rowntree's cohort Denson is the more spiteful of the two, and we see him rounding on Travis from the outset. The first words Denson utters in the film are to tell Bobby Philips, whom he passes on the stairway, to get his hair cut, and "stop tarding!". "I'm *not* tarding" the boy retorts stiffly, but with a toss of the head *just so*. Denson masks his own attraction to the boy by hotly condemning it in the other whips: "This homosexual flirtatiousness is *so* adolescent." He is the truly dangerous sort – converting sexual repression into puritanical venom.

The hero is of course healthily free of such appetites, his dialogue exclusively heterosexual – a fact not picked up by Raymond Murray's "*Images in the Dark*" review. He describes perfection as strolling naked into the surf with a beautiful girl on his arm, making love *just once* and then dying. He seems very much the fish out of water at a public school, as though he were a working class boy on a scholarship rather than a scion of the upper middle class himself. But the intriguing thing about Travis is that he does **not** seem to resent all the antique ritual and paraphernalia of the place. "When do we *live*?" he protests sullenly, "That's what *I* want to know." He's impatient with *school itself*, with wasting time when there is sex to be had, wars to be fought, life to be led. At a state school he would be the perpetual truant, not (as these days) because he is a hopeless pupil – he's top of the class in the one lesson we see him attending. His sour contempt of authority mixes freely with a very adolescent hunger for excitement. One particularly illuminating shot is when he is idly firing air gun darts into the newspaper cuttings pasted on his study wall. He shoots at politicians and pin-up girls, shoots olives into martinis, but when he fires a dart at the Queen in her coronation

coach, his dart avoids her head and hits a bystander through the window of the coach. He cannot quite bring himself to commit *that* small treasonous act. Anarchy has its limits.

The minutiae of school ritual, so coldly observed, is one of the film's greatest strengths – particularly from this archive's point of view – lending a quasi-documentary feel to many of the early scenes. Both writer and director brought personal experience to bear, so that “if....” counts as probably the best British boarding school film ever made. But Anderson's personal

style, the Brechtian touches and surreal humour, make it an intriguing film quite apart from that. The housemaster's wife strolling naked through the boys' deserted washroom while the house is out on military manoeuvres; Travis gazing through a classmate's telescope by night – to find his waitress waving lazily back at him from her bedroom window miles away; the shot and bayoneted school chaplain rising from a drawer in the headmaster's study, solemnly shaking hands with his assassins, then being filed away in the drawer again. These touches of magical realism (for want of a better label) serve to underline the director's allegorical purpose, but at the same time (as Ken Russell noted) they negate the impact of the climax. If Travis's nude cavorting on the floor of the café was a bit of wishful thinking on his part, why can't we dismiss the revolt at the end as another flight of fancy? Though the film was initially given an “X” certificate (for the brief sex and nudity) the violence is so stylised as to nullify its own purpose. In “**A CLOCKWORK ORANGE**”, by comparison, the scenes of mugging and gang-rape were more graphically realistic, but Kubrick choreographed them to jolly music (“The Thievish Magpie” for instance) as an alienating device.

The fees at this school, the headmaster reminds Travis and friends after ambushing the chaplain, are 15 guineas a week, “about the same as keeping a juvenile delinquent in Borstal”. Prisons and boarding schools are much alike in their rigid ordering of daily life, Borstals a perfect synthesis of the two, and boarding school films, like prison films, contain the same dangerous sexual charge of an all-male environment. As to the buggery so emphatically included in Sherwin's original draft, however, it seems to have been mislaid somewhere on the road to the finished film. But instead of using homosexual activity in a boys' school as a symbol of oppression (which the sex abuse industry would be sure to do today) Anderson refreshingly chose to use it as a symbol of non-conformity, an expression of individual freedom. Rowntree and the other whips cluck and gossip over the pert Bobby Philips, but it is Wallace, one of the renegades, who captures his affections and beds him.

