Lindsay Anderson: *Sequence* and the rise of auteurism in 1950s Britain

ERIK HEDLING

The 1950s represents an upheaval in European film history. The financial losses of the Europeans, as compared to the Americans on the popular market, caused drastic changes within the European film industries, leading up to the continental government-subsidised film industries of the present. Even if the historical reasons for the changes in European film policies were mainly socio-economic, they were at the time mostly discussed and dealt with in aesthetic terms, and we saw eventually the emergence of the European art cinema, a new kind of film, specifically aimed at the literate and professional middle classes.

One of the most important European contributions to the film history of the 1950s was, thus, undoubtedly the sudden rise of the auteur, the film director extraordinaire and the notion of the authored art film. Sweden had Ingmar Bergman, Italy had, for instance, Fellini, Rossellini, Visconti, and Antonioni, France had the *Cahiers du Cinéma* generation, towards the end of decade represented by the breakthrough of the *nouvelle vague*, with Truffaut, Godard, Rohmer and Chabrol. Traditionally, Britain has been said to have missed out on the development of auteurism and art cinema in the 1950s, instead clinging to its traditional industrial policies of trying to (albeit unsuccessfully) compete with the Americans on the popular market. (Peter Wollen's essay on 1980s British films as 'The Last New Wave' is a good illustration of this attitude.)[1] Even if this was true for the film industry, it is not entirely so for film culture as a whole, since Britain was at least intellectually at the very core of the foundation of the European art cinema in the 1950s, even if the art films as such – in the Bordwellian sense of personal vision, loose narrative structure, ambiguity and various levels of heightened realism – were not really to emerge until the 1960s (perhaps with the exception

---

I was born in the mid-1950s and had my first overwhelming experience of the cinema watching Lindsay Anderson's *If …* in 1969. My training in England and Sweden (Lund University) as an academic in film and literature eventually led to my writing my book *Lindsay Anderson: Maverick Film-Maker* (Cassell, 1998). *Erik Hedling*

of Jack Clayton's *Room at the Top* in 1959).[2] The seeds for an art cinema and auteurist policies were to a large extent sown in 1950s Britain, not least by the journal *Sequence*, founded in 1947 and in 1952, when its critics joined *Sight and Sound*, the most prestigious British film periodical, and there pursued similar ideological concerns.

In one of the original art cinema manifestos, Alexandre Astruc's famous *caméra stylo* essay of 1948, the writer pleaded for a cinema in which the camera is handled like a pen, that is, the author/film director employs his personal instrument, the pen/camera, to express a personal vision and create a work of art.[3] Unsurprisingly, most of the would-be European authors were writers before entering cinema, eventually exchanging their pens for cameras. Antonioni was a highbrow film critic for the Italian journal *Cinema* during the war, Truffaut and his contemporaries all wrote sophisticated film criticism for *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1950s, in which Truffaut formulated the intellectual basis for auteurism, 'La politique des auteurs' in 1954, and Ingmar Bergman was an aspiring author of dramas, short stories and film scripts in Sweden in the early 1940s.[4]

Britain and *Sequence* had, among others, Lindsay Anderson, the writer who would most eloquently formulate the art cinema credo, even before Truffaut did so, and who would later become something of an auteur himself, even if he was only to direct six feature films between 1963 and 1987, from *This Sporting Life* to *The Whales of August*. He was also to be a central intellectual figure within the European art cinema, among other things organising the famous 'Free Cinema' screenings at the National Film Theatre in London in between 1956 and 1959, where many of the most well-known future European auteurs (Claude Goretta, Alain Tanner, Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Roman Polanski) were first presented to an international audience.

Lindsay Anderson joined the university film society at Oxford, where he was an English literature student, at the age of 23 in 1946. In his seminal book *About John Ford* (1981) he describes his keen interest in the cinema from an early age.[5] From the autumn of 1947, Anderson was one of the editors of the journal *Sequence*, a continuation of the Oxford University Film Society magazine, along with, from time to time, for instance, Gavin Lambert, Penelope Houston and Karel Reisz.[6] All of them would later become prominent film critics, and in the case of Reisz, along with Anderson himself, a successful director of films, both in Britain and America, of works such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981). When Anderson graduated in 1948, he and his friends continued to publish the journal from London until the beginning of 1952.

