

# NATIONAL FILM THEATRE PROGRAMME NOTES

15.8.1977

## Free Cinema (1 and 2)

Free Cinema, whether as a specific historical movement or an a genre or as an aspiration, has been defined, written about or attacked in terms so various that it isn't surprising there is now a great deal of confusion as to what exactly the term implies. Perhaps it is best to start with its simple historical derivation.

In the mid-fifties, a period of complete stagnation in the British Cinema, a number of young film-makers, or aspirant film-makers, were working on different projects, most of them quite un-ambitious, but without any real idea of how they could be presented to the public or to the critics. There was Lorenza Mazzetti, a young Italian art student at the Slade, who had shown the British Film Institute her amateur version of Kafka's METAMORPHOSIS, and had managed to get money from the B.F.I. for a more ambitious project to be shot on 35mm. This was called THE GLASS MARBLE and concerned the adventures of two deaf mutes in the East End of London (probably inspired in some measure by Carson McCullert's THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER). The B.F.I. had also just begun activity with its Production Fund, and Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson (then just about to start with the new English Stage Company at the Royal Court) had been funded to make a film about a jazz club in Wood Green, MOMMA DON'T ALLOW. I myself had completed, some years before, a short 16mm impression of Dreamland, the Margate "fun fair" which I had called O DREAMLAND. This had never been shown to anybody except a few friends – for want of anywhere to show it.

In late 1955 Lorenza Mazzetti was sitting in despair in a B.F.I. cellar, quite unable to piece together the bits of her shooting on THE GLASS MARBLE. It had been a sort of crucifixion for her since naturally funds were inadequate. She had been deserted by her collaborators, and she had no real technical knowledge or capacity herself. There had been a good deal of jealousy and back-biting about Lorenza since many people thought (quite mistakenly) that she was pretentious and amateurish and should not have been supported by the B.F.I. I have to admit to being affected by these rumours, though I never met her until the autumn of 1955, when she came up to me after a screening of THURSDAY'S CHILDREN and explained her despair. Her predicament was now urgent, since within a week there was going to be a meeting of the Film Institute Committee responsible, and it looked as though they were going to impound and shelve the whole project. I suggested to Lorenza that she screen me the material and I would see if there was anything helpful I could say or do. The next day we saw the rushes and rough assembly of THE GLASS MARBLE at the old National Film Theatre: I was immediately impressed and moved and excited by what I saw and told Lorenza that I would undertake to supervise the completion of the picture if she was willing to work with me. She was, and of course the Committee was delighted to be relieved of its responsibility. We set to work editing the picture; I got Welter Lassally to do some extra shooting and John Fletcher came in to help with the editing and to record sound. The picture was completed and given its new title, TOGETHER, by the end of the year.

Talking with Karel, Tony and Lorenza about the miserable difficulty of getting our work shown I came up with the idea (at least I think it was me) that we should form ourselves

into a Movement, should formulate some kind of Manifesto, and thereby grab the attention of the press and try to get a few days showing at the National Film Theatre. Fortunately I had O DREAMLAND on my shelf, and the three films O DREAMLAND, MOMMA DON'T ALLOW and TOGETHER, seemed to fit together miraculously well, to make a programme which we called "Free Cinema". Interestingly and appropriately, Free Cinema was not invented for the occasion, but derived from an article in "Sequence" some six years before. This had been an article on the American avant-garde, sent from New York by Alan Cook (now one of Britain's leading television directors): I had done my usual re-writing job on the piece, trying to give it a more general flavour and therefore more importance, and I had come up with the term "Free Cinema" to describe the kind of independent work it was dealing with. It seemed to suit our purpose admirably, so we called ourselves "The Committee for Free Cinema", managed to get four days showings from the National Film Theatre and set about making our "Manifesto".

