

## **Walking the talk: reflections on Indigenous media audience research methods**

Kathryn Mackenzie and Karl Magee, Stirling University, UK

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### **Abstract**

*Britannia Hospital* was the final part of a trilogy of films directed by Lindsay Anderson which started so successfully with *If...* in 1968 and continued with *O Lucky Man* in 1973. However, *Britannia Hospital*, released in 1982, was condemned by the critics and largely ignored by the public, a disappointing end to the trilogy. This paper is going to look at aspects of the relationship between the director and his audience by examining the strains exerted on this relationship by the promotion and critical reception of *Britannia Hospital*. The Lindsay Anderson Archive at the University of Stirling provides the main source material for this through: Anderson's correspondence with friends, fans and critics; ideas for the advertising campaign for the film; and correspondence with the distribution companies.

**Key Words:** Lindsay Anderson; *Britannia Hospital*; Audience reception; Archives; British Cinema; Promotion

### **'A calamitous debut'**

In the words of David Robinson, the British film critic and author '...no major British film can ever have suffered so calamitous a debut.'<sup>1</sup> Robinson was referring to a number of things here; firstly the same day that *Britannia Hospital* opened in Britain was the day the Cup Final replay between Tottenham Hotspur and Queens Park Rangers was being televised; and the following day the Pope was due to arrive in Britain. Less glamorous but undoubtedly more important for the reception and success of *Britannia Hospital*, Britain at this time was in a period of serious economic instability, with unemployment reaching a record high since the 1930s<sup>2</sup>, the Falklands war occupying people's minds and the media, numerous strikes in the public sector, and continued IRA bombings. In the light of this social context it is hard to overstate the effect that negative reviews, and articles in which the film was portrayed as being 'unpatriotic', would have on the cinema-going public. Add to this the fact that the

number of people even going to the cinema in the UK had dropped dramatically, from just under 140 million in 1972 to around 60 million in 1982.<sup>3</sup> Although there were, as Robinson points out, a few exceptions, in general the film received very negative reviews in the British press and unsurprisingly, did very poorly at the box office.

*Britannia Hospital* is the final part of the 'Mick Travis' trilogy of films about Britain made by Anderson, all starring Malcolm McDowell as a character called Mick Travis (the others being *If...* and *O Lucky Man!*). The film is set in a hospital preparing for a Royal visit to celebrate its 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Preparations are hampered by the presence of demonstrators outside the gate (outraged at the presence of an African dictator inside) and within the hospital staff threaten industrial action. Meanwhile an investigative journalist (McDowell) prowls the building and a professor works secretly on a mysterious project. The film pulls no punches in its criticism of left and right, rich and poor, royalty and unions. Anderson's scattergun approach hits many targets and appeared to upset all.

Although *Britannia Hospital* was denied the boost of a positive critical response why had the promotional campaign not succeeded in attracting audiences? Prior to blaming the poor reception of the film on the critics for misunderstanding the film, Anderson had criticised the way that EMI were handling its publicity and promotion. He urged them to involve an outside PR agency, which they did, employing Gerry Lewis & Co to conduct the British promotional campaign.<sup>4</sup> The eclectic nature of the film provided the opportunity to promote different aspects that would appeal to different audiences but this variety, the lack of a single image or theme, proved problematic. Indeed this difficulty was noted by Anderson when writing to an EMI executive about the posters for the film:

I do not think it is easy – perhaps it is not even possible – to produce a design for BRITANNIA HOSPITAL which evokes all the characteristics of the picture.”<sup>5</sup> However Anderson finishes this letter on a positive note: “Everyone should realise that we have a film of outstanding quality and outstanding appeal. We should have confidence in it.”<sup>6</sup>

This confidence which Anderson exhorted others to have in the film did not extend to his own ideas for the advertising campaign. Anderson's original idea was for an image of a headless torso (a reference to a scene in the film) ([Figure 1](#)) but in a letter to Nat Cohen, (a film producer) in May 1982 he explains why he moved away from this idea

I could also see that the image of the headless torso waving a Union Jack ... was not a good idea in view of the wholly unexpected turn that public affairs have taken during the last month or so.

