

# Gavin Lambert **FREE CINEMA**

*“I want so much that we should create a life in common, a new spirit, a spirit of unanimity between a few of us who are desirous in spirit, that we should add our lives together, to make one tree, each of its free and producing in his separate fashion, but all of its together forming one spring, a unanimous blossoming. It needs that we be one in spirit, that is all.”*

D. H. Lawrence, **Letter to Katherine Mansfield**, 1915.

The makers of the three films, *Together* (directed by Lorenza Mazzetti from a story by Denis Horne), *O Dreamland* (by Lindsay Anderson) and *Momma Don't Allow* (by Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson), that formed such an exciting programme at the National Film Theatre in February, disclaimed in a programme note the specific idea of a “movement” - the films came together, were shown together, that is to say, by chance. When they came together, their creators felt they had an “attitude in common” and the programme was christened Free Cinema. In fact, the common attitude and the “new spirit” are less fortuitous than the programme note suggests; of course each film has its own distinct personality, each was separately and independently conceived (and *O Dreamland* was made more than a year before the other two); but it is not fortuitous that the same names appear on the credits of each – Walter Lassally photographed *Momma Don't Allow* and did some additional photography for *Together*, John Fletcher was cameraman and assistant on *O Dreamland*, editor and recordist for the other two films, Lindsay Anderson was Supervising editor for *Together*. Until one saw the films in the same programme, it was obviously impossible to realise how they might complement and illuminate each other; but, before this, it was clear that people – desirous in spirit – were working together, by a combination of accident and design.

The parallel with Lawrence is perhaps important, because his idea of a movement sprang from non-conformism, from impatience with convention, sadness about urban life, a sense of isolation from the main social and artistic developments of his time, the mechanisation of life around him, and a desire to regain contact with a more vital, individual force: with what he called the “freedom of the soul”, with what the makers of Free Cinema call “a belief in freedom, in the importance of people and in the significance of the everyday”. Beneath these three films lie aspirations and discontents very similar.

In the cinema today, particularly in this country, such beliefs, such criticisms, are not easy to express. But it is no exaggeration to say that, without them, no cinema can live. Thus *Together*, *O Dreamland* and *Momma Don't Allow*, are important not only in themselves but for the challenge they represent.

## II

In the broadest sense, *Together* and *O Dreamland* are films of protest; they are not conceived in the sweeping terms of, say, *L'Age d'Or*, but the camera-eye they turn on society – “society” is really too big and anonymous a word, it is better to say “life now” – is disenchanted, sad, occasionally ferocious and bitter. Watching Lindsay Anderson's account of the English sampling pleasures at a seaside funfair, or Lorenza Mazzetti's story of two deaf-mutes imprisoned in silence, loneliness and misunderstanding in the drab, strange streets and rooms of London's East End, one realises that the “significance of the everyday” does not include the discovery of the secret of happiness. If compassion is explicit in Lorenza Mazzetti's film,

implicit in Lindsay Anderson's, it is the most rigorous, difficult and austere kind of compassion: not for the moment or the particular situation, but a kind of permanent temperamental heartache for the world and the people apparently lost in it. The child watching "Torture Through the Ages", the shabby bulky women obsessed with their mechanical gambling, the family gaping at caged animals shrinking in their squalid little zoo, seem as lost, as helpless, as fettered as the deaf-mutes mocked by a band of children on their morning walk across the bombsite, enduring mealtimes under the impatient, affronted supervision of their landlady.

In *Momma Don't Allow*, it is true, there is a kind of happiness. Into the Wood Green Jazz Club – a hired room in a London pub – come the young typists, students, butcher boys, dentist's assistants, shop-girls, to dance to the Chris Barber band. As they improvise their own movements to the music, now rapt and slow, now swift and intricate, they move into another, an imagined world. For an evening they are free. But that is all; the return is the point of departure, the obscure indifferent everyday, of which the few opening glimpses appear sadly insignificant. Perhaps that is the significance of their escape...