Sequence was specialist, small-circulation (never more than 5,000 copies)

and not very well known – when Charles Barr and his friends started writing in *Movie* at the beginning of the 1960s, they had never heard of it although they, of course, knew of Anderson and his writings for *Sight and Sound*. But it became a force behind a British art cinema aesthetic and an intellectual venture to be reckoned with. Two major British auteurs, Anderson and Reisz, eventually emerged from its pages, and also two later editors of *Sight and Sound*, Gavin Lambert and Penelope Houston. It also acquired a certain cult status. In the words of Brian McFarlane, 'considering how short-lived it was – a mere fourteen issues between 1947 and 1952 – it acquired a firm niche in the history of British cinema criticism. Across the intervening decades, one found tantalizing references to it in the writing about cinema, suggesting how influential it had been among those who took cinema seriously'.[7]

Paul Schrader, scriptwriter and film director, has expressed his reverence for the writings in *Sequence*, claiming that he used to keep 'all sorts of rare things, like every issue of *Sequence*' in the back of the car in which he lived in Los Angeles towards the end of the 1960s, when he was the editor of the journal *Cinema* before himself entering the film industry in the mid–1970s.[8] Not many have studied *Sequence* for its historical importance to the 1950s film debates, particularly its auteurist philosophy, or for the radical art cinema doctrine that it taught.[9] The *Sequence* writers were influenced by Romantic philosophy, such as the writings of the German poet Novalis, and by the tendencies of literary New Criticism at the time: they were, after all, students of English literature. It is easy to compare the concerns of *Sequence* to Leavisite conceptions of the author – in *Sequence*'s version the film directors – whose works of art create a fusion of form and content. Thus, they were among the first European writers to create systematically a cult of the film director, or in other words, some of the initiators of the highly influential auteurist philosophy of the 1950s. This took place without the *Sequence* writers themselves really being aware of it, as is illustrated by Anderson's own introduction, written in the 1980s, for a planned reprint of *Sequence* material. In it he states that *Sequence* 'was quite untouched by French influence and the aesthetics of *Cahiers du Cinéma*. We certainly had no time for the auteur theory. From the start we knew that the film director was the essential artist of cinema – but we also knew that films have to be written, designed, acted, photographed, edited and given sound'.[10]

The writings themselves, however, do not entirely justify this, since those of Anderson's articles that deal exclusively with personalities mainly focus on individual directors like Alfred Hitchcock, John Ford and Vincente Minnelli. In a kind of generational rebellion, the *Sequence* writers quickly wrote off most of the British cinema of the 1940s, particularly the influential

documentary doctrines of John Grierson, and his belief in the utilitarian aspects of film, which had permeated much of British film criticism up to that date. In a 1947 article called 'Angles of Approach' Anderson delivered a fierce attack on contemporary British film culture, outlining a model for a devoted politics of creation, well in line with what we would later understand as auteurism and art cinema aesthetics.[11] On the role of film criticism, Anderson wrote: 'It is the critic's first duty (and in this sense we are all critics) to perceive the object of a film and to judge its success in achieving that object. This does not mean accepting every film at its own valuation; it means allowing every film to justify itself by its own standards, not by our preconceptions'.[12] Anderson was thus advocating a basically aesthetic approach to the art of film. In a later article, 'A Possible Solution' (1948), Anderson was enthusiastic about Italian neorealism, the first real art cinema movement to emerge after World War II.[13] On the same lines he praised little-known independent British film productions, such as Clive Brook's *On Approval* (1944), summing up his argument for a creative, non-industrially based cinema like this: 'what is required is a cinema in which people can make films with as much freedom as if they were writing poems, painting pictures or composing string quartets'. He is close to Alexandre Astruc's idea of the camera-pen.[14] Cinema, then, was an art form, and not a Griersonian institution of social propaganda, and it was particularly not supposed to be a commercial industry, producing popular entertainment for the masses. Anderson' s favoured metaphors were 'poetry' and 'poet', used as a way of describing great cinematic art as well as the cinematic artist: he believed that the real poets of the cinema were to be found in countries such as France and America. In this, Anderson and *Sequence* differed dramatically from the bulk of British cinema criticism of the late 1940s and early 1950s in which the realism and narrative unity of British films was generally applauded.[15]

Even if Anderson's polemic was directed at the documentarists, he shared with them certain values and also gave them some credit. He supported their realist aesthetic, the creative use of spatial verisimilitude, but generally spurned what he thought of as the use of realism as an 'excuse' for bad films. In a review of Rossellini's *Paisa* (1946) Anderson said that