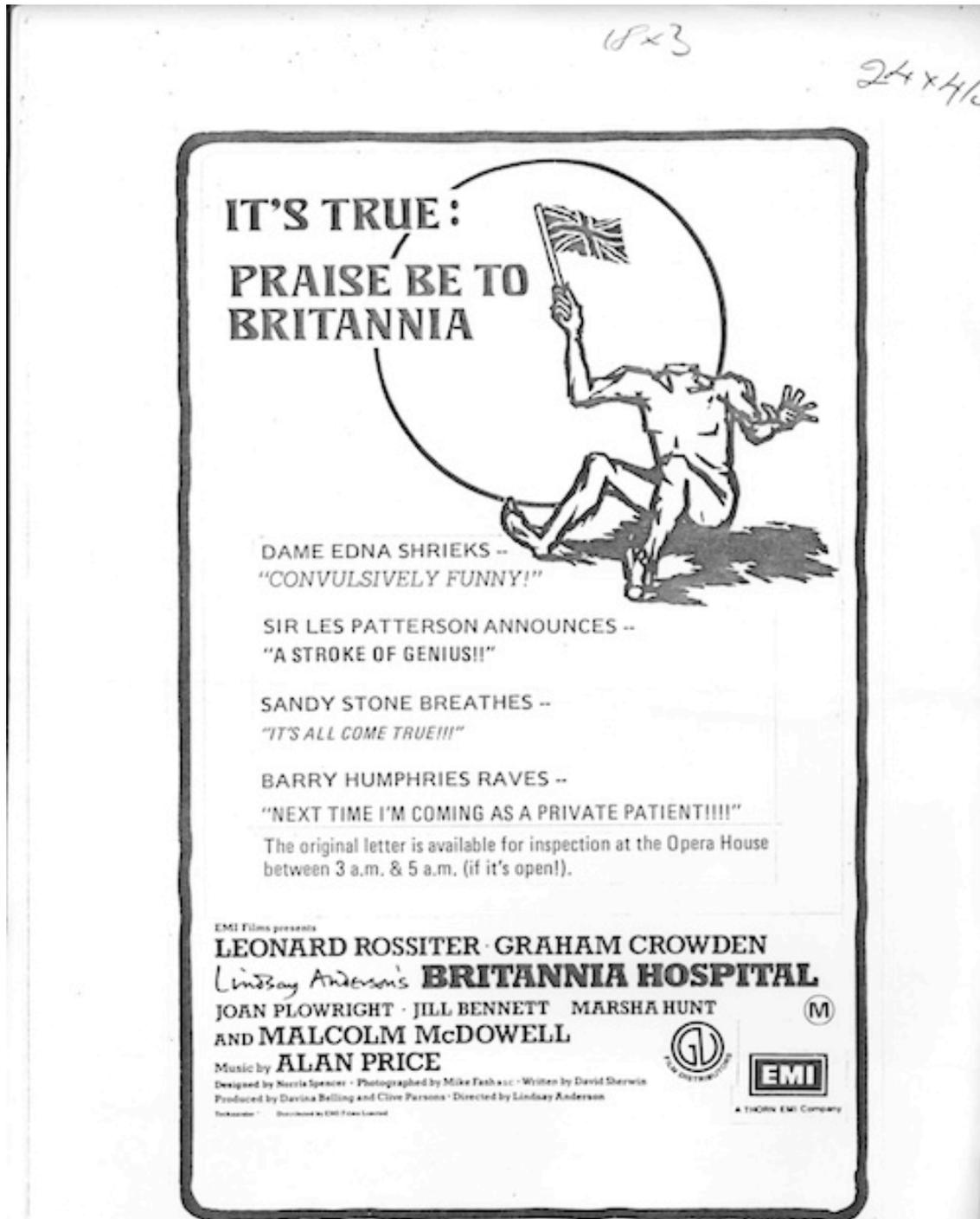


Figure 1

However, the other ideas (Figure 2) were only slightly more toned down and could still be easily imagined to cause outrage and offence! In particular the headline 'A Nation is Torn Apart' almost seems designed to incite charges of being 'unpatriotic'.



Figure 2

In the preliminary marketing plan the agency outlined a two-level publicity campaign, advertising the film as 'popular, controversial, provocative'; and also as 'up-market, Lindsay Anderson, movie-buff, highbrowish'. So while attempting, on the one hand, to appeal to the 'cultured' art-film audience they also, on the other, wanted to highlight the more outré aspects of the film to an audience enjoying the excesses of the home video boom. With a flourish that William Castle or Roger Corman would be proud of the agency planned to highlight the 'outrageous, offensive aspects of the film' by serving green-pea soup at screenings (a cheeky reference to the liquidised brain that Prof Millar drinks in the film) and by also giving away sponge-rubber brains. The agency's intention was to draw parallels with other 'outrageous' box-office hits like *Animal House* and *The Life of Brian*.

In April 1982 EMI commissioned the National Research Group to produce a 'promotional strategy survey' to gauge the interest of cinema-goers in the film. The report was based on a telephone survey of 420 cinema-goers who were provided with a short synopsis of the film along with information about its stars and director. The survey's findings highlighted the predominantly conservative tastes of an audience which enjoyed being amused rather than outraged. The main selling point for the film was the involvement of Leonard Rossiter, a familiar face from TV. His presence seemed to guarantee 'an accessible type of comedy which will probably touch on home truths.'<sup>7</sup> The views of the respondents suggested that 'the key elements which may undermine the popular image and which should be avoided in promoting the film are those which take it from the safely outrageous to cult status, which may put off as many as it attracts.'<sup>8</sup> In particular it was noted that 'reference to ribaldry at the expense of the Queen Mother should be avoided.'<sup>9</sup>

The preliminary marketing plan suggested that the traditional method of advertising in the up-market broadsheets should be ignored as they did not want to 'rarify the picture or treat it as an intellectual piece.'<sup>10</sup> Instead the agency promised 'to make a major effort to break the popular dailies'<sup>11</sup> by 'showing the film to people likely to be angered or shocked'<sup>12</sup> such as union leaders and newspaper columnists (as opposed to critics). If the intention was to create some notoriety for the film thereby generating additional publicity, the timing of its release succeeded in this aim without recourse to such deliberate provocation. Meanwhile this fractured, incoherent approach to *Britannia Hospital's* promotion seems to indicate that, right from the start, the publicists and EMI were unsure about how best to successfully market the film. Their solution was to try and cover all bases, which resulted in a disjointed and uncertain campaign that would do little to increase the film's popularity or success. The timing of the promotional campaign and marketing plans, only a month prior to the release of the film, would also have done little to benefit the critical reception of the film. It was going to be a difficult film to market, even Anderson admitted this, so leaving only one month to instigate a

promotional campaign does not seem to be very organised, or to show much confidence in the film.

Anderson himself did not always do the best to promote his film, however unintentionally. In an interview with a journalist from *The New Musical Express* he continually provokes the interviewer Richard Cook (although Cook did begin the interview by saying how much he hated the film!). He accused Cook of 'talking like a 60-year-old film critic from Leeds.'<sup>13</sup> Anderson also said that in order to understand the film properly it is necessary to 'use your intelligence' implying that this was something Cook was not doing! By alienating a journalist from a youth-focused paper he was inevitably distancing himself further from the very audience he would need to attract in order for the film to be successful. The exchanges with *The New Musical Express* continued, with Anderson writing a letter to them, which they published in its entirety, in which he attacked both the interviewer, and another writer from the paper who wrote a critical review of the film. In the letter he criticised the authors of the pieces, and by implication, the very publication itself when he said

"No doubt I was naïf to expect a sympathetic, iconoclastic humour from any representative of *The New Musical Express*... Well, if I have to go out of the window with Aristophanes, Johnson, Shaw and Brecht, Vigo and Bunuel, I'll be going in good company. And happy to leave Andy Gill to strut around his bonfire of books and movies with the Yahoo philistinism which is nearer than he thinks to the sappy, non-committal alienation of his "liberal" colleagues."<sup>14</sup>