No doubt of it, this is the world in which we live. In seizing upon these aspects—the anonymity of urban life, the aimless lonely figures swallowed up in the greater loneliness of the crowd, the pleasures hideous and mechanical or imaginatively aspiring—these film-makers compel above all the shock of recognition. How is it these images, so redolent of the times, have hardly appeared on our screen before? Trying to remember, fragmentary glimpses recur: the films of Jennings, the service dance in *Listen to Britain* and the riverside funeral in *Fires Were Started*, but the climate of life was different then, and in a time of war, of collective effort, an atmosphere of purpose and definite meaning enveloped these solitary pleasures and tragedies. One remembers the candid camera interviews with slum-dwellers in *Housing Problems*, and here again there was social purpose, propagandist fervour, the prospects of clearance and new homes. Now there is no war; no peace to look forward to; many of these people are living in better, newer homes. And it is still sad. Isolation of the individual, isolation of the crowd, isolation of escape – this is what one senses behind the Free Cinema programme, is why perhaps the films most strongly complement each other. "This is the world," the makers quote Dylan Thomas. "Have faith..."

### III

"This is the world..." In *Together*, some bleak East End backgrounds succeed the credit titles, then two deaf-mutes walk across a bombsite, followed by children who torment them with innocent cruelty. They are young, one is slender, open, friendly, with tousled hair and a ready, embracing smile; the other thickset, brooding, withdrawn, a little older. This walk, and the grimacing children, sets the pattern of their days. They work in the docks; they share a room in a lodging house, the landlady sharp and mistrustful, her husband ineffectually good-natured; they go to a pub, watch the juke-box fed, the people singing and dancing to music they cannot hear; sometimes there are tensions between them—one wants to go out for the evening, the other is tired, depressed, huddles on his bed. The younger one sees a dancer in a fairground, meets her in the pub, and has a dream that night of loving and being loved. As he wakes up in the morning his friend is pouring cold water from a jug into the washbasin. . . . When the younger one dies accidentally pushed by one of the children into the river, as he leans over the bridge, staring at the water—no one takes any notice. (Will the other ever discover what happened?) The river flows on, the dredgers roar, a barge passes; someone has died—and this too is part of the significant obscurity of everyday.

*Together* is a poet's film. Its method is secret, intuitive, visionary; dispensing wit explicit narrative structure, it falls into a series of episodes, deliberately unemphatic, deliberately avoiding the dramatic climax. Things are repeated—the walking around, the children's savage games, the visits to the pub, the meals in the lodging house, the going to sleep and getting up in the little tunnel of a room. The flow of the film is the flow of these two lives, isolated and joined together. A little episode, buying shoelaces in the market, breaks the routine for a moment; a greater one, seeing the girl in the fairground, disturbs it with dreams. The East End backgrounds, the grey riverside, the derelict open spaces where bombs fell, the crowds at the market and, more raffish and fantastic, in the pubs, the slanting cobbled streets and high tenement buildings, are in a sense realistic – shot on location, simply lit and composed – yet the total impression is not quite real. The melancholy of the film has seeped into them and has subtly dyed their appearance. In themselves the images may be desolate, yet their real, inner desolation comes from the director, from the scenes to which they are inanimate witnesses. So an image in itself very ordinary, the barge passing along the Thames at the end, carries tragedy with it: a symbol of time, indifference and oblivion that seems unforced and deeply sad.

From this penetration of the ordinary, *Together* derives its interior power. Unobtrusively yet relentlessly, the slow rhythm of the film catches the mood of the two lives and their surroundings, as each be-ins to counterpoint the other. The method is an extension of Zavattini's; *Together* undramatises life, so to speak, even more severely than *Umberto D.* Not that it is unselective – on the contrary, it merely rejects what most story-tellers in this instance would select, and selects what they would reject. The result is like walking around in a strange place and letting things happen to you – there is no preparation and no explanation. Such is the life to which the two deaf-mutes are condemned. And its meaning? The real vision, perhaps, is of the extraordinary seen through the ordinary. Hence the perplexity of the clergyman on the TV programme in which the film was discussed, and the incensed viewers who wrote that the film was an insult to deaf-mutes and the makers should have their ears cut off; for *Together* is not *about* how deaf-mutes live in the East End of London now. It is a film of two worlds – the one that we see, and the one that the deaf-mutes symbolically project in an almost Kafka-like fashion, a world of anxiety, helplessness and solitude.

