

*Taken from Ellis John (ed.), 1951-1976: British Film Institute Productions, London: British Film Institute, 1977*

## FREE CINEMA

'THESE FILMS ARE FREE in the sense that their statements are entirely personal. Though their moods and subjects differ, the concern of each of them is with some aspect of life as it is lived in this country today.'

'... these films, and those to follow, are offered as a challenge to orthodoxy. Most of them, so far, have been produced outside the framework of the film industry though not without the help of the industry. This has meant that their directors have been able to express their own viewpoints, sometimes unusual, without obligation to subscribe to the technical or social conventions imposed on work under commercial conditions.'

'Why do we not use the cinema? ... Why do so many thinking people not take a more active interest in an art so popular? And is it not time that artists whose convictions are humanist started to consider a little more seriously their relationship with their audience, the kind of use that can best be made of these mass media, so that their art be neither exclusive and snobbish, nor stereotyped and propagandist - but vital, illuminating, personal and refreshing?'

These quotations are taken from the introductions to a number of the Free Cinema programmes shown at the National Film Theatre between 1956 and 1959 (there were six programmes in all). They contain nearly all the strands which made up the movement as it first emerged through the screening of three films in February 1956 - *O Dreamland*, *Momma Don't Allow*, and *Together* - under the title of Free Cinema. That programme, and those shown subsequently, had been organised by a group of people, which included Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz, John Fletcher and Walter Lassally, who were sometimes known as the 'Committee for Free Cinema'. 'Free' rather than 'experimental' in order to emphasise that they understood their work as neither introverted nor esoteric, nor was their concern primarily with technique. 'Free' also as an expression of opposition to the way British film-making was organised at that time: it involved a hostility to the industry's conventions of style and technique - the insistence on studio rather than location shooting, the preference for investing huge sums in a prestige production rather than finance several more modest - and therefore, in their view, probably better films. It was also an opposition to the monopoly operating in film distribution, and the refusal of producers and distributors to consider films which were different, controversial. Here was involved not only the radical demand for an 'independent cinema', using 16 mm rather than 35 mm (still considered an 'amateurs' gauge') but also a concern to show that good films were just as (if not more) likely to be made on small budgets as large.

The antipathy to dominant British film-making of the time was combined with a desire to develop a different kind of film-making in Britain. The articles in *Sequence and Sight* and *Sound* already showed this - the admiration of John Ford, Minnelli and others working in Hollywood, the interest in new European films - the New Wave as it became called - this was the critical position from which Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson came to make their films. In this critical position they had much in common with similar movements of film-makers and critics in France, Italy, Eastern Europe and America at this time. Startlingly different however was the kind of film being made by the group - and the tradition in which they were working. *O Dreamland*, *Momma*

*Don't Allow*, *Nice Time* are all conventionally called documentaries; yet they are in marked contrast to the work of documentarists in the '30s, Grierson, etc., the British film avant-garde. It was a tradition which the Free Cinema group rejected except in the work of Humphrey Jennings, who was in any case an odd-man-out in the documentary movement. Jennings was admired most for the personal, and poetic, vision he expressed in his films, transforming 'conventional' war documentaries into moving allegories of the times.

That Free Cinema was a movement of essentially documentary film-making was not simply a question of tradition. Rather it reflected a belief that the cinema was an art, but also an art which if it did not have a direct relationship to society, would be trivial and insipid. Hence the concern for 'commitment' so strongly expressed in the manifestos and, for instance, by Lindsay Anderson in a number of articles on film criticism and on film-making. Commitment was both for cinema and for people. It was shown in the group's hostility to the typical film criticism of the time, which failed to take film and film culture seriously and which invariably reinforced the implicit snobbery and elitism of most British films where 'the functions of working-class characters are chiefly comic, where they are not villainous. They make excellent servants, good tradesmen, and first-class soldiers' (Lindsay Anderson, *Get Out and Push*). It was a concern to present real people in the cinema, to show contemporary life, to expose its beauty, and ugliness; to show people as individuals and as members of the community, in real situations, neither romantically nor snobbishly. The politics behind this commitment were not particularly radical, perhaps best expressed again by Lindsay Anderson: 'But one thing is certain: in the values of humanism, and in their determined application to our society lies the future. All we have to do is to believe in them.' It led, however, to a brief association by the Free Cinema with the New Left, and with *Universities and Left Review* which ended in disillusion when it became clear that their interests in the cinema were fundamentally different. Uninterested in making propaganda films for Right or Left, the Free Cinema group wanted films which were not only socially committed but were also art.

This was the other aspect of 'commitment' which Free Cinema sought to express - the commitment by the filmmaker to his or her own personal response. Free Cinema was free, then, not only of commercial constraints but also of artistic constraints. Art was understood as personal expression and the films were deliberate attempts to present reality not just as it is, but through the individual vision of the film-maker, hence able to show not just its 'surface' but also its depth, its meaning (this is especially true of, for instance, *O Dreamland*, and most of the British films shown as Free Cinema). It was, in fact, a belief that films should offer personal interpretations of their subjects; that there is no such thing as objectivity, and that therefore film-makers have the same responsibility as every other artist of the time: to make a statement.