#### **'Designed to annoy practically everyone'**

In a letter to the film American critic Vincent Canby, Anderson discussed the British press reaction

As you may know the English gave BRITANNIA HOSPITAL a fearful pasting.... The interesting thing was that it wasn't the "entertainment" critics who attacked the picture, but the "intellectuals", who one might have hoped would be ready or even anxious to support a picture which at least tries to relate to the agonising hazards and possibilities of the world around us.<sup>15</sup>

However, looking at a broad range of the British reviews, it appears this distinction is not quite so clear cut. The majority of the reviews in the British press were critical of the film to a great or lesser degree, with some acknowledging Anderson's talent as a filmmaker and seeing *Britannia Hospital* as an aberration, and others being much more critical of both Anderson and his film, seeing it as an attack on the country and its institutions. There were exceptions, most notably David Robinson in *The Times*, Dilys Powell in *Punch*, Alexander Walker in *The Evening Standard* and Kevin Gough-Yates writing for *Art Monthly*. The negative reviews of the film ranged from tabloid papers such as *The Daily Express* and *The Daily Mail* to broadsheets including *The Guardian* and *The Financial Times*, and, perhaps

most surprisingly, youth publications like the *New Musical Express* and *Time Out*. As well as the poor critical reaction the film also suffered from a flurry of news stories reporting on its controversial content with headlines such as 'Sick joke film angers hospital workers'<sup>16</sup> and 'Cruel Britannia – would any other country stand for a film that portrays us all as mad?'<sup>17</sup>

Anderson recorded his own impressions of the film's reception in this letter to Vincent Canby, 'I was certainly depressed..., by the number of people who came out of previews quaking and moaning in gloomy fashion'<sup>18</sup>. For Anderson the inability of the critics to understand the film was indicative of, and influential upon, the way in which the film would be viewed by the cinema-going public. In a letter to his old friend, the author and screenwriter Gavin Lambert, a few months prior to the film's release, Anderson explains his view of the majority audience:

I can't help feeling that I've become definitely alien to the English critical establishment, which more-or-less mirrors the English 'class' audience. And the popular audience I fear have had their taste and their capacity for response irrevocably dimmed by years of American cinema and British cinema and – worst of all – television.<sup>19</sup>

Then, after the film's release he writes to Lambert again, 'The critical reception here has been savage.'<sup>20</sup>, illustrating that the fears he voiced a few months previous had been realised. In particular he picked out Cook's very hostile review from the *New Musical Express* in which the critic wrote:

I left the showing of Britannia Hospital filled with hatred for a film besotted with a callous futility. Anderson's venom didn't seem to stop at the enfeebled grandeur of the institutions Olde England still cherishes dear but foreclosed on the existence of anything worthwhile remaining in the human spirit.... Savage satire or selfish disgust?<sup>21</sup>

That this level of hostility had come from a supposedly 'youth' centred publication was a great surprise to him as this is where he had thought there was a chance of the film garnering some support.

Another example of Anderson pre-empting a poor reception to the film is seen in a letter to David Sherwin, the scriptwriter for *Britannia Hospital*, when he explains 'I'm quite exhausted by the effort to complete the picture, and really haven't the energy to carry the battle against critics, journalists, publicists, advertising agencies., etc, etc.'<sup>22</sup> It is interesting that, even before the film has been released, Anderson views his relationship to the critics as a battle to be won or lost, and in this case he seems to have given up the battle before it has even begun. However in his correspondence with some of the critics, after the film's release, he puts on his more public, confrontational face. For example writing to the Italian journalist and film-director Davide Ferrario Anderson proclaimed 'I am arrogant enough to judge critics and people by their response to my films, rather than to judge my films by people's response to

them (!).<sup>23</sup> Similarly in a letter to Vincent Canby he explains the hostility to the film as indicative of an endemic, deeper hostility within British society towards anything which criticises the institutions and people who exercise power

I hope I am not flattering myself when I say I believe that the bitter hostility towards BRITANNIA HOSPITAL which was so general in London when it first appeared was a sign that radicalism or dissidence is just as unpopular in our increasingly conformist climate as it would be in the East.<sup>24</sup>

Writing to another American critic Andrew Sarris, he explains that he views the hostility to the film as a 'testimony to the validity of the picture – though it's not a comfortable testimony.'<sup>25</sup>

In sharp contrast to this, in a letter to the actress and writer Pauline Melville (who acted in *Britannia Hospital*), in July of 1981, Anderson wrote 'I'm passing these days in agonised dread. BRITANNIA HOSPITAL (as my picture is called) is the usual over-ambitious conception, satirical, ominous and absurd – designed to annoy practically everyone.'<sup>26</sup> Evidently, Anderson was already aware that his latest film might provoke a hostile reaction and this letter illustrates the extent to which the reviews did matter to him, no matter that he might sometimes say otherwise. For example, in a letter to David Sherwin just prior to the film's UK release Anderson said that he is not going to get upset about the way the film is received as 'nothing has changed, remember. It's just all got worse.'<sup>27</sup> However in the same month in a letter to Louis Marcorelles, the French film critic and author, he explains his reasons for entering *Britannia Hospital* for competition at Cannes. Anderson said that the current claims of a 'revival' in British cinema might be an invention of the media and that in order for a real revival to occur it is essential that British films do well abroad. He argued that the success of *Britannia Hospital* would aid this, concluding:

That is why I have submitted BRITANNIA HOSPITAL into competition at Cannes. It's not a question, I'm sure you realise, of my personal reputation. But it is a question, almost, of life and death for the British cinema. If British films win acclaim abroad, there's some chance that finally the British themselves will be forced to take their cinema seriously and support it.<sup>28</sup>

One positive review that appeared was in *The Star*, a Sheffield newspaper, when the film returned to the cinema for a second run. The journalist, Geoff Daniel, described it as 'extremely funny, totally valid and absolutely merciless'.<sup>29</sup> Anderson wrote to Daniel, thanking him for his article and again choosing to take a confrontational view of the general response to the film whilst at the same time revealing that the negative reviews have affected him, with his comment that

I suppose in a way the obtuseness and the hostility of its reception provided a justification for the film, and proved the accuracy of its portrait of Establishment Britain. All the same I couldn't help being disappointed by the scarcity of support. Your wholehearted commendation really cheered me up.