The problem raised by the film's method is of sustaining an inner development with so little outside help. In *Umberto D.* there were scenes (the landlady and her musical evenings) that seemed too conventionally dramatised in comparison with the rest. In *Together* there is, in the last twenty minutes, a slackening of inner tension. (Perhaps too it was a mistake to let the child be responsible for the death; it might have been more tragic if the accident had been pure, unmotivated, a completely impersonal affair with no visible human agency.) Here, in fact, by pushing Zavattini's method to its limits, the film exposes them; there is a point at which the everyday the "human moment", needs perspective if it is to retain meaning; there is a line beyond which repetition becomes merely repetitious and dulls itself. *Together* occasionally crosses it. Nor, incidentally, has the soundtrack, an often exciting, evocative blend of music and effects, the same sustained singleness of purpose as the images. Its inconsistencies (sometimes natural sounds are recorded, sometimes not) are clearly designed to match the non-reality of the film as a whole, but are occasionally disconcerting.

These reservations do not effect the essential quality of the film, its daring conception and personal style, its strange, intense and delicate mood reinforced by the telling uniformity of style imposed on the non-professional players (Michael Andrews and Eduardo Paolozzi, painter and sculptor respectively, giving an astonishing truth to their roles), and the quiet, melodic lines of Daniele Paris's music.

The method of *O Dreamland*, shot on 16 mm. by Lindsay Anderson in 1953, is the reverse. The first time, it is like a blow in the face; the second, one approaches it with a kind of eager dread. For ten minutes it assaults eye and ear with a rough-edged but sharp-centred impression of this South Coast amusement park, in which the ugliness and degradation of most of the distractions offered are symbolised by the mocking mechanical laughter of a dummy sailor. There is a working model of the execution of the “atom spies”, the Rosenbergs, which reconstructs the ritual for sixpence at the door; equally, a hanging may be viewed as often as someone cares to put a penny in the slot, and a lifesize Joan of Arc, looking something like the heroine of a touring pantomime twenty years ago, is burnt at the stake; while “Torture Through the Ages” dramatises the ordeals of boiling oil, thumbscrews, etc. Yet, whether the rendezvous is with violent death or a smutty peepshow, with a fire-eater or a gambling machine, a listless caged animal or an old mug of tea, reactions appear the same. People stare – a child blinks suddenly, an enormous woman creaks forward to reveal one stocking rolled below the knee, a family stands to watch the firebrand entering the mouth as if waiting for a bus, and even the gaunt women at the gambling tables are like a factory line, mechanically engrossed in routine. Signs of real vitality are produced by greed – the man watching the crane, as it nearly scoops a trinket, with an expression of rigid lust-by the juke-box music of Frankie Laine and Muriel Smith to which the girls giggle, sway, get hep, link arms in cowboy hats, and by the thrill of physical motion – the great aerial contraptions that look like spaceships, shooting diagonally up and down past each other and provoking laughter, mock-terror and a feverish elation.

Everything is ugly. A *papier-maché* facade with a swollen, grimacing gargoyle, an immense “artistic” statue representing a coyly nude pseudo-classical figure, a “Swiss beer garden” in which local music and yodelling emanate from twitching, squeaking puppets, the steaming, slippery, greasy trays of food labelled SAUSAGES and ONIONS in the Happy Family Restaurant; feet shuffle clumsily across ground fouled with all kinds of litter, buttocks encased in grey, shapeless material spread and crease over stools at counters; and all the time the sleek charabancs pour in. It is almost too much. The nightmare is redeemed by the point of view, which, for all the unsparing candid camerawork and the harsh, inelegant photography, is emphatically humane. Pity, sadness, even poetry is infused into this drearily tawdry, aimlessly hungry world. It is infused by imaginative comment-the counterpoint of sound and image, with Frankie Laine's passionately emetic “I Believe” blaring over the shot of the imprisoned lion pacing its cage like a creature in an endless dream, with the drawling cry of Muriel Smith's “Kiss me – Thrill me” rhythmically matching the spaceships as they cross in mid-air - but even more by the director's absolute fidelity to his subject.

