

# MOVIES

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It is difficult to separate Lindsay Anderson's *IF*... from the critical hullabaloo which has accompanied it. Magazines, newspapers, TV talk shows, and advertisements have promoted "if" so much like a product that audiences are beginning to treat it like a product. (By product I mean something which was made primarily to sell, either intellectually, emotionally, or economically, and is not necessarily an honest expression of the vender.) My final impression after seeing "if"—with all its finely drawn scenes, twisted intentions, and dashed ambitions—was that it was, above all, imminently sellable.

The first hour of "if" (sections 1-5) depicts the daily routine of an English Public School. Anderson focuses on the injustice and hypocrisy which permeates every level of the school system. His concern in this section is for social justice, and on this level is not substantially different from other Hell In The Regimented Life films, "I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang," "From Here to Eternity," "The Nun's Story." Although overly long, many of the vignettes in this section are incisive; the eccentric professors, the homosexual Whips' coy persiflage. On this first level Anderson makes no pretensions of being either a revolutionary or a surreal poet.

A dramatic change occurs after the hero, Mick, and his friends are whipped for their "general attitude". (The title card announces: "Resistance".) Mick shows his friends a handful of rifle shells and the mood becomes electric. At this point I thought I was about to see a very good film. Anderson's intention, I surmised, was to take a social battle (against inhumanitarian private schools) which had already been won by conventional civil libertarian methods, and say what "if" this battle had been fought in another manner, say, violent revolution. This premise of chronological displacement is inherently interesting; it has lent excitement to even the most banal "Time travel" films. For a moment in "if" there is a great sense of anticipation.

But it soon becomes evident that Anderson is after even bigger game. Anderson will not settle for a comment on social

injustice or the workings of revolution, but wants to portray the poetry of violence. Black and white and tinted scenes increase with impunity and surrealistic events begin to occur: the homely nurse wanders nude through the boys' dormitory, the jingoistic Chaplin is supposedly shot by Mick, then appears hiding in a morgue-like drawer. On this level Anderson's chief metaphor becomes the Crusader. ("Crusaders" was the title of the original script by David Sherwin and John Howlett.) The credits list Mick and his friends as the "Crusaders". Mick romantically relates how the Crusaders flayed their victims and sent the neatly-folded skins home to the victims' families. A Latin student translates a passage which describes how, in the Crusades, children were kept behind the lines but occasionally shown front-line action to harden them as one does a whelp dog. In the final section of "if", titled "The Crusaders", Mick and his friends go "off to war" and execute administrators, instructors, students, and family alike.

This is what has caused the many critical comparisons of "if" to Jean Vigo's 1932 "Zero do Conduite". Attempting to be a

poet of violence, Anderson aspired to one of the highest echelons of film art, now sparsely populated by men like Vigo, Bunuel, Godard. Unfortunately, Anderson's surrealistic details miss the mark. We don't know what to make of these poetic intrusions; they don't fit into the film Anderson had been making thus far. The viewer doesn't suspect Anderson of pretentiousness, just of confusion. Anderson's poetry creates bafflement rather than involvement. Lindsay Anderson's inability to pull off his grand poetic ambition brings the rest of the film crashing down on itself. After Anderson has made a play for the Gold Cup and failed, the minor rewards of "if" seem inadequate. There is an acute sense of disappointment about "if", not only over the great film Anderson failed to create, but also the lesser films he passed by.

Why then has "if", which by my description seems interesting but less than masterful, caused such a critical furor? The answer, I think, is because it is packaged well. Anderson stated in a quote conspicuously displayed in the "if" flyer that "Although the film is set in the present, it is not concerned with being contemporary or up-to-the-minute; nor is it concerned with political or social problems." In other words, Anderson wants to make a film like "Zero do Conduite", an immortal poetic of schoolboy violence. But when that poetic is not achieved the viewer's attentions fall back on those many "contemporary" facets of "if"—which are not exactly disguised. The poster of Che, Establishment double-talk, animated sex-play, and "Missa Luba" all define these youth as being contemporary. And it is finally at this lowest level—the level of youth mass-cult—that the identification with "if" occurs. Many young people have responded to "if" as if it were a radical "Joanna", which of course was the least of its possibilities. Anderson's talent is so effective for the mass audience (unlike Godard's), and his subject is so immediate, that young viewers respond without concern for the film's total mind and morality. If Anderson were less of a filmmaker, this would be called packaging.