Daniel also chose *Britannia Hospital* as his film of the year for 1982 in a later article<sup>30</sup>, which along with David Robinson choosing it as one of his top ten films of 1982<sup>31</sup>, must also have cheered Anderson up slightly!

Although he was friends with a number of influential and important critics, and despite being a critic himself, Anderson often held derogatory views of the quality and seriousness of fellow critics<sup>32</sup>. This is illustrated in a letter to Drusilla Beyfus, an employee of *London Vogue*, in which he criticises the magazine's review of the film. The review was written by Milton Shuman, whose criticisms centred on the ending, which he described as 'undergraduate tosh that provides an unnecessary pretentious note to a film that has enough humour, imagination, daring and fury to survive it.'<sup>33</sup> In his letter to Beyfus, Anderson countered this by blaming Shuman when he said, 'Of course Milton has misunderstood the end of the film completely, but then in most of the reviews one can sense the critics (metaphorically) searching under their seats for their hats and parcels.'<sup>34</sup>

#### **'A timid unconfident attitude'**

When it came to promoting *Britannia Hospital* outside the UK, Anderson was keen to stress that it was not a parochial work. In interviews and correspondence he repeatedly stresses that the themes of *Britannia Hospital* are universal and have relevance to all societies, not just Britain. This point was picked up by Alexander Walker (one of the few British critics who supported the film) in an article about its screening at the Cannes Film Festival in the *Evening Standard* in May 1982:

Its British setting in a London hospital, Anderson's metaphor for a sick Britain suffering a nervous breakdown, hasn't stopped practically every nationality present at Cannes from recognising and applying the truth of its savage comedy to the conditions of their own ailing countries.<sup>35</sup>

Anderson's archives include several correspondence files detailing the discussions relating to the promotion of the film in the US that took place between himself, the film's producers and its US distributor, United Artists Classics. As we have already seen, *Britannia Hospital's* wild amalgam of various styles and genres made it a difficult film to promote. In a market segmented into different social/age groups and tastes there was a clear danger inherent in concentrating on one element of the film to the detriment of others. The correspondence relating to the US campaign provides a good example of the decisions that are made when trying to sell a film that is difficult to categorise.

*Britannia Hospital* was scheduled to premiere in the US at the Plaza Theatre in New York in early 1983 after *Diva*, a stylish French thriller directed by Jean-Jacques Beineix, had finished its run. However the continued success of *Diva* (still selling out shows after nine months at the Plaza) delayed its release. During this protracted preparation for *Britannia Hospital's* release

the tone of the US advertising campaign moved quite clearly from the serious to the comedic. *Diva* was a tough act to follow – and *Britannia Hospital* was not a film designed to appeal to the audiences who were packing out the Plaza for this ‘art house’ sensation, a style of film which Anderson denigrated in a letter to Tom Bernard of United Artists Classics in August 1982 as ‘cinema as elegant, snob-appeal diversion.’<sup>36</sup> Indeed during the preparation for *Britannia Hospital*’s release United Artists Classics view of who the audience for Anderson’s film was clearly changed. On 12 January 1983 Anderson received a letter from one of the studio’s advertising executives informing him that the release of *Britannia Hospital* had been pushed back until March because of *Diva*’s continued popularity. The executive went on to write that:

The additional lead time now is really a blessing to me since the powers that be, in their infinite wisdom, have concluded that the chosen advertising direction was too erudite and we should revert to the cartoony-style campaign. The qualities [of the planned campaign] were deemed too heavy-handed so we are now finishing the cartoon campaign. This new art consists of the various and sundry characters spilling out of the hospital in a zany chase. The piece of art is well-executed; however, it just says very different things about the film.<sup>37</sup>

The executive also informed Anderson that the trailer for the film had been re-cut to emphasise the comedy (making it ‘almost zany’<sup>38</sup>) and featuring the film’s stars – in particular those recognisable to an American audience – Mark Hamill (Luke Skywalker) and Malcolm McDowell. The executive went on to explain the deletion of some scenes ‘I have deleted the violence that appeared in the initial cut. Out of context, the violence seemed gratuitous so I feel that the deletion only enhances the appeal of the trailer.’<sup>39</sup>

Unsurprisingly Anderson was not happy with the proposed changes. In his reply he wrote:

Many thanks for sending me the mock-up of the new BH ad. I can’t say I find it impressive – very conventionally ‘comedic’ in style and, of course, giving the impression that the film is a sort of farcical exercise in the ‘Carry on’ tradition, with nothing striking, original or exceptional about it. I think the change is very questionable and seems to imply a timid, unconfident attitude to the film. Which of course isn’t a good basis for successful presentation.<sup>40</sup>

Anderson was also unhappy with the new ad-line for the film, ‘British life ... goes under the knife?’, which replaced the original, ‘The most frightening comedy you’ve ever laughed at’. In particular he objected to the inclusion of the phrase ‘British life’, finding it ‘poor and restrictive’<sup>41</sup> and noted that ‘you haven’t advertised DIVA as being a comedy of French life have you?’<sup>42</sup> He felt that the universal themes of the film (which had been identified by many critics) were being ignored by this clear identification of *Britannia Hospital* as a British film about Britain. In a letter to another United Artists Classics executive Anderson continues his

arguments against the new tag-line fearing the film will be 'diminished into another crazy, domestic British comedy.'<sup>43</sup>

It appears that the studio's lack of confidence in the film (which Anderson identified) led to them 'playing safe' with *Britannia Hospital*. It had been almost 10 years since Anderson's last major film, *O Lucky Man!*, and unlike the UK where his frequent media appearances kept him in the public eye, he was not a familiar name in the US. They abandoned the idea of presenting it as a satirical look at the major issues of the modern world, the work of a recognised auteur ('a Lindsay Anderson film'). Instead the revised advertising campaign connected the film to an established genre/brand with a clear audience – in this instance the cheeky, Carry-On style of British comedy (remember, Benny Hill was a huge success in the US!).