The unexpected image tells. A haggard, elderly woman in a salad-bowl hat calmly, almost fatalistically drinks her tea; a plump, derisive one points at the “artistic” statue and staggers with laughter, a derelict little row of tramps and nomads chew their lunchtime sandwiches; the trio of girls lights up with ecstatic vivacity as the juke-box plays their favourite tune – and protest at this anonymous, bedraggled search for happiness turns into compassion, into love. All these people, one realises, are seeking something they will probably never find. The Rosenbergs die again and they bleakly, willingly stare-but there is nothing perverse about it, only a kind of uncertain passivity, an oppressive, sometimes intolerable sense of loss and deprivation. The pleasures are sad not because they are ugly but because there is nothing else. Where else should they go? At the end, the camera moves swiftly, vertiginously up to a panoramic view of Dreamland twinkling and blaring in the night-and it is like a plea for release.

In *Momma Don't Allow* there is the suggestion of a more real escape. The film celebrates a piece of urban folklore in the making. The movements created by the young dancers are often surprisingly complex and beautiful; evolving out of the music, of the mood as it comes and goes, they also suggest a curious abstraction from life. Costume plays a minor part—there is a youth with the Teddy Boy hairstyle and velvet-collared suit, a girl with a bold treble clef patterned on her white sweater—and at times the couples seem wholly remote from each other, each dancer preoccupied with his own movements, creating his own vacuum, occasionally, as if by chance, coming together for a moment with his partner; at other times an instinctive rapport apparently exists between a couple, and the excitement, the rhythmic responses, are shared. Compared with country folklore (the astonishing Cornish dance recorded by Alan Lomax in his *film Oss Oss Wee Oss*, for instance, with its festive costumes, mythological props and sexual tensions), the result is finally rather bleak. Partly this comes from the film's refusal to over-dramatise its material – this jazz club is not on the sex, violence and marijuana fringe, but more like a specialised community centre. Partly, though, it comes from a lack of definition in the makers' attitude.

*Momma Don't Allow* begins with a sequence showing the jazz enthusiasts arriving at the club for an after-work evening; the intention, evidently, is to evoke and illuminate their everyday backgrounds. Pleasantly observed as the shots are, however, they are not particularly revealing, and the contrast between the dancers' ordinary, obligatory world and the world of their imagination never emerges very sharply. For all its attractive skill, its sympathetic and unforced presentation of people – no doubt this is the first time in a British film that Teddy Boys and shop-girls are allowed to be themselves, undistorted by a patronising or melodramatic approach—the film is not quite a personal statement. It wants to do more than record, but when it sets out to interpret (as in the prologue, the little episode of misunderstanding between one couple, the satirically treated arrival of the “slumming” rich), it seems hampered by a note of reservation, it becomes almost commonplace.

The jazz club, whether its emotional level be feverish or relaxed, is a contemporary symbol. What one looks for in *Momma Don't Allow* is a clue to the symbol. “It is the freedom, exuberance and vitality of this world that we set out to capture and to admire,” its makers say in a programme note. Yet how free and exuberant in this context, one wonders, is it? Placed against the true folk dance, with its wealth of reference to inherited custom and mythology, its symbolic display, the self-expression here seems fairly limited. Folk dance is an affirmation of character—people reveal themselves in it, make an imaginative comment on their lives, part conscious, part unconscious. Here no such revelation is made; the dancing just happens, people are the same at the beginning and the end. Perhaps, if the prologue had been more penetrating, and complemented by an epilogue showing the dancers going home again, returning to their everyday lives, a real perspective would have been gained. As it is, the surface detail is nearly always very good, there is a freshness and affection about it that is genuinely personal, but the final impression is of an activity too isolated, too unrelated to the life from which it springs.

## V

The immediate genesis of these films is easily explained. *O Dreamland* was shot by Lindsay Anderson, for a total cost of less than £100, with privately raised funds, after the making of *Thursday's Children*. *Momma Don't Allow* and *Together* were sponsored by the British Film Institute's Experimental Production Fund. The other films financed entirely or in part by the Fund are, however, different; they form an original and eclectic group (notably the vivacious Anthony Gross-Hector Hoppin cartoon of *Round the World in Eighty Days* and the technical experiment of *The Door in the Wall*), but they are not “engaged.”