The scheme succeeded. We managed to attract attention from the press and from television (then of course in its infancy - but we did manage to get ourselves interviewed on "Panorama" by Richard Dimbleby) and the show made a considerable mark. It's worth emphasising that when we started, we had no particular intention of carrying on with our Movement. Free Cinema was devised for a specific purpose – the launching of O DREAMLAND, MOMMA DON'T ALLOW and TOGETHER. But some months later an American documentary director, Lionel Rogosin, arrived in London with a copy of a film called ON THE BOWERY, which he was trying to sell to distributors. We saw the film, and were tremendously impressed and tried to think of some way of helping Rogosin. The obvious thing seemed to be to present a second Free Cinema programme, featuring ON THE BOWERY, and including a couple of sympathetic short films. Again the plan succeeded and, as a result of the National Film Theatre showing and considerable press coverage, Lionel Rogosin managed to get distribution for ON THE BOWERY.

By this time Karel Reisz had managed to get himself a job with the Ford Motor Company to produce their advertising films. He did this only on condition that they allowed him to produce a series of non-advertising documentary films, which would give him and others the opportunity to start film-making more seriously. The Ford Motor Company agreed, and we devised a "series" title, LOOK AT BRITAIN. (This, it must be remembered was the time of the New Left, and a hopeful rekindling of ambition and vitality. It didn't last very long, but long enough for some good work to be done). Karel asked me to make the first film in the LOOK AT BRITAIN series, and this turned out to be EVERY DAY EXCEPT CHRISTMAS, a film about the Market at Covent Garden. I hadn't any particular interest in Covent Garden before starting the film, but I thought I might as well choose something that featured vehicles in it, which might make Ford more keen about continuing their series. The obvious way to launch EVERY DAY EXCEPT CHRISTMAS was with another Free Cinema programme: this, Free Cinema 3, included a portion of an early film I myself had made in Wakefield about the local newspaper, called WAKEFIELD EXPRESS. Another film we included in that programme was the first work by a young Hungarian refugee, Robert Vas, called REFUGE ENGLAND: Robert Vas is now of course the BBC's most eminent and creative television documentary director.

By now we were into our stride, and could see that it was worth keeping Free Cinema alive. Free Cinema 4 introduced to Britain for the first time two directors of the French

New Wave - Claude Chabrol (with LE BEAU SERGE) and François Truffaut (with LES MISTONS). This was followed (Free Cinema 5) with a selection of "black documentaries" from Poland - where there was now considerable stirring against orthodoxy. This featured the first showing in Britain of Roman Polanski's TWO MEN AND A WARDROBE.

Free Cinema 6 launched the film with which Karel Reisz followed EVERY DAY EXCEPT CHRISTMAS in the LOOK AT BRITAIN series - WE ARE THE LAMBETH BOYS. (It also launched Mike Grigsby, now a shining light at Granada, with his first film, ENGINEMEN). By this time, EVERY DAY EXCEPT CHRISTMAS had won a Venice Grand Prix (greatly to the chagrin of the British Selection Committee, which had refused to enter it officially on the grounds that it didn't show an aspect of Britain which merited official publicity). And WE ARE THE LAMBETH BOYS, which also won great interest and acclaim, went on to win the Grand Prix at the Tours Documentary Festival. These successes, unfortunately, did not prevent the Ford Motor Company from withdrawing their sponsorship from the series, as they felt it wasn't paying off sufficiently well in terms of direct advertising. (The films cost rather less than five thousand pounds apiece, less than a TV commercial today). We found ourselves without sponsorship from any but the obvious commercial sources: unfortunately, the Grierson school of documentarists, by then entrenched in positions of sponsorship, were not very sympathetic to our efforts as we were not particularly flattering about their accomplishments. So we decided to bring Free Cinema to a decisive end, and we launched WE ARE THE LAMBETH BOYS with the statement that this would be the "last Free Cinema".

But of course Free Cinema rapidly came, and by intention, to stand for a whole approach to film-making, and not just a label for films that had been shown in the original Free Cinema programmes. It is in this sense that some of the films in these two programmes can properly be called examples of Free Cinema. Independent, personal and poetic these may shortly be defined as the necessary characteristics of the genre. "Personal" did not imply, and does not imply, onanistic. It would be quite wrong to label the Free Cinema films as "socialist" or even necessarily left-wing, but all of them displayed, explicitly or implicitly, awareness of the social situation of the artist. It is in this respect that the defeat of the tradition in the mid-sixties, whether by exile, or by commercialism, or by the enticements of a swinging style, is most deeply to be regretted.

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