Previews of the film provided support for the decision made by United Artists Classics to highlight the 'zany', comic elements of the film to attract younger audiences. One of the film's producers, Davina Belling, wrote to Anderson on 17 February 1983 reporting on a preview screening in Los Angeles where '60 die-hard Lindsay Anderson fans braved the worst blizzard in years to attend the sneak preview.'<sup>44</sup> However the response to the film was not good with 15 walk-outs after the particularly gory operating theatre sequence. On the basis of this screening Belling argued that:

if your former fans can't stomach *Britannia Hospital* perhaps Tom Bernard has a point wanting the artwork to go in a 'zanier' direction in order to attract a younger crowd. I think there is a lot to be said for attracting a new generation of fans rather than count on your current ones, based on the reactions to date, provided the more comic approach is not totally misleading.<sup>45</sup>

Anderson accepted this analysis of the situation in his reply to Davina Belling of 23 February 1983. He agrees that he cannot count on his 'current fans' and also notes that he is 'fully conscious – perhaps over-conscious – of being unfashionable, and not much of a draw with the current art film crowd.'<sup>46</sup> He is also unsure of the critical reaction that the film will receive in the US (after the bruising experience of the UK reviews) and adopted a rather pessimistic tone:

I am quite ashamed to find that the general English-speaking hostility towards BH and the film's dismissal by prejudice and resentment masquerading as criticism have disturbed me more deeply than is healthy. Not caused me to doubt the work, exactly, but made me aware of the near impossibility of getting across a point of view, values of reason and morality so alien to the spirit of our times. It is not so much the strength of the opposition that has discouraged me, as the lack of support, the indifference of the 'uncommitted' majority, and their willingness to be led by the enemy behind the typewriter ... I have very little confidence that the film will do well. I don't know

whether it *could* have, given the benefit of a brilliantly intelligent campaign. But that is pure fantasy anyway.<sup>47</sup>

### **'The MASH of socialised medicine'**

Anderson's pessimistic expectation of the film's critical reception in the US proved unfounded. In a letter to Davina Belling in February 1983 he warned that the film would probably not get a good review from Vincent Canby of the *New York Times*, a key critic whose support for the film was seen by the producers as being vital in generating more widespread critical/media interest.<sup>48</sup> However Canby loved the film describing it as 'Anderson's best film to date'<sup>49</sup> and noting that 'the New York critics seem to find it much funnier than their London colleagues did.'<sup>50</sup>

Many of the US critics noted the comedic elements of the film. Reviews used terms such as 'witty', 'outrageous', 'wildly comic', 'mad, merry and mischievous', 'rambunctiously funny', 'randy, often hilarious' and in one memorable phrase (used in the press campaign) as 'the MASH of socialised medicine.'<sup>51</sup> It is interesting to speculate whether the critics were led by the tone of the promotional campaign or if they arrived at this view of the film independently.

The positive critical reaction certainly helped the film – it had a very healthy opening week at the Plaza, continuing the (extended) success of *Diva*. In a review of the film's performance in *Box Office* in June 1983 it was noted that 'there's no reason that this film shouldn't go on to become a classic ranked with the likes of *A Clockwork Orange* and *Dr Strangelove*.'<sup>52</sup> It was thought that the film should do well in the 'sophisticated urban markets'<sup>53</sup> that United Artists Classics had earmarked for the film. *The Hollywood Reporter* also saw good potential for *Britannia Hospital* noting that the film's 'wildly comic view of the world's malaise will appeal to the hip young audience that should respond enthusiastically.'<sup>54</sup> Buoyed by the positive response to the film Anderson wrote an upbeat postcard to his friend, the stage designer Jocelyn Herbert in March 1983: "Britannia Hospital amazed (and annoyed?) the distributors by getting amazingly well noticed in the New York Times and starting with excellent business... it won't be a big hit of course – but honour is saved!"<sup>55</sup>

The film also received a great deal of press in New Zealand. The violence depicted in the clash between protesters and riot police towards the end of the film had particular resonance for critics and journalists in a society which was still coming to terms with the violent demonstrations against the touring South African Springboks rugby team in 1981. A journalist writing about the film noted:

It could be August 15 1981, the day of the first test in Christchurch, when the protestors stopped five metres short of riot squad lines in Wilsons Road and the squad suddenly advanced, with the batoning movement of automatons, into a civilian

crowd for the first time. The scene [of the girl offering a flower to a riot policeman] reflects another image of that day, when a crash-hatted protester stepped from his line to offer an olive branch symbol to the squad.<sup>56</sup>

When asked about these apparent echoes of the Christchurch riots Anderson replied:

It's not surprising you see similarities. The demonstrations here affected the way that scene was put together. It affected the look of the police in *Britannia Hospital*. I had news footage of the New Zealand demonstrations on video cassette and studied it quite closely.<sup>57 58</sup>

While New Zealanders saw a reflection of their own troubled society Mediterranean audiences appear to have seen something far more exotic and fantastic. In a letter to Mike Fash, the film's cinematographer, in March 1983 Anderson notes that the film was well received in France and Italy and rather incredulously notes that it won an award at a Fantasy film festival in Portugal. This possibly goes some way towards explaining the Italian press ad for the film, a Euro-sex-sci-fi fantasy of two Metropolis-style robots in a passionate embrace (an image which bears no resemblance to any characters in, or scenes from, the film!)

