

A NEW HISTORY OF
DOCUMENTARY FILM

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Chapter Thirteen

British Free Cinema and Social-Realist Features, 1956–1963

In the late forties and early fifties documentary in Britain had run down, as it had in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in Canada, following the wartime boom. Grierson and his old boys were locked into former subjects and purposes that no longer seemed as relevant to the needs of the society as they once had—not as urgent anyway, and certainly not as exciting. In part they were suffering from their success. British documentary films of the thirties could be seen as having pointed to the need for a more collectivized, socialized state. Now that state had arrived.

Following the Labour party's enormous postwar victory at the polls, it remained in office from 1945 to 1951. When the Conservative party returned to power, it did little to reverse the social and economic changes effected by Labour. But beginning in the mid-fifties a sort of cultural revolution commenced, which affected British life generally and became manifest in film as well. With the advent of commercial television and a vitality in the political left that extended into the arts, new popular values ("vulgar" they were thought to be in some quarters) came to the fore.

Expressing these new values was a group of novelists, playwrights, and political essayists who were dubbed the Angry Young Men. What they were angry about was the conformity, the ugliness, the lack of individuality present in what was being called a welfare state—the very sort of state that Labour and the earlier documentary films seemed to be seeking. Further, the Angry Young Men protested that even within this welfare state the class system persisted, with the upper classes controlling government, business, education, and the media. They believed that these upper-class people through these institutions—"the Establishment"—were responsible for the flattening of the working class, for keeping the common people not only helpless but listless. Part of this agitation among young intellectuals and artists—the initial public evidence of it, as a matter of

fact—occurred in the documentary film. It took the form of a short-lived and slight but highly influential movement called Free Cinema. This was the first substantial reaction against the Griersonian main line since its beginnings back in 1929.

Critical Background

The roots of Free Cinema lay in a critical position espoused by a group of young people at Oxford University in the late forties. What they started as *Film Society Magazine* in 1947 quickly became *Sequence*. Persons associated with *Sequence* would become extremely important in the British film scene. Penelope Houston became longtime editor of *Sight and Sound*, the prestigious international film journal published by the British Film Institute. Gavin Lambert was her assistant editor, then screenwriter and author of a noteworthy collection of short stories (*The Slide Area*) and a novel (*Inside Daisy Clover*) about Hollywood. Tony Richardson, Karel Reisz (the only member of the group not from Oxford; he was Cambridge, from which a high proportion of the Grierson alumni had come), and Lindsay Anderson were three others. All three would become filmmakers of considerable distinction.

The editorial emphases of *Sequence* were clear-cut and contentious; it was strongly against some things, strongly for others. The British entertainment film industry was denigrated for being dominated by the Americans and failing to produce films having a national character. British documentary was scorned for its didacticism, dullness, and collective (as opposed to personal) creation. Certain new European films and filmmakers were lauded, for instance, *Farebrique* (France, 1946, Georges Rouquier), *People in the City* (Sweden, 1947, Arne Sucksdorff), and *Blood of the Beasts* (France, 1949, Georges Franju). A poetic cinema in Britain was called for that would also provide a national expression—a poetry of reality and of the common person. (This poetry was not to be confused with the poetry of ships, machinery, and trains prevalent in the Grierson documentaries, presumably.)

Lindsay Anderson was the leader of this group. Like Grierson before him, Anderson was the articulate spokesman and the first to begin making films. Also like Grierson, Anderson searched for precedents for the sorts of films he wanted to be made. He wrote seminal reevaluations of the work of Jean Vigo, John Ford, and Humphrey Jennings, finding in their films evidence of the poetic and of the expression of their respective cultures. When *Sequence* ceased publication in 1952 (Anderson and Reisz edited the last issue), the former *Sequence* people made and wrote about Free Cinema. They were vigorous polemicists, as the Griersonians had been.

Free Cinema Films

Anderson, in addition to his work on *Sequence*, had been making sponsored shorts since 1948. His first significant documentaries were released in 1954.