Free Cinema was more of an assertion than a movement; it existed most concretely in the six programmes of films shown at the National Film Theatre which were intended to show what the group valued in the cinema and in particular the work of young contemporary film-makers, and by showing such films, to encourage other films to be made. Not all of the films were made by members of the Committee or even by those in the looser group which broadly subscribed to the ideas expressed in the manifestos. The second, fourth and fifth programmes contained films which the group felt were made along the kind of lines it was pursuing. Included were two American documentaries, *Le Sang des Bêtes* by Georges Franju, a series of Polish films including ones made by Borowczyk, Lenica and Polanski, and a programme called 'French Renewal' with films by

Francois Truffaut and Claude Chabrol. Even with the British-made films there were many differences; they were made over six years between 1953 and 1959. The films were not made in collaboration but rather emerged as a group following their inclusion in the Free Cinema programme. Of the eleven British films shown, six were sponsored wholly or partly by the British Film Institute's Experimental Film Fund, and two by the Ford Motor Company in its Look at Britain series. Although essentially personal films, members of the 'group' did assist on each other's films, and in particular the names of John Fletcher and Walter Lassally recur on the credits for several films, handling editing/sound recording and photography respectively. It was a result of Lindsay Anderson's involvement in *Together*, as supervising editor, that the first programme came about. Lorenza Mazetti had already shot the film but was having difficulty finishing it, not least because of lack of facilities. Anderson was brought in to help in the editing, together with John Fletcher, and Walter Lassally who did some extra shooting. As Anderson says 'I saw the material ... and I thought this must be finished'. It was, *Together*, with a film just finished by Tony Richardson and Karel Reisz (*Momma Don't Allow*), and Lindsay Anderson's *O Dreamland*, that made up the first programme put on as Free Cinema in February 1956.

The three other films shown which were financed by the Experimental Film Fund were *Nice Time* by Claude Goretta and Alain Tanner, in the second programme; and *Refuge England* by Robert Vas, and *Enginemen* by Michael Grigsby, in the sixth programme. Vas and Grigsby were both members of Unit 5/7, a group of young film-makers who had pooled resources and equipment to develop further film-making amongst themselves. The Unit was interested in socially committed documentary along very similar lines to those put forward by Free Cinema and clearly grew out of a complementary impetus, taking even further the concern to develop independent production of films, although this also reflected necessity. The group was primarily Manchester-based and many of its members worked in television; it produced a periodic newsletter for its members and supporters, among whom were the members of the Committee for Free Cinema.

The British Free Cinema Films, in terms of being 'free from constraints and conventions of commercial production', were very successful. As documentaries they were very unlike conventional documentaries of the time - their subjects were quite different (the jazz-club of *Momma Don't Allow*, Piccadilly Circus and young people enjoying a night out in *Nice Time*) and they were filmed without the usual preconceptions, allowing the images themselves to 'speak'. There is also the marked intimacy of the observation deriving very much from the willingness to use close-ups and to take the camera (and sound) right into crowds, participating in the activities and actions of its subjects, which had been made possible by technical developments of lighter and more flexible equipment and faster film-stock.

Most of the films adopt a reportage-style in filming, using direct-sound in many cases, and usually dispensing with a commentary, allowing snatches of conversation or background noise to alternate or combine with accompanying music. The photography was very important, the choice of angles, the placing of a shot. But equally important was editing, with the extensive use of montage techniques and sound-image disjunctions. Through this, and by using simple dramatisation (or, as in *Together*, taking a story and filming it as a documentary) the film-makers produced films not of what 'things really "look like" but how they really are'.

In assessing Free Cinema it must be remembered that it was not a major film-making movement like that of the documentarists of the '30s. Beyond the films and manifestos of the programmes at the NFT it was much more diffuse, being part of an earlier engagement with film criticism, and subsequently leading to documentary work in television (especially the Unit 5/7 group) and also to involvement in feature films - *Saturday Night* (Karel Reisz), *A Taste of Honey*, *Tom Jones* (Tony Richardson), *This Sporting Life, If . . .* (Lindsay Anderson). Free Cinema's attempt to assert an independent film-making and 16 mm film production essentially failed in the face of lack of sources of finance beyond the traditional sponsored-documentary, and the very limited sums of the Experimental Film Fund, together with the impossibility of obtaining distribution for the films given the stranglehold of the distribution companies. Despite the huge success of the programmes at the NFT, and the widespread critical acclaim for many of the films, distributors were reluctant to book them in their commercial programmes; *Every Day Except Christmas* (produced by Ford Motor Company) was even refused screening by the BBC as not its sort of material'. Given this, Karel Reisz perhaps sums up best what the movement had been: 'Free Cinema was an attempt by some of us to form a group, and to attack current values in the English cinema, not by newspaper articles, but by films themselves ... but the worth of these films, if they have any, lies in the film and not in the movement'.