> the so-called 'Documentary approach' has no doubt its very considerable virtues. It makes for realism, for authenticity of atmosphere, for sincere if unpolished acting. But to the extent that it inhibits the artist (in this case the director) from imposing his ideas on his raw material, from exercising his right to shape and to exclude, it is not conducive to the making of masterpieces. Most directors would be all the better for a spell in the open-air (provided it didn't kill them); Rossellini one would like to see take an enforced vacation in a studio.[16]

Accordingly, the director (or poet) must shape his work according to artistic patterns, whatever the raw material. This view of realism was most clearly articulated in Anderson's article 'British Cinema: The Descending Spiral' (1949).[17] (The title alluded to a piece in *Vogue* by George Stonier, 'British Cinema: The Ascending Spiral'.)[18] In this piece, Anderson denied the documentary tradition the weight it had been given by several of his fellow critics. 'It was inevitable that British features should become more realistic as a result of the war, but whether as a result it is legitimate to associate them with the movement which started with *Drifters*, and during the war gave us many feature-influenced documentaries, is questionable.'[19] He vigorously attacked some recent British films, among them Charles Crichton's *Another Shore* (1948), Charles Frend's *Scott of the Antarctic* (1948) – the caption for the accompanying illustration sarcastically read 'The Frozen Limit' – and Harry Watt's *Eureka Stockade* (1948). All were condemned in spite of their realist pretensions.[20]

> It is ironic that, for all their determination to avoid hokum, and their sense of social and artistic responsibility, these directors end up making films whose predominant characteristic is their unreality. It is not that they lack an eye for realism, but that through inexperience or incapacity each shows inadequate grasp of what is even more important – the technique of drama. In varying degrees, particularly, their ability to characterize is weak.[21]

The ability to handle drama as well as the realistic environment – to be a poet – was to be found elsewhere.

Anderson also discussed at length the question of cinematic authorship, presenting a strong argument for the validity of the concept of director in articles such as 'Creative Elements' (1948) and 'The Director's Cinema' (1950).[22] In them Anderson outlined precisely the various contributors to cinema, ending up with a plea for the director as the primary artist of the cinema. In 'Creative Elements', Anderson says this:

> So, in this gathering together, this fusion, there must be a central figure, one man conscious of the relative significance of every shot, the shape and flow of every sequence. But he cannot stand alone; he stands with, dependent on, his author and his cameraman. No doubt in an ideal world the same man would fulfill each function, but it is no use writing criticism for an ideal world.[23]

Anderson's auteurist argument was sometimes more subtle than that of his French colleagues: compare, for instance, Truffaut's bold rhetoric in 'Une certaine tendence du cinéma français' where he frankly pronounces 'Long live audacity. You will have understood that these audacities are those of the cinema [like Renoir, Clouzot or Bresson] and no longer of scenarists, directors

and litterateurs'.[24] Although Anderson, like Truffaut and *Cahiers du Cinéma*, expressed deep admiration for European directors like the Italian neorealists, the surrealist Jean Vigo, and other auteurs canonised during the 1950s, like Renoir and Cocteau, his first directorial study, his first piece of auteur criticism proper, was the later often-quoted article 'Alfred Hitchcock', published in 1949.[25] Anderson's deep concern and search for a unique directorial style, in this case the 'Hitchcock touch', for instance in *The Lodger* (1926), is obvious: 'Most remarkable … is the rapid, ingenious style of narration. From the opening – the close-up of a man's pale hand sliding down the banister-rail as he slips quietly out of a dark house – the camera seizes on the significant details which convey the narrative point of the scene. The result is a compression which gives the film continuous excitement'.[26] This to Anderson highly original approach signified a true filmmaker, a 'poet', even if that metaphor was never used to describe Hitchcock. (Anderson would later in his own films often 'quote' the films he had written about in *Sequence*. The most obvious Hitchcock allusion was significantly taken from *The Lodger*, which also provided the main still illustration for the original article. In *If…* (1968), the hero Mick Travis (Malcolm McDowell) makes his entrance dressed exactly like Ivor Novello in *The Lodger*.)

