



Shadows of Progress

DOCUMENTARY FILM IN
POST-WAR BRITAIN 1951-1977



Three Installations

UK | 1952 | black and white | 28 mins

Director: Lindsay Anderson

Production company: Sutcliffe Film Unit

Sponsored by: Richard Sutcliffe

Producer: Desmond Sutcliffe

Photography: Walter Lassally

Camera: Desmond Davis

Editor: Derek York

Music: Alan Clare (piano),
Johnny Flanagan (drums)

Orchestral music from: Aaron Copland

Sound: Charles Green

How fortunate that Lindsay Anderson should bump into Lois Sutcliffe at a gathering of film societies in 1947. The meeting resulted not only in a warm friendship which lasted until Anderson's death in 1994, but also in the start of his filmmaking career. Sutcliffe soon commissioned the inexperienced Anderson to make pictures for and about her husband's conveyor belt business, Richard Sutcliffe Ltd and the result was

a series of four films, made between 1948 and 1954, of which *Three Installations* is the third and most accomplished

Watching *Three Installations* now, it is strikingly – irrepressibly – kinetic. The film documents three separate conveyor belt operations at an iron works, a cement plant and a dock construction – so there is some degree of movement built in. But Anderson does all he can to inject even more. Conveyor belts zig zag across the screen. Shots tumble on swiftly, one after the other. Dials turn, lories shudder, typewriters bash, and all the while accompanied by a sprightly soundtrack which includes a number called 'Conveyor Boogie'. Yes, this is more lively than Anderson's narration about 'rubber covered impact idlers' would have you believe.

Which is not to say that there aren't moments of reflection. Working on the first of nine documentaries with the cinematographer Walter Lassally, Anderson incorporates luminous interior shots of 1950s factories, and pulls back to reveal delicate landscape compositions. A scene where heavy boats glide their way into the Manchester canal is playfully reminiscent of one of Anderson's favourite films, Jean Vigo's *L'atolante* (1934). And, at all times, the camera shows more interest in

the people operating the machines than in the machines themselves. As with Anderson's earlier work for the Sutcliffes – especially *Meet the Pioneers* (1948) – there is an honest concern for the working man and woman.

Three Installations is also drenched in raw optimism. Anderson seems to be enjoying himself as he uses conveyor belts to join the dots between the different parts of the industrial process, from design to installation to fabrication to finished product. But the real delight comes in watching the workers interact with one another, weaving themselves into the fabric of society. And so it becomes clear that everyone, from draughtsman to driver, has a place in this particular patchwork. Anderson simply sits above it all, quietly observant, and following E M Forster's dictum – only connect.

Peter Hoskin

The Film That Never Was

UK | 1957 | black and white | 29 mins

Director: Paul Dickson

Production company: World Wide Pictures

Sponsored by: Central Office of Information, Ministry of Labour

Producer: James Carr

Script: Rex Edwards

Director of photography:

Ronnie Ancombe

Photography: James Allen

Editor: Denis Gurney

Sound: Tom Druce, Cliff Sandell

Cast: Brian Oulton, Peter Copley, Jefferson Clifford, Gordon Jackson, Patricia Burke, John Glyn Jones, Julian Somers, Larry Burns, Frank Pettingell, Arthur Howard, William Squire, Barry Keegan

1959 was a year of paradoxes. On the one hand the incumbent Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, famously fought his campaign for re-election, having rescued public morale from the nadir of the Suez crisis to the point that he could credibly claim 'let us be frank about it – most of our people have never had it so good'. Yet in the preceding two years following Anthony Eden's ignominious departure, Macmillan presided over a significant deterioration in the domestic economy, manifesting a wholesale breakdown in industrial relations. Between 1956

and 1958, the number of working days lost to strike action more than quadrupled. There was a widespread sense of injustice that many of the wartime austerity measures were still very much in evidence over a decade after its conclusion, while at the same time western Europe and the United States were visibly and ostentatiously having it very good indeed. The Attlee government's legacy, nationalising vast swathes of heavy industry, and of integrating the trade union movement into the apparatus of government, had created a sense of ownership and entitlement among the workforce. And perhaps most importantly, Britons increasingly sought growing prosperity at home.

On this basis, the underlying premise of *The Film That Never Was* appears spectacularly naïve, despite its intriguing documentary film-within-a film structure. This dramatised short, sponsored by the Government's communications agency, portrays industrial disputes as little more than trivial personality clashes between paranoid workers and insensitive bosses, proposing the use of works councils (semi official consultative committees that the Macmillan government hoped would eventually erode the unions' influence) to defuse disputes. *The Film* is structured around a hypothetical factory dispute: workers

suspect the owner of planning job losses and cuts by installing more efficient machinery; the boss suspects his staff of being workshy Luddites who instinctively resist progress. The inability of each side to take the works council seriously escalates into an acrimonious strike.

The film ignores its contemporary political reality. It emphasises that the story takes place in a non-unionised workplace, of which there were precious few in manufacturing industry by the late 1950s. The dispute is devoid of any ideological dimension; the protagonists are portrayed as cartoon characters (quite literally in one fantasy scene). The conflict is one of personalities, not of objectives, entirely consistent, of course, with the post-war consensus ideology which the Macmillan government sought to entrench and sustain into the fag end of the decade with ever increasing desperation.

Director Paul Dickson had launched his career with another public sector commission, *The Undefeated* (1950) (included on the BFI's *Land of Promise* DVD set), which sought to destigmatise the process of applying for social security for injured and disabled war veterans. As with *The Film*, the emphasis was on defusing misunderstandings and promoting cohesion between the citizen and the

authorities. *The Film* similarly sought to reduce the industrial relations problem to one of surface tensions, as illustrated by the leaflet that was distributed with 16mm prints of the film. It suggests that the audience be invited to take part in a debate after each screening, but that 'The Chairman might usefully try to guide the discussion away from considering whether the balance between management and workpeople is fairly upheld, to the basic factors making or marring joint consultation which the film suggests'. In other words, stick to personalities and avoid the issues.

The 'we're all in this together' approach to boosting national morale in the face of economic austerity had an impressive afterlife following the

war in which it was born, but by the late 1950s it was clear to all except the government's PR machine that in many respects, we were no longer all in it together and that there was no point in pretending otherwise. *The Film* thus makes a stark contrast to the Boulting brothers' satirical comedy *I'm All Right Jack* (1959) which packed British cinemas in the summer preceding the general election, and which portrays a very different set of conflicting motivations between management and workforce. Although Macmillan won another term in office, *The Film* is an ominous demonstration of the extent to which the COI's reputation as a force for ideological cohesion was by then in freefall.

Leo Enticknap