Thus *Together*, *Momma Don't Allow* and *O Dreamland* stand out sharply on their own, as the first signs for some time of a fundamentally progressive, personal approach to exploring contemporary life in this country through the cinema. Except for the documentary movement founded by Grierson, the avant-garde in British films has been a series of isolated achievements, not a movement forged by solidarities; and even in the documentaries of the 30's there were two diverging streams – the urgent, propagandist actuality of *Housing Problems* and *Children at School*, the more formal experiments of *Coalface* and *Nightmail*. It is the first group that seems most vital today, together with the films of Humphrey Jennings, that extraordinary, tender and socially acute poet who, through his own original vision, effectively fused both approaches, combining a passionate interpretation of actuality with his own genius for formal expression. Otherwise, it is a question of individual films – the genuine frivolity and inventive exuberance of Asquith's *Shooting Stars*, the cynical, uneasy world of melodrama evoked by Hitchcock in the late 20's and 30's, the separate essays in the comedy of manners (in which the English can display such a perverse, fantastic brilliance), *Major Barbara*, *On Approval*, *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, and Olivier's experiments with Shakespeare. The most striking factor in all these cases was the revelation of temperament, of unmistakable personal attitude. All these films illuminated; many others have recorded, more or less skilfully, more or less shrewdly, but without the passion of the true poet, the true interpreter, the true satirist, that alone can create a work of art. Our cinema has suffered intermittently since birth from two weaknesses-lack of concern with vital contemporary issues and a consequent isolation from many important factors of national life, and a tendency to confuse half-art with real art. The second is the outcome of the first. However brilliant the trappings, the stylistic effects, the incidental observation, if the world itself is too narrow and enclosed, the result will be, in the long run, thin and impermanent.

No doubt the lack of imaginative concern with the real, the changing world here made the revelation of the post-war Italian cinema even more powerful. Already, more than four years ago, Paul Dickson's *David* showed its influence and built its own cornerstone, using a "real" person to create a central portrait of compassion and authority, and humanising its "real" locations in a way that only Jennings had done before. It was, sadly, a film without issue – for itself and its maker. Or so, for some time, it seemed; because, in the perspective of Free Cinema, it also takes its place as a characteristic work of the younger generation.

The films make it clear that the argument that the English can never be "natural" actors is a myth. Fewer of them are, no doubt, than the Italians or the French, than the Americans probably. There are stronger barriers of reserve to be broken down. But, in their separate ways, the figure of *David*, the jazz enthusiasts of *Momma Don't Allow*, the amateur players of *Together* (drawn from widely contrasting social and professional levels), to say nothing of the children in *Thursday's Children*, expose the myth. And *O Dreamland*, of course, suggests rich possibilities for the candid camera style – one can imagine equivalent films of mass observation on, say, a holiday camp, or the Derby, or a day-trip to France. . . Here, at any rate, are "real" people in dramatised situations, conveying their own truth and illustrating human behaviour in a way that, it is no exaggeration to say, has never (Jennings excepted) appeared before on the British screen.

The films also penetrate a milieu. How completely or fully they succeed is less important than the fact that they bring so much; where has one seen this strange, sad, elusive yet tangible East End of *Together* before? Or the phenomenon of *Dreamland*? Or Teddy-Boys and shop-girls simply, unconcernedly enjoying their own pleasures?

The films were made with small units, outside the studio, and their total cost-as has been widely remarked-is less than that of a single newsreel. *O Dreamland* was made by two people; *Momma Don't Allow* by its two directors, its cameraman and sound recordist, and four

voluntary assistants; Together, on 35 mm., by a unit of three with occasional voluntary help. The cinema is still much less costly than its accumulated apparatus suggests, and if everyone who worked on these films had been paid at normal rates their budgets would still have been remarkably low. Without the British Film Institute Fund, of course, it is doubtful whether the last two would have been made at all but the important fact is that they have been, and the lesson is there.

At present, distribution policies and A.C.T. regulations do not favour this kind of activity, but the necessity for experiment must be realised if a tradition of vital film-making is to exist in this country, and, with it, the necessity for a more flexible, imaginative apparatus of production. This is not to suggest that any company should deliberately embark on a programme of films a l'italienne – but that the financing and distribution of a few should be considered. With the talent revealed by Free Cinema it is an obvious practical outlet for someone willing to take a chance; acceptance of the method by the professional cinema here would be a gesture of self-enrichment. The intense interest shown by the audiences at the National Film Theatre in the programme indicated, too, that what the films have to offer is meaningful, urgent-it was part of the whole experience to see them under these circumstances. Somehow, recognition was in the air; in this discovery of new aspects of contemporary life, method and intention seemed inseparable. That is the important, the necessary, point of departure.

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