Anderson's preferred director, or auteur, however, was John Ford. In his writings on Ford, Anderson particularly stressed exactly the aspects of Ford's film-making which could be connected to what was later identified as formal properties in European art cinema. Accordingly, Anderson 'close-read' Ford's *They Were Expendable* (1945). He was convinced the film dismantled traditional narrative, and that it was also an expression of a personal vision.[27] In Ford's films Anderson notes that

> close-ups, noble or affectionate, are held at leisure; long-shots are sustained long after their narrative function is performed, a marginal figure is suddenly dwelt on, lovingly enlarged to fill the centre of the screen. Informed with this heightened emotion, a single shot, abruptly interposed – a ragged line of men marching into nowhere, one of them playing a jaunty bugle-call on his harmonica – assumes a deeper significance than is given by its position in the story.[28]

Anderson concludes his essay by claiming that some of Ford's films 'stand among the truly noble works of art of our time'.[29] (Anderson would make it into one of his own artistic trademarks to employ the same loose narrative structure, as in *If…* and *O Lucky Man*, a mode typical also of the European art cinema.) In 1952 his final piece for *Sequence* was a review article about Ford's *The Quiet Man*, released that year, giving also an interview with the director. Anderson famously concluded that a good deal would seem to hang on *The Quiet Man*, for its success or failure must affect Ford's attitude

towards film-making in the future. In any event it is difficult to believe that he will not continue at it for a while yet. 'I want to be a tug-boat captain,' he says. But God made him a poet, and he must make the best of that.[30]

Besides the refinement of the notion of cinematic authorship, the apology for American cinema was the most important contribution to the discourse of criticism made by *Sequence* (which in this regard places it with *Cahiers du Cinéma*), a reappraisal which was part of critical debate about cinema in the 1950s.[31] It is interesting to note that the Ford films most admired by Anderson and *Sequence* were hardly ever the ones canonised by earlier criticism.

After its fourteenth issue *Sequence* ceased to function for financial reasons. In March 1952 Anderson wrote to Ford personally that 'my magazine has had finally to close down' and he also humbly asked the American director for work. He did not receive a reply.[32] The critical aesthetic introduced by *Sequence* at the end of the 1940s and after (objective realism; cinema as art; harmonic relationship between form and substance; critical affirmation of American cinema; and – particularly – auteurism) became established within British as well as European highbrow film criticism in the 1950s. This was partly a consequence of the recession at the British cinemas in 1948–49 and the general decline of critical support for British films in that period, and at least partly the fact that the *Sequence* critics became regular contributors to *Sight and Sound* which had a comparatively large circulation and was very much a trend-setter in British cinema criticism of the 1950s.[33]

Anderson would later become an auteur, very much in the style he had advocated in *Sequence*, trying to exert control over his own films, handling the camera as his own pen. Even if Anderson was to become a known filmmaker in the 1950s, with widely circulated documentaries like the Venice prize winner *Every Day Except Christmas* (1957), he never did adopt entirely the Fordian poetics he had himself hailed, instead turning to more theatrical means – particularly in the Brechtian vein – for films like *If…* and *O Lucky Man*. When Anderson's late, elegiac film *The Whales of August* (1987) was released, Richard Combs claimed that Anderson in it for once fulfilled the promises of *Sequence*.[34] He did occasionally work in the *Sequence* mode – never more so than in a film that was never actually released, *Wham in China* (1986), originally a feature-length documentary. Anderson was hired by George Michael to direct a film about the pop group Wham's tour of China in 1984. In it Anderson tried to create a poetic film utilising the *Sequence* aesthetic, down-playing the role of the band performances and focusing instead on images of modern China. In his original cut, called 'If You Were There!' Anderson included, for instance, an extended poetic montage of images of the river in Canton, with boats, people on bicycles, close-ups and

long shots against the background of a magnificent sunset. Anderson called this montage the 'river of life' sequence, according to his editor, Peter West.[35] Never in his career was Anderson closer to the concept of 'close-ups, noble or affectionate, held at leisure, long-shots sustained long after their narrative function is performed [or] a marginal figure suddenly dwelt on lovingly enlarged to fill the centre of the screen', to reprise his eloquent words about Ford in *Sequence*. It was hardly surprising, taking into account the style of mainstream commercial pop film-making in the 1980s, that Anderson was fired and his film completely recut.