Thursday's Children, codirected with Guy Brenton, celebrated the pupils and the loving, skillful teaching being done at the Royal School for Deaf and Dumb Children in Margate, England. *O Dreamland* (1953) castigated the dull and synthetic pleasures being offered the bemused masses at a seaside amusement park. Anderson himself described it as "a horrid little film." The cameramen on these two films would become principal technicians of the Free Cinema films: Walter Lassally (who subsequently became one of the world's great cinematographers) and John Fletcher (who would concentrate on sound and editing), respectively.

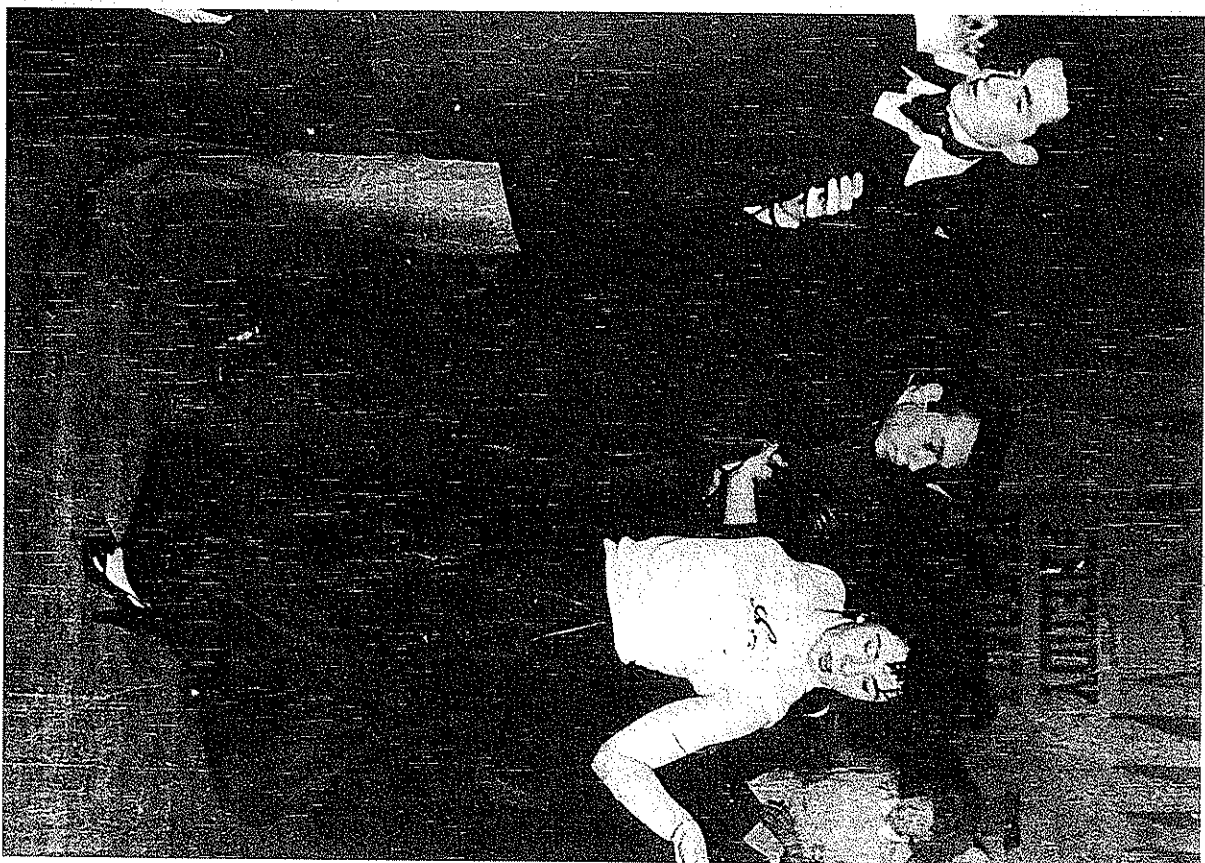
In 1955 Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson made *Momma Don't Allow*, about a lively London jazz club patronized by working-class teenagers. A year later Lorenza Mazetti made *Together*, which deals with the emotionally impoverished lives led by two deaf-mute dockworkers in London's East End. *Together* along with *Momma Don't Allow* and *O Dreamland* comprised the first program shown under the Free Cinema banner in February 1956 at the National Film Theatre of the British Film Institute.