#### **'The enemy behind the typewriter'**

In his correspondence Anderson talks about other films that were on release at the same time and compares their success to *Britannia Hospital*. In his letters to journalists and critics he dismisses the Oscar winning *On Golden Pond*, as 'sentimental'<sup>59</sup>, and describes Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* as 'soppy... with its passionate appeal to mindless sentimentalism as the solution to humanity's problems.'<sup>60</sup> On a more bitter note, discussing *Moonlighting* by the Polish director Jerzy Skolimowski, and *The French Lieutenant's Women* by Karel Reisz, he says

[*Moonlighting's*] substitution of sophistication of style for any real serious or moral position makes it uniquely suitable to be a hit with the contemporary "art film" audience [and] much the same can be said of THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S WOMEN.<sup>61</sup>

It is evident from his correspondence with various critics that these two reactions dominated his response, on one hand the resignation and hurt at the hostility with which his film has been met by the British media, and in contrast, his incredulity that this could happen and his feelings that it is the fault of the critics for not understanding the film and his intentions. This is typified in this response to a review of *Britannia Hospital* which Louis Marcorelles sent him (the author or publication of the review is not referred to) where he says of the review

It is sadly typical in its absolute refusal (incapacity?) to consider the film in relation to its *ideas*, which I find (or would have found eighteen months ago) very strange in such an obviously "intellectual" magazine. BH would have been a "better film" if it had been made by Benny Hill – an astonishingly crass statement, surely.<sup>62</sup>

In a letter to David Ferrario, Anderson explained that whilst the response in the UK was as he expected it was not as he had hoped and he blames the hostile reviews on the attitudes of the critics, saying:

it is certainly depressing to find yet again that our intellectuals have so little sense of responsibility or of reality that they can happily jeer at or try to destroy work which at least has the courage to take on some of the most serious issues of our time.<sup>63</sup>

In a letter to the film critic David Robinson Anderson shows his hurt, disappointment and bitterness about the hostile reviews *Britannia Hospital* received, particularly in Britain:

You know, it's not the antagonism that wounds or disappoints, nor the "failure". It's the lack of support... there's a limit to the length of time it seems worthwhile – or even possible – to go on when what one has to communicate can only fall upon ears so determinedly deaf.<sup>64</sup>

As a result he would often write to critics who had given the film positive reviews, thanking them for their work. For example, he wrote to the American critic Michiko Kakutani, thanking him for an article in the *New York Times* and explaining that 'It is awfully rare that one finds oneself – and one's work – not only taken seriously, but reported accurately and intelligently represented.'<sup>65</sup> He also wrote to thank Alexander Walker, for his inclusion of *Britannia Hospital* in a Christmas programme of films at the National Film Theatre in 1983. It is evident, from the long correspondences that originated in just one letter or meeting, that he greatly valued those friendships that (despite his prickly nature) he was able to forge with film critics and journalists such as David Robinson, Alexander Walker, Louis Marcorelles and Gene Moskowitz, even when he disagreed with what they wrote.

Further consolation for the generally poor reception to the film was found in a letter from his friend, the Polish director Andrzej Wajda who described *Britannia Hospital* as 'the most Polish film produced anywhere in the world in recent years'<sup>66</sup>. He referred to this letter many times in his correspondence with other critics and with friends; he also had the letter photocopied a number of times and these were kept with the letter, perhaps an indication of the importance he attached to it?

#### **'A comment from the stalls'**

During the summer of 1982 Anderson went on an extended promotional tour of the US, Australia and New Zealand. When he returned to London in August 1982 he was greeted with a pile of fan-mail praising the film – a delayed reaction from the cinema audience. It was a welcome contrast to the poor critical reception suffered by the film on its release. In a letter to his friend Gavin Lambert (in Los Angeles) in September 1982 Anderson noted that:

here [Britain] the waters have closed to bury *Britannia Hospital* deep beneath a smooth, gently undulating swell. People don't mention it to me; partly I imagine because they think they're being kind, but more often because they didn't see it.<sup>67</sup>

While Anderson was aware of either an embarrassing silence on the subject of *Britannia Hospital* from friends and colleagues or supportive comments which he would have expected anyway, his correspondence with fans shows his genuine gratitude for the unsolicited support and praise he received from the film's small (but appreciative) audience. In one reply to a fan letter Anderson wrote:

I was delighted to get your letter about Britannia Hospital. Believe me, such reassurances are needed as well as appreciated – there comes a time when, in the face of almost unanimous public denigration or dismissal, the enthusiasm of friends starts to become unconvincing.<sup>68</sup>

Anderson's replies to his fan-mail are unguarded and surprisingly candid. He indulges in a shared distaste with his fans for the critics and also the general cinema-going public who didn't understand the film, frequently referring to the 'idiotic press'<sup>69</sup> and the 'stupid, lumpen TV-watching public'<sup>70</sup> (or similarly derogatory phrases). Many of the letters of support received by Anderson came from people working in the NHS who appreciated (and identified with) the film's depiction of hospital life. Indeed these letters provide a clear example of the distance between critics and audience, the raw, emotional, appreciative responses of hospital workers being in stark contrast to the cold, distant analysis of the critics.

While Anderson shared a certain collegiate warmth with these fans he didn't refrain from admonishing or challenging his correspondents when necessary. A fan letter written in June 1982 began by attempting to counter the poor critical reaction to the film:

Dear Mr Anderson

I'm writing to say how much I enjoyed your film Britannia Hospital. I don't normally write to people about things I've liked since life's too short, but in this case I decided to because I noticed that of the reviews and articles I read in the Guardian, City Limits, NME, The Face, Melody Maker and Time Out, 5 out of 6 shat on the film from an extreme height. So I just wanted to say that I (and seemingly the rest of the audience at the ABC Shaftesbury Avenue) found the film very funny – very much on the nail.<sup>71</sup>

The letter writer then (some would say bravely, or perhaps foolishly) goes on to rate Anderson's work against his 'all-time list':

So although one wouldn't expect Britannia Hospital to top If... (my 5<sup>th</sup> favourite film of all time, behind Mean Streets, Performance, Dr Strangelove and Lolita, in a list of 157 excluding comedies) nevertheless [its] a considerable advance on O Lucky Man! (no. 109, I felt it lost its way in its second half, particularly at the end. The White Bus is at no. 55, This Sporting Life I've yet to see).<sup>72</sup>

These comments on his work couldn't, of course, go unchallenged by Anderson. In his reply he wrote: 'I'm sorry that you thought that O Lucky Man! lost its way 'particularly at the end.' But are you quite sure that *you* didn't lose your way? Have another look in a few years time.'<sup>73</sup>

Anderson also points out that the reaction of the 'alternative' press shouldn't be that surprising:

It's certainly sad – even shocking – to find the press which supposedly services the younger generation, reacting just as stuffily, just as short-sightedly as the Establishment. But of course they are part of the Establishment themselves. Time Out and the NME today – The Sunday Times and The Observer tomorrow.<sup>74</sup>

Anderson was particularly upset by the *New Musical Express* treatment of *Britannia Hospital* and was gratified to receive several letters criticising the paper's stance. In one reply Anderson wrote:

I'm interested that the comments in the NME didn't surprise you. I was simple-minded enough to imagine that a paper appealing to young people would actually welcome a disrespectful, anarchic, anti-Establishment comedy. But they seem to be almost more conventional than anyone else.<sup>75</sup>

In these private exchanges with fans about *Britannia Hospital* Anderson appears at his most relaxed and reflective. These exchanges do not require him to adopt the confrontational, tough public exterior that characterises his correspondence with critics or unsympathetic journalists (the nadir of this type of response being the vitriolic letter to the *New Musical Express*). These positive responses from his audience were a welcome vindication for Anderson's efforts. Indeed as one fan noted 'I can imagine that these comments will not be new to you: I just felt that you might like to hear a comment from the stalls.'<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

The decision to make *Britannia Hospital* proved to be a turning point for Anderson. It is perhaps the most unfairly neglected of his films, a victim of the poor reception it received on its British release. In contrast, *This Sporting Life* and *If...* are widely acclaimed as classics, and *O Lucky Man* has received a great deal of press recently, due both to its re-release on DVD and also to the many mentions made of it by Malcolm McDowell while promoting his recent film about Anderson, *Never Apologise*. After the failure of *Britannia Hospital*, Anderson did not make another feature film until *The Whales of August* in 1987, his final feature. In the five years between these two films there was also an ill-fated trip to China with the pop group Wham!, to record their tour and many attempts to make other films, for example a proposed sequel to *If...*, but none of these projects came to fruition.

It is evident from the time and effort which Anderson put into replying to correspondence from fans, friends and critics that he placed a great deal of importance on it. The poor critical reception of the film had a profound effect on him which is voiced in his diaries a few years later where he confides:

amazing that when we did *Britannia Hospital* I could readily believe there was an audience out there – in Los Angeles if not in London – who would receive my work

with friendly comprehension – with complicity! I'm afraid the rejection of that work has hit me hard, shaken my confidence, rendered me resentful, or scornful."<sup>77</sup>

Receiving, and replying to, correspondence seems to have worked as an antidote to all this, providing confirmation of his worth as a film-maker.

### **Biographical note**

Kathryn Mackenzie is an Archivist and Research Assistant on the three-year AHRC-funded project 'The Cinema Authorship of Lindsay Anderson'. Karl Magee is the Senior Archivist and Co-investigator on the project. In addition to Kathryn Mackenzie and Karl Magee the research team is comprised of Professor John Izod, the Principal Investigator, and Isabelle Gourdin-Sanguard, the Doctoral Candidate.

Contact: [k.m.mackenzie1@stir.ac.uk](mailto:k.m.mackenzie1@stir.ac.uk) and [karl.magee@stir.ac.uk](mailto:karl.magee@stir.ac.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> LA/1/9/6/9, David Robinson, 'Time to reconsider a masterly vision', *The Times*, 15/10/1982.

<sup>2</sup> BBC 'On This Day – January 26 1982' URL

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/26/newsid\\_2506000/2506335.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/26/newsid_2506000/2506335.stm)

[visited 20/03/2009]

<sup>3</sup> UK Film Council 'A short note on UK cinema admissions during recessions, 1970 to 2007', 16/09/2008, URL:

[http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/media/pdf/6/s/UK\\_cinema\\_admissions\\_during\\_recessions\\_-\\_16Sep08.pdf](http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/media/pdf/6/s/UK_cinema_admissions_during_recessions_-_16Sep08.pdf) [visited 20/03/2009]

<sup>4</sup> When criticisms were made of the way Gerry Lewis & Co were handling the publicity campaign they brought in Dennis Davidson Associates Ltd to help. Gerry Lewis & Co Ltd later resigned from involvement in the film.

<sup>5</sup> LA 1/9/3/15/17, Lindsay Anderson writing to Tom Nichols (EMI), 23/04/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> LA 1/9/3/15/12, A promotional strategy survey for BH conducted for EMI films by The National Research Group, Apr 1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> LA 1/9/3/15/7, Preliminary marketing plan for the UK (Gerry Lewis & Co.), 07/04/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> LA/1/9/6/9, Richard Cook, 'Growing Old Disgracefully', *New Musical Express*, 05/06/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling..

<sup>14</sup> LA/1/9/6/9, Lindsay Anderson, 'The Wonderful (?) World of Lindsay Anderson', *New Musical Express*, (letter written by Lindsay Anderson re: review of Britannia Hospital), The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>15</sup> LA/1/9/3/8/11, Lindsay Anderson, writing to Vincent Canby, 16/03/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>16</sup> LA/1/9/6/1, 'Sick Joke' film angers hospital workers, *Daily Star*, 18 May 1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>17</sup> LA/1/9/6/1, 'Cruel Britannia – would any other country stand for a film that portrays us all as mad?' *Daily Mail*, 18 May 1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>18</sup> LA/1/9/3/8/11, Lindsay Anderson writing to Vincent Canby, 16/03/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>19</sup> LA/5/1/2/26/12, Lindsay Anderson writing to Gavin Lambert 03/03/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>20</sup> LA/5/1/2/26/14, Lindsay Anderson writing to Gavin Lambert 16/06/1982 The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>21</sup> LA/1/9/6/9, Richard Cook, 'Growing Old Disgracefully', *New Musical Express*, 05/06/1982 – Interview with Lindsay Anderson, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>22</sup> LA/1/9/3/9/15, Lindsay Anderson writing to David Sherwin, 05/04/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>23</sup> LA/5/1/2/12/4, Lindsay Anderson writing to Davide Ferrario, 11/08/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>24</sup> LA/1/9/3/8/11, Lindsay Anderson writing to Vincent Canby, 16/03/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>25</sup> LA/1/9/3/8/12, Lindsay Anderson writing to Andrew Sarris, 28/03/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>26</sup> LA/1/9/3/5/10, Lindsay Anderson writing to Pauline Melville, 31/07/1981, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>27</sup> LA/1/9/3/1/6, Lindsay Anderson writing to David Sherwin 30/04/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>28</sup> LA/5/1/2/33/24, Lindsay Anderson writing to Louis Marcorelles, 28/04/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>29</sup> LA/1/9/6/9, Geoff Daniel, 'The Worst, the best and the rest', *The Star*, N.D, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>30</sup> LA/1/9/6/9, Geoff Daniel, 'The Worst, the best and the rest', *The Star*, N.D, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