In his final work, the 'farewell' film *Is That All There Is?* (1992), Anderson included the occasional '*Sequence* touch', not least in his initial quotation from the Free Cinema manifesto, 'Perfection is not an aim'. As to the upshot of Anderson's mission, *Sequence* was possibly more influential on film-makers and critics than Anderson himself. Auteurism and art cinema, for good and for bad, came to dominate the European cinema after the 1950s. For bad, it possibly caused, as Angus Finney claims in *The State of European Cinema*, disastrous financial decline in comparison to the American cinema. For good, it created some of the greatest cinematic masterpieces.[36]

Notes

1 Peter Wollen, 'The Last New Wave: Modernism in British Films of the Thatcher Era', in *British Cinema and Thatcherism: Fires Were Started*, ed. Lester Friedman (UCL Press, 1993), pp. 36–7.
2 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Methuen, 1985), pp. 205–33.
3 Alexandre Astruc, 'Naissance d'une nouvelle avant-garde: le caméra stylo', *L'Écran français* 144 (30 January 1948), p. 588.
4 See François Truffaut, 'Une certaine tendance du cinéma français', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 31 (January 1954), pp. 15–29.
5 Anderson, *About John Ford* (Plexus, 1981), pp. 13–17.
6 Among the contributors were Peter Ericsson, Lotte Eisner, Alan Cooke, Derek Grigs, Satyajit Ray and Siriol Hugh Jones.
7 Brian McFarlane, 'Sequence: Saying Exactly What We Liked', *Filmviews* (Autumn 1988), p. 31.
8 Kevin Jackson (ed.), *Schrader on Schrader and Other Writings* (Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 19. It would not be very difficult to relate the *Sequence* aesthetic to the narrative progression and style of some of Schrader's own works, like his script for *Taxi Driver* (1976) or his aesthetically influential film *Hardcore* (1979).
9 My book, *Lindsay Anderson: Maverick Film-Maker* (Cassell, 1998) contains a chapter on Anderson's film criticism.
10 Anderson, '*Sequence*: Introduction to a Reprint', p. 8 in the Lindsay Anderson manuscript collection kept at the British Council, but later removed and location now uncertain. It is also interesting to note how critically Anderson would handle the *Cahiers du Cinéma* form of directorial worship, as in a *Sight and Sound* piece in which he calls the journal's adulation of directors such as Hawks and Preminger 'a perverse cultivation of the meretricious'. See 'French Critical Writing', *Sight and Sound* 24, 2 (October–December 1954), p. 105.

11 Anderson, 'Angles of Approach', *Sequence* 2 (Winter 1947), pp. 5–8.
12 Anderson, 'Angles of Approach', p. 7.
13 Anderson, 'A Possible Solution', *Sequence* 3 (Spring 1948), pp. 7–11.
14 Anderson, 'A Possible Solution', p. 9.
15 See John Ellis, 'Art, Culture and Quality: Terms for a Cinema in the Forties and Seventies', *Screen* 19, 3 (Autumn 1978), pp. 15–20.
16 Anderson, '*Paisa*', *Sequence* 2 (Winter 1947), p. 31.
17 Anderson, 'British Cinema: The Descending Spiral', *Sequence* 7 (Spring 1949).
18 Anderson, '*Sequence*: an Introduction to a Reprint', p. 7.
19 Anderson, 'British Cinema', p. 6.
20 Anderson, 'British Cinema', p. 7.
21 Anderson, 'British Cinema', p. 8.
22 Anderson, 'Creative Elements', *Sequence* 5 (Autumn 1948), pp. 8–12 and 'The Director's Cinema', *Sequence* 12 (Autumn 1950), pp. 6–11, 37.
23 Anderson, 'Creative Elements', p. 12.
24 François Truffaut, 'A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema' [1954] in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols (University of California Press, 1976), p. 234.
25 Anderson, 'Alfred Hitchcock', *Sequence* 9 (Autumn 1949), pp. 113–24.
26 Anderson, 'Alfred Hitchcock', p. 115.
27 Anderson, 'John Ford and *They Were Expendable*', *Sequence* 11 (Summer 1950), pp. 18–31.
28 Anderson, 'John Ford', p. 115.
29 Anderson, 'John Ford', p. 31.
30 Anderson, '*The Quiet Man*', *Sequence* 14 (New Year 1952), pp. 18–31.
31 John Ellis, 'Art, Culture and Quality', p. 46.
32 Anderson letter to John Ford, 12 March 1952, John Ford manuscript collection, Lily Library, Indiana University.
33 See John Ellis, 'Art, Culture and Quality', p. 46.
34 Richard Combs, '*The Whales of August*', *Monthly Film Bulletin* 652 (May 1988), p. 154.
35 I was given a tape of Anderson's original cut by the director in the late 1980s.
36 See Angus Finney, *The State of European Cinema: A New Dose of Reality* (Cassell, 1966).