Of the subsequent Free Cinema films—there were only a dozen or so altogether—*Nice Time* (1957) was made by a couple of Swiss aliens, Alain Tanner and Claude Goretta, who would return home to become fiction filmmakers. It is about the people in Piccadilly Circus in London's West End (comparable to Times Square in New York City) on a Saturday night. Lonely and disconsolate by and large, they are shown seeking pleasure and diversion among the movie theaters, the refreshment stands, the prostitutes, and the milling crowds of others like themselves.

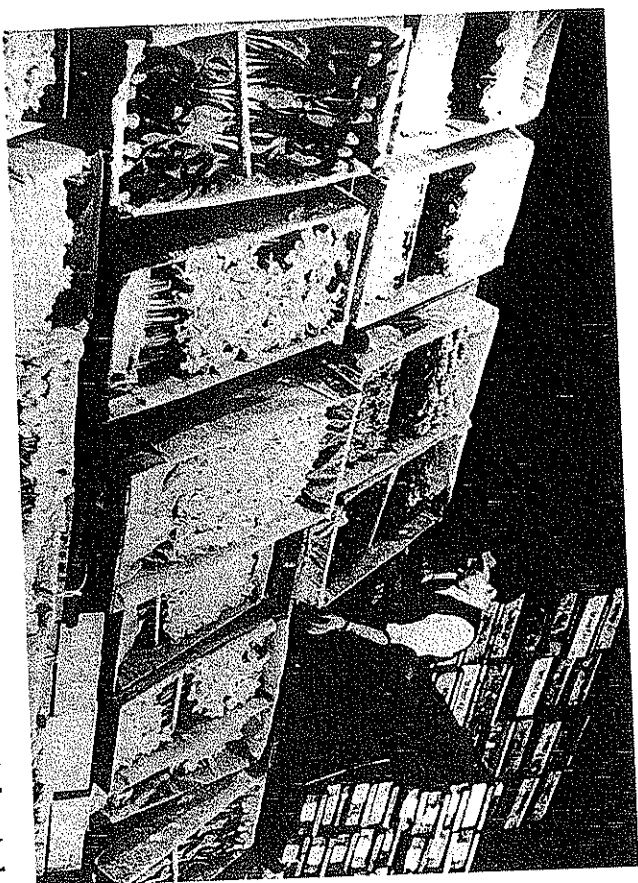
Every Day Except Christmas (1957), by Lindsay Anderson, is about the Covent Garden produce market (which no longer exists). It is an observation of the workers and their culture—the look, the feel, and the activities of the place—from early evening, as the trucks come in from the country with vegetables, fruits, and flowers, until closing the following morning. *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1959), is about teddy boys—kids from a tough part of London—at a social center and on an outing to a cricket match at a posh suburban private school. It is a sympathetic and respectful view of these young people whom the popular press were presenting as gangs of dangerous delinquents.

What did these filmmakers mean by Free Cinema? Essentially independent: free from serving the sponsor's purposes (as in traditional British documentary); free from pandering to the demands of the box office (as in entertainment features). "Implicit in our attitude," they wrote in their program note for the first showing, "is a belief in freedom, in the importance of people and in the significance of the everyday."

Gavin Lambert, in an article in *Sight and Sound* (Spring 1956), wrote of the three films shown at that first Free Cinema program. Likening their spirit to that of D. H. Lawrence's writings, he noted that they "sprang from non-conformism, from impatience with convention, sadness about urban life." Like Lawrence's



Momma Don't Allow (U.K., 1955, Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson). Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive



The Covent Garden Market in *Every Day Except Christmas* (U.K., 1957, Lindsay Anderson). Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive

work, too, they represented "a desire to regain contact with a more vital, individual force." Lambert continued:

In the broadest sense, they are films of protest; they are not conceived in sweeping terms . . . but the camera-eye they turn on society . . . is disenchanted, and occasionally ferocious and bitter. . . . If compassion is explicit in Lorenza Mazet-its film [*Together*], implicit in Lindsay Anderson's [*O Dreamland*], 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.

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—the film-makers compel above all the shock of recognition.