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- <sup>31</sup> LA/1/9/6/9, David Robinson, 'Fading of a false dawn', *The Times*, 23/12/1989, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>32</sup> Lindsay Anderson sets out his belief that serious criticism at its best should improve cinema in 'Creative Elements', *Sequence 5*, Autumn 1948, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>33</sup> Milton Shuman, review of *Britannia Hospital*, *London Vogue*, N.D, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>34</sup> LA/1/9/3/8/3, Letter from Drusilla Beyfus (*London Vogue*) to Lindsay Anderson, 27/08/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>35</sup> LA/1/9/6/9, Alexander Walker, 'Lindsay – putting the knife in', *The Standard*, 27/05/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>36</sup> LA 1/9/3/17/1, Letter from Lindsay Anderson to Tom Bernard (United Artists), 27/08/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>37</sup> LA 1/9/3/17/2, Letter from Dani Ticktin (advertising executive at United Artists) to Lindsay Anderson, 12/01/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>38</sup> LA 1/9/3/17/2, Letter from Dani Ticktin (advertising executive at United Artists) to Lindsay Anderson, 12/01/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>39</sup> LA 1/9/3/17/2, Letter from Dani Ticktin (advertising executive at United Artists) to Lindsay Anderson, 12/01/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>40</sup> LA 1/9/3/17/4, Letter from Lindsay Anderson to Dani Ticktin (advertising executive at United Artists), 31/01/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> LA 1/9/3/17/5, Letter from Lindsay Anderson to Bill Stuart (United Artists), 31/01/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>44</sup> LA 1/9/3/11/14, Letter from Davina Belling to Lindsay Anderson, 17/01/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>45</sup> LA 1/9/3/11/14, Letter from Davina Belling to Lindsay Anderson, 17/01/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>46</sup> LA 1/9/3/11/15, Letter from Lindsay Anderson to Davina Belling, 23/02/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>49</sup> LA/1/9/6/8, Review of *Britannia Hospital*, *New York Times*, Vincent Canby, 4/03/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>51</sup> LA/1/9/6/8, Review of *Britannia Hospital*, *New York Post*, Rex Reed, 4/01/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

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<sup>52</sup> LA/1/9/6/8, Review about Britannia Hospital in *Box Office*, Harley W Lond, June 1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> LA/1/9/6/8, Review about Britannia Hospital in *The Hollywood Reporter*, Charles Ryweck, 14/01/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>55</sup> Postcard from Lindsay Anderson to Jocelyn Herbert, 15/3/1983, in the Jocelyn Herbert Archive at the University of the Arts, London.

<sup>56</sup> LA/1/9/6/12, Geoff Chapple, 'It's a riot', *New Zealand Listener*, 24/07/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>57</sup> LA/1/9/6/12, Lindsay Anderson quoted in 'It's a riot', *New Zealand Listener*, 24/07/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>58</sup> The Lindsay Anderson Collection includes over 700 VHS video tapes of news footage, television programmes and films recorded off television by Anderson and used as a visual reference library. The collection also includes a detailed card index made by Anderson listing the contents of the tapes.

<sup>59</sup> LA/5/1/2/33/24, Lindsay Anderson writing to Louis Marcorelles, 28/04/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>60</sup> LA/1/9/3/8/13, Letter from Lindsay Anderson to Michiko Kakutani, 30/03/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>61</sup> LA/5/1/2/33/28, Letter from Lindsay Anderson to Louis Marcorelles, 07/11/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>62</sup> LA/5/1/2/33/32, Letter from Lindsay Anderson to Louis Marcorelles, 03/10/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>63</sup> LA/5/1/23/12/4, Letter from Lindsay Anderson to Davide Ferrario, 11/08/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>64</sup> LA/5/1/2/48/4, Letter from Lindsay Anderson to David Robinson, 17/08/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>65</sup> LA/1/9/3/8/13, Letter from Lindsay Anderson to Michiko Kakutani, 30/03/1983, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>66</sup> LA/1/09/3/16/62, Letter from Andrzej Wajda to Lindsay Anderson, 27/04/1984, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>67</sup> LA/5/1/2/26/15, Letter from Lindsay Anderson to Gavin Lambert, 06/09/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>68</sup> LA 1/9/3/16/60, Lindsay Anderson, in reply to 'fan' letter, 27/04/1984, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

<sup>69</sup> LA 1/9/3/16/23, Lindsay Anderson, in reply to 'fan' letter supporting him after NME article/review, 13/08/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.

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- <sup>70</sup> LA 1/9/3/16/15, Lindsay Anderson, in reply to letter from a friend, 13/08/1982 and LA 1/9/3/16/39 Lindsay Anderson, in reply to a long, florid 'fan' letter, 13/08/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>71</sup> LA 1/9/3/16/28, Letter from 'fan' to Lindsay Anderson, 22/06/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>73</sup> LA 1/9/3/16/29, Lindsay Anderson's reply to 'fan' letter, 20/08/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>75</sup> LA 1/9/3/16/49 Lindsay Anderson, writing in response to 'fan' letter (referring to *New Musical Express*), 24/08/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>76</sup> LA 1/9/3/16/45, Letter from 'fan' to Lindsay Anderson, 19/07/1982, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.
- <sup>77</sup> LA/6/1/77, diary entry by Lindsay Anderson, 04/01/1985, The Lindsay Anderson Collection, University of Stirling.