We see them first exchanging intimate confidences in an outbuilding one night (like the similar lovers of “**LES AMITIÉS PARTICULIÈRES**”); in a later scene the camera pans serenely across the younger boy's dormitory to find him snug in bed with the sixth former, and by the end of the film he has become an unquestioned adjunct to the three Crusaders, as has Travis' nameless waitress. But affairs of this kind are more pederastic than gay by nature, the age differential being significant and crucial. The most telling and erotically charged scene comes when Bobby's class are changing after gym, and he gazes down from the balcony to watch Wallace performing gracefully on the parallel bars. Music thick with desire swells as Bobby dresses in languorous slow motion, his eyes feeding hungrily on the older boy. There is no pretense at all that the attraction flowed solely from the elder to the “innocent” younger. Anderson (naively as it turns out) was equating sexual liberation with political liberation. Since 1968 that equation has worked out pretty well for gays, and of course for women, but certainly not for the 13-year old Bobby Philips's of the world. No indeed. Virginity is still compulsory at 13. Like Latin grammar.

“if...” works better if you don't know that Malcolm McDowell was already 25, hence ludicrously old to be playing a 15-16 year old schoolboy. McDowell's facial structure, however, is sublimely insolent, and his early career was full of cheeky chappie characters – he even played Flashman in a woebegone sequel to “**TOM BROWN'S SCHOOLBOYS**” called “**ROYAL FLASH**” (75) – but his subsequent films with Anderson were lame and meandering, “**BRITANNIA HOSPITAL**” a total fiasco.

One can't really review this film without turning to the caning scene, which had a far deeper impact on audiences than the shoot-out at the end. It is (again) the most savage caning in any film, and modern viewers may feel it's rather overdone. Customs recorded at other public schools suggest the contrary. One, for example, had the ultimate sanction of a "pop-tanning", which was conducted with the pupil bending out an open window in view of the other boys in the yard below, the prefects rushing at him with the cane in precisely the manner shown here.

Anderson handles the scene in conventional fashion, the camera dollyling past ranks of younger boys in their swot-room, listening in silence to the echoing strokes – Travis' *bête noir* in the sixth-form dormitory tucking into chocolate and relishing his moment. No sequence elsewhere conveyed more eloquently the late-sixties argument against corporal punishment in schools. Uncomfortable to witness, it is the single most powerful moment in the film.

I like "if..." better today than when I was younger (the McDowell factor), and it hasn't lost its edge nearly so much as other British films of the period. The humour still sits at odds with its cool "J'Accuse" observations, and the strains of "Sanctus" do wear after a time. The politics are too reductionist, and the class-war motif, coming from an ex-public schoolboy, has more than a whiff of patronage about it, but it remains a dazzling work of individualism, rich in visual wit and stylistic invention, an oddly *continental* film about such a resolutely British institution.
Recommended.

The younger boys, as always, are sidelined by the story, but not ignored altogether. They are Jute ([Sean Bury](#)), Hunter ([Martin Beaumont](#)), Markland (Charles Sturridge), Brunning ([Michael Newport](#)), Biles ("Shag off, you creeps!" - Brian Pettifer), Machin (Richard Davis) and of course Bobby Philips ([Rupert Webster](#)). Newport and Bury have been dealt with above, but Martin Beaumont was in "CRY WOLF" (68) and "BLINKER'S SPY-SPOTTER" (71), both for the C.F.F., and "THE BOYS OF PAUL ST." (69). Brian Pettifer's face certainly looks familiar (even when it's not thrust head-first down a toilet) and he probably did TV work following this film. Nothing else is known of Sturridge or Davies, and Rupert Webster made no other films so far as I'm aware, sultry catamite roles being few and far between. It's profoundly to be hoped the role didn't leave him with a complex, as seems to have been the case for Bjorn Andressen after "DEATH IN VENICE".

See also "ZÉRO DE CONDUITE" – which bears only the faintest of resemblance to "if..." – and subject index under [BOARDING SCHOOL / PUBLIC SCHOOL](#), [BULLYING](#), [CORPORAL PUNISHMENT](#), [CRIME / DELINQUENCY](#), [KID STRIKERS / PROTESTERS / DEMONSTRATORS](#), [OSCAR-WINNERS / AWARD-WINNERS](#), [RECOMMENDED TITLES](#) and [SEX & SEXUALITY](#).