A collusion apparent here between critic and creator is reminiscent of the Grierson documentary people who wrote about their own films in *Documentary News Letter*, which they had established. Anderson, in his seminal essay "Stand Up! Stand Up!," also published in *Sight and Sound* (Autumn 1956), demanded that film criticism be socially committed. Commitment, individuality, and poetry were key terms in the rhetoric of Free Cinema.



We Are the Lambeth Boys (U.K., 1959, Karel Reisz). Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive

The Free Cinema films continued to feature workers and the working class, as had the documentaries of the thirties. But rather than their work, Free Cinema was concerned with how the workers spent their leisure time. The films address the values of the people, their pleasures or lack of them. Rather than material progress and improvements, they concern matters of social psychology and of the spirit. The one Free Cinema film dealing with workers working, *Every Day Except Christmas*, shows what the people working in Covent Garden are like more than what they do and how they do it.

As for purpose and approach, the Free Cinema films are nondidactic, aesthetic rather than informative; they appeal to emotion more than to reason. The sluggish, unimaginative, and flaccid are censured (*O Dreamland*, *Nice Time*); the lively, vigorous, and idiosyncratic are extolled (*Momma Don't Allow*, *Every Day Except Christmas*, *We Are the Lambeth Boys*). They have in common a vaguely anarchic, nihilistic, iconoclastic air. What they seem to be calling for is a total reordering of society—they are consistently anti-Establishment—rather than trying to make the existing system work better. They are implicitly revolutionary rather than actively evolutionary, as Grierson saw his position to be. (He observed of them that they seemed strangely French.) If English precedents are

required, they can be found in the writings of D. H. Lawrence, as Gavin Lambert suggested, and also in those of George Orwell.

The formal aspects of the Free Cinema films, especially their structural organizations, are closer to the work of Humphrey Jennings, much admired by Anderson, than they are to the documentaries more directly in the Grierson main line. The Free Cinema films are impressionistic. Though they employ a loose chronology, they follow feeling more than logic. Neither narrative continuity nor a topical outline will altogether account for the selection and ordering of their parts. Commentary is eschewed for the most part. (There is some in *Every Day* and *Lambeth*, but none in the other four examples cited.) Instead, the filmmakers' points are made through their choice and arrangement of sights and sounds. Juxtaposition of symbolic contrasts and counterpoint of the visible and audible abound. Considerable irony and wry humor result.

The production techniques and technology used grow out of the subjects and purposes of Free Cinema. The filmmakers confined themselves to what could be seen and heard on the location. The sights and sounds used are those that could be captured without direction (though bits of invented performance are inserted into *Momma Don't Allow*, as in *Rien que les heures* and *Berlin* much earlier). Quite a lot of Free Cinema is candid—the subjects are unaware they are being filmed—hence the preponderance of places where people gather publicly: amusement park, dance hall, Piccadilly Circus, social center, Covent Garden. In the early examples cited the camera was handheld, the images grainy and underexposed. Location sound, including the inferior quality of a public address system, constitutes the sound track. Between 1954 and 1959 there is increasing technical/technological refinement, from non-sync sound (a so-called "wild track" being recorded and edited to the footage available), to simulated sync, to sync. The camerawork goes from candid to increasing awareness on the part of the subjects that a camera is present to steadier and more carefully composed images. In adjectival terms you might say that the visual-aural style progresses from ugly to casual. But throughout, the roughness of the impressionistic form and nondirected "grab" shooting are in contrast to the Grierson documentary.

The main reason Free Cinema ended seems to have been economic. Free cinema indeed, snorted Grierson, in the most expensive artistic medium yet devised by man! If the films were free from the sponsor (and those who could afford to sponsor films were not likely to pay for the dissent offered by Free Cinema), if their forms and contents did not need to be shaped for the box office (and the public was not much interested in poetry or commitment), how were the films funded? *O Dreamland* cost a few hundred pounds and was paid for by Anderson himself. The other three of the first four films received grants from the British Film Institute Experimental Film Production Fund. The last two listed were sponsored by the Ford Motor Company, evidently with a sense of noblesse oblige similar to that which Grierson cultivated among big oil and gas companies

in the thirties. But apparently no more industrial sponsorship was available after *Every Day* and *Lambeth Boys*.

As for the arguments between the Free Cinema newcomers and the old-line documentarians, the former were just as much propagandists as the latter, despite their attacks on earlier documentaries as attempting to manipulate viewer opinion. Merely the ends were different—New Left vs Old Left—as well as the techniques and styles used to advance those ends. If Grierson was correct in anticipating that Free Cinema would cease for lack of economic base, he also foresaw that it would metamorphose into something else. It filtered into the fiction feature film in conjunction with the work of other Angry Young Men and Women of theater and literature.

Political and Cultural Context

The year 1956 was a crucial one in the political and cultural life of Britain. It was the year of one of the last gasps of imperial arrogance in the foolish and failed invasion of Suez. As a result of that debacle the whole governmental system was discredited. To many on the left, the Labour party, which worked within the system, seemed as culpable as the ruling Conservatives. Nineteen fifty-six was also the year of the Khrushchev attack on the cult of personality under Stalin, and of the Soviet invasion of Hungary, which caused many Marxist intellectuals finally to become disillusioned with Stalinist communism.

Partially in reaction to these events, a politically sophisticated younger generation of dissidents arose around the universities—particularly Oxford, which most of the Free Cinema group attended. The label New Left was attached to them, and their publication was entitled *New Left Review* (originally *Universities and Left Review*). The New Left wanted to go beyond the old-line socialists, with their basis in dialectical materialism, trade unionism, nationalization of industry, and social welfare. They were concerned more with theory and a fundamental restructuring of society that would affect the total quality of people's lives. As an intellectual movement that also encompassed the arts, the New Left in Britain was more like the continental Left.

The creators in various media who arose out of this spirit of the time, many of them with a working-class background, attacked the Establishment and the rigidities and inequities of the class system. In 1956 John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*, directed by Tony Richardson, opened. (Both Richardson and Anderson directed more plays than films for the simple reason that financing for theater was more readily available.) At about the same time Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop started. Playwrights such as Arnold Wesker and Shelagh Delaney soon joined Osborne to create an outpouring of plays set among the lower classes that were articulate and sometimes strident in their social criticism. Novels of a similar tone began to appear as well, with John Braine's *Room at the Top*

in 1957 followed by Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Stan Barstow's *A Kind of Loving*, and David Storey's *This Sporting Life* among them.

Though Free Cinema had in fact appeared slightly before the explosions in the other arts, it wasn't until it connected with the new drama and literature that its kind of expression moved over into the feature film and became economically viable. The Free Cinema movement as such virtually ceased with *We Are the Lambeth Boys* in 1959. Nonetheless, the attitudes and some of the rough-hewn style of Free Cinema carried over into the new social-realist features that began just as the Free Cinema shorts ended.

Social-Realist Features

Room at the Top (1958), much more conventional than Free Cinema in both content and form, launched the new phase. Set in an industrial northern town, it deals with the compulsions and confusions of a cynical young arriviste determined to climb up out of his slum origins. Its romantic conflict is class-based. *Look Back in Anger* (1959) put some of the same matters, and others, in a clearer and less ambiguous way. Through the Jimmy Porter character's brilliant and paranoid monologues, we could begin to understand what the anger was all about. At least it was clear what he was trying to tear down (the Establishment, personified by his wife's parents) and what he was trying to preserve (the working-class virtues, represented by his friend Ma Tanner).

Those two films, double-billed in the United States, began the social-realist cycle that dealt with various aspects of working-class character and problems. As a body the films tended to be set in the industrial regions north of London. Thus they contrasted with British entertainment films made up to that time, which, according to the Free Cinema group at least, had reflected almost exclusively the outlook of metropolitan southern English culture and the middle and upper classes. Here were efforts to include "the rich diversity of tradition and personality which is the whole of Britain" called for in one of Free Cinema's manifestos.

Of the Free Cinema trio of Anderson, Reisz, and Richardson, it was Richardson who first entered the feature field with *Look Back in Anger*. Those three were joined by John Schlesinger, an Oxford classmate of Richardson's. Together they constituted the main directorial talent of the social-realist features of the early sixties. New in content—in their concern with working-class characters and criticism of the Establishment—these films were essentially conventional in fiction film narrative technique. All of them were based on the writings of the so-called Angry Young Men (or Women, as the case might be). Richardson went on to direct three more of those features in rapid succession. *The Entertainer* (1960), from another Osborne play and script, was seen as offering evidence of collapse within English society. *A Taste of Honey* (1961) was from a play by Shelagh Delaney, who worked on the screenplay as well. The distinctive location cinematography in Lancashire was by Walter Lassally, who became as prominent a figure

in the social-realist features as he had been in the Free Cinema shorts. *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962)—from a story by Alan Sillitoe, who also wrote the script—portrays the life, frustrated ambitions, and resentments of a lower-class youth who wanders into crime and is sent to prison. The causes of his problems are portrayed as societal; sympathy as well as understanding is offered for his form of rebellion.

Karel Reisz directed only one of the social-realist features (Richardson produced it), but his *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) is in many ways the most exemplary of their tendencies as a whole. The documentary intention dominates. Served equally well by a story that grows out of the situation (rather than being imposed on it) and by convincingly natural performances, the film flies in the face of accepted demands of both box office and dramatic convention. From Sillitoe's popular novel (and he again did the script), it focuses on a working-class rebel. Though hostile to the system, the young ladie operator finally lacks the resources—the imagination and understanding—to break free from it. Proudly indigenous as the film is, one doesn't have to know England to sense that the rows of identically drab houses, the father glued to the telly, the job without meaning, and the inadequate release of a Saturday night's drunk and tumble in the hay must be how it was for a large segment of the population (as it was elsewhere). If an epilogue were to be added to it, it could borrow from Dylan Thomas, as did the Free Cinema filmmakers for their first program: "This is the world. Have faith."

Lindsay Anderson, acknowledged leader and spokesman of the Free Cinema group, was last to arrive at features. Curiously, his first, *This Sporting Life* (1963), if it marked a high point in the social-realist cycle, also indicated a turning away from the sources that had given that demimovement its character and strength. From a novel and script adaptation by David Storey, it has the requisite general characteristics of northern industrial town and working-class background. Where it departs from the other films is in its concentration on the tortured love affair between the miner turned professional rugby player and his widowed landlady, and in its flashback sequences of surrealist exaggeration. At the time of its release Anderson was complimented by British reviewers for having broken out of the confines of the social-realist films—with their air of objectivity and use of the representative to make their criticism stick—into richer areas of individual feeling, the traditional concerns of great art. Perhaps what was by then being referred to as the "kitchen sink" school of filmmaking was limited in certain important ways and had run its course. Whatever the reasons, *This Sporting Life* along with *Billy Liar* (directed by John Schlesinger in the same year) proved to be the last films directly connected to the line that had begun with *Room at the Top*. The documentary influence has contributed to some of the most interesting and distinctive cycles of British fiction production: wartime semidocumentaries, postwar Faling comedies, and social-realist features. It might be argued that the quiet genius of British cinema has always pointed most surely in the direction of

realism and what John Grierson called the documentary idea. For a while in the nineteen sixties, as the young men of Free Cinema came together with the young men and women of theater and literature who had been tackling similar themes, the veracity of documentary detail was warmed and strengthened by the addition of story and character. Perhaps those who made the social-realist features between 1958 and 1963 got some of the older documentarists' preoccupations and methods more widely and effectively before a larger public.

At the time Free Cinema ended and metamorphosed into the social-realist fiction features, another development began that would move documentary closer to the dividing line between art and life it has always tried to cross. Called *cinéma vérité* in France and direct cinema in America, this development is the subject of chapter fourteen.

Films of the Period

1953

O Dreamland (Lindsay Anderson)

1955

Mamma Don't Allow (Karel Reisz and Tony Richardson)

1956

Together (Lorenza Mazetti)

1957

Every Day Except Christmas (Anderson)

Nice Time (Alain Tanner and Claude Goretta)

1958

Room at the Top (Jack Clayton)

1959

Look Back in Anger (Richardson)

We Are the Lambeth Boys (Reisz)

1960

The Entertainer (Richardson)

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (Reisz)

A Taste of Honey (Richardson)

1961

A Kind of Loving (John Schlesinger)

1962

The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (Richardson)

1963

Billy Liar (Schlesinger)

The Leather Boys (Sidney Furie)

This Sporting Life (Anderson)

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